Practicing with Paul

Reflections on Paul and the Practices of Ministry
in Honor of Susan G. Eastman

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in celebration of her sixty-fifth birthday.

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11

Christlike Feasting: Attentiveness, Solidarity, and Self-Restraint in Romans

Presian R. Burroughs

Friendships commonly deepen around food. People bond over meals while they discuss the latest issues, share personal stories, and laugh over common foibles. Their connections strengthen through the breaking of bread. These bonds can grow stronger and extend to even more people as Christians partake of broken bread during Eucharist. Friendships are formed and strengthened in the presence of good food and the good Creator.

When I was a seminary student and then her first doctoral advisee, I had the privilege of enjoying several meals with Susan Eastman, and I offer this essay in her honor. During those meals together, we would give thanks to our Creator for the food before us and enter a sacred space of conversation and edification. Because of Susan's pastoral *and* academic wisdom, I was the primary beneficiary of our lunchtime fellowship. She would listen to me reflect on my emerging sense of vocation, my developing grasp of Paul's thought, my concern over how to bring Pauline studies into conversation with other disciplines (especially ecology), and my questions about the finer points of teaching and grading, and she would graciously offer her insights. Even though our respective roles conferred unequal amounts of power, our meals together revealed our fundamental solidarity—no matter our differences, we both depended on nourishment from the Creator and God's creation and benefitted from mutual encouragement and love.

Sharing meals together also played an important role in establishing solidarity between diverse peoples in first century Rome. Although Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome addresses a wide variety of theological and practical issues, incompatible eating practices that threatened to divide the Roman churches take center stage in chapters 14–15. Seeking the unity of all God's people (whether Law-observant or not), Paul directs the Christians

not only to continue expressing gratitude to God for their food but also to exercise self-restraint in their food choices so that they, like Christ, might truly walk in love and not "destroy one for whom Christ died" (Rom 14:15b, author's translation).

Paul's call to Christlike feasting holds relevance for God's people today in ways that extend beyond questions of Law observance. We live in a time when most of our foods are grown by agricultural practices that pollute soils, waters, and air through the use of toxic chemicals and climate-warming fossil fuels. These practices—especially the use of pesticides and herbicides—diminish the health of farmworkers and consumers, people for whom Christ died. Without even intending to do so, we daily engage in eating habits that injure the human and nonhuman creation that Jesus came to liberate. This situation of undue destruction calls for our attention, and Paul's theology of creation articulated in Romans invites us to reorient our practices in solidarity with the suffering of all creation, to live in gratitude for creation's innumerable gifts, and to exercise self-restraint so that its suffering might be reduced.

When we read Romans with an eye toward our current ecological situation, we find that this letter provides a guide for navigating many of the difficult eco-ethical decisions we face today. Chapter 1 directs us to attend to creation's witness to God and to live in gratitude for the gifts of God's creation. Chapter 8 leads us to recognize the ways in which human sin negatively affects creation but also how human righteousness—especially of Jesus Christ and ultimately of God's resurrected and glorified children—will liberate creation from ongoing destruction. Chapters 14–15, finally, teach us to practice Christlike feasting by expressing gratitude to God for our food and exercising loving self-restraint so that we might live as people who support the flourishing, rather than the destruction, of God's human and nonhuman creation.

Romans 1: Proper Attentiveness

At the beginning of his letter to Rome, a missive in which he elaborates the theology and practical implications of God's universal gospel, Paul explains that people fail to glorify and give thanks to the Creator God (Rom 1:21–23, 25). He states,

> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. (1:19–21)[1]

Here in chapter 1, Paul acknowledges God as the Creator and points to problems that exist between creatures and Creator. If God's human creatures maintained a proper relationship with the Creator, they would both glorify God and thank God for the gifts of creation. Glorifying God, on the one hand, would involve a humble acknowledgment of the complete otherness of God, the distinction between God and creation.[2] Sincere thanksgiving to God, on the other hand, would recognize that God has given good gifts without which life could not survive.

Undergirding Paul's indictment of humanity stands a particular theology of creation that recognizes a dynamic relationship between God and all that is not God, what I am calling *creation*.[3] This relationship moves in two directions simultaneously, both of which highlight the close connection between the Creator and the creation.

In the first, initiating movement of a Pauline theology of creation, God directs divine energies toward creation.[4] As hinted in Rom 1:20 and poetically portrayed in Gen 1–2, God made the creation, speaking the creation and all living things into existence (according to the first creation account in Gen 1:1—2:3) and fashioning humanity out of the fertile soil, apparently with God's own hands (according to the second creation account in Gen 2:7). God also draws near to the creation through self-disclosure and allows the creation itself to manifest some aspects of the Creator God, in particular God's power and divine nature (Rom 1:19–20). This is not to say that creation reveals the full knowledge of God to sentient beings, but certainly "God has revealed something of himself in and through the created world."[5] Standing behind Paul's words in this passage is God's ongoing care for the

1. All scriptural quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

2. By glorifying God, as Robert Jewett explains, people acknowledge "the relative status of God and humankind. This expression differentiates true worship from the worship of the images of humans, birds, and serpents (1:23)" (Jewett, *Romans*, 157).

3. Although this chapter often refers to humans and "creation" as if these were two distinct groups, we must always recall that humans too are creation. At times, I will highlight this fact by using the phrase "nonhuman creation" in order to describe those created things that are not human beings.

4. Drawing upon the rich theological insights of the Orthodox tradition, Norman Wirzba describes God's energies as "the divine operations that go forth from God and communicate God in the world. These energies are not creatures but God himself (though not according to God's substance)," (Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation*, 81).

