Holiness, health and consumption

WHAT WE PUT IN

In the second of a three-part series, Salvationist ecologist MATT SEAMAN continues to explore the theme of holiness, health and consumption. His first article focused on “What we put on” our bodies, and in this article he reflects on the biblical stance of “What we put in” our bodies.

“Didn’t you realise that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don’t you see that you can’t live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So let people see God in and through your body.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (The Message)

“But as the One who called you is holy, you yourselves also be holy in all your conduct and manner of life aiming for holiness requires transformation. For it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy.” 1 Peter 1:15-16 (Amplified)

In the previous article in this series, we noted that there is a substantial interconnectedness between so many areas of life, between people and the places we live in. This means the seemingly insignificant choices we all make every day can impact our own personal health, the health of our local communities and the land, the wellbeing of people and ecosystems right across the world.

In particular we considered “what we put on our bodies”, how “status anxiety” - unnecessary worry based on the things we buy and wear - can hinder our spiritual journey, the idea that holiness encapsulates social and ecological issues, holy living considers the wider impact of our lifestyles on local and global communities and ecosystems, and that living a life aiming for holiness requires transformation.

Before we go on, I must again emphasise that I share my reflections in a spirit of love, care and encouragement – certainly not in a spirit of judgement, legalism, or negativity. We each have our own story, our own experiences, challenges and understandings. These are personal reflections on challenges to a holy lifestyle, yet my hope is that they may be of value and encouragement to you in your journey towards wholeness and holiness with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, let us further consider how we might better live in light of the gospel and God’s call to loving, holy lifestyles that are mindful of personal, social, spiritual and ecological health.

In the remainder of this article, let us consider “what we put in our bodies”. In this we can include both physical and non-physical things. In the physical food, drink and other substances that are not necessary to survive; and the non-physical, such as ideas and thoughts.

Personal health

I’m not a dietician, food expert or health professional so I’d best not be too definitive or specific, however, we can confidently say that there are strong links between what we eat and drink, how much we eat and drink, and our own personal health and wellbeing. Our diet can significantly impact our lives. If we are not able to live our lives to the full to some extent due to what food and drink we consume, how does this affect the part we play, both now and in the future, in partnering bringing God’s kingdom to earth? Reflecting again on 1 Corinthians 6:19, we are called to glorify God through how we use our bodies. Therefore, our diets are of great importance on our personal journey toward holiness.

One of the more interesting things I’ve learnt through more in-depth research into the Booth family – something that is relevant to our considerations of food in light of spiritual, social and ecological matters – is that William and Catherine Booth were promoters of vegetarianism. Salvationist scholar Roger Green states that Catherine’s “knowledge of the slaughter of animals caused her to become a strict vegetarian, a position shared by William Booth. The eight Booth children were reared in a vegetarian home.”

William Booth, in a tract Religion for Every Day had this to say about eating meat: “Animal food should not be taken at most, more than once a day. There are multitudes of men and women who would be wiser, healthier, happier and holier without meat altogether. I recommend everybody who has not made the experiment of total abstinence from flesh meat in every form to do so at once. Give it a month’s trial.”

Ecological and social health

Following on from Booth’s comments, it is interesting to note the social and environmental impacts that emerge from today’s factory-farming methods.

Sociologist Ryan Gunderson argues that “many humans suffer from various physical, social and mental health problems, resulting from corporate food animal rearing practices.” This includes issues such as environmental pollution. Gunderson also mentions that “the global poor, workers, and marginalised rural communities are the most susceptible to the environmental and general public health consequences of livestock agriculture.”

There are many other areas in which the production of the huge amounts of food and drink available to us could be less harmful to God’s creation and for all who live in it. For instance, reflect on the amount of packaging that is created to transport and sell food and drink.

The huge increase in packaging over the past few decades has, therefore, also expanded the amount of waste that requires disposal (or recycling).

In addition, consider the energy required to transport our food large distances if it is not grown and consumed locally. Eating locally grown food is not only more ecologically sound but socially beneficial as it also supports the local community.

And we haven’t even begun to consider the issues of fair trade, and the working conditions of many across the world, particularly those who have been trafficked against their will and forced to work to produce ingredients for food and drinks that we consume.

In all these areas, how might the food and drink we consume to sustain ourselves contribute to sustaining others and to holy and loving lifestyles?

Of the many tracts John Wesley wrote, one particularly pertinent tract is Thoughts on the Present Sacrificy of Provisions. Wesley believed that the rich were cheating the poor by their over-indulgence and consumption. Might this still be the case today? Can we now also notice various environmental impacts of the rich cheating the poor in addition to social impacts?

To conclude this reflection on how the things we put in our bodies impact ourselves, others and God’s creation, let us consider the idea by theologian Douglas Koskela that part of the “work of the Holy Spirit is detaching us from the practices that oppose God’s saving purposes”. Aiming towards holy living requires change, a continual recalibration of our thoughts and actions in light of the gospel and kingdom values. How might we continue to wisely change our everyday lifestyles to care for ourselves and others, to show love to all creation and to bring glory to God?