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Biblical Approach to Diet Culture

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Pursuing a Biblical Approach to Diet Culture

There is a term that has been increasingly recognized in Western society: *diet culture*. Diet culture denotes a way of thinking about and behaving toward food and bodies. Harrison (2019) recently published comprehensive new research about the subject. As a leader in this field, she has defined diet culture as: “a system of beliefs that equates thinness, muscularity, and particular body shapes with health and moral virtue; promotes weight loss and body reshaping as a means of attaining higher status; and demonizes certain foods and food groups while elevating others (2019, p. 7). Harrison asserts that it is so embedded in Western society that it has become the default way of thinking. Other researchers and health experts also point out the evidence of the widespread cultural praise of dieting, certain body types, and weight loss pursuits (e.g., L. Bacon, 2010; Lelwica, 2011). While many people do go on diets in efforts to lose weight, Harrison (2018) says a person does not actually have to follow an official diet to be caught up in diet culture, because it is foremost a way of thinking and a set of values (“What is”).

Diet culture manifests in the cultural landscape and in individuals in multiple ways. One way is through media. Dieting and weight loss are advertised on more than just television commercials and magazines. Lelwica (2011) points out that images inspiring the pursuit of the ideal body are “*everywhere* in the U.S. today— at the news-stand, on billboards, in grocery stores, on the Internet, in waiting rooms and in living rooms” (p. 274). The high value our society places on weight loss, thinness, and regimented eating is revealed in part by how much money is collectively spent on products and programs that promote weight loss. As of early 2019, a report found that the diet industry was worth more than \$72 billion, “a record high” (as cited in Harrison, 2019, p. 6). It is also evidenced by the number of diet plans, of which Tribble

and Resch (2012) say there are too many to name (p. 1). The high value our society places on body reshaping is revealed in part by the success of the fitness industry. Exercising obsessively to change one's body to fit an ideal image is a product of diet culture. And according to Allred (2018), recent statistics showed that gyms and weight loss centers have been increasing in business (p. 173).

That our culture largely has a bias against fat and prizes thin bodies is also easy to observe. L. Bacon (2010) points out that so many institutions and authorities tell that we will be happier and healthier if we lose weight that many people do not even question these assertions. Rather, she says, most people view weight control as the "right" thing to do; and while exercising for weight control is not as common as dieting, she says, "we are all certainly aware that we *should* exercise and feel the guilt of not doing enough" (2010, preface). A report in 2011 found that the majority of the female population in the U.S. believe that they would be happier if they were thinner (as cited in Lelwica, 2011, p. 262). Harrison (2019) affirms that body image disturbance is common in men as well.

Because diet culture's messages are so entrenched in Western society, members of the Christian Church are being influenced by them. Golbek (2018) affirms this notion, and it can be observed in various ways. H. Bacon (2013) says that in the U.S., "evangelical Christian women in particular are encouraged to get 'Slim for Him' or pray their weight away" (p. 14). The Christian Podcast Central identified numerous "Christian diets" such as the "Eden diet" and "Take Back Your Temple" diet, for example (n.d.). Some church congregations have done corporate weight loss challenges (Rauser, 2012), and some have diet support groups (Hoselton, 2013). Golbek (2018) says "it's not uncommon to hear leaders preaching and encouraging church

members to focus on restricting certain ‘bad’ foods and burning calories in the gym to achieve health” (ch. 1). Allred (2018) points out that numerous Christian books have been published on the topics of fitness and dieting, and that is common for Zumba classes to be offered within church facilities (p. 173). In more subtle ways, many Christians accept certain beliefs from diet culture in their mind and heart. Lelwica (2011) says one very common belief people adopt from diet culture is that they are morally superior for rejecting certain foods.

Should Christians accept and promote the core tenets of diet culture in these ways? Are thin bodies, dieting, food restrictions, and hard, habitual exercise considered righteous in the eyes of God? If so, then Christians should embrace diet culture’s beliefs even more. If not, however, Christians must go against the popular culture’s pressures. Scripture tells us not to simply “conform to the patterns of this world” —or popular culture—but to be informed and transformed by God’s Word and wisdom (Rom. 12:2). For these reasons, Christians need to consider the messages we are taking in from popular culture and analyze their truth or falsity against God’s Word.

