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**CONVEYING CHRISTIAN VALUES THROUGH DIET:
A CASE FOR VEGETARIANS**

by

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Introduction

Diet plays a major role in the health of individuals since you are what you eat. Different people choose different foods to form their diet depending on their cultural backgrounds, upbringing among other factors. A good diet is important for health as it gives good nourishment to our bodies. People should eat to live and not live to eat, hence the choice of a good diet is of paramount importance. Our bodies are the temples of the Lord and should not be defiled in anyway by what we put in it, be it in terms of food or drink for it is written, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). It is also important to note that there is an eloquent connection between dietary habits and physical, as well as spiritual health.

There are two major classes of diets that one can choose from: the plant-based diet (vegetarian) and the meat-diet. A vegetarian diet has over the years been recommended by scientists as being superior. There are variations to vegetarian diet; there are strict vegetarians or vegans who exclude animal flesh and animal products from their diet, lacto-ovo-vegetarians who include eggs and dairy products in their diet, lacto-vegetarians who exclude eggs but include dairy products in their diet, and ovo-vegetarians who exclude dairy products but include eggs in their diet.

This essay attempts to give clear Biblical evidences that support the importance of a vegetarian diet as well as identify several Christian values that can be conveyed through a vegetarian diet.

God's Ideal Diet

God's first dietary law was strictly vegetarian: God said, "I have provided all kinds of grains, and all kinds of fruits for you to eat" (Gen.1:29). Generally, this diet consists of nuts, grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables. These foods are still the most beneficial to us. Everyday discoveries in science point to these foods as superior to others for human health and well-being. Seldom does one ever hear a negative report on any of these and if we do, perhaps the report is questionable and not the foods from these groups. Shipton (2000) points out that disease outbreaks are being increasingly associated with plant-based products but on the account of the ways in which they are produced, processed, and marketed.

White (1938) in *Counsels on Diet and Food* states that "God gave our first parents the food He designed that the race should eat. It was contrary to His will to have the life of any creature taken" (p.81). She continues to say that "Again and again I have been shown that God is bringing His people back to his original design, that is, not to subsist upon the flesh of dead animals. He would have us teach people a better way..." (p.82).

Man's diet was modified after the fall to include vegetables and herbs. The modified food groups include every tree yielding seed e.g apples, avocados, grapefruit, pecans,

papaya, etc; every plant yielding seed e.g tomatoes, beans, lentils, wheat, berries, squash, etc and; plants of the field e.g greens, onions, parsley, cabbage, celery, etc.

The first place the Bible speaks about eating meat is after the floods. This was a temporary solution to man's food problem because all plants had been destroyed as a result of the flood. Gen. 9:2-4 says,

“All the animals, birds, and fish will live in fear of you. They are placed under your power. Now you can eat them, as well as green plants, I give them all to you for food.”

However, the Bible is not silent on which animals should be eaten. It gives a clear distinction between the clean animals to be eaten and the unclean animals which should not be eaten as recorded in Leviticus 11:

“... Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: ³ You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud. There are some that only chew the cud or only have a split hoof, but you must not eat them...

... 'Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales. ¹⁰ But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales—whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water—you are to detest...

... 'These are the birds you are to detest and not eat because they are detestable: the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, ¹⁴ the red kite, any kind of black kite, ¹⁵ any kind of raven, ¹⁶ the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, ¹⁷ the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, ¹⁸ the white owl, the desert owl, the osprey, ¹⁹ the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat...

... 'All flying insects that walk on all fours are to be detestable to you. ²¹ There are, however, some winged creatures that walk on all fours that you may eat: those that have jointed legs for hopping on the ground...

... 'These are the regulations concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves in the water and every creature that moves about on the ground. ⁴⁷ You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten" (NIV).

However, a warning is given concerning the consumption of meat. Genesis 9:4 says “the one thing you must not eat is meat with blood still in it; I forbid this because the life is in the blood.” Palacio and Monica (1997) list meat, poultry, fish, and eggs as particularly hazardous foods that require a lot of precaution (high temperature in preparation) in their preparation so as not to cause food borne illnesses (p.69).