5. Matera, *Romans*, 49.

creation. From beginning to end, the Bible depicts God as the loving and creating Provider, who sustains, renews, and directs creation (Ps 104:30; Job 38:41). Fundamental to a Pauline theology of creation, then, is the recognition that God is intimately involved in the creation.

The second movement within a Pauline theology of creation is creation's response, testifying to God's existence and—at least among sentient beings like humans—glorifying God for God's being. God has created the world in such a way as to display God's "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom 1:20; see also Ps 19:1; 97:6). The power of the natural world reflects God's own unbounded power and invites people to worship the One who is other than creation. As sentient beings, we humans may perceive from the wonders of creation that a powerful, divine Creator is present. This is not to say that through the creation people come to know the fullness of God's redeeming love, which is revealed in God's covenant with Israel and the renewed covenant through Jesus Christ.[6] Yet, Paul suggests that through creation itself people can know God as the generous Creator to whom they ought to render thanks (Rom 1:21; 14:6). Gratitude to God for the gifts of the earth, therefore, is always appropriate.

Unfortunately, rather than feasting their eyes on the magnificence of creation and thereby recognizing the magnificence of the Creator, people often consume creation and forget the Creator. Human sin distorts and misappropriates the creation's revelatory testimony about God's power and divinity (1:20–23). Perception—or, more rightly, misperception—is at the root of the problem since people perceive creation with a view toward satisfying selfish appetites.[7] Thus, people not only neglect the Creator God by failing to "honor him as God or give thanks to him" (1:21), but they also misconstrue creation itself. This, according to Paul, erroneously leads them into making created things into idols or gods. People "worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator" (1:25, NET), because they imposed upon creation inordinate expectations, assuming somehow that

6. Keck, *Romans*, 63; Jewett, *Romans*, 154–5; Dunn, *Romans*, 57–58; and Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 105.

7. Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation*, 87–94. Influenced by the ascetic traditions of Christian monasticism, Wirzba describes the ways in which sinful human passions distort our vision of and consequent relationships with creation: "Asceticism is all about attending to customary ways of approaching others that lead to distortion because what we see is dominated by the anxiety or hubris or insecurity we so often feel" (ibid., 89). In order to counteract and correct this distortion, we must engage in a rigorous process of self-examination (with the assistance and encouragement of a community) (ibid.). This process "begins with attention to how personal ambition, fear, and boredom get in the way of seeing things for what they are, that is, expressions of God's love, and as such, the material manifestations of God's goodness and delight" (ibid., 91).

created things—whether people, animals, or inanimate objects—would deliver God-sized blessings, meaning, and results.[8] People no longer directed their adoration to the eternal God—"from [whom] and through [whom] and to [whom] are all things" (11:36)—but instead adored and served perishable and transient things. In doing so, humans interrupted the generous movement of God toward creation and creation's own movement back to God by focusing their attention on the creation itself rather than directing their gaze *through creation* onto God.

One may be inclined to conclude that the solution to this problem is to concentrate all our attention on the Creator. Yet, because we are embodied beings that depend upon the creation for air, water, shelter, and nourishment, we cannot entirely disregard creation; we must continue to toil and till the ground in order to "eat of it all the days" of our lives (Gen 3:17). The dualism in which we isolate spiritual attention from physical necessities promises to lead our spirits and the well-being of creation into grave danger. In turning all of our spiritual energies entirely away from the creation in order to concentrate solely on the Creator, we are blinded to the fact that nonhuman creatures occupy their own, unique position of value in the Creator's economy. This position of value should shape our own response of gratitude and self-restraint. To concentrate simply upon God would ignore the value of that which God has made and the divinely derived claim that it has upon us. Elevating the self at the expense of other members of creation, such a posture would lead to mutual deterioration and destruction.

Proper worship of the Creator thus requires appropriate attentiveness to creation. This means we must remain alert to the ways in which creation points toward the gracious provision of our Creator even as we acknowledge creation's limits. As Paul's theology of creation continues to unfold in Romans we also find that appropriate attentiveness to creation means remaining alert to the ways in which our activities harm creation. In chapters 5 and 8, Paul directs our attention to the ways in which our lives and purposes intertwine with the whole creation, and he calls us to live in solidarity with creation's suffering as well as its liberation.

Romans 8: Solidarity

In Rom 8:19–22, Paul depicts creation as being subjected to frustration and enslaved to destruction. These undesirable circumstances result, in part, from human sin but will be rectified when God ultimately liberates humans

8. Ibid., 48–49.

from sin at their resurrection (8:19, 21, 23).[9] This way of portraying creation's current condition and its ultimate liberation indicates an important aspect of Paul's theology of creation. Paul suggests that humanity and creation stand in solidarity, solidarity of suffering as well as liberation. Solidarity expresses the fact that humanity and the rest of God's creation are interdependent; they currently share in suffering and ultimately will share in the experience of salvation. So intertwined are they that creation's suffering goes hand in hand with humanity's slavery to sin. Since human sin inflicts devastation and destruction on both human and nonhuman creation, people hold some responsibility for the unnecessary degradation of creation. Although Jesus rectifies this situation so that people may be liberated from sin's tyranny (6:12–13), the nonhuman creation's liberation will not be realized until the presence and possibility of sin are finally and fully removed.

The twin principles of solidarity and responsibility come embedded within Paul's larger explanation of how sinful people live into their redemption, the righteousness and abundant life that the indwelling Spirit makes possible (8:1–13). Yet, even within this abundant life, Paul acknowledges that God's people continue to suffer (8:17). This acknowledgement of suffering brings Paul to address the wider creation's suffering and also its hope of liberation. The nonhuman creation now experiences slavery to destruction but will ultimately be liberated into glory, as Paul explains in 8:19–23:

> For the creation expectantly awaits the apocalypse of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but on account of the one subjecting it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation is groaning and laboring together even till now. And not only creation but also those having the first fruits of the Spirit, we and they groan in ourselves while awaiting adoption, the redemption of our body. (Rom 8:19–23, author's translation)

The concepts of solidarity and human responsibility emerge in Paul's references to subjection, waiting, mutual groaning, and liberation, and they harken back to the earliest creation narratives in the Bible. To grasp the theology of creation at work here, one must unpack what Paul means by creation's subjection and its liberation.

