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The Promised Land of Weight Loss:

by **R. Marie Griffith**

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SUMMARY

To dismiss Bible-based diet books for their shallowness is to ignore the pain and spiritual struggle behind them.

Thirty-nine years ago the CHRISTIAN CENTURY printed a waggish but eloquent essay by William B. Mueller titled "Of Obesity and Election." An article so named today would likely be one more tiresome exposé of Bill Clinton's struggle for girth control, but Mueller intended "election" to ring predestinarian bells as he reviewed

the latest book by a then youthful Presbyterian minister, Charlie W. Shedd: *Pray Your Weight Away* (1957). As Mueller observed with due irony, Shedd had managed to blend the tone of a down-home preacher with the shrewdness of an entrepreneurial fitness broker in order to peddle the gospel of slimness, condemning portly bodies in the unequivocal lexicon of sin and guilt while touting born-again reduction through sustained and humble prayer.

Though Mueller winced at Shedd's theology, he confessed its resonant power in his own life, remembering his weight-obsessed Presbyterian mother over whose dressing table hung portraits of John Calvin and fitness guru Bernarr Macfadden in paired consecration. Mrs. Mueller had apparently labored hard to instill fear of all things flabby in her young son, awakening him daily at 6 A.M. for strained carrot juice, a brisk jog around Baltimore's Lake Ashburton and "a grueling order of calisthenics" before sending him, exhausted, off to school. Mueller's wry commentary on these weighty matters, mixed with tenderness for his well-intentioned mother, doubtless prompted many readers to chuckle sympathetically, though I suspect more than a few paused long enough to order Shedd's popular book for themselves.

Those who did obtain the book could reflect on what it really meant to pray their weight away by pondering such apparently irrefutable points as, "When God first dreamed you into creation, there weren't one hundred pounds of excess avoirdupois hanging around your belt." Shedd, who claimed to have divested that much from his own body, recommended various treatments for successful slimming, including vocal mealtime affirmations such as: "Today my body belongs to God. Today I live for Him. Today I eat with Him." He also advised, as a useful time-saver, combining daily devotions with 15 minutes of calisthenics, and encouraged readers to follow his own regimen, which included executing karate kicks while reciting the third chapter of Proverbs and timing sit-ups to the spoken rhythm of Psalm 19. All the while, readers could emulate Shedd in imagining the mountain referred to in Matthew 17:20 as a mountain of flesh, able to be moved (i.e., lost) by the person of true faith. With a heavy dose of positive thinking to balance his rebuke of excess poundage, Shedd assured readers that beneath their bulk "there is a beautiful figure waiting to come forth. Peel off the layers, watch it emerge, and know the thrill which comes when you meet the real you."

Shedd and his readers could hardly have foreseen the impending explosion of Christian diet literature into a multimillion-dollar industry, one that rode the back of the American diet craze and capitalized on it by creating a message specially geared to the evangelical multitudes. Today the shelves of Christian bookstores bulge with material that makes Charlie Shedd look like a prophetic sage (even if he did recommend only a trifling 15 minutes of exercise per day) rather than an object of easy derision. However amusing William Mueller may have found Shedd's dieting strategies, Shedd seems to have had the last laugh, judging from the millions of Americans who consume Christian fitness publications, sweat to the industry's exercise regimes and otherwise venerate the gods of reduction.

I suspect many Christians are, as I am, puzzled if not troubled by recent developments in this industry. Perhaps it is time to try to assess the full scope of this movement and formulate a cogent theological response.

Since the 1950s American Christianity has seen the rise (and sometimes fall) of groups and concepts like Overeaters Victorious, Believerscise, the Faithfully Fit Program, and the Love Hunger Action Plan. Episcopalian Deborah Pierce, transformed from a 210-pound object of campus ridicule to a "highfashion model" in Washington, composed *I Prayed Myself Slim* in 1960, followed seven years later by pastor Victor Kane's *Devotions for Dieters*, a book that was reprinted in 1973 and again in 1976.

When Christian diet literature underwent its initial boom in the 1970s, Charlie Shedd again led the way: his 1972 book *The Fat Is in Your Head* remained on the national religious best-seller list for 23 months and sold more than 110,000 copies by 1976. Evangelist Frances Hunter produced *God's Answer to Fat* in 1975, a top religious best seller that far exceeded even Shedd's numbers, with 1977 sales figures nearly matching Charles Colson's *Born Again* and the inspirational autobiography *Joni*. Other striking successes in this period include C. S. Lovett's *Help Lord—The Devil Wants Me Fat!* (1977), Patricia Kreml's *Slim for Him* (1978) and Neva Coyle's *Free to Be Thin* (1979), which sold more than half a million copies and spawned a virtual industry of Coyle-authored diet products, including an exercise video and an inspirational low-calorie cookbook.