Vegetarianism is considered a healthy, viable diet. The American Dietetic Association and the Dietitians of Canada have found a properly planned vegetarian diet to satisfy the nutritional needs for all stages of life (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/vegetarian>).

Health Consciousness

Currently more and more people are becoming health conscious and trying to make healthy food choices that are free from animal origin. Ludington and Hans (2000) allude to the fact that vegetarians are sprouting all over with more than 16 million in the US alone. Vegetarians, who were once stereotyped as food fanatics or leftover hippies, are now widely respected (p.182). They say that food fanatics of yesterday have become today’s trendsetters... Today vegetarianism is increasingly viewed as being smart, healthy, caring, and a responsible choice (p.112).

Marshall William H. (1972) concurs with Ludington when he states that the American consumer today is convinced that there is a definite connection between what he eats and how healthy he is, and he makes use of what knowledge he possesses in his food choice (p.90). As a result, there are lots of information on “healthy foods”, some of which may

be true, others false. Fanija Samak (2004) in euromonitor.com points out that consumers have been inundated with news about food related health crises around the world, leaving them feeling insecure about the quality and safety of the food products they purchase. More so, changing lifestyles and work patterns, as well as rising levels of disposable income, have resulted in more diet and health conscious consumers, which has led to a greater demand for healthier foods in recent years.

Various animal food safety scares have risen over recent years. According to research findings, these scares have included Avian influenza in poultry, foot-and-mouth disease in sheep, PCBs in farmed salmon, mercury in fish, generally high dioxin concentrations in animal products, and artificial growth hormones, antibiotics or BSE, also known as Mad Cow Disease, in cows. According to various organisations, Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease in humans is strongly linked with exposure to the BSE agent that has been found in beef. Toxins such as lead and mercury can bioaccumulate in animal products in higher concentrations than what is considered safe. These scares have led many people to opt for vegetarian diets.

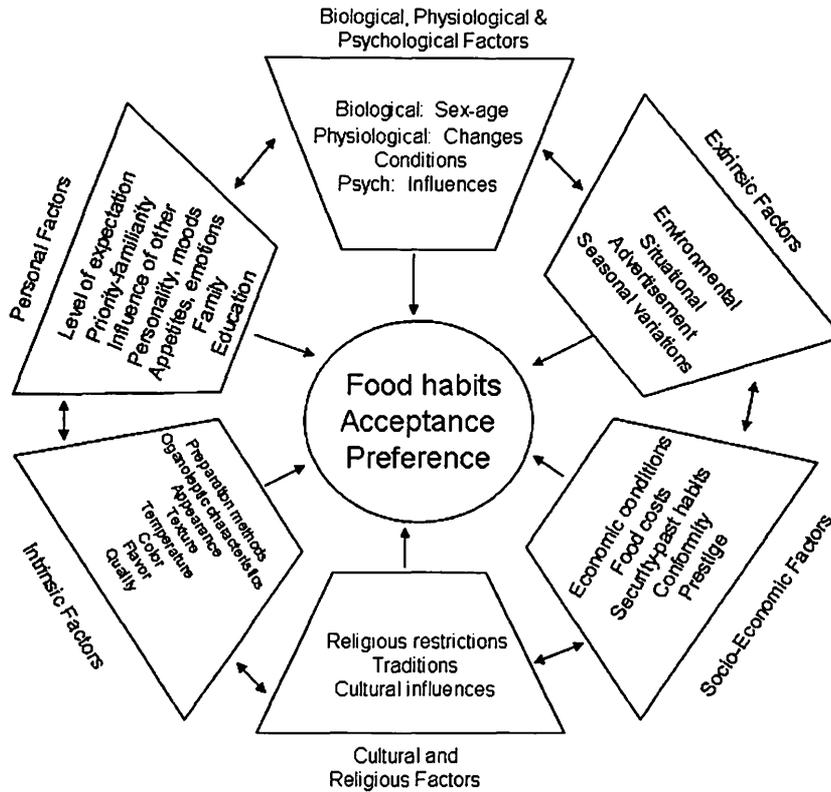
Additionally, our markets today are flooded with varied types of foodstuffs ranging from unmatched abundance due to improved technology in food production to genetically modified foods. Today, those who would be disciplined in diet face tremendous obstacles. The food industry has thrived by producing addictive albeit unhealthy products. Grocery store shelves are filled with delicacies that are *a delight to the eyes*. Through indulgence, many of us have become subject to our inherited and conditioned

unnatural cravings. Several factors have been cited as influencing food choices among different people. These factors include:

