



*A Ministry of the  
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

# Eating the Bible Way





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Food is a fascination for the modern world. Good eating and nourishment have always been a basic necessity for personal health and growth, as well as an activity that's both gratifying and socially formative. Food is also an entertainment industry these days, with whole networks devoted to culinary delight.

Not surprisingly, health issues like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, food allergies, and eating disorders have us talking a lot about food. Fad diets, fasts, and cleanses proliferate, even as advances in genetics and transportation allow us to produce and consume a wider variety of food than ever before.

Within this modern context has emerged renewed interest in what the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures, says about food and eating. What does God's Word teach on this subject? Does it really matter to God what we eat? Can Christians under the new covenant honor and serve God with their food as they do in other arenas of life? And if so, how?

This study seeks to answer these questions. It turns out that Scripture actually says a great deal about food and eating — with broad implications. After all, God's first commandment, and our first sin, was about eating. So why would the Creator, who gave us food to enjoy (Genesis 1:29), define humanity's first sin by our appetite? Could it be that food, like little else, gets down to the fundamentals of human need, desire, relationship, and our total dependence on our Creator? What better means, then, than food for God to teach His children what it

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means to be holy, and to be His, within the world He's made!

Let's see what the Bible says.

## **A holy people**

While God is concerned about our health (Exodus 15:26; Psalm 103:1-3; Luke 9:1, 2; 3 John 2), His instructions for food are rooted not so much in physical wellness as in a broader desire that His covenant people be holy — set apart from the world's wickedness. A prime example of this scriptural theme comes from Paul's pen in Romans 12:1, 2: "I beseech you . . . present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world. . . ." The growth to holiness urged in this text takes place by God's grace and the Holy Spirit working through the Word in the hearts of Christ's followers. Not a means to salvation, this faith response brings us a renewed mind and a will submitted to God, rather than our being squeezed into the world's mold.

This sanctification process yields physical and spiritual benefits as the believer grows in understanding of God's distinction between what is holy and what is unholy. Christians seeking holiness will search for the pure paths of righteousness and shun any wickedness or uncleanness. Paul says this powerfully in his 2 Corinthians 6:11-18 discussion of idols: "'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you'" (v. 17, quoted from Isaiah 52:11).

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What we eat and don't eat is just one of dozens of daily opportunities we have to practice this holiness. Several biblical principles and injunctions, like avoiding drunkenness and gluttony (Proverbs 23:21), may guide our dietary choices. Christians do well to study and apply these, guarding against unbiblical and unhealthy eating practices. In this study we will focus on one biblical guideline regarding food.

## Old Testament

As early as the time of the Flood, Scripture distinguishes between clean and unclean animals. Noah was instructed to take *seven* of every "clean" animal and *two* of every "unclean" animal with him into the ark (Genesis 7:2, 8). This suggests that a surplus of clean animals would be available for food and sacrifice after the Flood, leaving others to propagate the species. While animal sacrifice was introduced with Abel in Genesis 4, not until animal flesh was considered for food in Noah's time did God give a distinction between clean and unclean animals.

After departing the ark, "Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar" (8:20). With only a single reproductive pair initially available, Noah's eating or offering unclean animals after the Flood would have resulted in the extinction of that species.

Later, God told Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs" (9:3). Our first impression here may be that

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God gave Noah all animals for food. But this ignores the context cited in the previous paragraphs, and this verse's final phrase ("even as the green herbs") states another important qualifier. Earlier, God had given man "every herb that yields seed . . . and every tree whose fruit yields seed . . . for food" (1:29). That is, He allowed man to eat plants *within limits*. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is one example of such a limit on "every" tree (2:16, 17).

Thus God gave Noah all animals "even as the green herbs," implying that there were already understood limitations to the animals given as food, just as plants in Eden had been given with limitations. That Noah already knew what God did and did not designate as food is seen when God directed him to stock the ark with "all food that is eaten" (6:21).

This implication is further bolstered by the testimony of God's law, where the distinction between clean and unclean animals served not for sacrifice but primarily for human diet. After naming which animals were clean and which were unclean in Leviticus 11, God stated in verses 45-47, "I am the Lord . . . be holy, for I am holy. This is the law of the animals and the birds and every living creature

. . . to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten." While sacrifice or offering is a major theme in Leviticus, those words don't appear in Leviticus 11.

These two key passages about God's gift of food to Noah and Moses both begin with



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“Then the Lord said [spoke] to . . .” (Genesis 7:1; Leviticus 11:1). These introductions remind us that God is our Creator. He speaks the word, giving and limiting food for His creatures (Genesis 1:29; 2:16, 17). Because we are created in His image (1:27), God who separated and sanctified at Creation calls His children to imitate Him in distinguishing between holy and unholy, good and evil, in all areas of life — from sex to food and all points in between. This wide concern for holiness is seen especially in the moral instructions given to both Israel and the foreigner in Leviticus 17-20. This section of Scripture repeats the command to “be holy . . . [as I] am holy” (19:2; 20:26). Interestingly, this section also begins and ends with reference to the clean and unclean (17:14; 20:25).

This critical distinction between clean and unclean, and our call to recognize them, appears often in the Old Testament, both in reference to food and to holiness in general (e.g., Leviticus 10:10; Deuteronomy 14:3-21; Isaiah 66:17; Ezekiel 22:26; 44:23). When Israel failed to make holy distinctions, particularly in matters of diet, sex, and worship, the results were practices the Lord God regarded as “abominations” (Deuteronomy 7:25, 26; 14:3; Leviticus 18:22-30).

