

Consuming Passion

Does food command too large
a priority in your life?

By Dean Merrill

I've forgotten the menu, but the table conversation still sticks in my mind. The scene was a wedding dinner reception in a suburban restaurant about 20 percent more splendid than the bride's father, a barber, could afford. My wife and I were seated at a table of eight, among them a local pastor and his wife, and after learning each other's names, we passed the time trading restaurant recommendations.

"Have you ever been to Hugo's at the Hyatt Regency?" "The prime rib is fantastic at George Diamond's downtown." "We were at this quaint little place up near Barrington not long ago, and they . . ." It soon turned into a can-you-top-this kind of joust, and my wife and I, being of moderate means, were not winning. We were, of course, making mental notes, lengthening our list of fancy places to visit as soon as the budget would permit.

Eventually, as we were waiting (waiting being the main activity of most wedding receptions), it hit me: Eating is almost the only legal indulgence for evangelicals. We don't

smoke, drink, dance, chew, or hit night spots, but so help us, there's nothing wrong with eating, and the more lavishly the better. We've finally found a sanitary pleasure.

And in so doing, we are simply following the life-style of our Lord, are we not? It has become common in our time to highlight the sociable Jesus, the charming guest who enjoyed the Cana wedding reception as well as the repasts of Martha, Peter's mother-in-law, Simon the Pharisee, Zaccheus and others. He was not like John the Baptist, we are fond of noting; he was a people-person, a mingler, even a *bon vivant*.

Perhaps we have seen what we sought to see. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made some decidedly nonpicurean comments:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? . . . So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your

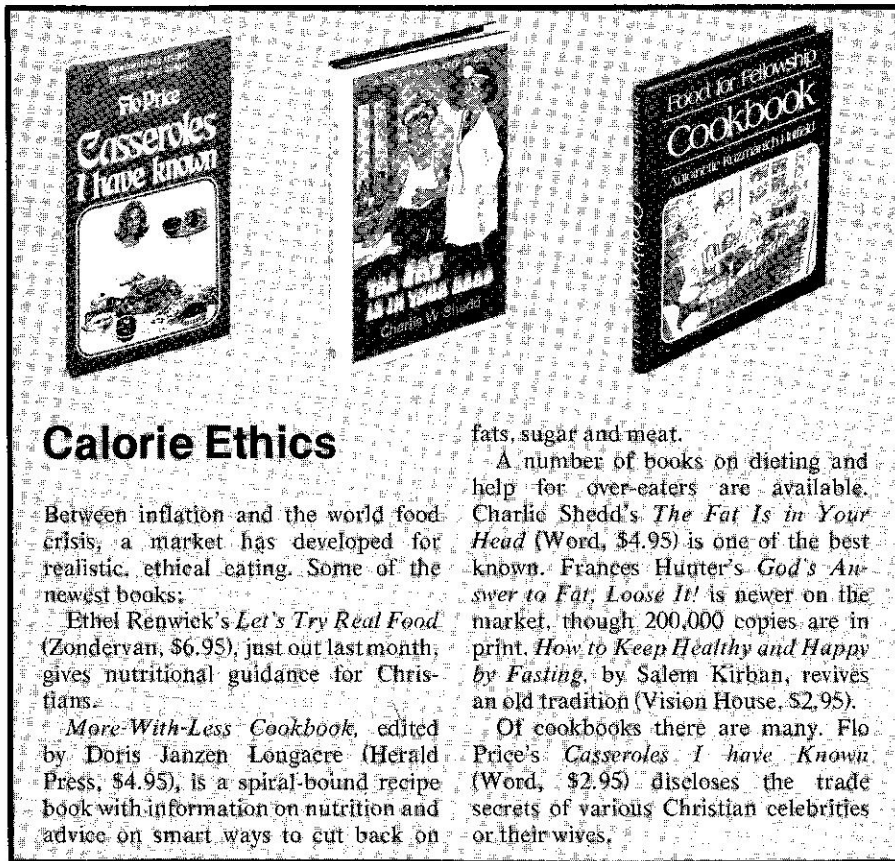
heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:25, 26, 31-33, NIV).

Well, I guess I must be a pagan. Because, come to think of it, I certainly spend enough time lolling around the question "What shall we eat?" I would admit to making special trips to the office bulletin board for the sole purpose of checking the cafeteria menu posted there—as early as 9:30 in the morning! Already my mind is going: "I wonder what's for lunch today?" More than once have I proved the truth of Samuel Johnson's statement, "A man seldom thinks with more earnestness of anything than he does of his dinner."

What makes it worse (or better, depending on your perspective) is that I'm among the minority of the population that can get away with it. My metabolism is such that calories don't stay around; my 160 pounds remain scattered along my six-foot-plus frame, impervious to the quantities of intake. So why not keep eating? "Keep stuffing it away—it never shows anyway," say my endomorphic friends as they squint with envy.

But then Jesus comes along and says the opposite. He's not necessarily appealing to my sense of altruism, i.e.,

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Calorie Ethics

Between inflation and the world food crisis, a market has developed for realistic, ethical eating. Some of the newest books:

Ethel Renwick's *Let's Try Real Food* (Zondervan, \$6.95), just out last month, gives nutritional guidance for Christians.

More-With-Less Cookbook, edited by Doris Janzen Longacre (Herald Press, \$4.95), is a spiral-bound recipe book with information on nutrition and advice on smart ways to cut back on

fats, sugar and meat.