9. While here I concentrate on the ways in which sin, death, resurrection, and the eschaton affect creation, Ann Jervis in chapter 6 considers these in relation to human beings, though without losing sight of the new creation. For further discussion of the new creation, also see Charles Campbell's chapter 3.

Solidarity of Subjection

Paul takes it for granted that the creation exists in a subjected state, noting, "The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but on account of the one subjecting it" (8:20, author's translation). But, one might ask, to whom was creation subjected? In the immediate context, the answer remains obscure. In order to fill in these gaps, we must look to the wider context of this letter, primarily chapter 5, where Paul reflects upon primeval history in order to contrast the failure of Adam with the fidelity of Christ.

According to Paul, Adam's fateful transgression introduced sin, condemnation, and death into human existence (5:12–21).[10] He explains, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (5:12). By referring to the Bible's first human, Adam, and describing the origin of sin in this way, Paul likely draws upon the creation account found in Gen 2–3. In this second creation account, God gives Adam (and thereafter Eve) one command to govern life in the Garden of Eden: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). Death, then, would be the consequence of transgression.[11] When Adam and Eve *do* transgress God's command by feasting upon the forbidden fruit, God consigns human beings to a mortal life that will no longer find any reprieve in the fruit of the tree of life (2:9).[12]

In addition to incurring the just sentence of death, humanity's sin blights the land and places people into an antagonistic relationship with the rest of creation. God declares to Adam:

> cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your

10. For an insightful examination of this passage and Paul's anthropology more generally, see Eastman, "Double Participation."

11. For a detailed explanation of Rom 5 in relation to the Genesis narrative, see Cranfield, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 269–81. Other Jewish interpreters around the time of Paul also drew from Gen 3 the inference that death was foreign to God's intended created order and that it intruded upon the human experience. For example, see Wis 2:24 and the Apocalypse of Moses 32 (ibid., 274). Whether death here refers to cessation of life that strikes any and all living things or humanity alone is up for debate.

12. Wenham, *Genesis*, 83. By being expelled from the garden of God and not having access to the tree of life, the man and woman "were no longer able to have daily conversation with God, enjoy his bounteous provision, and eat of the tree of life; instead they had to toil for food, suffer, and eventually return to the dust from which they were taken" (ibid., 74).

> face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen 3:17–19)

The once fruitful land now lies cursed because of human beings.[13] As a result, if people are to postpone the sentence of death, they must do so through the continuous, difficult toil needed to nourish earthly life.[14]

Together Rom 5 and Gen 2–3 teach that disobedience mars the human creature's experience in this world and blemishes the nonhuman creation itself. When read through the lens of Gen 2–3, Rom 8:20 suggests that human sin subjects the land (and the rest of creation) to frustration. The Greek term often translated in Rom 8:20 as "frustration" or "futility" names an "ineffectiveness of that which does not attain its goal."[15] That goal, according to the creation narratives of Genesis, entails being fruitful and multiplying (Gen 1:11, 22, 24, 28), basking in the presence of God (3:8), and producing plants that are "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (2:9). These ends are frustrated when human sin disrupts creation's ability to produce and support life. While it presumably matters little to the land whether it grows vegetables or thorn bushes, it matters greatly to humans.

The land's propensity to support the flourishing of thistles and thorns (in other words, plants that do not produce edible food for humans) rather than fruit trees, grains, and vegetables drastically changes its relationship with humans. In order to obtain nourishing foods, people must now tear at and cut into the once spontaneously fecund soil. They must dig water channels, create terraces, and rip down trees. Although these activities may bring about a certain kind of productivity, they are often attended by negative, unintended consequences, such as erosion, flooding, and the leeching of nutrients from the soil. Although God had placed humans in the garden in order to till and keep it so that they might experience solidarity and mutual flourishing (Gen 2:15), humans and the fertile soil now stand as adversaries. The solidarity they do share is no longer in flourishing but in suffering. Nevertheless, Paul suggests that another possibility exists, for the creation was subjected *in hope* (Rom 8:20).

13. Ibid., 82.

14. Wenham makes a similar connection: "Man's offense consisted of eating the forbidden fruit; therefore he is punished in what he eats. The toil that now lies behind the preparation of every meal is a reminder of the fall and is made the more painful by the memory of the ready supply of food within the garden (2:9)" (ibid., 82).

15. Cranfield, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 413.

Solidarity of Liberation

Suffering, frustration, and destruction are not the end of the story. Just as God would not leave sinful humanity to condemnation and death (Rom 5:8–10), neither does God abandon subjected creation to perpetual futility and destruction. Instead, God seeks to liberate creation from its current condition, as Paul indicates at 8:21: "the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (author's translation). Because this verse occurs in a passage with clear eschatological overtones,[16] the future tense of "liberate" and the reference to the glory of God's children indicate that creation's liberation will take place when God ultimately resurrects the children of God.[17] Prior to that eschatological event, the nonhuman creation waits for the fullness of God's salvation that has come in and through Jesus Christ. God's people wait too as they groan in solidarity with the nonhuman creation and eagerly anticipate the consummation of salvation (8:19, 22, 23). Just as human and nonhuman creation stand in solidarity in their suffering, they also experience solidarity in their hope of God's ultimate salvation. Yet, it is reasonable to wonder what the liberation of nonhuman creation entails.[18] Three elements in verse 21 suggest an answer: the meaning of destruction, the concept of liberation, and the implications of glorification.

