

Heavenly Hunger

BY R. MARIE GRIFFITH

A new Christian fitness culture is dramatically redirecting older concerns about gluttony and corpulence into schemes for getting “slim for Him.” Does it distort the devotional significance of our bodies, making them the very medium of self-improvement, the primary stuff upon which to practice purification, obedience, and discipline and to establish perfection?

F*at People Don't Go To Heaven!* screams a headline in the *Globe*, a national weekly tabloid circulated to millions of American readers. The story beneath this lurid caption recounts the rise of Gwen Shamblin, founder and CEO of the nation's leading Christian diet company and subject of extensive press coverage from “Larry King Live,” “20/20,” and *The New Yorker*. The media flurry feeds partly on controversies swirling around Shamblin, who has alienated many supporters by rejecting the Trinity and allegedly firing several former employees for refusing to join her own start-up church, the Remnant Fellowship. But reporters are even more stirred by her stringent guidelines for proper Christian body size and their widespread reception. “I am not a savvy businessperson,” Shamblin pronounced in a front page *Wall Street Journal* feature. “I’m just a dumb blonde with a genuine heart for God, who found the golden product that everyone wanted.” That coveted discovery, a spiritual route to guaranteed weight loss, is marketed in the Weigh Down Workshop, whose Shamblin-packed videos, audiotapes, books, conferences, and twelve-week seminars teach restrained food eating as a divine command. The eternal costs of overeating are markedly severe: “Grace,” in Shamblin’s words, “does not go down into the pigpen.”¹

Forecasts for the future of Shamblin's slimming enterprise are mixed at best. Bad publicity recurrently trails her, as when law enforcement officials raided her Weigh Down office in May 2004 while investigating the suspicious death of an eight-year-old boy whose parents were Remnant Fellowship members and strict disciplinarians. But whatever happens to Shamblin, the culture of Christian fitness is increasingly mainstream and firmly secure. Millions of American Christians make something of a religious duty out of diet. They enroll in programs like First Place, Overeaters Victorious, Step Forward, Thin Within, 3D, PRISM, and the Hallelujah Diet. An ever burgeoning blitz of books, audiotapes, video ministries, and Internet chat groups steadily expand the reach of the Christian diet movement. Growing corporations are devoted to Christian fitness, including the Lord's Gym, a California-based national franchise operation whose logo features a muscular Jesus doing push-ups underneath his heavy cross; Logia, a company in Florida that sells highly processed Bible Bars, nutritional supplements, and other supposed "Foods of the Bible"; and the celebrity-drenched Tae Bo program developed by Billy Blanks and marketed in retail chain stores throughout the country.

Whether certain that God advocates calorie counts and pre-packaged foods or a creationist regimen of raw foods and barley green, whether preaching prayer and counseling or spandex and kick-boxing as the way to perfect health, the devout are theologizing about fat and fitness as never before. Disregard what goes into your body, specialists warn, and you will not only gain weight, look ugly, and feel awful but also doom yourself to a lifetime and possibly an eternity of divine disfavor. Put in positive terms—"Jesus wants you to be well!"—this message has been around for some time in gospels of health promoted by Sylvester Graham, William Alcott, and John Harvey Kellogg, to mention some notable proponents. But whereas these figures often were viewed as hucksters, even among their fellow Christians, the contemporary version of this gospel increasingly pervades American Christianity and the surrounding culture with its motivational blend of vanity, guilt, and fear. Here the body appears hazardous to the soul, able to demolish the hardest won spiritual gains merely through ingesting the wrong material or failing to work up a real sweat. If the message of a particular authority such as Shamblin seems extreme or unpalatable, there are myriad other Christian fitness plans from which to choose, all warning of the perilous yet arduously redeemable body.

TOWARD A PSEUDO-RELIGION

Christian diet vendors have hit upon a painful but highly marketable and lucrative theme. A few years ago sociologist Kenneth Ferraro correlated religious practice in the U.S. with obesity, focusing on Christians generally (Southern Baptists in particular) as the heaviest of all.² Demographic patterns and regional food habits likely provide better explana-

tions for this data than does theological analysis, but there's no disputing the preponderance of overweight church goers. Protestants (and recently some Catholics and Mormons) have seized the situation with tremendous force, creating a fast-growing fitness culture whose products sell purity and somatic perfectibility and whose consumption patterns cut across lines of gender, class, and race to permeate a wide swath of believers.