This paper will appeal not only to Scripture—God’s special revelation—for a biblical understanding of diet culture, but will also cite science and research—God’s general revelation—to seek the truth about the effects of diet culture on the human body and psychology. Here I will make a case for why Christians should reject the core tenets of diet culture and instead seek a sanctified view of, food, body weight, and treatment of the body.

Embodiment

Because diet culture relates to how we view and treat our bodies, it is valuable to first briefly look at what Scripture teaches about the value of the physical body and how to treat it.

Allison (2009) observed that many evangelicals have a disregard or hatred toward their bodies, and some even consider their body and its physical appetites to be inherently evil—a hindrance to spiritual maturity (p. 4). According to Swindoll (2009), the belief that the body is evil is often coupled with a belief that only the soul matters enough to take care of. This rejection to care for the body traces back to the biblical heresy of Gnosticism, which Swindoll says still permeates the thinking of many Christians today. Gnostics would “beat their bodies into submission and . . . never allow themselves the enjoyment of bodily pleasures,” thinking this makes them more holy (Swindoll, 2009). Today, a gnostic view of the body might cause a Christian to engage in harsh treatment of the body and denial of pleasurable food.

Scripture reveals, however, that an attitude of body hatred and its accompanying behaviors are not biblical. Rather, Scripture has a magnificent view of the body. Firstly, the state of physical embodiment is a part of God’s glorious design for humans (Gen. 2; Ps. 139:13, 15), which He deemed “very good” (Gen. 1:31), and a part of being made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). The apostle Paul urged Christians to view the body as an important instrument with which to serve God (Rom. 6:13; 2 Cor 5:1-10), and as a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), making it worth honoring. The apostle Paul made it clear that to honor God with the body and attain righteousness was *not* to treat the body harshly or reject certain foods, however (Col. 2:16-23; 1 Tim. 4:4). Paul made it clear that such strict rules “have indeed an appearance of wisdom. . . but they are of no value in stopping the indulgences of the flesh” (Col 2:23). Allison (2009) argues that, in light of the Bible’s view of the human body as a valuable vessel given by God, Christians are to view their body as a gift to respect and care for. We must keep this view in mind as we compare it with diet culture’s view.

Body as a Temple Argument

It is rare to come across a Christian conversation related to food and bodies that does not mention 1 Corinthians 6:19, which says, “your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.” Christians often use this verse to justify dieting and weight loss behaviors. McAdams (2019) affirms this, saying:

[a] popular application is to preach that being healthy (eating good foods, exercising, taking vitamins, etc.) is a proper application of 1 Corinthians 6:19, because healthy people are taking care of the temple of God. Inversely, they reason that overeating and/or leading a sedentary lifestyle is abusing the temple of God and is a violation of 1 Corinthians 6:19.

That our bodies are temples of the Spirit is one fact that causes some Christians to accept diet culture’s value of a thin body and succumb to its pressure to exercise frequently and have great self-restraint in eating. Some Christians take this verse as a moral warrant for dieting. But multiple scholars point out that this is a misapplication of the text. Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid (1993) show how the verse’s author, Paul, was making an argument for sexual purity in this context (p. 924). He said nothing about health or how to eat or exercise when he implored the church to “honor God with their bodies” in the next verse. McAdams (2019) points out that we should be careful to not go beyond the author’s intended application in applying the passage to things that are not inherently sinful like eating and resting.

Nevertheless, it is not wrong to apply the wisdom of the verse to our view of the human body to some extent. Paul asks, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul points out that

our bodies are highly valuable gifts from God. As such, we are indeed called to be “faithful stewards of what God has given us” (Allred, 2018, p. 181).

Some might still think that stewarding one’s temple should include strict eating because this seems healthy to them. However, if this were the case, it seems that the Bible would have prescribed a specific diet for Christians to follow. Did it?