Paul's description of creation being enslaved to *decay* (NRSV) may conjure visions of spinach leaves in the fridge growing slimier by the day. The underlying Greek term *phthora*, however, has a broader range of

16. See, for example, Paul's reference to the "apocalypse of the sons of God" and "the redemption of our bodies" in verses 19 and 23. Many thanks to Susan Eastman, who during my doctoral studies helped me understand the apocalyptic and eschatological nature of this passage while also grasping its relevance for daily life now.

17. See my dissertation, "Liberation in the Midst of Futility," where I provide more detailed explanation of this interpretation.

18. Most theological reflection focuses on the implications of God's salvation for humanity and only rarely considers the implications for the rest of creation. When we do consider creation's salvation it is usually to imagine what sort of environment we humans will enter at the resurrection. Even more than imagining bodily resurrection, many American Christians imagine they will become semi-angelic beings that fly up to heaven. God's salvation, in this depiction, entails whisking us away from embodied life on earth so that we can enjoy an ethereal existence with the angels and God. We find these mistaken perspectives especially in hymns. See, for example, the lyrics of the following United Methodist hymns: UMH 528, "Nearer, My God, to Thee"; UMH 361, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me"; UMH 308, "Thine Be the Glory"; and UMH 700, "Abide with Me." But Paul's repeated emphasis on bodily human resurrection and his portrayal of nonhuman creation entering the "glorious" environment of God's children (8:21) push against these popular misconceptions.

meanings.[19] It can describe the passive processes of decomposition (thus, decay) (1 Cor 15:42) or the active practice of destruction and death (1 Cor 3:17). Since physical destruction leads to the passive processes of decomposition, "slavery of destruction" encapsulates both ideas (Rom 8:21). This phrase also aligns with the theological anthropology Paul has already articulated in Romans: because human sin is to blame for the entrance of sin and death into the human experience (5:12), human sin appears also to stand behind the nonhuman creation's inordinate experience of active destruction. Put together with Paul's understanding of creation as subjected to frustration, 8:21 further indicates that creation is not only frustrated in its divine calling to flourish but may be prevented from doing so because of humanity's destructive activities.

Liberation from anthropogenic destruction, then, suggests that creation would be freed from excessive forms of damage and the ongoing threat of destruction. Several passages in Isaiah—particularly chapters 11 and 65—articulate a similar vision of the new creation.[20] After extolling the positive social effects of Jesse's descendant who rules with righteousness and faithfulness (Isa 11:1–5), Isaiah describes the effects of the Messiah's rule on the animal world:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
>
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
>
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
>
> and a little child shall lead them.
>
> The cow and the bear shall graze,
>
> their young shall lie down together;
>
> and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
>
> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
>
> and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
>
> They will not hurt or destroy
>
> on all my holy mountain;
>
> for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
>
> as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6–9)

19. BDAG, 1054–55.

20. Isaiah 11 probably influenced Paul's own conception of creation's liberation; he at least had this passage in mind when writing to the Romans since he quotes Isa 11:10 (the verse that immediately proceeds those quoted here) in Rom 15:12.

Here, predators lie peacefully with their former prey, carnivores now eat plants, none destroys another, and the earth itself is overflowing with the knowledge of God. In fact, this knowledge of God seems to be the reason why none destroys another on God's sacred mountain.[21] Perhaps, according to this theology of the new creation, the earth will perfectly communicate the knowledge of the Lord in fulfillment of God's purposes (Isa 11:9; Rom 1:19-20). Human sin will no longer impede, and God's liberation of creation will restore it to its God-given roles of reflecting the Creator and teeming with life.

But this liberation also goes beyond the mere restoration of Eden. Creation will move *from* its current slavery "*into* the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (8:21b), enjoying its own form of glory. For humanity, glorification involves bodily resurrection and participation in God's immortality. For nonhuman creation, the experience of glory likely involves fullness of life.[22] God's liberation, on the one hand, will terminate creation's ongoing experience of destruction, which takes place under the supervision of sinful humanity; on the other hand, liberation will inaugurate creation's God-given experience of life and flourishing when humans are finally free from sinful impulses. In the eschatological future—in God's new creation—the nonhuman creation will experience the Spirit's life-sustaining and life-restoring power by entering the liberty God has prepared for Jesus' siblings (8:11, 21, 29). The solidarity in suffering brings with it solidarity in hope and liberation.

Although we must wait for our ultimate liberation from sin in order for nonhuman creation to be liberated, this does not mean we humans are

21. Brueggemann perceives a similar dynamic at work in Isa 11 as I see in Rom 8. Although scholars debate the connections between Isa 11:1–5 (focused on humanity) and 11:6–9 (focused on nonhuman creatures), he argues that these sets of verses stand together and inform one another so that "the new scenario for 'nature' is made possible by the reordering of human relationships in verses 1–5" (Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 102; see also Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 263–65). Brueggemann suggests that Gen 3 stands behind Isa 11 and concludes that "*The distortion of human relationships* is at the root of *distortions in creation*. . . . It is a *human* violation of God's order that produces the enemies of *nature*" (Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 102; emphasis original).