Along the way, women who had failed to lose weight on their own took a cue from

the strategy of such commercial groups as TOPS (for Taking Off Pounds Sensibly, founded in 1949), Overeaters Anonymous (1960) and Weight Watchers (incorporated in 1963) and began seeking help from other struggling dieters, adding a biblical dimension to the program. The New York wife of a Presbyterian pastor, for instance, gave up the strict regimen of Weight Watchers in 1972 to form 3D (Diet, Discipline, Discipleship), advertised as "a Christian counterpart to national weight-watcher programs" and expanding to more than 5,000 churches and 100,000 participants by 1981. About the same time, 248-pound Neva Coyle from Minnesota, having failed at every commercial diet program she tried, turned to the Bible, lost 100 pounds, and founded Overeaters Victorious in 1977, which launched her successful career as a best-selling author and inspirational speaker.

This trend hardly faltered in the 1980s and '90s. The recent plethora of publications includes books on "spiritual discipline for weight control," "biblical principles that will improve your health" and achieving "greater health God's way." More Christian diet groups have emerged and gone national, including Houston-based First Place (founded in 1981), with programs in nearly 5,000 churches across the country and in 13 other nations, and smaller programs like Jesus Is the Weigh.

Currently, the largest of these programs is the Tennessee-based Weigh Down Workshop (founded in 1986), a 12-week Bible study program that is now offered in as many as 10,000 churches in the U.S. and elsewhere. That program is likely to gain new ground with the recent release of founder Gwen Shamblin's *The Weigh Down Diet*, stocked at both commercial and religious bookstores across the nation. Just as Christian exercise programs have taken the country by storm (in 1996 Sheri Chambers's "Praise Aerobics" video immediately went gold, fast selling over 50,000 copies to compete numerically with the latest offerings from Bon Joy and Janet Jackson), Bible-based diet programs are expanding rapidly, with no ebb in sight.

Concern with weight and dieting is hardly the sole province of religious conservatives. Readers of theologian Mary Louise Bringle and church historian Roberta Bondi, both of whom have written moving accounts of their struggles with food, recognize that eating compulsions of every variety bedevil liberal Christians no less than their evangelical sisters and brothers. Awareness of this

point, and of the extreme suffering that accompanies such compulsions, should make us sympathetic toward Christian weight-watching. Yet I suspect that more than a few churchpeople, conservative and liberal, continue to scorn those who relish the earnest, homespun approach of Charlie Shedd, Neva Coyle and Gwen Shamblin—those who pray feelingly about issues that may not seem to the rest of us to be on God's top list of concerns.

We may well chortle at Coyle's belief that God actually urges faithful dieters to abstain from fattening treats, or at Shamblin's insistence that the deity "is too smart to let somebody like Weight Watchers or Jane Fonda be your savior and get all the credit" and so "will not let other diets work." How can we not smile at titles like *Slim for Him*? Yet hundreds of thousands of downhearted dieters look to this kind of devotional advice for redemption as assiduously as they have ever listened to Sunday sermons, and often with a great deal more desperation. While it is easy to find the comic in this genre, we ought not lose sight of the living people generating and responding anxiously to these titles and teachings; Mueller's own humorous account was, after all, laced with regret for the diet prison in which his mother had trapped herself.

The tone of Christian diet writers themselves is usually one part ebullience and two parts anxiety. Shored up by relief at having successfully reduced proportional body fat, they remain haunted by dread that the pounds, the scorn and the self-hating misery may surge back at any time. Neva Coyle reached her peak size at the age of 28 and recounts in grueling detail the immense shame and loneliness that accompanied her obesity. Joan Cavanaugh, author of *More of Jesus, Less of Me* (1976), grew up a fat child who was ridiculed mercilessly by other children and so made the cookie cupboard her "altar." "It was my heart that was hungry," she explains achingly, "but all I could think to do was feed my face."