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How should we, as Christians, evaluate such diet programs? What theological assumptions do they make, and what ethical issues do they raise? Gwen Shamblin's *Weigh Down* may make for sensationalistic headlines, but clearly this group and others strike a chord with their focus on fat and its perceived cause, gluttony. Practices of disciplined eating and fasting, which have been respected for centu-

ries as devotional habits, also—conveniently for many devotional writers today—lead to good health. We might trace these practices through medieval and patristic times to see the complicated ways Christians have wrestled with matters of body and soul, seeking the release from the flesh of the true inward self.

But today's image-saturated media culture, aided by the Christian weight-loss industry, is distorting the devotional significance of the human body. No longer do our bodies merely represent important truths of the self; they now have become the very medium of self-improvement, the primary stuff upon which to practice purification, obedience, and discipline and establish perfection. More to the point, the Christian industry tutors us to read each other's flesh for signs of sin and virtue. Like the culture into which it's interwoven, American Christianity has aligned with the pseudo-religion of physical fitness in a new way, dramatically redirecting older anxieties about gluttony and corpulence into schemes for getting "slim for Him."

The earliest text to articulate this new message, aptly titled *Pray Your Weight Away*, was published in 1957 by the Presbyterian minister Charlie Shedd, who would later become very well-known and beloved in evangelical circles as an inspirational writer. Blending positive thinking with a sharp rebuke of fat (which he deemed a palpable sign of sin), 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.”³ Other male pastors authored similar books over the next forty years, but women seized more intently on the genre, helping to turn Christian dieting into a multimillion dollar industry that capitalized on the American diet craze with a message specially geared to the faithful. The Episcopalian Deborah Pierce composed *I Prayed Myself Slim* in 1960, describing how she was transformed from a 210-pound object of campus ridicule to a “high-fashion model” in Washington. Evangelist Frances Hunter produced *God’s Answer to Fat* in 1975, a top religious bestseller whose 1977 sales figures nearly matched Charles Colson’s *Born Again* and the inspirational autobiography, *Joni*.

Other striking examples are Joan Cavanaugh’s *More of Jesus, Less of Me* (1976); Carol Showalter’s *3D* (1977, 2002); Patricia Kreml’s *Slim for Him* (1978); Neva Coyle’s *Free To Be Thin* (1979); Stormie Omartian’s *Greater Health God’s Way* (1984, 1996); T. D. Jakes’s *Lay Aside the Weight* (1998); Joyce Meyer’s *Eat and Stay Thin* (1999); Don Colbert’s *What Would Jesus Eat?* (2002); Judy and Arthur Halliday’s *Thin Again: A Biblical Approach to Food, Eating, and Weight Management* (1994, 2002); Ben Lerner’s *Body by God* (2003); and La Vita Weaver’s *Fit for God: The 8-Week Plan that Kicks the Devil OUT and Invites Health and Healing IN* (2004). By my count, more than 160 such books have been published urging contemporary Christians to embody true faith in their trimmed down flesh.⁴ More and more authors seek to win over the competition by claiming to be fitness experts. One of the latest, La Vita Weaver, describes herself as an ordained minister and fitness instructor, while the physician Ben Lerner advertises himself as “America’s Maximized-Living Mentor.” Such mantles allow their wearers to celebrate the apparent congruence between current medical dogma about health and the biblical writings.

BECOMING “SLIM FOR HIM”

While repeatedly decrying the material rewards of slenderness offered by the secular world as superficial, these Christian writers appeal to them constantly. Patricia Kreml’s *Slim for Him* exemplifies the common pattern of urging 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 maintains. “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.” Likewise, Shamblin notes that “Being skinny will only be a side benefit, certainly not the major reward for being obedient in this area of food.” Yet authors like these entice the faithful with itemized rewards (“jewels” in Shamblin’s parlance) that will come their way through this obedience, gifts

both spiritual and material. Indeed, Shamblin's second book, *Rise Above* (2000), promises restrained eaters a kind of erotic fulfillment from pleasing God, whom she consistently describes as handsome and charming, "the best-looking and most-loving and richest Husband of all times." The Lord is "not a wimpy lover," in her words, but "a passionate, jealous God," the "Hero we have all been dreaming of," the "passionate pursuer of our hearts," "my Knight in shining armor," "your first, honeymoon-passionate love." The body is God's temple, authors remind their readers, and while the real aim of keeping it "under subjection"—that is, thin, firm, and disciplined—is sacrificial obedience to God, it has the additional benefit of making a person (usually, a woman) more beautiful, sexy, desirable, and naturally more envied by those who fail where she succeeds.⁵