22. Cranfield asserts that *eleutheria tēs doxēs* (liberty of glory) "is a liberty which results from, is the necessary accompaniment of, the (revelation of the) glory of the children of God. Paul's meaning is hardly that the creation will share the same liberty-resulting-from-glory as the children of God will enjoy, but that it will have its own proper liberty as a result of the glorification of the children of God. We may, however, assume that the liberty proper to the creation is indeed the possession of its own proper glory—that is, of the freedom fully and perfectly to fulfill its Creator's purpose for it, that freedom which it does not have, so long as man [*sic*], its lord (Gen 1.26, 28; Ps 8.6), is in disgrace" (Cranfield, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 416).

free now to live in whatever destructive ways we please. As Paul has already exclaimed in 6:1–2, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" Paul expects that those who receive new life in Christ will no longer "present [their] members to sin as instruments of wickedness" but will instead "present [their] members to God as instruments of righteousness" (6:13). Christians now "walk in newness of life" and live into the righteousness that Christ himself embodied (6:4, 11).[23] Therefore, in a creation marred by sin and destruction and during this time of waiting for God to conform us to the image of his Son (8:29), we allow God to transform our lives in line with God's future liberation of creation. In chapters 14–15 Paul fleshes out this call to transformation by pointing to two Christlike characteristics: gratitude and loving self-restraint.

Romans 14–15: Gratitude and Self-Restraint

Chapter 14 addresses a conflict happening within and between the various house churches in Rome. A chief aspect of this conflict concerns what community members might eat at their communal meals, during which they also celebrated the Lord's Supper.[24] One faction in Rome understood Christlike behavior to be specified by the Law, so they ate meat from approved animals that were slaughtered according to Jewish regulations.[25] Practically, this sometimes meant that God's people refrained from eating meat entirely, particularly when they lived in foreign lands.[26] A different faction of Jesus followers apparently considered themselves to be free from the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law, believing that "in the Lord Jesus . . . nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). These Christians regarded eating meat from animals that were not Law-approved or had not been slaughtered according to Jewish custom as an expression of their Christian liberty. Bringing these two factions together for a common meal would prove challenging to say the least. The vegetarians might judge (and implicitly condemn) those who lived in apparent disrespect of God's Laws (14:3b). The omnivores, in turn, might despise the vegetarians (14:3a), assuming that their conscientious eating habits flowed from outmoded dietary restraints rather than Christian liberty.

23. Emily Peck-McClain argues in chapter 10 that by intergenerational formation the church best supports Christians as they resist the domination of sin and instead live into the new life of righteousness.

24. Jewett, *Romans*, 834–35; Barclay, "Faith and Self-Detachment," 193.

25. Barclay, "Faith and Self-Detachment," 192–93.

26. The specific identity of those who eat only vegetables is debated, but most scholars agree that these Christians refrain from eating meat in order to follow Torah. They are followers of Jesus that may be either Jewish or gentile converts to Judaism. Their diet may be practically motivated since kosher meats would be difficult to obtain, but it could also be motivated by devotional goals. As Gary Shogren illustrates, important Jewish heroes (for example, Daniel [Dan 1:8–13]; Tobit [Tob 1:10–11]; Judith [Jdt 10:5; 12:1–4, 17–19]; and Esther [Esth 14:17]) refrained from eating meat and wine in foreign lands especially when those foods were associated with imperial regimes (Shogren, "Is the Kingdom of God about Eating," 249).

Paul's response to this conflict is complex. Fundamentally—and perhaps surprisingly to many Christians today—Paul affirmed that both factions were motivated by a desire to honor the Lord and to act in gratitude toward the Creator and Sustainer of life. He states, "those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God" (14:6). Both groups, then, express gratitude to the Creator, a quality that ought always to mark the Christian's relationship to food, whether feasting or fasting.

Such gratitude—the humble recognition that we depend on powers beyond our own for which we give thanks—is central to Christlike feasting not only in Romans but elsewhere in the New Testament. The practice of thanking God for the gifts of food was modeled by Jesus (Mark 8:6; 14:23; Matt 15:36; 26:27; Luke 22:19; John 6:11; 1 Cor 11:23–26) and practiced by Paul and the early Christians (Acts 27:35; 1 Cor 10:30–31; Rom 14:6).[27] This practice of thanksgiving was and continues to be so central that it marks a key act in Christian worship, the Eucharist (*eucharisteō*, "to give thanks"), which recalls when Jesus "took a loaf of bread, and when he had *given thanks* [*eucharistēsas*], he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11:23–24, emphasis added).[28] Gratitude of this sort recognizes the ways in which the lives of animals and plants and the elements that produced them support our well-being and flourishing.

Yet an "attitude of gratitude" alone does not ensure righteous, Christlike feasting and fasting. Paul provides more concrete measures of Christlike behavior in the rest of chapter 14. He exhorts the Roman Christians who eat meat to take thought for how their actions affect those around them since the choices they make—even about something as apparently innocuous as eating—can "destroy one for whom Christ died" (14:15b, author's translation). Paul's concern here is that the empowered ("strong" in the NRSV) who eat

27. Wolff, "Thanksgiving," 436.

28. Elizabeth Theokritoff beautifully illustrates a Pauline theology of creation by explaining: "When we offer products of the earth as Eucharist and receive them back from their Creator as the food of incorruption, we are recognizing that the creation of the world and its ultimate transformation are both part of the same movement, the same divine plan" (Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation*, 42).

meat might put pressure on those who refrain from eating meat (14:20–21; 15:1).[29] This might then lead the "weak" to stumble in their undivided devotion to the Lord if they act against their conscience by eating unlawful meat. The danger is that their faithful orientation to Christ, the Lord, would be set adrift and even destroyed. Paul explains, "But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (14:23). The person's eating "for the Lord" is undone in the process of eating for the approval of others.

Paul evaluates this situation in relation to Christ's self-restraining love. Because "Christ did not please himself" (15:3) neither should the empowered Roman Christians please their palates by demanding that meat be served during communal meals. Such a situation may result in a brother or sister "being injured by what you eat," and this would indicate that the meat-eaters "are no longer walking in love" (14:15a). To this possibility Paul exclaims, "Do not, by your eating, destroy that one for whom Christ died" (14:15b, author's translation). Destroying one for whom Christ died is antithetical to love since God's love works to save, reconcile, and glorify those who are weak, hostile, and susceptible to destruction (5:6–10; 14:15).

