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The Christian Diet: A New Perspective on Food

MEGAN AND MORGAN JEFFERSON (WITH MORGAN IN FIRST PERSON)

Last January neither one of us was expecting to take as much away from Dr. Chris Doran's Christianity and Culture class as we did, and we certainly never thought our parents would learn anything life-changing from one of our general education courses at Pepperdine. But in April 2012, all of our lives changed for the better.

The class focused on the Christian perspective on the environment—more specifically, the Christian responsibility towards preserving and bettering the environment. When we first heard that these topics would be the focus of this particular religion class, we had no idea what it meant. Never before had we seen or heard anyone talking about the environment from a Christian perspective and, quite frankly, we could not see the correlation between the environment and Christianity: they seemed totally dissimilar. To us, it seemed as if Pepperdine created this class just to experiment with a topic many college students care about today while still maintaining the university's religious affiliation. Initially skeptical, we were interested in seeing where this class would go. Little did we know it would give us one of the biggest wake-up calls of our lives.

Dr. Doran began the class with a video about the people of the Carteret Islands being forced to flee their homes due to rising sea levels caused by an ever-warming climate. The video was so shocking that it jarred us into realizing the point of this class: Everything on this earth is created in God's image so, as Christians, we are called to go above and beyond in treating the environment with the respect humans are supposed to give one another. In other words, simply because humans are "at the top of the food chain" does not give us the right to mistreat and abuse the rest of God's creation. This concept particularly stood out to us when our class began discussing food. The unit on food emphasized that although humans are able to speak and (in some regards) think at a higher aptitude than animals, animals are still part of God's creation and should be treated in a manner that acknowledges their importance and respects their existence.

Neither one of us had considered this notion in regard to food before, but we have always loved animals. Ever since Megan was in middle school she could not stand the thought of animals being mistreated for our benefit, so she begged our mom to make the family adopt a more vegetarian diet, thinking that was the only way to respect animals' lives. Mom was not receptive. She knew that purchasing more health-conscious and cruelty-free products would be more costly, but she primarily refused to cut out meat because she knew our dad would never go for the idea.

Our entire family was born and raised in the South, where meat is essentially the main dish for every meal. Our dad's attachment to meat began when he was a child growing up in Houston, Texas. His family ate meat almost daily and they never thought about how the meat was treated before it reached the dinner table, let alone the effect it would have on their health in the years to come. On the contrary, our mom grew up on a small farm in Arkansas where, as one of six children, she was responsible for taking care of the chickens and pigs. Mom's family ate some meat, but they also followed a more plant-based diet than Dad's family since her family mainly raised the animals to be sold to other people for eating.

During many of our discussions about going meat-free, Mom would joke that she did not care about animals that much, but whenever we asked about her childhood pet pigs and chickens, she always spoke

fondly of them. We knew from our parents' upbringings that our mom was more inclined to agree with us than our dad, but getting him to change his mind was a monstrous task. However, Megan was never one to give up that easily, so she tried talking to Dad about not eating meat—but his classic response was always, “A pig, a cow, and a chicken cannot do anything for me besides be my dinner. Meat is good for you anyway.” Defeated, we figured that we would never be able to convince our dad to change his perception of meat, so we accepted that this was the way our family was going to be. We became accustomed to eating meat and not thinking about how it was treated before Mom cooked it.

Once we started college, Megan adopted a vegetarian diet that introduced our parents to new ways of getting protein. While our parents were somewhat impressed with Megan's ability to maintain a healthy, balanced diet, they were still unwilling to change the way they ate at home, so, for us, coming home every summer meant resigning ourselves to eating meat again. However, once our last semester of sophomore year started, we realized there was a bigger purpose for not consuming meat. Before Dr. Doran's class, we just thought that eating meat was not right just because it harmed an animal that was born and slaughtered in a factory, but one class video made us realize there are so many more reasons to eat a meat-free diet. In the video, a mother cow gave birth and, seconds after the calf was born, a man immediately dragged it away from its mother. The mother cow jumped up and chased after her baby while *still* in the process of finishing giving birth. The mother cow had no chance to nurse and bond with her calf, all because the calf was taken away to be turned into veal. The video also showed chickens being pumped full of steroids so that they could grow the larger breasts more popular for human consumption. These chickens' breasts would become so large that their small legs would break, no longer able to support their weight. Dr. Doran's point was this: As Christians, God has asked us to treat every living creature with respect and dignity—as if each animal, plant, or any other life form is him. Yes, God developed a hierarchy in his creation where humans are at the top of the pyramid and animals are meant to be consumed by humans, but the least we as Christians can do is give animals a humane, happy life before they are killed to become part of our diet.

