

# DRY BONES

## Confessions of a tomato-hater

Praise the Lord and pass some more catsup

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM



There is a fine line between self-centeredness and self-confidence, between egotism and security.

The insecure man is always afraid, often angry. The

secure man faces his flaws, confesses them before the accuser gets to him (and to others) and is unashamed. He knows it is far better to risk and fail, than to court himself unworthy and not risk at all.

One of the risk areas of my life is my relationship with tomatoes. I do not eat them. I have never eaten a tomato. This is not necessarily a religious practice, it is just that I cannot stand the thought of biting into one of those quivering, jellied, nauseous things. It is not that I have anything against tomatoes *per se* because I love catsup. I eat catsup on everything from cheese to scrambled eggs.

But a long time ago I made a quality decision — and for the life of me I do not know why — that I would not eat tomatoes. The thought of biting into one of them is as repulsive as chewing earthworms. That's just the way I am.

I almost ate one several years ago. I had ordered a hamburger at a hamburger stand "skip the tomatoes, please" — and took it back to my table. I had already taken a bite when I discovered I had that foul thing in my mouth.

It wasn't the thought of swallowing which bothered me, it was the thought of chewing it up. Fortunately I was able to spit it out. (A less courageous man would have swallowed without chewing.)

Then I had to go through the process of getting it off my hamburger before it soaked into the bun — all those little seeds with mucus around them. Then I discovered I had gotten some of it on my fork and had to wipe it off — much to the pleasure of my children who were watching, and giggling. However, I didn't ruin my

record, and can proudly state to this day I have never eaten a tomato.

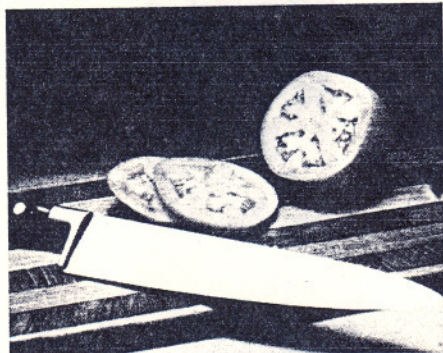
(Some theologians, I understand, believe it was not an apple but a tomato Eve handed to Adam, thus contaminating all mankind.)

It doesn't bother me that I don't eat tomatoes. I am not the least bit embarrassed to take tomatoes out of my salad and put them in my wife's bowl when we go out to eat. I pick them out of the soup, also, for the only thing worse than a raw tomato is a cooked one — especially if it is boiled with okra.

Just as I do not drink hard liquor, dip snuff, or chant incantations to the devil — so I do not eat tomatoes.

It is simply part of my way of living and comes as natural as saying "No thank you" to a whiskey sour.

But while some of my Christian friends may applaud my abstinence



from hard liquor, very few understand my decision to skip tomatoes.

"What? You don't like tomatoes? What's wrong with you anyway?"

"You eat catsup, don't you? What's the difference?"

I've heard these and every other remark over the 47 years I have not eaten tomatoes. The difference is I have chosen not to eat tomatoes. I was not taught that way at home, or in the seminary, nor has it been forced on me by some "shepherd." It's just my way of life.

I do not grow angry when questioned. I am secure.

The other day I visited the cafeteria in Vero Beach with my mother, my wife, and a lady missionary the same age as my mother.

We went through the line and I ordered a piece of ground steak. The woman behind the counter asked if I wanted mushroom sauce. I said yes.

I didn't know the mushrooms were cooked in tomatoes and before I knew it she had smeared that horrible stuff all over my meat — big hunks of quivering, pink tomato in lots of juice.

I took it calmly and when we got to our table I began, as unobtrusively as possible, to take the tomatoes off my meat and put them on the bread plate.

Well, the ladies at the table thought that was awful. All of them had loud things to say about my not liking tomatoes.

My mother said it was a shame I was still like that. My wife said I embarrassed her every time I went to a restaurant. The elderly missionary lady said if I lived overseas long enough I'd learn to eat things like that — and be grateful.

I managed to smile through it all and finally wound up pouring the tomato juice into the ashtray to keep it from soaking into my cornbread.

I enjoyed my dinner immensely, but the ladies never did seem to get back in the mood for eating.

In the areas where I am secure, where I know who I am, I never grow angry. In such areas I refuse to let the world — even the world of my wife and mother — mold me into its image. It is only when I am on shaky ground, unsure of my stance, or afraid to take off my mask and let folks see me the way I really am, that I explode in the defense mechanism of anger.

Salvation, in its purest sense, is becoming the person you really are — the person God created you to be. It is there you achieve the individuality and personal identity for which each man yearns.

At that time a man can, if he chooses, submit to his brothers as an act of his will. In fact, it is only when a man is secure in his identity that he is free to wash feet — which is the difference between serving and groveling.

Perhaps, one day, I shall eat a tomato. In fact, there are times when I wonder, "Is this the day?"

But until then I am content with my uniqueness and feel no need to defend my status.

In the meantime, pass the catsup please. ☞