Paul's practical advice, then, is *not* for the Roman Christians to do what seems right in their own eyes but to walk in love and exercise self-restraint so that others may flourish—or at least not be destroyed. Those with the power to choose express their gratitude to God by restraining their own freedoms so that their eating practices support the flourishing and faith—rather than the destruction and infidelity—of others.[30] Paul expects Christians to recognize that the Kingdom of God is not focused on the enjoyment of food and drink. "By contrast, love, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit *are* of ultimate value (14,15.17)."[31] Living according to these virtues helps God's people avoid destroying one for whom Christ died.

Although in the immediate context of Rom 14:15 the phrase "the one for whom Christ died" clearly refers to a brother or sister in Christ, the cosmic scope of God's salvation broadens its potential application. Since God intends to liberate the nonhuman creation from its slavery to destruction and since this liberation depends upon Jesus Christ's salvation of humanity,

29. Barclay, "Faith and Self-Detachment," 201.

30. Barclay argues, "This is not a compromise of the good news but precisely its necessary expression: only so can they act in love (14,15) which is the central characteristic and core product of the Christ-event (5,5.8; 8,39; 13,8–10). Like Christ, and because of Christ, their priority is to work for the good of their neighbour (15,1–3), such that their strength is expressed not in getting their own way, but in 'bearing the weaknesses of the powerless' (15,1; cf. Gal 6,2)" (ibid., 204).

31. Ibid., 199.

"the one for whom Christ died" can be said to encompass the whole of creation. Walking in love so as not to destroy "one for whom Christ died" means that we take thought—at the very least—for how procuring and eating food (as one of many human acts) might bring inordinate destruction to God's creation.[32] As we become increasingly aware of how our eating unnecessarily destroys not only human and nonhuman life but also soil, water, and air quality, we are encouraged by Rom 14–15 to exercise self-restraint in our eating choices because we are motivated by Christlike love. Our proper attentiveness to the world around us, our solidarity with the whole of creation, and our Christlike love enable us to express authentic gratitude for the gifts of life. In turn, these attitudes inspire and promote the kind of Christlike self-restraint that is required for the well-being and flourishing of others. In so living, we are not attempting to bring about God's new creation by our own efforts but to live in correspondence with that future reality by the Spirit's life-giving power that inhabits us now. We nevertheless continue to wait for the apocalypse of the children of God when God will complete our redemption and will finally liberate creation from its slavery to destruction (8:19, 21). But for now, we are motivated by gratitude and Christlike, self-restraining love so that even our feasting might be transformed in light of who God the Creator is and what Jesus the Christ has accomplished.

While Paul's concern here is to establish ecclesial health, chapters 14–15 also hint at ways in which people in the twenty-first century can support ecological health. Of course, Paul did not have our modern ecological problems in view as he wrote his instructions to the congregations in Rome. Therefore, we need to exercise discernment as we attend to the witness of creation (including its forms of suffering) so that we may understand how Christlike gratitude and self-restraining love can lead us to live now in congruence with God's future liberation. The contributions of natural and ecological sciences prove indispensible in such discernment as they reveal the ways in which human activity causes destruction throughout creation. Pursuing such discernment requires courage, patience, and solidarity as we come face to face with the suffering of creation. At the same time, however, we keep in view God's ultimate desire to liberate creation from its slavery to destruction. This God's-eye perspective provides the moral and spiritual guidance we need in order to follow Christ's ways of love and liberation.[33]

32. Perhaps the ethical principles drawn from Romans ultimately lead Christians toward vegetarianism. While vegetarianism still involves killing living things, plants as well as insects, it does not lead to the destruction of vertebrates—birds, fish, and mammals.

33. For a helpful study on how it often takes more than just knowledge to implement ecologically friendly practices, see Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability*.

Agriculture and Christlike Feasting

Attending to the suffering condition of the nonhuman creation exposes the ways in which our lack of gratitude and self-restraint has led us to inflict unnecessary and unhealthy amounts of destruction on species and ecosystems, even though these consequences are often unintentional. As an exercise in solidarity and attentiveness, then, let us consider one prominent way in which our agricultural efforts decrease the health of ecosystems and people: the use of toxic chemicals.

A central and persistent challenge in agriculture is overcoming the limiting and sometimes devastating effects of pests and weeds on crop yields. Insects eat crops. Weeds take up precious nutrients and space so that our crops are less productive and harvesting becomes more difficult. Thus, in order to eat the fruit of our delicate crops, we daily toil and sweat in our attempts to keep non-crop species at bay.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, people have attacked this problem by using pesticides and herbicides—chemicals that are toxic and deadly to the targeted intruders. A significant problem with this approach, however, is that the chemicals do not simply poison the invader. They also poison and kill the living things that make for healthy soils and the beneficial insects that prey upon such pests. We are left with dead soil that no longer functions as the nearly miraculous place where bacteria "fix" nitrogen from the atmosphere into plant food and where insects, earthworms, and fungi transform waste and dead plants and animals into nutrient-rich soil. By applying toxic chemicals, we kill the soil biota since, as the prominent geologist Harvey Blatt notes, "Most pesticides destroy a broad range of living organisms, many of them either harmless or beneficial—like ladybugs, praying mantises, and earthworms—along with the undesirable pests."[34] The use of pesticides and other toxic chemicals effectively exterminates the living organisms that make new and nutrient-rich soil, undermining our whole food system.[35] In our attempts to feast easily and bountifully on the fruit of the earth, we have ignored the fact that "[f]ertile soil is alive" and

