

Creating with the Creator: Cooking as a Spiritual Practice

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Most scholars will readily agree that people who regularly eat home-cooked meals tend to be happier and healthier, but the agreement ends on the answer to the question: how can we find the time and money to cook? Instead of cooking at home, we are relying on convenience foods to fill our tables; this is affecting our relationship to food itself, to our natural surroundings, to others, to ourselves, and most importantly to God. I advocate for home-cooking through a Christian lens: when we cook as Christians, we enter into a spiritual realm where we acknowledge the sacredness of food and its beauty from our Creator—essentially, cooking is a spiritual practice.

WHEN IT COMES TO the topic of home-cooking¹, most scholars will readily agree that people who regularly eat home-cooked meals tend to be happier and healthier. Research has demonstrated that cooking at home typically equates to a healthier diet with a greater vegetable and fruit intake and less reliance on convenience foods and processed foods (Hartmann 126). Cooking has also shown to reduce anxiety and attune us to the present moment (Day 227). Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the answer to the question: how can we find the time and money to cook? Several studies have been conducted on the barriers that hinder people from home-cooking. Julia Wolfson, researcher from the Department of Health Policy and Management of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and her colleagues studied the perceptions of cooking and factors related to home-cooking behavior. They discovered the key barriers to home-cooking: affordability, lack of time, and lack of enjoyment (Wolfson 146). Similarly, Fiona Lavelle, researcher for the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen’s University, and her colleagues found the same barriers as well as facilitators to home-cooking in their research. The two main facilitators include the desire to eat for health and well-being and creative inspiration (Lavelle 384). To summarize, while some are convinced that they must find time to cook because they desire to eat for health and well-being, others maintain that cooking simply is not worth the time, money, and effort. Time appears to be the

¹ There is much debate on what defines *home-cooking*. Perceptions range from all scratch cooking to anything made at home—even frozen macaroni and cheese (Wolfson 150). For the sake of this paper, home-cooking involves preparing and creating meals with basic, raw ingredients.

key issue. Recent findings described by Michael Pollan in his essay “Out of the Kitchen, onto the Couch” would question validity of the time barriers of Americans, however. He describes a reduction time of Americans on food preparation to less than thirty minutes per day, while at the same time Americans who “don’t have time to cook” spend an hour watching TV shows on Food Network (Wirzba 190). The problem here may not be time after all. It may be lack of effort.

The decline in home-cooking in America is something that should not be ignored. Obesity rates will only continue to rise as people are becoming reliant on convenience and ultra-processed ready-made foods. Fewer people have the skills to prepare foods from raw ingredients (Lavelle 384). In his article “The Joy of Cooking,” Joseph Campisi, Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, acknowledges that this reliance on convenience foods has “affected our relationship to food itself, to our natural surroundings, to others, and to our own selves” (414). People desire meals that are easy and fast, whether it means popping something in the microwave or waiting in the drive through line.

In hopes of sparking interest in home-cooking, members of the Slow Food Movement² (SFM) have tried to draw others to the quiet material pleasures beyond the gustatory ones that arise from eating: the tactile pleasures of cooking. They believe that there is a “personal satisfaction one may feel in baking bread” that ultimately contributes to “a life of long lasting enjoyment” (Campisi 416). The

² The Slow Food Movement (SFM) began in 1986 by Carlo Petrini who was haunted by the appearance of countless fast food restaurants in Italy. The SFM articulates three main principles of what food should be: good (tasty), clean (environmentally sustainable), and fair (socially sustainable) (Petrini 93).

movement's purpose is to slow down our fast-paced lives in order to have a deeper appreciation for our world, its food, and its farmers.

While this movement may spark some interest in people and holds some truths, there is an even stronger religious appeal of home-cooking and eating that the Slow Food Movement neglects, specifically Christian appeal. Before their differences are named, their similarities must be addressed. Like the SFM, Christians seek to slow down their lives and be present. Many of them also understand that food is more than fuel. Likewise, Christians care for the environment and their neighbors. The difference lies in what is at the core of these beliefs. For the SFM, the world and the self are at the center. For Christians, God is the center of it all. Christians slow down to be present with the Lord, to stand in awe and wonder of His Creation, and to give Him thanks. Idolizing food and the creation of it can be an issue of the SFM. Eating and cooking with a Christian mind set seek to glorify God, not man. A theology of cooking from a Christian perspective is necessary in order to call Christians to cook. I would like to present a way to think about cooking from a Christian lens. Cooking holds more than physical and psychological benefits. When we cook as Christians, we enter into a spiritual realm where we acknowledge the sacredness of food and its beauty from our Creator. Essentially, cooking is a spiritual practice.

