

The Taste of Discipleship
Cultivating the Flavor of Faithfulness

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THE TASTE OF DISCIPLESHIP:
CULTIVATING THE FLAVOR OF FAITHFULNESS
By Ragan Sutterfield and Brent Laytham

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DISCIPLES ARE FOODIES!

IF YOU haven't noticed, from the first bite of the forbidden fruit to the marriage supper of the Lamb, there is a lot of eating in the Bible. Food is a dominant metaphor in the scriptures, and for good reason. Food is where and how we engage with the rest of creation. In eating food, we receive nourishment by 'taking in' the earth. Food is where and how strangers become companions—literally, sharers of bread. Sharing meals shapes community. In 'the Lord's Supper' and in every other supper we eat, food is where and how God gifts us with life. Because it is so central to human life, and a clear focal point of our interaction with creation, food is something we must pay careful attention to in our discipleship.

But what if we were to say that discipleship itself tastes good? Could following Christ have a flavor? Yes! Not only does faithful discipleship have a flavor, but fidelity tastes good. God made it that way in the act of culinary genius we call *creation*. Unfortunately, creation has been soured and our tastes have been twisted. Israel arrived in a land flowing with milk and honey, but chose infidelity: "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer. 31:29). We dwell in a world of delectable bounty, but choose the junk food mass produced by food scientists and flavor engineers. Our taste for the goodness of truthful discipleship has been led astray both figuratively and literally. So we are trained to prefer Big Macs—metaphorical and real—over the delights of the complex flavors God sets before us.

After a lifetime spent eating east of Eden, the task of learning how to taste *the good* is a challenge for all of us. We may need to recognize as a lie the notion that taste is a matter of pure subjectivity, incapable of being judged definitively good or bad. Our taste buds may need an exodus from captivity to the powers and principalities that have made us miss out on the delicious flavors of discipleship. This pamphlet seeks to cultivate the truth about taste and the goodness of discipleship by walking again through the beauty of God's garden. Rereading Genesis 1-4, we invite the church to recover the flavor of fidelity in a world of liquid smoke and aspartame—a world of deceit, apathy, violence and greed. We suggest that faithful discipleship is cultivated and cultivating—it is agricultural and leads, when practiced well, to a savory, faithful flavor. How this is done must begin with some dirt work.

GROUND OF GOODNESS, BEAUTY AND TRUTH

Open your Bible and read—from the beginning. As you go over the familiar turf of God's creation of the world in Genesis 1 do this little experiment: every time the text reads "and God saw that it was good" substitute "And God relished, 'mmm that's good!'" To get that final exclamation in verse 31 exactly right you should probably go on and add, "mmm, mmm, that's really good!"

This exercise may seem a bit odd, but it is meant to focus our attention on what God is really saying in his proclamation that the creation is good. Think of a chef in a kitchen, tasting each dish as it is prepared—this is good! And then, to continue the metaphor we might understand the Sabbath as the final savoring of the meal of creation—a day founded in feasting and delight more than lazy rest for a worn out god—the feast is set, now bon appétit!

The wonderful thing about this feast is that we are invited not only to enjoy it, but to serve as sous chefs in the divine banquet kitchen. In this work we do not set the ingredients or even the gen-

eral cuisine—we enter into a culture and tradition. It is God who creates and defines goodness, beauty and truth, but we participate in the perfection of God’s flavors through cultural activity. Culture is traditioned and purposive activity which cultivates creation’s goodness, beauty and truth.

Traditioned means that cultural activity is far too complex for us to invent on our own. We may innovate newness, improve a recipe, inaugurate a new style, even discover a whole new approach. But we don’t invent the canvas, paint or brush; we didn’t invent chords and tempos and rhythms; don’t invent cultivating the soil or husbanding livestock. These are given to us as a tradition, an ongoing loving conversation and conservation. The tradition continually converses about what is good, beautiful and true, defining and defending standards of excellence. The tradition continually conserves its goodness, beauty and truth by developing and deploying regimens of formation (i.e., tradition produces good cooks and good farmers and all the rest by defining the ‘good’ of that particular cultural endeavor, and by training the next generation of practitioners).