34. Blatt, *America's Environmental Report Card*, 110.

35. The long-term problem with killing the organisms in soil is that the soil is unable to rebuild itself from the effects of erosion (effects that are multiplied through agriculture, especially ploughing). As Blatt has explained, "Six inches of soil are needed for crop production, a thickness that takes many hundreds or perhaps thousands of years to form, and human farming activities are causing it to erode an average of 10 to 100 times faster than this" (ibid., 106).

needs to flourish with a great variety of living things so that we might go on feasting for generations.[36]

But applying such chemicals not only kills pests, weeds, and soil biota but also damages human health as the poisons unleashed on pests and weeds infiltrate our water systems, remain on our food, and enter our bodies (and the bodies of other animals). Blatt captures the irony of such agricultural practices well:

> Given that the soil nourishes the plants that grow in it, and given that a great variety of living organisms in the soil contribute to a plant's health, it is little short of astonishing that farmers in the United States are so willing to spray poisons on their crops and into the soil. The United States consumes 35 percent of the world's pesticides. Cereal crops are sprayed an average of five or six times a season; potatoes thirteen times; apple trees eighteen times; and peaches are sprayed with forty-nine assorted pesticides and fungicides on a weekly basis from March until harvesting in July or August.[37]

Because farmers and farm workers apply and re-apply these chemicals and handle sprayed crops, their bodies are regularly exposed to the devastating, long-term health effects of these poisons. Consequently, they succumb to the chronic neurological, developmental, and reproductive problems brought on by these chemicals in greater proportion than the rest of the population.[38] Our agricultural system disables and sometimes destroys the people who work tirelessly (and often most vulnerably) in our fields so that we can feast.

Over the past two decades, scientists have attempted to reduce the need for pesticides and herbicides by using new technologies, such as genetic modification (GM), which introduces genetic material from another species into the crop species. Two different types of characteristics may be altered in the modified plant, depending on the crop and problems to be addressed. One type of modification makes a crop pest-resistant by transferring qualities that deter pests from one species to a pest-prone crop species. For example, genetic engineers introduce genetic material from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (*Bt*), which produces a protein that is harmful to insects, into a crop plant (such as *Bt* corn) so that the plant itself now produces

36. Ibid., 109.

37. Ibid., 110.

38. Cimino et al., "Effects of Neonicotinoid," 156, 158, 160.

the insecticidal protein.[39] With this resistance, the farmer is able to use fewer insecticides (at least for a time) while maintaining high yields.

A second type of modification makes a crop herbicide tolerant by introducing genetic material from a species that is able to withstand specific herbicides into the crop species that would otherwise die when herbicide(s) are applied. For example, the herbicide glyphosate (patented as Roundup) kills weeds (as well as all bacteria and plants that are not tolerant) by interrupting their production of essential amino acids. In order to kill weeds but not harm crops, scientists have developed "Roundup Ready" crops so that weeds can be killed when glyphosate is sprayed on the fields. The crops themselves are protected from the deadly effects of Roundup because genetic material from the soil bacterium *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* has been incorporated into the crop species. This bacterium is able to continue producing essential amino acids even in the presence of the herbicide glyphosate.[40]

Nevertheless, because agricultural pests and weeds are living things with the ability to adapt to changing conditions, including poisons, even farmers of GM crops have had to rely on increasing amounts and varieties of herbicides to maintain high crop yields.[41] Thus, although GM crops often require less tractor power and fewer chemicals than do conventional crops—features that make them, at least in these respects, less environmentally damaging—they have not proven to be the technological savior they were heralded to be. In fact, researchers are becoming aware of the negative ecosystem and health effects of Roundup, the predominant herbicide used in agriculture, especially in growing soybeans and corn and in drying grain crops.[42]

39. For explanations see Monsanto, "Global Insect." For information about the development and safety of a wide variety of GM crops, see Center for Environmental Risk Assessment, http://www.cera-gmc.org/.

40. For a brief explanation of this process, see Center for Environmental Risk Assessment, "GM Crop Database."

41. In a study that examined GM agriculture from 1996 to 2013, increases in weed resistance to one of the most common herbicides, glyphosate, developed. Application of herbicides "put tremendous selection pressure on weeds and as a result contributed to the evolution of weed populations predominated by resistant individual weeds" (Brookes and Barfoot, "Environmental Impacts," 105). Consequently, farmers have had to apply more and different herbicides to their fields (ibid.). It should be noted, however, that farmers who planted conventional, non-GM strains of these crops also had to increase their applications of herbicides and still outpaced the applications of the GM crops (ibid., 105–6). See also Blatt, *America's Environmental*, 121–22.

42. "Drying" crops involves spraying non-herbicide-tolerant grain crops with herbicide toward the end of the growing season so that the plants die and the grains or seeds will dry sooner for harvest and processing (Kincaid, "Are GMOs Toxic?," 54).

Roundup, or glyphosate, kills not only targeted weeds and non-targeted microbes in the soil but also the bacteria that reside in the guts of the animals and humans that eat the crops. Thierry Vrain, a genetic engineer who began gardening extensively during retirement and started noticing the destructive effects of pesticides and herbicides on his soil's ecosystem, explains:

> A large number of published scientific studies—mostly done outside the United States—show that as little as 1 ppm [parts per million] of glyphosate will kill almost all bacteria—particularly beneficial bacteria—in the gut of animals; that endocrine disruption starts at 0.5 ppm; and that even just a few ppm can cause oxidative stress, chronic inflammation, DNA damage, and many other disruptions in mammalian organ cells and tissues.[43]

Vrain goes on to explain that in 2015 the World Health Organization conducted an investigation of glyphosate and concluded, "the scientific literature contains enough convincing evidence to classify glyphosate as a probable carcinogen."[44] Thus, although the foods produced by plants that have been genetically modified may not themselves be hazardous to human and ecological health (though the jury is still out), the herbicides used to produce them are indeed harmful to the community of living things in the soil, the farmers who handle the chemicals, and the consumers who eat them. We discover, then, that the foods on which we feast are slowly assaulting our bodies.