“Biblical Diets”

The Christian Podcast Network (n.d.) discusses the “Christian Diet market” and names several diets that are supposedly based on Scripture. The most popular of these diets, they say, is the “Daniel Diet.” Hoselton (2013) reports that the Daniel Diet has “gained momentum among Christians,” and that many churches promote it. The Daniel Diet is based on Daniel 1:12-13 which tells of how Daniel and his friends eat nothing but vegetables and water for ten days. Daniel was an Old Testament prophet, which means he was still under the old covenantal law that prohibited Israelites from eating certain foods at that time. The purpose of their strict eating plan was not to be healthy but to show themselves as God’s obedient, set-apart people in the presence of the royal court of Babylon. Today, the “Daniel Plan” (2013) prescribes a diet of “seventy percent fresh fruits and vegetables and thirty percent whole grains” (Hoselton, 2013). Rauser (2012) exposes the unsound logic that is used to justify this diet. He points out that multiple stories in the Bible describe the way people ate for a period of time in obedience to God. For instance, Elijah ate bread and meat twice a day, Moses ate quail and manna, and Jesus fasted for forty days. Thus, it does not make sense to point to the story of Daniel and determine that it is the most ideal, healthy, or righteous way to eat. Additionally, Rauser (2012) points out the flaw in the creation of all diets based on the Bible, noting that the creators take specific

verses out of context to support their agendas. As this relates to diet culture, Christians should not be misled to believe that the Bible prescribes a specific eating plan.

Gluttony

Many Christians condone dieting because the Bible warns against the sin of gluttony. Thus, it is important to consider what gluttony means. Butler (2017) points out that many people equate gluttony with eating too much and being overweight. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) say that gluttony is frequently associated with food and is mistaken for obesity (2014). But the ERLC explain how this idea of gluttony is inaccurate. They say: “Gluttony—a term derived from the Latin word meaning to “gulp down”—is usually used in reference to over-consumption of food or drink. But from a Christian perspective, it applies more broadly” (2014). Donato affirms that gluttony is about an “excess of anything,” not merely food (As cited in ERLC, 2014). Indeed, Butler examines the context of all the biblical texts that mention gluttony and finds that the Bible never defines gluttony as overeating; the passages about gluttony are dealing with “morally unscrupulous and basically ungodly behavior and lifestyle” and “not fearing the Lord” (2017). With all of this in mind, it seems erroneous to assume that the Bible’s mention of gluttony is specifically a warning against overeating or becoming fat. Rather, it is pointing out an issue of the heart—one in which a believer repeatedly or excessively fills their desires with something other than God’s goodness and ignores his presence.

Now, gluttony *can* indeed apply to food, and gluttony is certainly a sin. But a proper perspective and approach need to be addressed. To be precise, gluttony is not the sin of overeating or becoming fat. It is also not an issue related to our physical health or God’s way of

condemning the consumption of certain foods. Gluttony points more to an idolatrous heart. If someone repeatedly turns to food to soothe what ails them or consistently turns to food instead of prayer, then food may have turned in to an idol, and repentance is in order (1 Cor. 10:14). But starting a diet may not always be the way of repentance, for restricting food alone will not guarantee one's heart will be rid of gluttony or idolatry. Turning from constant over-consumption to strict eating may not address the heart issue.

This conversation about gluttony relates to diet culture because assigning moral virtue to restrictive eating and having a small body are core tenets of diet culture. But Christians should not accept these tenets in the name of avoiding the sin of gluttony.

Dieting

One of the most common ways of promoting and engaging in diet culture is by dieting. Harrison (2019) clarifies that dieting is “the act of changing your eating and exercise habits in order to lose weight and ostensibly improve your health,” and that dieting can sometimes disguise itself under names such as “plan, protocol, lifestyle change, reset, reboot, cleanse, detox, program, template, or eating plan” (pp. 6, 33, 73). Our cultural narrative has normalized so many different names for restrictive ways of eating that some people may not even realize they are on a diet. Harrison (2019) finds that the most popular form of dieting today is “clean eating,” which is a strict way of eating that avoids artificial ingredients, preservatives, sugar, and anything ‘processed’” (p. 65).