Purposive means that cultural activity is not simply an after product, but has an aim. The aim of painting is not just the picture, but its beauty. The aim of composing is not just the song, but its truth. The aim of parenting is not just the child’s compliance, but her goodness. Thus, whatever proximate aim our cultural activity has, it also aims for beauty, truth and goodness. In other words, in these various proximate aims there is ultimately a hunger for God.

Hunger for God has an encompassing metaphorical sense—one born out in many a passage of scripture—e.g., “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). But hunger for God is no mere metaphor. Hunger for God is also the real bodily hunger for food, a hunger that drives us to engage with God’s creation through cultivation and agriculture. To begin to see exactly what this means we must turn to the reiteration of the creation story found in Genesis 2.

AGRICULTURE IS DISCIPLESHIP

God, we could say, was the first farmer. It was God who first engaged the soil, cultivated and worked with the life potential within it and brought new life from the ground. Adam was formed from the adamah, human-beings from the humus.

To fully engage the significance of this creation account we must correct some old understandings of the soil and engage with some new ones. First we must note that the sad translation of “dust” simply misses the meaning of adamah. Adamah is not “dust” in the way we might think of it—adamah is agricultural soil, good soil, life giving soil. What we now know about the nature of good soil might inform our understanding of a God who forms life from the dirt.

It has traditionally been understood that plants grow well with the right combination of the chemicals nitrogen (N), potassium (K), phosphorus (P)—it is upon this basic formulation that the seeming abundance of modern industrial agriculture relies. But the result of relying on only N-P-K for fertility has been a depletion of nutrients not only from the soil, but also from our vegetables. Nutrients like the cancer fighting riboflavin, for instance, are often depleted in soils that have only been fertilized with N-P-K fertilizers.

What current research is showing is that soil nutrients are best metabolized and delivered to plants in soils that contain rich microbial life. Thousands of microbes ranging from bacteria, to fungi, to protozoa live in healthy soils and process the nutrients necessary for plant life. In an amazing ecosystem beneath our feet, plants send out sugars in an area around their roots called the rhizosphere that attract bacteria and fungi to feed on. These bacteria carry nutrients with them that are in turn delivered to the roots or further metabolized by predatory protozoa that eat bacteria and

leave nutrient dense waste behind for the plant roots. The variety of these microbes is immense and scientists are only beginning to learn about the full complexity of these ecosystems. From what we do know, we understand that some microbes actually fix nitrogen from the air into the soil, others emit electrochemical pulses that draw plant roots deeper into the soil, while still others work to change the carbon structure of the soil which in turn creates a larger surface area for increased microbial life and an easier path for plant roots. Good soil, in other words, is not just potentially life giving, but is already full of life.

Because God formed humankind, as well as all animals, from life giving soil, we must understand that it was not from the inorganic that the organic came, but rather from the living that life was born. Already, from the start, we were tied up through the soil and the myriad ecosystems within it—it is a denial of not only humus but our humanity to refuse to recognize that our life is not singular, but tied up within a community of beings.

When we farm, and farm well, we are formed into the recognition that our life is tied up in a community of beings—to cultivate the soil is to cultivate the soul—we are always tied up together. Dallas Willard's definition of soul is helpful here, "Soul' is...the hidden or 'spiritual' side of the person. It includes an individual's thoughts and feelings, along with heart or will, with its intents and choices. It also includes an individual's bodily life and social relations, which, in their inner meaning and nature, are just as 'hidden' as the thoughts and feelings." This definition of soul is helpful because it recognizes that the human soul is a "center of being" that touches upon and is in relationship with many other beings, not least of which are God and the myriad creatures on which our life depends.

In Genesis 2 we are given a picture of the human vocation as gardener—a calling whose central practices require us to live in the reality of our being dependent and depended upon within the network of creation. To take on the work of growing and cultivat-

ing, of husbanding animals and managing timber lands we are involving ourselves in practices that will form us more truly into the “humus-beings” we are. Wendell Berry in one of his *Mad Farmer* poems offers this proverb: “But the real products of any year’s work are the farmer’s mind and the cropland itself.” And later he adds, “The finest growth that farmland can produce is a careful farmer.” Good farming, in Berry’s view, cultivates the land and the land cultivates the farmer.