Jim Tear, coauthor with Jan Houghton Lindsey of *Fed Up with Fat* (1978), crested at a perilous 425 pounds and remembers: "I didn't feel God's love. I felt like a joke to Him. My fat had become such a fortress around me that even God couldn't penetrate it with His love and help." This is not pollyannaish Shedd-talk, capitalizing on positive prayer as the latest cure-all for those unsightly bulges around the aging midriff. These are stories of serious despair and alienation, and perhaps of grace as well.

These and scores of similar stories ought to make us cringe at the ease with which Bible-based diet books (and the writers of them) are fodder for highbrow derision, as when B. Laurence Moore in *Selling God* cattily dismisses them as "merchandise in questionable taste" and lumps them indifferently with "love-making manuals" and "the Christian equivalent of Harlequin romances." Or when Os Guinness, in *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, skewers Christian dieting as the anti-intellectual concern of the "slim, svelte, and tanned...striking blond in her twenties" who is basically either too lazy or too dumb (in his view) to care about the life of the mind. Perhaps those who have never felt ashamed of their own bodies or feared that God saw them as a "joke" are disinclined to take such matters seriously. In any case, these poignant accounts merit compassion, not cheap shots. Even where the theology seems highly questionable in its trivialization of the gospel, drowning in bathos, the issues addressed deserve serious reflection. What does it mean to be embodied in a culture that celebrates both thinness and indulgence?

The mocking of these texts also highlights a persistent tendency, both within and outside of the church, to devalue what are viewed as "women's issues." Not that Bible-based diet literature is a purely feminine genre. From Charlie Shedd to Victor Kane, C. S. Lovett, Harold Hill, Jim Tear, Edward Dumke, Charles Salter and Nathan Ware, men have contributed significantly to it and have addressed a reading audience of men as well as women. But an unmistakable difference separates the writings of male and female authors: far more women than men identify their food habits as "compulsions" and testify to the depression, loneliness and shame that accompany obesity. Men (with a few exceptions) focus less on the emotional dimensions of being overweight than on its detriments to physical health, stamina and vigor. Perhaps the intensity of the women's testimonies, accounts of uncontrolled bingeing and self-hatred that terminate in divine surrender and ultimate triumph, prompts critics to judge them delusional and overwrought.

But the pain and humiliation at the heart of these stories signal a powerful despair that ought not to be trivialized, nor should writers simply be indicted for reinforcing the very standards of thinness that gave rise to that despair in the first place. Failing to take their stories seriously, to let them stir us to understanding, intensifies the marginality and shame articulated by their authors, male but especially female; whereas opening our ears to hear them ought to sharpen our

attentiveness to that same pain in the churches and communities that surround us.

What marks the more recent literature as distinctive is not its concern with corporeal thinness and good health per se but the apparent willingness of authors to accept, ardently and without flinching, the somatic standards of the wider culture and convert them into divine decree. "Think of your 'promised land' as a thin body," writes one author. Another insists that God wants us aware that "sloppy fat, hanging all over the place (or even well girdled), is not a good Christian witness and is not healthy." Here and elsewhere, diet writers display rather too little critical reflection on the profaner sources of these assumptions, such as the modern commodified images of seduction that make an idol out of hungry-looking, sexualized beauty.

On the other hand, advocates of Bible-based dieting do caution each other to keep their eyes on the holy prize rather than focus too intently on the material rewards of slenderness offered by the secular world. Patricia Kreml, author of *Slim for Him*, warns her readers against vanity even while assuring them that they will become more beautiful via her regimen. "We don't diet, lose weight, and firm our bodies just so we can look nice and get compliments. This will be a result of our efforts but not the main reason for them," she earnestly avers. "Our first reason has to be keeping our bodies under subjection that we might live the temperate, Christ-like life we are called to live." The body is God's temple, these authors remind their readers, and the real aim of keeping it "under subjection"—thin, firm, disciplined—is not mere self-gratification but sacrificial obedience to God.

The severest critics of this genre target the assumed equation of fat with sin. An irate writer published an essay in *Daughters of Sarah* in 1989 assailing the "holy hucksters peddling diet books preaching that thinness is next to godliness and faith can remove mountains of you-know-what. The message, whether blatant or subtle, is that fat-is-sin-and-the-righteous-are-thin-amen." In her 1992 book *The God of Thinness*, Mary Louise Bringle similarly denounced the Christian diet industry for "feeding off the facile conflation of fat and sin (and forgetting that the traditional teachings of the church condemn consumptive behaviors but say nothing about cosmetic matters of body shape and size)." Both writers justly

protest that this simple conflation is not only false but cruel, as well as hazardous to everyone's spiritual and physical health. In Bringle's succinct avowal, "Thinness is a false god. Fatness is a pseudo-sin."