FOOD AS A GIFT

Although not all Christians think alike, it is easy to fall into a mind set where food is secular. Norman Wirzba, Professor of Theology and Ecology at Duke University, and author of *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, considers theologian Fyodor Dostoyevsky's perspective on the possibility of a "spiritually dead" world. It is one in which people "view the world (and our food) as consisting of material entities or varied chemical nutrients." In this view, our world is "essentially bereft of all goodness and beauty" (Dostoyevsky qtd in Wirzba 30). This view easily takes hold as the nature and "pace of much contemporary life [make] it less likely that people will receive the mystery of food or receive it as a precious gift and sign of God's sustaining care" (Wirzba 2). In this fast-paced world, everything is at our fingertips, including food. "Grab and go" meals are hindering our reflection and gratitude for what is before us: God's creation. When we shift our perceptions of "food as fuel" to "food as a gift," we recognize God's blessings for us.

Eating and preparing food is a sacramental act. When we eat sacramentally, we acknowledge that our nourishment in eating has life-giving power from God. In order for

food to be considered sacred, we must consider the way God views His Creation. In her essay "The Artist and God," Dorothy Donnelly, a theologian, claims that "everything in this world has a sacred meaning." This is because "God saw that *all* the things he had made were good" (Donnelly 418). This means that every fruit, every vegetable, and every animal that we eat is sacred—God created it. Though we often view the origins of our food as from farm to store to table, the ultimate source is from the very hands of our Creator. Christian environmentalist Paul Tillich also professes the sacramentality of all things. He furthers this idea by adding that "the material element is never arbitrary: the whole sacrament [...] is a product of the 'intrinsic power' of the material element and the acts of Divine will" (Pihkala 70). To summarize this, God had a purpose for everything He created; His Creation is an action of sacramental power.

Furthermore, we must exercise food as a sacramental gift with care. Wirzba, urges us to "knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, [and] reverently" eat sacramentally. If we instead eat "ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration" (1). Too often we eat quickly—without gratitude. Food is much more than a matter of desire, convenience, taste, or fuel: it is a gift of God's grace. The Psalmist urges us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8, ESV). By properly designating our food as a gift from God, we will abandon our inability to be self-sufficient. Our rumbling stomachs daily demonstrate that we "are not self-subsisting gods" (Wirzba 2). We have to rely on God and His Creation to live. Eating can be an intimate and pleasing way in which we acknowledge that it is God who daily blesses us with food.

PARTAKING IN THE BEAUTY OF GOD'S CREATION

Cooking is an art form. It is a way to celebrate God as the Creator. In order to understand this, we must first recognize God's beautiful Creation for He is worthy to receive "glory, honor and power, for [He] created all things and by [His] will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:11, ESV). Beauty encompasses us—in the extraordinary and the seemingly mundane. Jerram Barrs, founder and resident scholar of the Francis Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Theological Seminary, discusses the vastness of beauty in his book *Echoes of Eden*. He believes "there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty." In this, it is "impossible" not to be "overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory" (Barrs 13). There is something absolutely breathtaking about God's Creation. How powerful and beautiful is it that

God's divine, invisible hand, created visible things (Hebrews 11:3, ESV). God's handiwork is here to be noticed. Luci Shaw, Christian poet and author, recognizes the beauty of God's Creation and urges readers to pay attention to it in her chapter "Beauty and the Creative Impulse" of *The Christian Imagination*. She insists that "to show indifference to beauty is an insult to its Creator" (Shaw 90). Beauty is often overlooked in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives. We walk around, oblivious to the wonder surrounding us. God's Creation should not be overlooked. Acknowledging and valuing beauty are ways to celebrate His great works. When we eat and cook then, we must see our food as sourced from His Creation.

One may ask *how do we cook for the glory of God?* The answer to this question begins with understanding that God created us to be artists. We were made to bear God's image (Genesis 1:27 ESV). We therefore have the ability to imagine and create like God has the power to. Some may be quick to point out that cooking will then cause us to value ourselves and our own abilities in what we create over God. Donnelly acknowledges the French novelist and art theorist, André Malraux's perspective on "creative power." To him, "creative power" produces "self-determination" and creates a "superior man" (Malraux qtd. in Donnelly 415). Here, glory for a creation is given to man, not to God. This is not how we should view our artistry as cooks nor is it how God intends us to use our creative capacities. As Barrs explains, we are not made to be creators of beauty but "sub-creators following after [our] Creator. The God who made all things made us to exercise dominion under him over this good creation" (99). Barrs describes the values of a true artist: "the true artist values something more than self. The true artist holds up a mirror to what God has made" (38). Instead of using our creative capacities to find power and marvel at our own artistry, we must employ our creative capacities to be disciples. When we cook as disciples, all glory of our creation extends to God, not to man. So, to answer the question, I will apply Christian scholar and editor of *The Christian Imagination*, Leland Ryken's words from his chapter "Thinking Christianly About Literature" to cooking. We can cook to glorify God "[b]y enjoying the beauty that human creativity has produced and recognizing God as the ultimate source of this beauty and creativity" (27). When we cook, we produce new meals with ingredients from our Creator. In this, we must not neglect God as the source of our new creation of food. Though stirred, kneaded, and baked into a new form, all of the ingredients within a meal are of God's. Our work is created on the basis of the great works He has already created—this is something to be celebrated.