After showing our class this video, Doran asked us the following week who changed how they ate over the weekend. A few hands rose, ours included. While Morgan had been rather apathetic towards meatless diets prior to the class, both of us wanted to grow in our Christian faith, so we felt that we *had* to change how we ate in order to respect the treatment of animals and honor God's will in wanting *all* life he created to have significance, meaning, and purpose.

Although we both felt called to change our diet, it did not change the fact that reducing the amount of meat we had been eating was hard...*really* hard. It was not hard because we were carnivores or because we ate an obscene amount of meat before taking this class, but it was hard because we realized just how many meals served on and off campus include meat. Morgan still remembers the first time we went to get something to eat after deciding to reduce our meat intake: looking at our options, we realized that it was taking both of us a *lot* longer to find something to eat without meat in it.

Despite the initial mental and physical adjustments it took to reduce our meat consumption, it slowly became easier for us not to eat meat. It also forced us to become more creative with our food choices. The change was incredible for both Megan and me, because we not only felt that it was bringing us closer to God, but also because we were taking away a new perspective from a class we never expected to change our lives in a meaningful way. *This* is what college was supposed to be about—and we wanted to share this with our parents in a way that would change their lives, too. The problem? How were we going to do that? We both thought, “How in the world are we going to get our parents—the people who usually tell *us* what to do—to make a major lifestyle change?” You can see the precarious state Dr. Doran had put us in!

Now the last thing we wanted to do was upset the authority roles in our family—while we have a wonderful relationship with our parents, they aren't the kind of parents who try to act like our friends. We wanted to share with them the changes we made and the reason we did, but we were unsure of how to convince them to make similar choices without completely uprooting their way of life. We ultimately decided that the best—and only—option was simply telling them how and why we had changed. It sounds simple enough, but it was not exactly easy at the time. Would Mom take offense, thinking that we were implying we

no longer liked her cooking? Or would Dad be angry that if our mom was convinced to change her diet, he would have to say goodbye to ribs for the rest of his life? These might seem like silly concerns to have but, at the time, neither of us was sure how they would take the news.

Looking back, I realize what Megan and I had going for us was that our mom was a teacher before we were born. From when we were very young, she stressed the importance of education and wanted us to view school as an opportunity that many kids wished they had, rather than a burden or chore. Quite naturally, she was always thrilled when we were excited about something we learned in school, and we believe that our parents' willingness to change their view of meat was due to the enthusiasm and dedication we showed because of what we learned in a college course. Our mom was surprised and interested in our altered diet, and genuinely seemed willing to try it along with us—but of course, our dad was the lone holdout. The thought of Texas barbeque being taken away from him forever was too grave a thought for him to agree to change. Or so we thought.

Mom has always done the cooking in the family and Dad does the grocery shopping. As a rule, she cooks only what everyone will eat, not just what pleases one or two of us. Because our dad was resistant to our new diet, it was initially hard for her to make the transition since she was not going to cook separate meals for everyone and he did the shopping (and therefore bought what he wanted). Nevertheless, we continued to talk to our mom about how important reducing meat consumption was to us, knowing *she* was not the holdup—Dad was. He can be stubborn, but he also listens to our mom (despite his attempts to try not to!), and the more we spoke to her about meat, the more she spoke to him about it. After some time, our mom began calling and telling us what she had made for dinner, always mentioning how much less meat they were eating. Admittedly, we were surprised at his participation in this change, but thankful for it at the same time. The next step with our parents was to move them towards eating organic, grass-fed, free-range meat, reminding them about God wanting all creatures to be treated humanely, even when raised for the intention of eventually becoming food. Much to our collective delight, Dad began buying organic meat—even proudly sending us a photo of the free-range turkey he bought for this past Thanksgiving!

As a family, we have grown in our faith as a result of these changes to our diet. For all of us, the environment—particularly food—had not been placed in a context that we could all relate to and care about prior to Dr. Doran's class. The class opened our eyes toward viewing our food choices as more than just nutrition, but also as a way in which to honor and respect God and all of his creation. We have come to realize that *everything* is of equal importance in God's eyes, despite the sense of entitlement that humans have from being his most significant creation: this was a very humbling experience for us and our parents. Dr. Doran's class went beyond being a simple general education requirement and became the single most important class we have taken as undergraduate students...and perhaps the best investment our parents have made thus far in our education!

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