In our attempts to produce food easily, cheaply, and abundantly, we have ended up unintentionally "destroying those for whom Christ died" (Rom 14:15b, author's translation). Even for those who might not wish to extend the benefits of Christ's death to all of creation, such as bacteria and worms, we must recognize that our use of herbicides is destroying the health of *people* for whom Christ died. Although it is easier to turn a blind eye to this destructive and overwhelmingly complex situation, Christlike feasting requires us to express our love for one another through attentiveness and the kind of self-restraint that seeks to rectify the agricultural system so that vulnerable brothers and sisters, and indeed creation more broadly, are not "injured by what [we] eat" (14:15a).

43. Kincaid, "Are GMOs Toxic?," 54. Vrain also notes, "A German study suggests that glyphosate accumulates in all organs (liver, kidneys, intestines, heart, lungs, bones, and so on) of animals and people eating food products made from Roundup Ready crops" (ibid.). For the medical report of these findings, see Guyton et al., "Carcinogenicity." For an accessible overview of the World Health Organization's conclusions, see Cressey, "Widely Used Herbicide."

44. Kincaid, "Are GMOs Toxic?," 54.

A key way in which individuals and communities can work to remedy this situation and work to liberate creation from undue destruction is by supporting organic gardening and farming efforts. Growing food in our home or community gardens gives us the ability to withdraw from the deadly cycle of pesticide-intensive agriculture. Because organic, fresh foods are more expensive than processed and fast foods,[45] low and middle-income people find it difficult or even impossible to afford healthier options. On top of this, low and middle-income individuals and families often do not have the time and resources to grow and prepare fresh foods. As those who seek to follow Christ in alleviating destruction and supporting the flourishing of others, Christians have the opportunity to provide community support systems to ensure that all people—especially infants and children who are most affected by agricultural chemicals—are able to eat healthy food. One example of this effort is a community garden in Fairview, North Carolina, called The Lord's Acre, which "raise[d] three tons of vegetables on a mere quarter acre" through organic, intensive gardening methods and donated much of the produce to local food banks.[46]

Many people either do not have the opportunity to garden or do not like the work; and yet even they may be able to purchase and consume organically grown foods. Organic foods grown on local, small-scale, biodynamic, and polyculture farms (rather than large monoculture farms that depend on toxic chemicals or even large monoculture organic farms) best maintain the long-term vitality of the soil.[47] By supporting farmers directly through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), we can encourage them to transition away from conventional, chemical-based agriculture to more sustainable and healthier approaches.[48] Admittedly, this transition involves highly complex factors. Many skeptics wonder whether we can

45. This is the case in large part because the U.S. government subsidizes the production of corn and soybean crops, which are processed into all kinds of ingredients used to make the apparent vast array of foods at the grocery store. Corn and soybean are also used to feed livestock for cheap (as well as more expensive) meat and dairy. Agricultural historian, R. Douglas Hurt, explains the complexities of agriculture subsidies in *American Agriculture*, especially chapters 8–9. Nutritionist Marion Nestle describes the relationship between agriculture and the foods we find in grocery stores in *Food Politics*. For an accessible explanation of corn agriculture, see Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, especially chapters 1–7.

46. Bahnson and Wirzba, *Making Peace*, 93. See the garden's inspiring website at The Lord's Acre, http://thelordsacre.org/.

47. For a picturesque depiction of one such farm (Polyface Farms, http://www.polyfacefarms.com/), see chapters 8–14 of Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*.

48. To find a local CSA, see Local Harvest, "Community Supported Agriculture," at https://www.localharvest.org/csa/.

feed the growing global population with organic methods. But we might equally wonder whether chemical-based farming will be able to feed the world for the long haul. Because conventional farming undermines the long-term fertility of the soil even as it poisons our air, water, and bodies, it should at least occasion grave worries. Moreover, given that the production of meat is extraordinarily inefficient—the amount of grain necessary to produce a single pound of beef could feed a person for ten days[49]—a transition to more sustainable eating practices would lead us to eat less meat and thereby use the land's produce more efficiently. Such a change will demand self-restraint that is motivated by love for the well-being and flourishing of others, including future generations of people who must also till and reap fruit from the land.

In addition to these modifications, we can advocate for the well-being and flourishing of farmers and farm workers by supporting justice efforts.[50] We can elect and call on government officials to establish laws that limit the use of toxic chemicals in agriculture and establish clear safeguards for their proper use. In so doing, we exercise our power for the benefit and flourishing of those who are disempowered. In other words, "we, the empowered, carry the frailties of the disempowered and do not please ourselves" (Rom 15:1, author's translation).

We approach these tasks with Christlike love, giving thanks to God for the opportunity to stand in solidarity with creation in its suffering and ultimately in its liberation. In our attempt to follow the Christ who lived, loved, and died for the liberation of others and has shown us what it means to feast in ways that support the well-being of others, we direct our attention to the witness of creation (its dying soils, polluted waters and air, and diseased creatures) so that we might live into the liberation that God intends for all.

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49. Blatt, *America's Environmental*, 128.

50. Organizations that advocate for the rights and well-being of people and the environment are Farmworker Justice (https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/content/about-farmworker-justice-home), Alliance for Fair Food (http://www.allianceforfairfood.org), and Earthjustice (http://earthjustice.org).

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