

Confessions of a Food Catholic

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *Confessions of a Food Catholic*
Copyright ©2016 by Douglas Wilson.

Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost.
Cover design by James Engerbretson.

Printed in the United States of America.

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the King James Version.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Wilson, Douglas, 1953- author.

Title: Confessions of a food Catholic / Douglas Wilson.

Description: Moscow : Canon Press, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016026903 | ISBN 9781944503475 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Food--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Dinners and dining--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BR115.N87 W565 2016 | DDC 261.5/6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016026903>

Confessions of a Food Catholic



DOUGLAS WILSON

canonpress
Moscow, Idaho



This book is dedicated to all those at church dinners who I noticed didn't have enough protein on their plates and who tried to cover it up by noticing I didn't have enough greens on mine.

Contents

	Introduction: You Talkin' to <i>Me</i> ?	1
1	Standards True and False	15
2	Nouvelle Kosher	25
3	Boycottery.....	57
4	Poison and Medicine	59
5	Natural & Organic versus Chemical & Corporate... ..	69
6	More on Food Aesthetics.....	93
7	The Pretense of Omniscience	101
8	The Pretense of Omnipotence	131
9	Food and Family.....	151
10	A Pastoral Issue	159
11	What Do They Teach Them in These Schools?	173
12	The Table of Gratitude and Love	185

INTRODUCTION

You Talkin' to Me?

Many years ago, when I was in a band, I came home one evening after a practice or a gig or something. I say this because I remember this incident vividly, and I was carrying my guitar. The kids were in bed, and my wife, Nancy, met me at the door very worried about something. Our duplex apartment was full of a foul smell—and it was really bad. Nancy has an acute sense of smell, and she often smells things that I don't, but this odor registered with both of us in a big way. She was worried about a possible chemical leak in the neighborhood—something like that—and the question was whether we needed to get the kids up and out of there. Before we did that, I began hunting around outside

our apartment, looking for some dead critter in the junipers right below the windows. In the course of this investigation, I stumbled across the problem. Our Korean neighbors were having a social get-together, and they were cooking up a batch of ethnic food with their friends, just like mama used to make.

Now it takes all kinds, and I can't tell you how much this story has delighted me over the years. But I have not just been delighted because *I* thought it was foul, but it also delighted me that our triune God made people's tastes so different. It delights me that *they* thought it was wonderful. I thought it was foul, but I probably need to get out more. This story should set the stage for what follows in this book.

My purpose in writing on this subject is that I have seen a number of Christians developing an extremely unscriptural approach to food. And by this, I do not mean that they have started to like things I don't like, or have started to dislike things I like very much. The issue is not one of taste. This is a free country. Make your own choices. You should be able to go to Arby's or Wendy's. *Joke*. Seriously, joke. Difference in taste is one of the things that keeps us from becoming boring, and keeps us reflecting the infinite character and nature of God. So hooray for differences in taste, whether individual or cultural.

Neither am I a “food egalitarian.” There is great cooking, good cooking, so-so cooking, poor cooking, and carrots out of the bag. Men and women exercise dominion in this area, just as we do in others, and this means that there will be a varied range of accomplishments, with some of them being more praiseworthy than others. So I am not saying that there are no qualitative differences between foods.

Neither is it my intent to say that the apostle Paul, when he said that the weaker brother eats only vegetables, was talking directly about our modern forms of vegetarianism. Of course not. But what he said *applies* to modern vegetarianism. The same thing goes for the ritual defilements from food that the Jews were so concerned about. A rabbi’s religious loathing of bacon proceeded from a very different source than does a modern (quasi-religious) loathing of refined sugar. The difference is that the rabbi at least had *some* passages to back him up. My argument here is *a fortiori*—if Jesus declared all ritually unclean foods from the Old Testament clean (representing the Gentiles as they did), then how much more are *all* foods declared clean? If *bacon* is now clean, then how could it be possible for processed cheese *not* to be? And if processed cheese had somehow become unclean, wouldn’t God have told us about it?

My point is *not* that sinning with food is impossible. A man can sin by not sharing it, by eating way too much of it, by throwing it across the cafeteria, and so forth. My point is that a man *cannot* sin by bowing his head over it, saying grace with true gratitude in his heart, and then tucking in—and this truth is not affected by whether what he is about to eat is a chocolate pudding cup from a fast food joint or lots of spinach, rich in iron.

So the comparatively new and alarming trend in Christian circles toward the demonization of certain basic foods is the sin I particularly want to address.

I am *not* speaking of those who have genuine allergies, but rather to a larger, culture-wide despising of things that God gave to us, having first pronounced them good. I am speaking (to take just two examples) of whole milk straight out of cows, and gluten straight out of a wheat field. To make my point clearer—yay, fat! yay, gluten!

Someone with a genuine allergy takes it as a hard providence that he cannot drink milk anymore. He really is lactose intolerant, and it tears him up every time he thinks of how much he used to enjoy a mounded bowl of cookies and cream. But when someone else reacts to milk in an *ick, poo!* fashion, the problem is something else altogether. For many

people in this latter category, the language of allergies, or faux-medicine from some guru, or “Bible diets,” can provide useful temporary cover, at least until more Christians can be persuaded to join them in their gnostic orification of the good stuff.