COOKING: A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

With acknowledging food as sacramental and appreciating the beauty in God's Creation, cooking becomes a spiritual exercise. It is an exercise that allows us to be present with God's love. Cooking slows down our busy lives. Wirzba characterizes eating as a spiritual exercise in his book: "[Eating]," he writes, gives us "the opportunity to see, receive, and taste the world with spiritual depth" (29). Thus far, Christian conversation about food has focused on eating. Eating as a spiritual exercise can be applied to cooking. When we prepare meals, we can fall more deeply in the presence of God. Cooking can quiet our minds and open our hearts to receive and experience His Holy Presence. When we cook, we can pay more attention to many ingredients sourced from God's Creation. Each ingredient holds much detail. Barrs urges us to take a closer view of the facets: "If we look under a microscope at anything God has made to see it in all its detail, we will discover that the more we see, the more amazing is his creative genius. A closer view enables us to see new and unimagined beauties and infinitesimally tiny wonders" (14). We, as cooks, can pay attention to the smell, the tensions, the tastes, the textures, the lines, and the shapes of our food and marvel at His wondrous handiwork. From early on in the Bible, small details mattered. God called His people to partake in the preparation of food with specific, extensive guidelines. This is seen in Exodus 12 as God gives Moses precise instructions for how the people of Israel are to cook the Passover meal and smear the blood of the lamb on the door posts: "Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat" (Exodus 12:7-8 ESV). The cooking of the lamb was a spiritual exercise of the Israelites that saved them from Pharaoh's wrath. The meal signified God's wonderful presence, power, and promise to keep them safe. When Jewish people prepare the Passover meal, it serves as a reminder of God's covenant with them. So too, when we prepare a meal, it should be a reminder of God's commitment to us. When we are reminded of God's commitment to us, the process of cooking becomes more meaningful; it is no longer perceived as a chore. Cooking as a spiritual exercise brings us into the presence of God and we get a taste of His love and care for us.

There is much spiritual involvement in cooking. Cooking fixes our eyes on God as the Creator of all things and our hearts are filled with great joy and gratitude. If we continue to eat without acknowledging and thanking God,

we are taking His Creation for granted. When we rely on convenience foods, we are not experiencing the beauty of His handiwork nor our calling to be artists of His Creation. While there is a strong religious motivation for home-cooking, the reality is that even with the spiritual lens, some people simply do not enjoy cooking and are not willing to put in the time and effort. One of the participants in Lavelle's study on cooking perceptions highlights this view: "[Cooking from scratch] is a lot of time and effort and if you're already hungry and you're standing there smelling the food and stuff, that's a nightmare so if it can't be prepped and cooked within 30 to 40 minutes I won't bother and it's the same at weekends" (Participant 2 qtd. by Lavelle 387). Though I concede that this participant's view on home-cooking is relatable to many people, I still insist that perspectives have the potential to change if they consider and more importantly *practice* cooking as a spiritual exercise. I am not aware of any research on how the Christian perspective of cooking can change people's habits and perceptions. A study on this may draw more interest and spark families to cook at home. In examining this, it is necessary that participants are not only informed of how cooking can be a spiritual exercise, but they also must practice the exercise for themselves. Only here, can we demonstrate impact of cooking with a spiritual focus. By viewing and practicing cooking in a spiritual light, we will grow deeper in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. We will use cooking as a time to commune with Him, to create from His Creation, to admire His beauty within our food, and to give thanks for the food that nourishes and blesses us. While some may still argue that they do not have the time to cook, I would challenge these people to consider their daily habits and ask them: "are you willing to *make* time to honor and glorify the Lord?" Maybe time spent watching Food Network can be replaced with time in our own kitchens, cooking and communing alongside our Heavenly Father. "Bless the Lord, O my soul! [...] You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Psalm 104:14-15, ESV).

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