Food Rules and Moralizing Food

Tribole and Resch (2012) say that dieting is about relying on external sources like a food plan or food “rules” to “judge” your eating (p. 16). Because of the rules that come with dieting, a

dieter often feels a sense of morality attached to eating. Lelwica (2011) says many people find a sense of “virtue, purity, and self-worth” from following a diet and “feel ‘bad’ for eating the ‘wrong’ food, or eating ‘too much’” (p. 269). About the highly popularized “clean eating,” Harrison (2019) says, “[it] is wrapped up in morality—the idea that right-thinking, upstanding people ‘eat clean,’” and “clean eating has echoes of religious dietary laws” (p. 67). Indeed, following food rules and deeming certain foods clean and unclean harkens back to the days when Pharisees of the New Testament judged people for what they ate. So, what does the Bible have to say, if anything, about following food rules or labeling foods?

It turns out the Bible actually speaks against moralizing and judging certain foods and warns people not to reject certain foods out of a prideful heart. Before Jesus came and established the new covenant, God’s people, the Jews, did rely on laws to keep them in good standing with God. Some of those laws were related to food. About this, Hawthorne et al. (1993) explain: “...laws and observances regarding food served as important ritual markers of Jewish identity. Jewish identity was in no small measure determined by how food was prepared, what sort of foods were and were not eaten, and with whom one did or did not eat” (p. 306). At that time then, some foods were forbidden, considered unclean and unrighteous for Jews. However, when Jesus established the new covenant, those rules were no longer necessary for Christians to follow. But some early Christians, especially the religious leaders called Pharisees, struggled with the notion that food laws were no longer “necessary for followers of Christ” (Hawthorne et al., 1993, p. 308). Troubles arose when the Pharisees tried to enforce these food rules on others, but the Apostle Paul and Jesus both addressed this issue many times. Jesus said, “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into

their heart but into their stomach,” and the verse explicitly states, “Jesus declared all foods clean” (Mar. 7:18-19). Along with declaring all foods clean, he points to the fact that food is not inherently sinful, but that sin is a matter of one’s heart. Paul was also clear with early Christians that restricting foods did not make them more righteous. He said, “food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (1 Cor. 6:8). To some people who were still following old food rules and strict ascetic practices, Paul said,

Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink . . . why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? . . . Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Col. 2:16, 20-23).

Although food rules had an “appearance of wisdom,” Paul corrects this idea, urging them in the next chapter to instead focus on the “things above,” because their morality comes from God alone. Again, in yet another instance Paul tells the believers, “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:3-5). This was a reference to food, meaning Paul warned them not to reject and regard any foods as bad.

The Bible makes it clear that there are no foods that are inherently more holy, sinful, clean, or unclean, and that believers should not attach morality, judgment, or shame to certain foods. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul said that rejecting certain foods seemed wise in the culture at that time but that doing so was a counterfeit way of trying to be righteous. Today, the narratives of diet culture and clean eating make rejecting certain foods seem wise too. And Lelwica (2011) points out that those who follow strict diets tend to feel virtuous (p. 269). However, Scripture makes it clear that it is the person’s motivations driving their eating that makes them righteous or unrighteous. This is one more reason why Christians should reject diet

culture, which “demonizes certain foods and food groups while elevating others” (Harrison, 2019, p. 7).

Now, one of the core tenets of diet culture still has not been addressed: the assertion that having a thinner body is healthier and that, therefore, dieting for weight loss is a worthy endeavor. Now, if being fat is truly unhealthy, and if dieting is a process that leads to better health outcomes, it could be argued that dieting for weight loss is in fact good stewardship of our bodies. Since the Bible does not speak about the health of body fat, weight, or dieting, we must turn to an area of God’s general revelation: what science and research reveal to us about body weight and how bodies react to dieting.