And don't write me an earnest letter claiming that all the “good stuff” was inserted by our evil factories. The devil isn't that generous. Food phobias have a long and rooted history in American Christianity, and they are in the middle of a strong comeback. Neither should anyone write me a letter claiming that I have said there is no such thing as a genuine food allergy. There certainly is, just as there are people in the world with a missing leg. My point, and I am seeking to make it carefully here, is that people with two legs are not restricted to one leg, and that it is better to have two. And it is not to the point to say that I am making light of the tragedy of having just one leg. No, I am actually trying to point out another tragedy of two-legged people hopping around unnecessarily—all because they read a book that seemed quite persuasive.

I am not going to make my case for it here, but simply state the conclusion, let that settle in, and try to argue for it later: A large part of the reason that Christians are pulling away from certain foods with

loathing is the result of father hunger. When you learn the meaning of fatherhood, you have learned the goodness of *provision*.

These qualifications should make it clear that I am not mocking the sick and the infirm, or being hard-hearted toward those who are truly hurting. Nor are these qualifications simply a *pro forma* sort of thing, giving myself plausible deniability, in case someone's feelings get hurt and I wanted to have something to point to while maintaining that I didn't say that. I really believe my qualifications.

Here is another full paragraph of them, and a longish paragraph it is too. First, I understand that these things operate on a sliding scale—it is not the case that you either go to the hospital all swoll up with your life on the line, or your problem is entirely imaginary. Some allergies are very serious immediately, while others should be filed under certain foods “not agreeing with” your constitution. There are food allergies, with varying degrees of seriousness, and there are food intolerances, with varying degrees of seriousness. The law of love should govern in all instances. Hosts should be thoughtful hosts, and guests should be thoughtful guests. Also, when it comes to particular cases and instances, with people I deal with directly, I am not trigger-happy in offering

the suggestion that the problem might not be “real.” Actually, the problem is always real in some way, but it is sometimes not real in the way that everybody first thought. But if I am counseling someone, for example, and begin to suspect that some kind of self-delusion is going on, it will usually take me months to get to the point where I would suggest that directly. There would be a lot of other ground to cover first. And what this means is that I am not making snap-diagnoses at a distance of particular individuals in any of my writing on this subject.

I have been dealing with people in pastoral ministry for decades, and have pretty much seen it all. I have seen enough to know that there is a true category out there of hypochondria, and there is another category of people who are genuinely sick—and some of them with illnesses that are quite mysterious, and hard to pin down. Now the fact that I believe there is such a thing as the former category does not mean that I deny the existence of the second, or the seriousness of what people in the second category face, or the difficulties they confront when they are afflicted with something that might look to outsiders like they are making it all up. To all such—my heart goes out to them, and they don't have worry about any snide comments from me. I have never been talking about them.

This being the case, why do I run the risk of being misunderstood by some with a genuine ailment? When I am attacking abuse in this area (as I frequently do), it is because I have seen the real damage, in real time, that play-acting can do to marriages, families, and friendships. I have also seen a situation where someone in genuine pain just soldiers on through because she will not be lumped in with those who have their boutique allergies. This is a situation created by the fakery, and not by recognition that there is such a thing as fakery or self-deception.

Here are the principles I am most concerned about:

1. The first point is that table fellowship is one of the most important ecclesiastical issues found in the New Testament. We need to remember that, and act accordingly. Some of the fiascoes I have seen were the result of ignoring that truth. We have gotten to the point where there is widespread disruption of such table fellowship, and I simply think that more of us should act like it is a big deal. Just to be clear on the point, genuine food allergies, etc. do *not* disrupt table fellowship because they provide an occasion for love. The disruption is caused by manipulation and selfishness, which is the opposite of *koinonia* fellowship.

2. The second issue concerns the nature of knowledge. I could care less what other people eat—provided

they are having a good time with it. But I care very much about truth and verification. I care very much about irrationality being given a free pass simply because it is what Smith or Murphy “are into.” Once the principles of unreason are well-established in our midst, we will find that we cannot turn them off with a switch, simply because we are now dealing with something more serious. We are to love the Lord our God with all our minds, and I have to say that I have seen some striking instances of that not happening. The *post hoc* fallacy is not the queen of the sciences.

3. The third point concerns frequent abdication on the part of fathers and husbands. Many times, emotional and spiritual issues show up in the lives of women as food issues, and the men involved are often too weak, or cowardly, or defensive about their own causal role, to address it in the way they ought to. Women are prone to be deceived (1 Tim. 2:14), and men are prone to let them be deceived. This is an area where I have seen radical unsubmissiveness on the part of some wives, and radical cowardice on the part of some husbands, conspiring together to destroy families. The food is just a symptom; the real problem is located somewhere else entirely. And wives, don't read this and go off to demand that your husband tell you if this is true in your case. It might not be, but if it

is, you are unlikely to get a straight answer from him. Get on your knees and ask the Spirit if it is true. *He's* not afraid of you.