- Taste, texture and appearance.
- Economics - The cost of food affects what we eat.
- Our early experiences with food
- Habits
- Culture
- Advertising
- Social factors

Factors Affecting Food Habits, Acceptance, and Preferences

Food preferences is the selection of food items from among a variety of acceptable foods while food habits refer to the way in which individuals, in response to social and cultural pressures, select, consume, and utilize the available food supply. Khan (1998) suggests that food habits and food acceptances are learned, acquired, and finally become a part of the self and that several influences start acting on food preferences at birth and continues to operate throughout life. It has been noticed that **we eat what we like, but** it goes beforehand that **we like what we eat hence we** develop a taste for the foods that are familiar. According to Khan, several factors affect food habits, acceptance and preferences as shown in the figure below:



Appetite also plays a major role in the kinds of foods that people eat. White says that appetite is one of the strongest temptations that man has to meet. This is because sin came into the world as a result of appetite when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. She says “As our first parents lost Eden through indulgence of appetite, our only hope of regaining Eden is through the firm denial of appetite...” (Healthful Living, p.74).

Since there are several factors that affect food choice, it is important that our food choices are influenced by what was created for man since this was the best.

Meat vs Non Meat Diet

Importance of Plant-based Diet

The importance of plant-based diet cannot be overestimated. It revives and vitalizes our system so as to do our best for God. Furthermore, as opposed to plant-based diet, animal diet excites the animal instincts and the baser passions that inhibit or retard growth of the fruits of the Spirit. White states that the use of meat excites the animal propensities to increased activity, and strengthens the animal passions. When the animal propensities are increased, the intellectual and moral powers are decreased. The use of the flesh of animals tends to cause a grossness of body, and benumbs the fine sensibilities of the mind (Testimonies, II, 63). The Bible also gives an account of Daniel and his friends who refused to eat the royal food at the king's court and instead ate vegetables and drank water, eventually they looked ten times better than those who ate the royal food. The Bible records thus:

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself...¹²Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink... Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat... As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams... And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm” (Daniel 1:8-20 KJV).

White further states that all the elements of nutrition are contained in fruits, vegetables and grains and when these are well prepared, they impart nourishment to the body, and

give a power of endurance and vigor of intellect that are not produced by a stimulating diet (*Healthful Living*, p.78). She asserts that,

“Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank; for he knew that such a diet would not strengthen his physical powers or increase his mental capability. He would not use wine, nor any other unnatural stimulant; he would do nothing to becloud his mind; and God gave him knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom; and also understanding in all visions and dreams...” (Counsels on Diet and Health, p.154).

According to Sivanada (1957), the noble understanding that underlies the practice of vegetarianism is the fine fruit of enlightened thinking; it is an active evidence of the growing purity of the nature of individuals practicing it and a sign of the operation in their lives, of the endearing, extra-social, and unifying characteristics that are conducive to spiritual realization. The practice of broad based vegetarianism, leads the consciousness of man into an intimate experience of the divine foundations of all forms of life; it is this experience alone that can become the bedrock of world-unity, world-harmony, world-happiness, and world-progress.

The original diet also prevents the risk of suffering from many maladies such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis, arthritis, and obesity. Ludington and Hans (2000) indicate that the average risk of heart disease for one eating meat, eggs, and dairy products is 45%. The risk of one who leaves off meat is 15%. However, the coronary risk of a vegetarian who leaves off meat, eggs, and dairy products drops to only 4% (p.182). They quote an editorial in the Journal of the American Medical Association which commented that “a total vegetarian diet can prevent up to 90% of our strokes and 97% of our heart attacks” (p.182).