A number of books on dieting and help for over-eaters are available. Charlie Shedd's *The Fat Is in Your Head* (Word, \$4.95) is one of the best known. Frances Hunter's *God's Answer to Fat; Loose It!* is newer on the market, though 200,000 copies are in print. *How to Keep Healthy and Happy by Fasting*, by Salem Kirban, revives an old tradition (Vision House, \$2.95).

Of cookbooks there are many. Flo Price's *Casseroles I have Known* (Word, \$2.95) discloses the trade secrets of various Christian celebrities or their wives.

the injustice of my surfeiting while starvation stalks two thirds of my planet. (He gets around to that in other passages.) In Matthew 6 he simply says that "What shall we eat?" is not one of the priority questions of life. It's not worth a major amount of mental energy. There are other issues far more pressing and significant.

I can't speak for anyone else, but I have been made uncomfortable enough to admit that I really am something of a foodaholic and that I need to do something to correct it. The new fad known as Erhard Seminar Training (est) repels me generally, but I have to salute at least one of its concepts. Est sessions allow neither mealtimes nor restroom breaks, and when an initiate begins to squirm and complain, the instructor roars, "You're nothing but a tube! Tube! Tube! You're so obsessed with what goes in your mouth and through you that you can't think about the really important things we're telling you!" It's all a psy-

chodrama, I realize, but there's a chip of truth there too.

Most evangelicals have little problem with Jesus' other question, "What shall we drink?" There's been enough grief over alcoholism in this country that they shoot back a quick and ready answer: "Nothing!" by which they mean nothing intoxicating. But why hasn't the first question been taken with equal seriousness? Why has the temperance movement over its long history done only half a job?

Let's face it—we use food quite frequently in the same way the harried salesman, the pressured actor and the bleary bum use liquor. It's a quick way to feel good, to have a pleasant experience on an otherwise rotten day. When the person we have to contact isn't available, or we can't meet the deadline we promised or a secretary or colleague is being surly—we decide to get away from it all momentarily with coffee and danish. Or the kids are screaming, the phone is ringing for the

third time and it's raining outside—time for a pause at the refrigerator.

In fact, it might be argued that housewives around the world often build much of their self-concept, their sense of personal worth, around their ability to put a good meal on the table. I have a relative whose letters are invariably a rehash (no pun intended) of the week's menus, how the broccoli was prepared last Tuesday night, what's scheduled for Sunday dinner and especially what she served the last time she and her husband had guests. She's no eccentric; she is trying her best to please her family and friends, and in her mind food is just about the central aspect of all that. If she couldn't cook well, she would unquestionably be a failure in life.

Jesus tried to tell us long before women's liberation that food was made for people, not people for food.

When some of the five thousand chased him around to the other side of the lake in hopes of another free meal, he would not be used. "You are looking for me," he announced somewhat directly, "... because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:26, 27, NIV).

Strangely enough, the quest for eternal food at times leads us away from meat and potatoes altogether. Perhaps the idea of fasting is not so quaint after all. Perhaps it affirms to God and, even more importantly, to ourselves, that we are serious about our search for him—so serious that we will temporarily deny our tube-nature. It's a small price to pay, when you stop to think about it. But we are rather adroit at not stopping to think sometimes.

I could hardly be called one of the world's great fast-ers. To be truthful, I've done it successfully only once in my life, and then only for 24 hours. But a curious thing happened. I found that the oft-repeated claims about fasting—you don't get hungry, and your mind is a lot sharper—were not

hogwash. I was able to bear down in prayer for the particular crisis at hand which had prodded me to fast. The usual distractions and tangents of thought somehow stayed away from my brain. I was really "into it." The longer the day wore on, the more I sensed that the Almighty and I were getting through to each other.

And I didn't collapse from starvation, either.

In contrast, the pursuit of food, or any sensual pleasure, can grow and intensify to the exclusion of most other goals. Harold Myra, in his science-fiction tale *No Man in Eden*, at one point thrusts the protagonist David and his celestial escort Marcor into "antimatter," a version of hell. Flame, smoke, and brimstone? No. "They were in a meadow, with great leafy trees drooping with ripe fruit, thick green grass, and a rippling creek edged by more fruit trees. Green countryside extended as far as they could see."

Everyone they meet is eating com-

pulsively. The czar of the place, called "the Receiver," explains the special body provided for each new arrival: "Full development of every pleasure sense. Taste buds of acute and exquisite quality cover all areas of the mouth and lips and throat. The stomach is designed to handle unlimited supplies of food, simply passing off excess beyond calorie need. Also, large areas of the arms have hidden taste buds so that you can rub food on them and get quite the same effect." Other features provide for unlimited visual and sexual thrills as well as the cancellation of all pain impulses.

But the place is hardly Utopia. Such a body has quickly made neanderthals of the hapless people. One of them pleads with David for a weapon with which to assassinate the Receiver. When David hesitates, the man screams, "Don't you know you'll quickly despise the pleasures even as you gulp them? Can't you see you'll want to hurt and kill because it's part of you? You'll take from others even

though you have Good God, we can't be just animals sucking up things to tickle the sensors they've sewn into these hellion bodies!"

Pure fantasy, yes. But not so far afield from the real earthlings described in Phil. 3:19, "whose God is their belly." The apostle tearfully called them "the enemies of the cross of Christ."

I don't mean to imply that one must be an ascetic to be a friend of the cross. Church history is strewn with the embarrassments of those who have mistakenly held that food and other material items are bad or at least carnal, forgetting that God is "the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (I Tim. 6:17).

What is needed is rather a sense of balance, a correct priority. What shall we eat? "Your heavenly Father knows . . . and all these things will be given to you." That should be enough to let us relax. Our culinary needs will be supplied. Meanwhile, we can turn our minds to greater things. □