4. And last, if any reacted to my earlier use of the phrase boutique allergies, and assume that anyone who uses phrases like that must be attacking you individually, then this illustrates the heart of the problem with “qualifications.” There is no good reason I can think of for someone with a real broken leg being defensive on behalf of someone who is faking a broken leg. To make the point bluntly, referring back to my second concern, if I write that Smith is faking his broken leg, it is not germane to the discussion to point to a picture of your son, who is not a Smith at all, with the bone sticking out. My belief that there is such a thing as a boutique allergy industry does not mean that I believe that you are a customer. I mean, I don't even know your name. But those shops are out there, and they do have customers.

So if genuine sufferers are not my target audience, then who is? Let me put this one in the categories of two different prepositions—at and for. Who is this book aimed *at*, and who is it *for*?

It is directed at every species of phood pharisees. Some may think that such legalism mostly a windmill to tilt at, but I think differently. I see and hear

expressions of moral superiority based on personal food choices on a regular basis, and such expressions are a true enemy of our souls. They are deadly.

This is quite a different thing than a recognition that some foods can be better than others—aesthetically, nutritionally, and so forth. Avoidance of pharisaism is not equivalent to food relativism—though the pharisees usually think that it is. If *their* made-up rules fall, then all moral standards must topple with them, and civilization with it. Or so they think.

What comes to mind when you imagine a person with a seared conscience? The first thing might be a sociopath—someone who has no compunction about doing anything whatever. “Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron . . .” (1 Tim. 4:2). That is a natural move, but it is a mistaken one. In scriptural terms, when a person’s conscience is seared with a hot iron, he doesn’t become an anarchist, he becomes a fierce moralist. Notice the next verse—“forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:3). A man with a seared conscience is the prohibitionist, the wowser, the fusser.

On reflection, this should not be surprising. As long as we bear the image of God, we have to function in

terms of antithesis, in the light of a foundational right and wrong. But because we are in rebellion against God, we violate His holy commandments. But we still have a need to *feel* righteous, and we have a desperate need to shout down our guilt. What better way to shout down the guilt than to go on a compensatory crusade? This is displaced moralism.

Thus we have a man who screams at his wife, but who drives a Prius with a smug look, a man who uses porn, but who is fastidious about avoiding gluten, a woman who has a botoxed face and siliconed chest, but who eats plenty of leafy greens because it seems “more natural,” a man beset with homosexual lusts who is on a fierce crusade for wealth redistribution, and so on.

Nothing is being said here about the gourmand who knows and understands good food, and would consequently prefer a meal bursting with the interplay of numerous intelligently placed spices to a meal on the couch from a crinkly bag, the name of which ends with that pervasive food group suffix -itos. That is simply a man getting good at something, just like other men get good on the guitar, or laying down asphalt, or building skyscrapers, or writing novels. Good on him, and maybe he should think about becoming a chef.

No, I am talking about the crusader, the devotee. I am talking about the person who, having eaten the *cibus prohibitus*, feels guilty. I am talking about the person who, observing his brother at Quiznos (from a high and lofty perspective), feels censorious.

The point is not just that this displaced moralism is a bad thing in itself, which it is. The point is that it is often a smoke-screen distraction, an attempt to persuade himself, his family, his church, and his pastor, that he is a morally serious person—despite the hidden drunkenness, porn, anger, homosexuality, and so on. We are so constituted that we do not just set aside the Word of God. We do it *by means of* our own traditions.

So that is where this book is aimed. If you're not living in Phariseeville, then, as the Aussies say, no worries. If you have never seen an instance of phood pharisaism, and you don't know *what* I am talking about, then perhaps you should consider whether you are one. But if like the rest of us you do live in a society that is given over to this foolishness, then it would be difficult not to be affected by it all. But being affected by pharisees is not the same thing as being one, and those in that category can find themselves being pushed in a direction they haven't really thought about much.

So if you assume that natural, ancient, and organic *always* means healthier, then this book is for you. Something could genuinely be all three and still be bad for you. If you tend to think that natural on a label is anything other than an advertising hook, manipulated and controlled by bureaucrats and corporate execs, this book is for you. If you think that you (or your children) ought to be required to eat the heel of the loaf because the browner and tougher it is, the more nutritious it must be, then this book is for you.

Lastly, and above all, if you think that all these things are rules for *holiness*, and consequently that those who aren't following them aren't holy and therefore deserve your righteous condemnation, then this book is *most definitely* for you.

Standards True and False

The position I am arguing for is not food egalitarianism or, worse, food relativism. There is no neutrality anywhere, including in the kitchen and dining room, and this means that in principle we can say that “this food” is better than “that food.” But when we do, we are making an aesthetic and practical judgment grounded in a biblical worldview. We are making a judgment that has moral implications (as everything does)—but we are *not* making a moral judgment on individual behavior.

A moral judgment proper says that if you commit adultery, you have sinned. If you steal something from the local drugstore, you have sinned. An aesthetic judgment with moral implications is a very different