A lovely little book called *The Gardener’s Guide to Life* suggests that gardening cultivates in us such virtues as gratitude, diligence, attention, silence, hope, patience, perseverance and reverence. Notice how the capacities of a good gardener are likewise the virtues of a faithful disciple. The cultivation of soil, which is the cultivation of the soul, can work to form us more deeply into the image of Christ. But what about the essential element of any Christian discipleship—cross-bearing? Do we need farming and gardening to truly bear the cross?

Farming, in the Genesis 2 sense, is service. When God places humankind in the garden they are to “till and keep it.” The word here is “abad” which also means to serve. This is essential to understanding what good farming must be. Tilling, when done poorly or in some cases at all, can deeply damage the soil and cause the erosion over months of sediments that were built over millenia. Wes Jackson, a pioneering plant breeder, has even called farming “humanity’s original sin” because of the deep damage inflicted through basic farming practices like tilling. But this deeper meaning of abad tells us that we are not just to till the garden—we are to serve it, to work toward its health. And just as tending the soil works to form the soul, so serving the soil serves a greater work.

The corporal works of mercy (Mt. 25) serve a neighbor’s immediate need, but also implicate whole cultural domains. Tending the sick (25:36, 43) opens out to the practice of medicine and the culture of public health. Clothing the naked (36, 43) implicates textile arts. Welcoming the stranger presupposes homemaking

and even architecture. Slaking the thirsty may require no more than the craft of the potter or the cooper. More likely, these days, it opens onto the metallurgic arts and hydroculture. Which brings us to the first corporal work of mercy and its cultural correlate: “I was hungry, and you fed me” entails agriculture. Thus the same agriculture enables us to serve our neighbor’s need and creation’s fecundity, and by God’s grace this will draw us into God’s own delight.

Good food is then the intersection of the careful cultivation of soil in a pattern of service rather than exploitation, which in turn is the cultivation of the soul. To savor food, to grow it turns the most temporal of pleasures toward the beauty of the infinite. In every good farm there is some of Eden and in every community garden plot in the most urban of neighborhoods there is some of the New Jerusalem. But now, in this time of the in between, there is a fallenness we must face.

WEEDS, ROUNDUP AND TASTELESS TOMATOES

When the fall of humankind comes in Genesis 3 it is because of a distorted taste—an unwillingness to be satisfied in the permissible delights of the garden. Boundary had to be crossed in the fulfilling of human desire no matter the risk and ultimate catastrophe it caused. The forbidden fruit was not unlike the Genetically Modified Organisms of today—it required a violation of given boundaries in order to fulfill human desires. And like those plants that are engineered beyond their natural limits, the eating of the forbidden fruit resulted not only in damage to the soul of humankind, but to the soil and the creation upon which it is founded. In refusing to accept the abundant gifts of creation and savor the goodness God freely provided we decided to push beyond our limits to fulfill our desires—the result is agriculture and taste that are both distorted.

Agriculture today is distorted—by greed, haste, intemperance and pride. These vices may or may not characterize the individual farmers you know, but probably not. They certainly do characterize our food economy. Agribusiness is a corporate endeavor that serves the bottom line rather than the common good. Food distribution and preparation systems sacrifice quality for speed. Food consumers recognize neither seasons nor regions, expecting every food to be available all the time. Genetic modification of grain is a hubristic endeavor with the classic structure of tragedy—a noble aim that eludes our finite grasp while risking terrible unintended consequences.

Taste is also distorted. Taste is neither naturally fixed nor infinitely malleable. The child who wretches on brussel sprout may someday come to love them (Brent doesn't think he ever will). Tastes can be cultivated for individuals over time, and are cultivated by participation in a given culture. The cultivation of taste happens between sweet and bitter, delight and disgust. Our predilection for the taste sweet steered humanity toward foods that fueled our brains. Our natural dislike for the taste bitter protected us from a whole range of plants that make us sick or die. But these givens are not always accurate, nor are they fixed. This means that taste can be a truthful guide to what is good and delightful, but also that it can be distorted toward what is gross or disgusting.