## **New Testament**

Like the Old Testament, the New contains several texts encouraging God’s people to avoid what is unclean and pursue what is clean in all areas of life (e.g., Romans 12:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 6:11-18; Titus 2:11-15; 1 Peter 1:15; 16, etc.). Though the command to

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avoid eating unclean animals is not repeated explicitly, several texts refer to them in an unpalatable manner consistent with biblical culture (Matthew 7:6; Mark 5:11-16; 2 Peter 2:22; Revelation 18:2). Several other New Testament passages imply the continuity of this instruction. Curiously, some of the latter are often used to teach that the clean and unclean meats distinction has been abrogated! Let's consider these.

Acts 10 is the linchpin text for the argument against the perpetuity of clean and unclean foods for Christians. Here Peter sees a vision of various animals, both clean and unclean, and is commanded to rise, kill, and eat. He recoils in disgust, unwilling to do so because he has never eaten anything common or unclean (cf Ezekiel 4:14). This response indicates either that Christ's teaching did not overturn the clean-unclean laws or that, if it did, Peter misunderstood his Lord's teaching in this regard.

In the vision, Peter is told that he must not call common what God has cleansed. The vision repeats three times and leaves Peter still hungry and wondering about its meaning (Acts 10:9-17).

Later, in Cornelius' house, Peter understands the meaning of the vision: "God has shown me that I should not call *any man* common or unclean" (v. 28, emphasis added). Nowhere does Scripture say that God intended, or that Peter understood, this vision to mean that God had made all *animals* clean. Rather, the biblical explanation is that God wanted Peter to stop seeing and treating *Gentile people* with disgust, as common or unclean. In our interpretation, we

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must be careful to not insert other meanings into scriptural visions than those specifically given.

Thus the main passage used to support eating unclean animals, when understood as Peter himself came to understand it, does not support that practice at all. Rather, it implicitly strengthens the argument for Christians distinguishing between clean and unclean meats. Peter, an apostle of the faith, testified after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ that he still respected that distinction in his diet. It seems God would have used this occasion to correct Peter's thinking and practice about food, yet He gave no correction.

Our next passage, 1 Timothy 4:3-5, lists a few things forbidden by those who depart from the faith, including "foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving. . . ." Often used to support Christians eating any animal they please, this text actually teaches that we ought to receive and eat with thanks any food that is sanctified through the word of God and prayer (v. 5). Thus this passage defends the consumption only of what *God created to be eaten*, and God never declared — in His Word — that unclean animals are to be received for food.

Other food-related passages often used to support eating unclean flesh actually address the issue of human traditions, not clean or unclean meats. Thus the incident in Mark 7:1-23 concerns the elders' tradition of washing hands (vv. 3, 4), and Jesus' comments in verses 14-23 must be understood in that context. Furthermore, the purification spoken of in verse 19 is by the digestive

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process, not the cleansing of unclean meat prior to consumption. Rather than abrogating them in Mark 7, Jesus defends the commandments of God against man-made rules and traditions (vv. 8, 9; Matthew 5:17).

In Romans 14:14 Paul says, “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean [*koinos* - common] of itself.” Since the context here contrasts meat-eating with vegetarianism (vv. 1-4), this verse should not be misconstrued essentially as a contrast between clean and unclean animals. This likely involved a case of some Christians avoiding otherwise edible meat or wine that might have become *common*, polluted by association with idolatry. Paul does not say here that “there is nothing unclean [*akathartos*] of itself.” *Akathartos*, the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word *tame* (or “unclean”) in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, is used consistently in reference to *unclean* spirits, animals, and behaviors biblically defined (Mark 7:25; Acts 10:14; 2 Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 5:5; Revelation 18:2).

Similarly, Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10:23-31 do not refer to clean and unclean animals but to food offered to idols. Indeed, while Paul’s comments regarding food are often used to support the consumption of unclean meat, we contend that Scripture never defines unclean meat as legitimate *food*. Thus passages such as Romans 14:17 and Colossians 2:16, which speak of food, should not be misinterpreted to refer to the issue of unclean animals.

The early church’s debate over borderline issues of eating foods potentially contaminated by idolatry or unclean animals

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(Romans 14; Acts 10) shows the deeply conservative nature of the controversy, which reinforces the broad acceptance of the biblical teaching regarding clean and unclean.

The New Testament's interest in eating the Bible way for Jews and Gentiles alike is probably best seen with the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The apostles' decree that emerged from this council addressed dietary rules in three of four minimum requirements for Gentile converts (vv. 20, 29; 21:25), and in the same order they were given in Leviticus 17-20: abstaining from 1) meat offered to idols (17:3-9); 2) blood (vv. 10-14); 3) the strangled (vv. 15, 16); and 4) sexual immorality (18:1-30). Thus the apostles' decree follows God's instructions to Noah and Israel, implying that new covenant Christians too are called to enjoy the blessings of food while eating within divinely appointed limits.

In summary, these passages illustrate that the New Testament contains a substantial amount of teaching regarding believers and food. While the New Testament never explicitly repeats the law of the clean and unclean, neither does it explicitly repeal it. More importantly, throughout the Bible we see exemplars of the biblical diet — the way Jesus ate — while nowhere in Old or New Testaments do we find unclean animals positively celebrated in the diet of God's people.

## **Set apart**

Having briefly considered the biblical witness, we confidently call upon believers to distinguish between clean and unclean animals in their diet, for both spiritual and

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physical benefit. Eat with discernment and without offense, as to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). God desires His people to be set apart in holiness and in health, in body and mind, to imitate Him and distinguish between good and evil, clean and unclean. As Apostle Peter wrote, quoting Leviticus 11:44, 45, "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15, 16).

In a world fascinated by eating and often enslaved to its appetites, may our observance of this biblical counsel be an outward expression of our love for Creator God, an inward desire to honor Christ, unspotted by the world's evil. As often as we eat, may we be led by the Spirit and learn to separate from the unclean in every area of life.



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