In the course of researching this Christian fitness culture, I interviewed many women and men who participated in *Weigh Down, First Place, 3D, Thin Within*, and other groups, even going through one such group myself. I interviewed authors of Christian fitness literature such as Neva Coyle, Carol Showalter, and Charlie Shedd, along with less widely known curriculum writers and local group coordinators. I attended a variety of small and middle-sized conference meetings devoted to Christian dieting and talked with many other participants in these settings. I joined online Christian chat groups devoted to weight loss and engaged in thoughtful discussions with people leading quite desperate lives, due (as they see it) to their weight. Before email addresses became restricted, I even corresponded with numerous amazon.com reviewers of Christian diet books, asking them to tell me more about the impact of this reading upon their lives. From this ethnographic and personal experience, I can confirm that readers and participants in this Christian fitness culture hold a wide range of views as to the proper Christian way to think about slimness and the body in today's world. They read selectively and think for themselves, in other words, and it would be a mistake not to highlight the multiplicity of perspectives that find sustenance in this culture.

At the same time, the culture of Christian food restraint has consequences not always clearly perceived even by its more careful supporters. Consider how this culture idealizes a particular type of feminine beauty and calls (sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly) all Christian women to achieve this standard in order to be accepted. Here, the Christian diet industry overlaps in important ways with the Christian beauty industry, exemplified in classics like Anne Ortlund's *Disciplines of the Beautiful Woman* (1977, 1984) and more recent books such as *The Beautiful Balance for Body and Soul*, by mother-daughter team Cynthia Culp Allen and Charity Allen Winters (2003). "God's children, when compared with the children of darkness, should declare without a word that God is good," Ortlund noted. Her explicit solution was to give just over an hour a day to her appearance, and

she challenged her readers to moisturize their skin, style their hair prettily, tone their muscles, “stay supple,” and “stand tall; to be a good advertisement of God’s wonderful care of his children.” Weight was “a key factor in being a beautiful woman for God,” in her view, and God could “help you get to and keep the weight that is right for you.”⁶

Christian literature about fitness, weight-loss, and beauty frequently instructs its readers to uphold a pleasing image in the world, as standard bearers of Jesus’ love and prototypes of the redeemed life to which non-Christians hopefully would aspire. Yet it embraces American ideals of slender beauty which stand in glaring contrast to attitudes in the developing world that have long associated fat with beauty, wealth, and merit or divine blessing. Still more, these ideals mask the extent to which thinness signifies the very opposite of prosperity in many nonwestern contexts. Many commentators have denounced global patterns of food scarcity that emaciate impoverished populations in parts of Africa and Asia at the same time that privileged Americans struggle to stay fashionably slim. Perhaps this incongruity helps to explain why many citizens of other countries believe Americans to be deeply indifferent, if not contemptuous, toward them. Their ill health, life-shrinking poverty, and high death rates, a cynic might say, bolster U.S. supremacy in material and mythic ways.

Let’s not link world hunger with Protestant American body fixations too cursorily, or deny the countless initiatives aimed at helping the poor and hungry across the

globe. Nor is it fitting purely to scorn these modern-day pursuits as merely the solipsistic hobby of affluent, self-absorbed women and men. We may justly wonder, nonetheless, at the paradoxes evident here. American corporations are abetting the global proliferation of fast food chains and the promotion of heavily sugared drinks and processed

snack foods in developing world markets, transforming local eating patterns and increasing obesity rates overseas. As nutritionists and investigative journalists point out, these products contribute in highly visible ways to the bodily illness and poverty of expanding consumer populations.⁷ At a time when the most educated, affluent Americans increasingly shun junk food in favor of healthier “organic” and “natural” choices, the

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fast food and soft drink (not to mention tobacco) industries are achieving unprecedented levels of success among the poor, both in the United States and abroad. Where is the Christian protest to this brutal health inequity? Why is the inward-looking Christian fitness industry so much more conspicuous, and more assured of its righteousness?