The Health of Weight Loss and Dieting

In the most recent decade, more and more researchers have published works that prove wrong many of the long and widely held beliefs about weight and dieting. One belief that drives many Americans to pursue weight loss is their belief in the supposed “obesity epidemic.” But L. Bacon (2010) debunks the obesity epidemic myth, showing that while Americans did gain weight over the last few decades, the incidence of obesity is no longer increasing (p. 139). More importantly, she notes that the increased obesity rate was never a crisis, because “life expectancy actually increased dramatically during the time period in which weight rose” (pp. 139-140). Some more of L. Bacon’s related key findings are: body fat may protect us from many diseases and/or the risks associated with certain diseases like hypertension, atherosclerosis, and diabetes (pp. 131-137); “overweight” people typically live longer than “normal” weight people (p. 124); “severe obesity” fails to show up as a statistically significant mortality risk (p. 125); and one study found that people who fit society’s ideal weight range had a lower life expectancy than

some of those who were obese (p. 127). Harrison (2019) adds that obesity was classified as a disease in 2013 even though 70% of the committee who studied the issue had ruled that it should not be considered a disease (p. 49). This kind of unethical action, L. Bacon reports (2019), is just one way that stakeholders of the weight loss industry have misled Americans into believing fat is incredibly unhealthy (pp. 151-156). She points out how the industry has a multibillion-dollar interest in promoting the view that being overweight has negative health consequences and can be manipulated through its products and services (p. 150). In summary, higher weight bodies have many unpublicized benefits and are not as unhealthy as is typically assumed; in fact, they may be healthier, and often live longer, than thin bodies. So pursuing weight loss in the name of health and longevity of life may not be stable ground.

The Ineffectiveness of Dieting

Perhaps the most compelling reason why Christians should not diet for the purpose of weight loss though, is that recent research has determined that this kind of dieting is actually both ineffective and unhealthy. First, it rarely works longterm. L. Bacon (2010) asserts, “dieting doesn’t work and can, in fact, be harmful. Research shows that the act of dieting increases your risk of gaining more weight” (p. 43). In fact, the latest research finds that “intentional weight-loss efforts don’t work; with a failure rate that many researchers agree is north of 95 percent” (Harrison, 2019, pp. 84-85). Tribole and Resch (201) affirm that people do tend to lose weight quickly at the very beginning of a diet, but the results are not long term (p. 55).

One reason diets fail is that the act of under-eating often triggers overeating (L. Bacon, 2010, p. 44). As explained by Tribole and Resch, “food restrictions stimulates the brain to launch a cascade of cravings to eat more. After substantial weight loss, people have been shown to

prefer food both high in fat and sugar. . . The dieter gives into the cravings, overeats, and eventually regains any lost weight” (2012, pp. 46-48). Additionally, they say: “The longer foods are prohibited the more seductive they become. Consequently, eating these illegal foods brings with it a compelling sense of guilt for most dieters. And as the guilt increases, so does the quantity of food intake” (2013, p. 82).

The primary reason diets don’t work though is that the human body is wired to prevent weight loss. The setpoint theory explains why the body resists fat loss:

Your body likes to maintain the status quo and keep your weight relatively stable; this range of stable weight is called your setpoint. Your body strongly protects against dipping below your setpoint. When you lose weight and threaten this system, your body may react by raising your setpoint, protecting against future threats. (L. Bacon, 2010, p. 26)

Tribole and Resch (2012) explain further: “Each diet teaches the body to adapt better for the next self-imposed famine (another diet). Metabolism slows as the body efficiently uses each calorie as if it’s the last. The more drastic the diet, the more it pushes the body into the calorie-pinching survival mode” (p. 3). So, it turns out that the body’s resistance to weight loss is a result of it trying to protect itself from danger and maintain homeostasis. Interestingly, when talking about setpoint theory, even L. Bacon—a secular researcher—says, “the body’s regulatory systems are *designed* to maintain homeostasis” (2010, p. 13). She is pointing to the fact that our bodies were in fact designed by an intelligent creator, God. Science reveals that God designed our bodies to fight to protect us from danger. And all that the dieting process entails, like quick weight loss, under-eating, and over-exertion through exercise, can feel like danger to our bodies.

