

A time to keep kosher: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

To the best of my knowledge, the early church dispensed with the kosher food laws of Judaism for two distinct but closely related reasons.

The first was that “all things were clean” to those who, through Jesus Christ, had been made “a new creation.” The second reason followed logically from the first. The absence of food restrictions would make it easier for gentile converts to become a part of that “new creation.” After all, they too had once been regarded as “unclean.”

The Christian approach made sense. It “worked.” In fact, we might say that it worked in the same way that human reproduction “worked”: so effectively and so irresistibly that at times one wonders if it worked *too* well. The population of the church, like that of the earth, grew so large as to raise serious questions about carrying capacity and the forced extinction of other religious life forms. And the physical creation became so clean to us that we scarcely gave a thought to how dirty we were being to it.

Contented gentile though I am, I sometimes wonder—even as I eagerly break open the claws of a boiled lobster or fry up a pan of smoked bacon—whether the morally dubious motto that says, “If it feels good, do it,” isn’t just another way of saying, “If it tastes good, eat it.” In America it sometimes seems that on these two commandments hang all the law and the profits.

Of course, even in its “liberation from the law,” the early church was not so libertarian as we. The Book of Acts tells us (after the stories of Peter’s vision of the heavenly smorgasbord and his subsequent baptism of the gentile Cornelius) that Christians are enjoined not to eat blood, or the flesh of strangled animals, or food that has been offered to idols. In other words, the Christians in Acts never abandon the idea—which is after all as eucharistic as it is Hebraic—that they are what they eat.

Perhaps I oversimplify their historical moment. I do think that I know our own, however, and I think it is not unlike the historical moment that gave rise to kosher laws in the first place. We live in a time when Christians of the industrialized world sense that they are implicated in any number of crimes against nature and neighbor but feel powerless to extricate themselves from their own culpability. We live in a time when many Christians feel a crisis of identity within an alien culture that not so long ago described itself (albeit incredibly) as “Christian.” Finally, we live in a time when Christians and non-Christians alike hunger and thirst for ways to be “spiritual” that connect intimately with their daily lives.

This is not unlike the historical situation in which a group of Israelites found themselves in the sixth century before the Common Era. They were exiles in Babylon, a conquered people without country or shrine. They needed ways in which to preserve their identity and counteract their powerlessness. They also needed a way in which households could effectively replace the temple they had last seen in flames.

Their answer to these needs was profoundly simple. They codified the way they ate. They took the preparation and eating of food—that is to say, they took the basic stuff of biological, domestic and economic life—and put it at the center of their religious life.

They were, of course, a fragile minority. In contrast, there are at present more than 250 million Christians in North America. What if even half of them refused to purchase factory-produced chicken because that kind of food production is unjust to family farmers, unhealthy for poultry workers and certainly unpleasant for chickens? In other words, because it was “against their religion.”

With a single stroke they could change the way farmers farm, the way chickens live—the way Christians witness. Without so much as a single ill-advised attempt to undermine the separation of church and state, they would have stood up for Jesus against powers and principalities. What is perhaps most important of all, they would have taken theology out of the seminaries and put it into the supermarkets.

Yes, I know: they might also drive up the price of chicken “so that poor people couldn’t afford it”—the perennial objection of those who would rather feed the poor by starving farmers than by taxing themselves. Furthermore, to enact a set of Christian dietary laws would require us to possess qualities as endangered in the

modern church as any rare bird or plant in the Amazon: namely, authority, solidarity and sacrifice. “I just feel that the kind of chicken I buy is a personal choice, and I don’t think that my religion has any right,” etc. Toothless at last, the Church of a Billion Alternatives prepares to sink its gums into the issues of a new century.

Nevertheless, there is hope, and you can find that, too, in the aisle where they keep the matzos. The kosher laws that the rabbis adjudicated for centuries were not for a single moment safeguarded by the rabbis. Nor are the sabbath candles in a Jewish household lit by a rabbi—unless she happens to be the leader of a synagogue that ordains women. Kosher dietary laws are kept by kosher homemakers. In regard to any progressive change in the way we Christians eat, I’m praying for the bishops, but I’m betting (as I always do) on the mommies.

Two or three dietary restrictions prayerfully chosen, freely embraced and widely observed, two or three refusals as simple and quiet as a child’s table grace, and the world would stand amazed. Behold, the kingdom of God remains in that place where Jesus put it on the night in which he was betrayed—in fact, where most of the other things we lose sight of are bound to turn up—right on the kitchen table.