However apt this indignation and however fruitful its alternative perspectives, these critiques do not seem to reflect a thorough scrutiny of the literature being censured. Christian diet books, brochures for Bible-based weight-loss programs, and evangelical women's stories about their bodies do not articulate a uniform message. In fact, these sources present strikingly varied interpretations of the role that food and weight-watching play, or ought to play, in the Christian life. Whereas Shedd presumed that excess weight was the result of gluttony, pure and simple, recent writers have given a distinctly therapeutic spin to the varied reasons why people eat more than their bodies require.

The most commonly voiced predicament now is addiction rather than greed: one confesses no longer to being a penitent sinner but rather to being an acute "foodaholic," one whose compulsive eating is triggered by forces that were previously beyond one's knowledge or control (whether chemical, demonic or a combination of the two). As Frances Hunter put it as early as 1975: "I want to tell you that I am a 'foodaholic' and I have always been and I will always be, but with God's help, this foodaholic is going to let Jesus control her appetite from now on!" While this classic model of addiction may like the therapeutic sensibility underlying it, be of limited value, it has significantly nuanced, if not displaced, the fat-sin equation so often debunked by critics of evangelical diet literature.

One of the truisms of religious weight-loss books, consonant with the wider American diet industry, is that so-called "head hunger" (the desire to consume when there is no physiological urge for food) is in fact hunger of an expressly spiritual kind. As Shamblin puts it in *The Weigh Down Diet*, the purpose of a Christ-centered diet program is to "learn how to replace head hunger with the will of God so that you transfer this urge for a pan of brownies to that of hungering and thirsting after righteousness." Cavanaugh's *More of Jesus, Less of Me* makes a similar point: "Those of us who hunger for more than we need, for more than is good for us, have another hunger: we have emotional problems that we have not exposed to the healing of our Lord Jesus. . . But there is good news: the Holy Spirit can heal these unnamed hungers." Taking this idea to its ultimate

therapeutic conclusion, another author maintains, "Jesus went to the cross so that His people no longer need be the victims of compulsive acts."

The recognition of gluttony has not dropped out of the picture altogether, but a perceptible, if subtle, shift has taken place in its articulation. Authors increasingly stress not the carnal sign ("fat") but the concrete act or practice of excessive overeating. Writers today do not declare, with Shedd, "We fatties are the only people on earth who can weigh our sin." Instead they assert with the author of *Health Begins in Him* (1995), "If people who do not know Christ can walk in discipline and self-control, surely we as Christians can walk free from bondage to food." Or, as the author of *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living* (1996) puts it, "Don't let any food or drink become your God."

The old fear that being overweight may be a hindrance to one's Christian witness has by no means disappeared but has begun to be put in ostensibly more positive (and therefore more broadly appealing) terms. Rather than choosing between sinful-but-scrumptious indulgence on the one hand and godly-but-tiresome obedience on the other, the challenge is to select between enslavement to unwholesome and distasteful foods—bondage to Boston cream pie is one author's illustration—and deliverance into the possibility of living a truly energetic, salubrious and meaningful existence. The problem in view is not fat but loving food more than God. And the cure begins not with denying the flesh but with revealing the deeper, spiritual needs that trigger anxious eating.

A more conspicuous development in this literature is its growing systematization: it includes charts and graphs and regular pretensions to "scientific" authority. Well into the early 1980s a few Christian diet writers aspired to anything more scientific than a crude theory of the tripartite person—spirit, soul and body, in Harold Hill's formulation—intended to shed light on the distinctive appetites motivating human desire. By the 1990s, however, authors seemed to catch on to the idea that readers accustomed to secular diet books distributed by physicians would be more likely to buy a devotional fitness manual if it laid claim to medical science. So one finds—along with assertions about the authors' dietary credentials—Weight Graphs, Habit Charts, Calorie Worksheets, Menu Planners and Food Journals in the back of books like *The Joy of Eating Right* (1993) and *Thoroughly Fit* (1993). Inspirational testimonials written by ordinary nonprofessional folks,

largely homemakers, who resolved their weight problems through improvised devotional regimens of their own making now seem almost obsolete.