Today our tastes center on food that lacks goodness, beauty and truth. Coke Zero lies to us about the presence of sugar, Cheetos are the product of engineers and food scientists who design chemical systems that will trick our taste-buds into thinking they are food. These “food-like substances” as writer Michael Pollan calls them, have proliferated over recent years in part because of our agricultural policies which give subsidies and encourage the large scale production of grain and soybeans—agricultural products that are easily malleable into new forms and storable for travel. We must remember that good food rots and spoils fairly quickly—it participates in the cycle of soil. Try composting a Dorrito.

Our bodies and brains are equipped with a host of tools that allow us to distinguish good food from bad, but in this fallen state of Industrial agribusiness and distorted taste, we cannot trust what we see or taste on the surface. Millions are spent each year on arranging grocery stores, manufacturing packaging, even using gas compounds to elicit colors that indicate ripeness in fruits like bananas and tomatoes. Tomatoes in particular have been engineered to appear a certain way even though they clearly lack flavor. There are even laws that have been put in place by industrial agricultural interests to prevent tomatoes with better flavor from being shipped beyond the borders of states like Florida. Barry Estabrook's *Tomatoland* is an excellent introduction to how the industrial agricultural system works to manipulate and limit our taste possibilities to the bland fair they provide.

When Ragan grew up in Texas he was promised that “real” tomatoes existed in Arkansas rather than the tasteless, white fleshed variety they had in Texas. It was always a treat during summers to stop at farm stands and get “real” tomatoes. Unfortunately, most people have lost the traditions and memories that remind them of what “real” tomatoes are. It is no wonder most children hate vegetables. Not only have they not been trained in how to savor the flavor of good vegetables, but the vegetables that are provided to them on the \$1.25 budget of a school lunch are entirely lacking in flavor. It is only in such a situation that we could even imagine pizza being classified as a vegetable as it was by congress for the Federal School Lunch Program.

The first time someone comes to many heirloom tomato varieties it is easy to be skeptical. Many of these traditional tomatoes don't look like we think a tomato is supposed to—some aren't even red. But a taste of a good tomato will enliven us to a new reality and realization—there are wonderful flavors in the world we've been kept from, we've been lied to.

This is how the industrial agricultural economy, and sin for that matter, work—they both promise pleasure and variety in the

mundane, but what they really offer are myriad varieties of repackaged corn and soybeans with a smattering of tasteless vegetables scattered in. Sin cannot be savored and for that reason we are easily led into a spiral of overeating in search of what might satisfy our desire.

Flavor in its connection to beauty and truth is tied up in the soil. Each garden will deliver a slightly different flavor and a different nutrient profile. This is because plants do not exist in a vacuum and appear magically from a seed. A tomato seed is a very small thing, but within it is the information necessary to grow into a tomato plant with fruit through the utilization of myriad nutrients, sunlight, and water. Every place gives the tomato its own mix of nutrients and so there are differences in what the flavor of the tomato will be. This is what food critics call its *terroir*—a term that refers to the unique flavor bestowed on wine or food by the geology, climate, and other placed conditions surrounding it.

In our fallenness—a time of weeds and brambles, of soil that is cursed because of us (Gen. 3:17-19)—we must work the soil and struggle with it in order to experience the beauty and truth of its flavors. But in our constant effort to escape the reality of our fallenness we have invented Round-up and the genetically modified crops that are engineered to resist ever heavier doses of herbicide to go with them. We grow plants in a mix of chemical fertilizers, that limit our understanding of fertility to chemistry, resulting in a view of soils as little more than a chemical medium rather than a cultivated source of life—all of this in an effort to escape once again, our proper place, role and limits. In this we deny our original vocation to “serve the soil” and the result is food that is not only tasteless (lacking in beauty) but also food that is destroying our bodies (lacking in truth). Thankfully there is hope for a better harvest—one that admits our fallenness and yet seeks to live into a redeemed relationship with the soil.

A HAPPY HARVEST

In Genesis 4 we find a continuation of the fall—murder, lying, fear. But we also find a new reality—a community of people organizing their lives around a place and settling there. It was in these new communities that Goodness, Truth and Beauty were able to be rebuilt, ever so tenuously, east of Eden. This new community is where, we are told at the end of the chapter, “that people began to invoke the name of the LORD.” This indicates to us that worship moved from an individual act (Cain and Abel) to the act performed in a community by the People of God.