The following are listed by Ludington and Hans (2000) as some of the health benefits of plant-based diet:

- Greater longevity;
- Fewer heart attacks and strokes;
- Fewer weight problems;
- Lower cholesterol;
- Lower blood pressure;
- Less diabetes
- Fewer hemorrhoids, less diverticular disease, and good regularity;
- Less cancer of the breast, prostate, and colon;
- Stronger bones, less osteoporosis;
- Fewer stones of the kidney and gallbladder, and less kidney disease, gouty and arthritis;
- It is fun, rewarding, and cost effective (p.111)

Khan (1998) adds that grain products, vegetable, and fruits provide vitamins, mineral, and complex carbohydrates (starch and dietary fiber) and that eating a variety of fiber-containing foods helps reduce chronic constipation, diverticular diseases, and hemorrhoids, and may lower the risk of heart disease and some cancers. In general it helps maintain efficient bowel movement (p.7). Additionally, plant based diet is environment friendly. Vegetarianism favors the environment in that the meat-centered diets involve extensive soil depletion and erosion, air and water pollution related to the

widespread production and use of pesticides, fertilizer, and other chemicals, and the destruction of tropical rain forests and other habitats. Vegetarian diet also leads to good health. Walter Willett, MD, professor of epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health states that higher intakes of fruits, vegetables, dietary fiber, antioxidants and phytochemicals from vegetarian diets than from nonvegetarian diets may contribute to vegetarians' good health (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/vegetarian>).

Recent research has demonstrated the importance of protective antioxidant nutrients in the diet found in fresh fruit and vegetables. These antioxidant nutrients include the beta-carotene form of vitamin A, vitamin C and E. Many researchers now believe that these nutrients play a major role in reducing the risk of chronic ailments such as heart disease and cancer. A high consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables is a benefit of vegetarian diets. All these factors contribute to the proven health of vegetarians although it is difficult to account for the exact contribution of each nutrient (<http://purifymind.com/Vege.htm>).

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Research has also found vegetarian diet to be therapeutic as patients are sometimes advised to adhere to it. Vegetarian diets have been used in the treatment of various illnesses, including rheumatoid arthritis and nephrotic syndrome among others. It has also been found that vegetarian diet also increases intelligence quotient (IQ).

Importance of Meat-based Diet

Meat-based diet is important for several reasons:

- Serves as a source of high quality protein which a single vegetarian food is not able to provide.
- Contains very high quantities of iron compared with plant-based diet.
- Phosphorus content gets much more easily absorbed than that which is present in cereals and legumes (plant-based diets).
- Main source of the intake of vitamin B₁₂.

However, meat-based diet does not contain any kind of fiber, is very high in saturated fats, thus is recommended to be eaten in moderate quantities (60-75 grams per day and not more than three time a week). Meat-based diets are also linked with the outbreaks of food-borne illness. Shipton (2007) indicates that the association between food borne disease and meat eating is strong. The most spectacular outbreaks of disease and deaths have usually been associated with foods that are not of plant origin.

Additionally, meat-based diet has several effects. Research shows that the meat-based diet is bad for the environment, aggravates global hunger, brutalizes animals and compromises health. There is mounting evidence that meat-based diets are unhealthy, and that just about every aspect of meat production—from grazing-related loss of cropland and open space, to the inefficiencies of feeding vast quantities of water and grain to cattle in a hungry world, to pollution from “factory farms”—is an environmental disaster with wide and sometimes catastrophic consequences (<http://e-magazine.com>).

For instance,

- It takes 2,500 gallons of water, 12 pounds of grain, 35 pounds of topsoil and the energy equivalent of one gallon of gasoline to produce one pound of feedlot beef.
- 70% of US grain production is fed to live stock.
- 5 million acres of rain forest are felled every year in South and Central America alone to create cattle pasture.
- Roughly 20% of all currently threatened and endangered species in the US are harmed by livestock grazing
- Animal agriculture is a chief contributor to water pollution. America's farm animals produce 10 times the waste produced by the human population.
- There are sound reasons for health, ethically, and ecologically to be vegetarian. There is nothing strange about being vegetarian. www.diet-and-health.net

Moreover, Azadbakht and Ahmad found out that increased red meat consumption is significantly associated with greater risk of metabolic syndrome and inflammation [presence of abdominal adiposity (waist circumference > 88cm), low serum HDL – C (<1.29mmol/L), high serum TG concentration (>1.65mmol/L), elevated blood pressure (>130/85mm Hg), and abnormal glucose homeostasis (>6.05mmol/L)] (J. Nutr.139).