A recent resurgence of fasting in American Christian circles is closely connected to Christian weight loss and fitness concerns. Christian books commend public and private fasting as instrumental for deepening spirituality, gaining God's favor, and strengthening prayer. The website www.fastforbush.com urges its cyber-audience to pray for President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, the Presidential Cabinet, and the policies of the Bush administration. Catholic layman Steve Habisohn founded a group called "e5 men," named for Ephesians 5:25 ("Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"), whose members commit to a monthly twenty-four-hour fast that creates a "fortress of flesh that protects the woman you love" for the explicit purpose of recapturing men's rightful role of headship over women within the home. The point is not that Christian body disciplines everywhere are linked to conservative causes—*Sojourners'* David Batstone recently commended food abstinence as a cure for our "culture of gluttony," and undoubtedly some liberals are fasting for the Democratic Party—but that such disciplines today are unashamedly linked to aspirations for personal and political power.⁸

This link remains evident even outside these more extreme examples of power fasting. "Fasting is the foundry in which we are purified," writes health minister Lee Bueno-Aguer, founder of Born Again Body, Inc. "Its fires refine our faith; its flames separate the base impurities from our true character in Christ; its hot blasts purify our hearts." More importantly, she continues, "Once we accept and practice fasting as a Christian duty, rewards will surely follow. The power of food will be exchanged for the miracle-working power of the fast."⁹ Like the Christian diet industry's promise that material gain accompanies fat loss, the purveyors of abstinence guarantee miracles, as bodily discipline once again acquires merit as a tool for getting precisely what the prayerful faster wants.

THE RARE AND INADEQUATE CRITIQUES

Christian critiques of the get-in-shape culture have been few and far between. A rare example is a 1998 book by Neva Coyle, the formerly obese author of several best-selling Christian diet books (including *Free to Be Thin*) and founder of Overeaters Victorious. Some years after earning renown as the model for successful Christian dieting, Coyle gained back more than one-hundred pounds she had so famously lost. Because she was still working in the Christian weight-loss industry, traveling around the country giving seminars and publicizing her books, her weight gain was public and deeply humiliating to her. She struggled despondently with her

mortification and sense of failure until she finally came to believe that God loved her even as an overweight woman and that she should accept herself that way. And then, she writes, she got angry.

Angry that I had been so unmerciful and shallow with myself and other large Christians. Angry that no one had guided me differently when I made decisions that risked my life and health in order to be slender. Angry that it had taken me so long and had cost me so much to finally realize that one reasonable alternative to weight management was healthy management of my large body. Angry that I had never before considered that one perfectly legitimate solution to my weight struggle was to focus not on the weight but on ending the *struggle*.¹⁰

Now “Loved on a Grander Scale,” as Coyle titled this account, she seeks to undo the damage she did before as one of this era’s most influential purveyors of Christian dieting, to free women and men from captivity to “fitness.”

However sincere, well-intentioned, and penitent, Coyle stands rather forlorn. “I’m kind of a lone voice out there,” she remarked in my 2001 interview with her. “It’s not a real fun place to be.” After she found the courage to make the videotape *Fit for a King*, an exercise video for large women, she received angry phone calls from strangers and was greeted with pity and contempt from Christian women who believed her to be a sinner for her weight gain. The indignities continue: *Loved on a Grander Scale* remained in print only one year, and media coverage was scarce to nonexistent. When called upon to comment on Shamblin’s Weigh Down program by the producers of PBS’s *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, Coyle’s views got short shrift.

A few other innovators are helping people of faith, usually women, heal from such fixations. Eating disorders especially are gaining more attention in religious circles. Christians may purchase texts such as Deborah Newman’s *Loving Your Body: Embracing Your True Beauty in Christ* (2002), sponsored by James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, or Gregory L. Jantz’s *Hope, Help, and Healing for Eating Disorders* (1995). And in Arizona, the Remuda Ranch Center for Anorexia and Bulimia advertises itself as a “Christ-centered, Biblically-based program” that, unlike secular programs,

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is dedicated to God's perfect and everlasting truth as a cure for eating disorders. One certified Christian counselor specializing in eating disorders told a student researcher, "When I am meeting with someone for the first time, I always start with the passage where Paul says that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.... When we understand that because of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice God dwells in us by the Holy Spirit, it really transforms the way we think about and treat our bodies."¹¹

