Do Christian have to be vegetarian?

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The question of vegetarianism in the Bible is a bit complex. The Bible addresses it from the point of view of creation to re-creation. Yet at the same time it allows for humans to eat certain meats. Thus we cannot require vegetarianism as part of a Christian lifestyle. But let’s examine some of the biblical evidence that speaks to your question.

1. Vegetarianism in the Bible: It is well known that the original diet God gave to humans was vegetarian (Gen. 1:29), and that it remained as such after sin entered the world (3:18). This diet was given in the context of God’s command to exercise dominion over the animals (1:28), thus setting a limit to humanity’s power over the animal kingdom. In the context of the Creation account, the vegetarian diet pointed to the absence of violence and death within the created order and to God’s intention to preserve that order. But the diet also revealed God’s wisdom and love in providing for humans the type of food that would make it possible for them to work with the Creator in preserving their lives in optimal conditions. Meat was unnecessary to sustain life.

Interestingly, the Bible suggests that at the end, after the eradication of sin from God’s creation, humans will again be vegetarians. This is particularly implied by the prophetic description of the transformation of the animal world and the absence of violence within it: “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isa. 11:9, NIV; see also Isa. 11:6-9; 65:25). The absence of violence in the animal world presupposes its absence among humans.

2. Restricted Meat Consumption: After the global flood, and in the context of the absence of flora, God allowed humans to eat animal flesh (Gen. 9:3). This was based in the divine distinction between clean and unclean animals (Gen. 7:2; Lev. 11). This restrictive use of animal flesh had two main purposes:

First, since it was a dietary law, it identified the flesh of animals that could best contribute to the preservation of human life in a world of sin and death. Second, it served to set limits on human violence against animal life by restricting the consumption of flesh to a particular number of them. The animals would fear humans and literally run for their lives when seeing one (Gen. 9:2).

The divine ideal of a meat-free diet was not totally forgotten later in the Bible. When Israel was in the wilderness in need of food, God provided manna. When they insisted
on eating meat, the Lord gave them quail; but the result was sickness (Num. 11:4-23, 31-33). According to the Bible the Lord rarely provided flesh to His people (cf. 1 Kings 17:6). In fact, the regular diet of the Israelites was basically vegetarian. Only under special circumstances did they eat meat (e.g. sacrifices, Lev. 3:1-9). Their domestic animals constituted their “bank accounts” and were the source of milk, curds, and cheese (Deut. 32:14; Judges 5:25; 2 Sam. 17:29).

3. *God’s Ideal for His People:* Adventists have taken seriously the law of clean and unclean animals as representing the minimum the Lord requires from us concerning proper diet. We submit to it in grateful obedience to His will because it expresses His loving interest in our physical and spiritual well-being. By taking proper care of our bodies, which are temples of the Holy Spirit, we glorify God. Biblical evidence has led Adventists to conclude that vegetarianism is God’s ideal for His people. Such an ideal is very relevant in a world that is slowly realizing the tremendous benefits of such a diet.

Vegetarianism is on the rise around the world for a variety of reasons: ethical, ecological, religious, even narcissistic. This may be the proper time to reaffirm that ideal and avoid the use of meat in official meetings of the church (potlucks, workers’ meetings, etc.) and, whenever possible, by excluding it from our kitchens.

This I write to you that “you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 2, NIV).