According to Shipton (2000), the scientific community has come to realize that the vegetarian lifestyle has much to recommend it. Studies commenced 50 years ago have shown rather convincingly that a plant-based diet leads to a healthier and longer life than

one based on a meat diet. He says that according to the World Health Organization, by the year 2020, two-thirds of the global incidence of disease will be attributable to chronic non-communicable diseases, most of which will be caused by over nutrition – eating animal products and increased consumption of refined foods and fats.

Values Taught Through a Non-meat Diet

- **Balance:** The plant-based diet is able to meet all the nutritional requirements needed by the body without necessarily consuming meat as opposed to meat eating in which one must eat some vegetables in order to obtain all the necessary nutrients.
- **Respect for life:** Plant-based diet is what God intended for man to eat at creation White (1997) in *Counsels on Diet and Food* states that “it was contrary to God’s will to have the life of any creature taken” (p.81) and so with a vegetarian diet no life will be taken.
- **Long life:** Research has proved that plant-based diets lead to long life. Biblically people lived over 900 years when man consumed vegetables only. The life expectancy began to come down after the fall when man was allowed to eat meat. Today life expectancy is averagely at 65 and it is even lower in some countries.
- **Obedience:** By eating plant-based diets we obey God’s instructions concerning what he intended man to eat. At creation God said, “I have provided all kinds of grains, and all kinds of fruits for you to eat” (Gen.1:29). Secondly, one of the commandments states that you shall not murder/kill. Vegetarian diet does not involve the killing of any of God’s creatures.

- God's creation vs evolution: through plant-based diet we can appreciate God's creation. When God finished creation he said that everything that he had created was good and he created food for each one of them. This means God created everything and nothing evolved.
- Witnessing: through plant-based diet one's health becomes better physically and this also leads to wellness in other aspects of life. Man's mind does not get clogged up as it does with meat-based diet and this enables man to serve God better hence becoming better witnesses.
- Stewardship: At the end of creation God put man to be in charge of all that was created. Animals too were to be cared for by man and so when man eats plant-based diet, no animal life will be taken hence man will become a good steward of what was placed upon his care by the creator.
- Kindness to animals/mercy: Proverbs 12:10 teaches that "The righteous person considers the life of his beast." The Psalmist states that, "The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His creatures" (Psalms 145:9). Concern for animals is even expressed in the Ten Commandments. Many Biblical laws command proper treatment of animals
- Happiness: Vegetarian diet is associated with reduction of morbidity and when one is healthy, he becomes happy. This is why in the Bible, Jeremiah records that God has good plans to make us happy hence He created the right food which when we consume, most of the diseases will be gone and we will be happy.

- Patience and endurance: Developing a taste for vegetarianism is not easy and takes long especially for someone who has been used to a meat diet. It needs patience and endurance for one to completely change their diet.
- Self control: Since the animal instincts which inhibit or retard the growth of the fruits of the Spirit are not found in the plant food, vegetarians tend to be calm and once a person is able to tame the appetite, he is able to exercise self control in other aspects of life as well.

Conclusion

With so much evidence about making the right choice in what you should eat and drink and how diet affects our health, it is only reasonable to give oneself the benefit of a sound nutritional advantage by choosing the vegetarian diet.

At creation God provided food which was good for man and would not harm him in anyway. The Bible states “For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jer.29:11).

From this passage it is clear that when God designed food for man, He knew what kind of food was best for him - the vegetarian diet since it would make him happy and not harm him. Today scientific evidence is proving that plant-based diet is superior to meat diet. Consumption of plant-based diet is associated with lack of or reduction in the occurrence of many chronic diseases whereas consumption of meat diet is associated with occurrence

of many chronic diseases. Plant-based diets are also therapeutic hence are used to cure a number of diseases.

This paper has attempted to highlight the several ways in which the vegetarian diet is superior to the meat diet and has enumerated several values which can be conveyed through the vegetarian diet. Let us strive to get back to the original diet that was designed by our Maker.

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