An exception is Shamblin's down-to-earth *Weigh Down Diet*. Though a dietician, she abandoned the pseudo-scientific techniques of her peers—even calorie and fat-gram counting—in favor of the simple (and perhaps simplistic) principle that one should learn to eat when hungry and stop, even if midway through a candy bar, when full. Her careful approach, fortified with a keen awareness of just how difficult it can be to distinguish physical needs from vaguer but no less powerful emotional ones, also eschews the fraudulent claims and dangerous practices perpetuated by the "five-day miracle plan" style of American dieting.

At the same time, increasingly thoughtful attention has begun to be paid to syndromes like anorexia and bulimia. Evangelical fitness maven Stormie Omartian led the way (even while plugging her own diet and exercise plan) by addressing, in 1984 and again in 1993, the tyranny of contemporary body standards and noting that most dieters carry on a self-defeating battle with food and exercise that is "a prelude to the most intense feelings of failure." Exploring the pathology behind 20th-century eating disorders, Omartian's books deplore the pressure on women in American society to be perfect and entreat readers to remember that success and happiness are dependent not upon looks or weight but only on God. "You must make up your mind to have respect, love, and appreciation for the body God gave you, no matter what shape it is in at this moment," she urges. Such a respectful, appreciative attitude toward one's body remains rare, even, and perhaps especially, among the most disciplined Christians. Omartian's own books display her model-thin body, making her plea for inclusive appreciation rather feeble.

This heady mix of theology, pseudo-science and therapy remains profoundly disturbing in its implications for "overweight" Christians, many of whom incur no health risks from their weight and are merely a few pounds over some impossible cultural ideal. Others, the clinically obese in particular, may suffer from glandular or other physiological causes unrelated to issues of overeating or spiritual discipline—an issue not commonly treated in this literature. There is no doubt that the message of the Christian diet and fitness industry may still work to perpetuate the most harmful stereotypes of those in our society who are heavier than the

latest faddish norm, reinforcing the double jeopardy of being a "fat" Christian in America. Often enough it slides alarmingly close to depicting a God who loves a size six woman more than a size 16.

Yet there ought to be a clear distinction in our thinking between a critique of the effects of this genre, with its deceptive promises of liberation, and a more empathic inquiry into the writers and especially the readers of this literature, those searching for some kind of encouragement and relief that they have failed to find elsewhere. Given the pressures on all of us, women especially but also (and increasingly) men, to be thin and attractively "fit," it would be wise to view these writers and readers as simultaneous casualties, ambivalent promoters and intermittent resisters of these cultural pressures. In this respect, they are much like the rest of us. And it would be too cynical to conclude that everyone contributing to this body of work is simply out to exploit cultural obsessions for a fast buck. The narratives, often supplemented with corroborating photos, are too wrenching and the tales of childhood ridicule, adolescent exclusion and adult shame too authentic.

Southern fiction writer Clyde Edgerton managed, in his 1990 novel *Killer Diller*, to bestow a tender dignity on Christian dieters through the character of Phoebe, a 230-pound resident of the Nutrition House for Overweight Christians whose abundant size obstructs neither her vigorous self-respect nor her attainment of love. Yes, Phoebe is embedded deeply enough in the culture around her to want to lose weight, but she is a sparkling and animated young woman who mostly enjoys her life and refuses to be so controlled by her diet, or the social norms around her, that she won't defiantly consume a bag of buttery popcorn now and then.

I have seen and interviewed a lot of women like that in my research on evangelical and charismatic Christian women—women who are concerned about their girth yet not to the point of hating themselves or losing their faith in a loving, gracious God. I have also observed many others whose obsession with weight has become a curse, an endless source of self-recrimination and spiritual insecurity. Despite all the determined efforts to maintain a triumphal optimism about the liberating possibilities of weight loss, the oppressiveness of fleshly disciplines may well prevail, as the command to love oneself, including the body, is

contradicted and undermined by the directive to amend its defects and unceasingly refine its contours.

The empathy that I'm calling for certainly does not preclude critique of Christian diet and fitness books. My own feelings toward the genre remain ambivalent at best. I am persuaded, however, that recent programs like First Place and the Weigh Down Workshop are at least more sensible than their forebears. Whatever our final assessment, we ought to be able to separate the trivial and sometimes truly ridiculous from what is potentially worthwhile in this literature: the affirmation of embodiment, the recognition of suffering, the hopeful quest for healing and the special attentiveness to women's lives and stories.

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