It is in community then that we can begin to recover our taste for our true home, our taste for discipleship and its delights. It is through the careful education of a community that we begin to learn how to taste the good and true and beautiful against the counterfeit realities that are offered to us in the marketplace. We have three suggestions for how to do this.

First we must Keep Faith. This means that we must re-tradition our taste and learn again the satisfactions of real food. This is an activity best done in community and can easily be integrated into that oldest of church traditions—the potluck. Have a potluck on a Sunday evening but ask that everyone bring a dish that is homemade and uses local ingredients. Provide a recipe bank of seasonally appropriate foods. Even invite farmers to use your church as a market location on Saturdays or a CSA drop off for parishioners.

Your church may even consider doing a study of where your communion bread and wine come from. Consider developing a relationship with a local winery or a wheat farmer to make your own bread. If these products are not available locally consider partnering with a congregation within the appropriate bioregion to acquire your church’s wheat and wine. Make a pilgrimage once a year to visit the soil from which the body and blood are grown.

Second, we must learn to voice our joy. Think of the delight when you eat a wonderful meal. You cannot help but want to hug the cook. In recovering our ability to express joy and gratitude we gain the ability to rediscover agriculture as the link between the soil and souls. This means that we turn meals into the full realization of the intersection of soil, labor, the myriad life forms of the creation, sun, water, transportation—to give thanks for each element that went toward the creation of one meal we are forced to realize how deep our proxies, our obligations and responsibilities go. We are also forced at times to confess and mourn the exploitation of creation and our fellow human beings through our choices of food—a confession that must be answered with true repentance. How do we say thanks for a Big Mac when we know its costs? In whatever thanks we offer for such a meal we must also confess. When faced with such a meal try saying, “Lord we thank you for the gifts that you have given us for our sustenance and we ask your forgiveness that we have not accepted those gifts from your abundance, but have instead exploited your good creation to fulfill our fallen desires. Change our tastes Lord and guide us to a better way of eating at our next meal.”

Third, in realizing again the abundance of God’s love through the soil, we should seek to extend that love through the sharing of God’s abundance. We should work to live in the reality of God’s economy against an economic system that would tell us that there is not enough. One key element of this is our own work to practice agriculture. Even a small garden in a suburban yard would provide an abundance of food that could be shared. Every grassy lawn turned into a vegetable garden is a witness of God’s abundance against an economy of planned scarcity and waste (farmers call the invasive grass species used for most yards devil weeds for more reason than one). Even the simple act of planting a couple of fruit trees, which require very little ongoing maintenance, will yield an incredible abundance. Also consider keeping laying hens—only 3

or 4 hens will yield more eggs during the laying season than most families can consume in a week (around 2 dozen a week).

Many churches have gathered together to create their own gardens with food to give to those who are hungry. These can be on the church grounds or at locations in the community. Another possibility for churches to embrace is that of agricultural grange and co-op. Create forums for church members and people in the community to share agricultural knowledge, swap seeds, and make bulk orders of supplies together. When it comes time to order chicks in the spring order them together so that you can get a better price. Have a chicken coop building workshop at the church and even build coops and supply chickens for families in need. Or take the same concept and build raised bed gardens for families in need with a starter pack of plants and instructions on how to care for the plants. Churches could even maintain a community truck that could be provided to church members for their gardening needs.

These practices hold the promise to work within the work of discipleship to form our desires and our tastes, so that we can hunger in the right way for the right things. It is by allowing ourselves to become disciplined by the way of Christ that we can learn to enjoy the good the God invites us to sit down to.

Agriculture creates a path for the concrete practice of discipleship and thus for a participation in God's love that is as fecund as creation itself. But without a retraining of our taste for discipleship, we are doomed to miss the delights of that love. It is time that our churches return to the catechism of taste and show us how to savor flavors of discipleship. To do so we must use agriculture as a central formational practice that teaches us how to taste by shaping and connecting both soil and soul. When this formation is in place we will see again that discipleship holds the way to goodness, truth, and beauty—a wonderful meal to which we can all sit down. *Bon appétit!*

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land: God's Call to Reconcile with Creation* (InterVarsity, 2012)

Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* (The Modern Library, 2002)

Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)