These efforts to reexamine Scripture for messages of love and wholeness that may abet the healing process of food-obsessed young women deserve commendation, and many undoubtedly do provide a form of help for women and girls in need. Insofar as they fail to question the religious assumptions of the Christian fitness and beauty culture, however, it is difficult to view them as a vital counter to these far more powerful industries. They seem especially intent on protecting the Christian tradition from criticism: Newman's *Loving Your Body*, for instance, repeatedly points to Satan and his worldly temptations as the chief cause of poor body image. "There is nothing Satan would enjoy more than getting women to feel ugly and useless in God's kingdom," she notes. "The world measures men and women by their looks, their talents, their money, and their power. God has a completely different measuring system. We aren't supposed to measure ourselves by other people. We should measure ourselves only by God's Word."¹² Blaming poor body image on all that is ostensibly secular and derived from Satan, Newman acknowledges neither the decades-old Christian fitness culture nor the tradition's historic ambivalence toward flesh as vital sources of contemporary obsessions. With this strained blindness, it will take more than a few well-meaning counselors and curriculum writers to undo the body worship to which vast numbers of Christians have succumbed.

CONCLUSION

Though the Christian participants in devotional fitness regimens surely are well-meaning and moral, the implications of this growing fixation are sobering. These programs have not provided a robust solution to the much publicized obesity epidemic, nor is there evidence that they counter the persistently high rates of eating disorders in the populace. All of us, I believe, are enmeshed to a greater or lesser degree in this ideology, simply as people who live and struggle amid this culture's confused norms of right and wrong, healthy and unfit, beautiful and ugly. At our best, we may try to refine or contest these in some fashion, but still we daily (if unintentionally) help reproduce contradictory standards for others.

What we do with our bodies, how we work to make them ever appealing and desirable, the health care policies we obtain for ourselves and allow for others—all of these are religious matters. They speak louder than our words about what kinds of bodies we adore and what types we de-

spise or at least are willing to abandon. If no critique emerges to challenge today's Christian fitness and beauty culture, we may soon be faced with a still narrower set of Christian exemplars: an army of born-again bodies and malnourished souls.

NOTES

1 "Fat People Don't Go To Heaven," *Globe* (November 21, 2000), 5. Shamblin is quoted in Ianthe Jeanne Dugan, "Church Lady of Diet Weighs In on Trinity and Her Flock Flees," *Wall Street Journal* (October 30, 2000), A1, A18.

2 Kenneth F. Ferraro, "Firm Believers? Religion, Body Weight, and Well-Being," *Review of Religious Research* 39:3 (March 1998), 224-244.

3 Charlie Shedd, *Pray Your Weight Away* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 40.

4 See the bibliography in R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 294-302.

5 Patricia Kreml, *Slim for Him* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing, 1978), 126; Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 171; and Shamblin, *Rise Above: God Can Set You Free From Your Weight Problems Forever* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 99, 135, 137, 305.

6 Anne Ortlund, *Disciplines of the Beautiful Woman* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977; 1984), 45, 44, 78.

7 See, for example, Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), and Greg Critser, *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

8 For more on e5 men, see R. Marie Griffith, "The Fasting Masters of the Twenty-First Century" (www.beliefnet.com/story/122/story_12233_1.html, accessed August 5, 2004). David Batstone, "What's Eating You? Gluttony Takes a Toll on the Interior Life," *Sojourners* (July-August, 2003) (www.sojournal.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0307&article=030766, accessed August 5, 2004).

9 Lee Bueno-Aguer, *Fast Your Way to Health* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 2001), 201, 202.

10 Neva Coyle, *Loved on a Grander Scale: Affirmation, Acceptance, and Hope for Women Who Struggle With Their Weight* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1998), 10.

11 "Anne," quoted in Rebecca Hylander, "Starving and Saving the Body: Christianity as Cause and Cure of Eating Disorders," Senior Thesis in the Department of Religion, Princeton University (2003), 74.

12 Deborah Newman, *Loving Your Body: Embracing Your True Beauty in Christ* (Carol Stream, IL: Focus on the Family Publishing/Tyndale House, 2002), 34, 24.



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