

*Whitebread Protestants*, by Daniel Sack

Reviewed by [Christopher H. Evans](#) in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

Food unites mainline Protestants, Daniel Sack argues in this engaging account of the role played by food in white, middle-class churches--what the author affectionately calls "whitebread Protestants." Touching on a variety of topics ranging from communion practices, to inner-city soup kitchens, to fellowship meals, Sack presents a culinary montage that reveals the deep symbolic and theological meaning of food. The book reminds historians, theologians, pastors and laypeople that understanding church tradition has as much to do with how a potluck dinner is conducted and what foods are eaten in our homes and churches as it does with doctrinal debates.

"We can learn a lot from a meal," observes Sack, who is associate director of the Material History of American Religion Project at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. In the 19th century, the temperance and sanitation movements led many Protestants to replace wine and chalice with individual communion cups and grape juice. However, Sack's primary focus is on the nonsacramental use of food. He examines the development of soup kitchens, international food-relief ministries, and shifts in personal and communal eating habits. The author argues persuasively that food symbolizes how mainline churches have nurtured piety, formulated community and defined larger visions of social transformation.

Sack relates his insights (many drawn from visits to local churches and food pantries) to broader historical themes. He examines the evolution of church meals in a prominent urban congregation (St. Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church in Chicago) from the late 19th through the 20th century. From opulent multicourse feasts, this congregation shifted to more frugal meals that reflect greater empathy for the poor and the demographic changes in the church's neighborhood. Sack's discussion demonstrates the larger shift from a time when mainline churches were marked by material abundance and an imperialistic zeal to build a "Christian America" to our era in which these churches struggle with declining cultural status, financial scarcity and a greater awareness of cultural and religious pluralism.

This shift in Protestant self-perception is very clear in Sack's examination of food pantries and shelters in Atlanta, and of 19th- and 20th-century dietary reform

movements that castigated high-fat meat diets and promoted vegetarianism. He notes that changing perceptions of food in the 20th century caused Protestants to think less of their own personal affluence and, instead, to contemplate larger justice issues related to domestic and global hunger. At the same time, changing perceptions of what it means to follow the biblical injunction to feed the hungry have caused rifts between churches over questions of theological identity, the practice of ministry, and the church's mission.

Some readers may be a bit disappointed that Sack does not engage in greater depth the topics he examines. His discussion of communion practices, while insightful, almost belongs in a different category from his consideration of the more symbolic uses of food that constitutes the bulk of the study. Even though Sack claims that the chapters are linked thematically, he could flesh out his conclusions to reflect on how changing perceptions of food might shape the future of Protestantism.

As a general history of Protestant food practice, the book only scratches the surface, and it raises as many questions as it answers. For example, if it is true, as Sack argues, that future Protestant communion practices will be characterized by a diversity of methods, how will these practices relate to larger ecumenical conversations concerning the theological and practical meaning of the sacrament? Sack asserts that urban and suburban Protestants will shift away from using church volunteers to using professional food ministries in order to build community. Will these shifts also occur in small, rural congregations--a sample that Sack fails to examine? How do the food practices of whitebread Protestants compare to those of other Christian, and non-Christian, traditions?

At the same time, the book reminds us that the old saying "you are what you eat" accentuates issues of ministry and theological identity. It is a must read for anyone who has ever confronted debates over how to serve communion, participated in church fund raisers, or seen the hand of God at work at a church pot luck. In short, it is for all of us who have wondered why so much congregational fellowship revolves around the kitchen.