The Dangers of Dieting

Not only does dieting for weight loss usually fail to deliver desired long-term results, but it usually deleterious to one's biological, psychological, and emotional wellbeing. Firstly, L. Bacon (2010) explains that dieting typically results in weight cycling—the process of losing and regaining weight repeatedly—and that this process damages the body. Weight cycling from “extreme” dieting, she says, can cause one's body to shed lean tissue from muscle and organs in addition to fat, and that losing lean tissue is harmful (pp. 140-141). Weight cycling, according to Tribole and Resch (2012), is also strongly associated with increased risk for diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and even death (2013, pp. 48, 141). Researchers observe that dieting causes any combination of the following side-effects: headaches, menstrual irregularities, fatigue, dry skin, hair loss, sluggish metabolism, urges to binge eat, feelings of guilt and shame, loss of trust in one's self with food, self-punishing behaviors as penance for overeating, exercise abuse, losing touch with biological hunger and satiety signals, obsession with food, personality changes, onset of apathy, irritability, moodiness, depression, worsened body image, forgetting one's food preferences, emotional eating, worsened quality of life from obsessive thinking about food, loss of self-respect and self-esteem, social anxiety, social withdrawal, and eating disorders (Tribole & Resch, 2012; L. Bacon, 2010; Harrison, 2019). So it seems that dieting for weight loss may not be the best way to steward our bodies after all. This is another reason Christians should reject diet culture which hinges on the assumption that weight loss and thin bodies are always healthy.

Another significant reason Christians should be wary of dieting is that dieting is a strong predictor and one of the leading causes of the development of eating disorders. Several experts affirm this correlation (e.g. Tribole & Resch, 2012; L. Bacon, 2010; Harrison, 2019). The

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) says that “eating disorders are serious, potentially life-threatening conditions” that affect a person’s emotional and physical health, productivity, relationships, and can affect “every organ system in the body” (n.d., “Health”). NEDA also explains that eating disorders are categorized by obsessive thinking and worrying about food and can lead to the development of perfectionism, behavior inflexibility, shame, anxiety, depression, isolation, low self-esteem and a variety of other health conditions (n.d., “Body,” “Risk”). It seems obvious that God would not want his children to suffer from any of these ailments or conditions; so Christians should be incredibly wary of dieting.

The anxiety, shame, idolatry, and other mental effects often accompanied by dieting and eating disorders are not part of the abundant life God wants us to live. Our mental health matters to God. Jesus said he does not want us to be anxious about any transient things, but to trust him as our source of security and provision instead. In fact, he mentioned food and the body as things for us not to worry about (Matt. 6:25). Jesus also wants us to have peace, to not be “troubled or afraid,” and to receive his peace, which is unlike the peace found from worldly things (Jhn. 14:27). The apostle Paul reminded believers to set their minds on things which would last into eternity rather than fixating on earthly things destined to perish, like our physical bodies which are wasting away every day (Col. 3:2; 2 Cor. 4:16). When a dieter’s mind constantly seeks safety, security, comfort, esteem, or purpose from their physical body or food, they treat those things as their savior rather than Jesus Christ. So, along with the fact that diets are physically unhealthy, they often cause mental distress or disorders that prevent them from being at peace in Christ. This is another reason Christians should reject diet culture.

Exercise

One aspect of diet culture that should also be mentioned is exercise. In Harrison's (2019) definition of dieting is the phrase "changing your eating and *exercise* habits in order to lose weight" (p. 6). Tribole and Resch (2012) report that many dieters begin an exercise program while simultaneously starting a diet (p. 183), and Lelwica (2011) explains that those who are wrapped up in diet culture exercise for weight loss rather than true fitness (p. 269). Many who exercise for the sole purpose of losing weight will "become a slave to working out and counting calories burned," and "continually subject themselves to an experience that does not feel good because they are lacking enough calories to feel invigorated" (Tribole and Resch, 2012, p. 183-187). As was previously mentioned, the Bible spoke against the ascetic behavior of "harsh treatment of the body" (Col. 2:23). And if exercise is something one is enslaved to, it is not good stewardship.

Though exercise has health benefits when done properly, in diet culture exercise is elevated to a level that is unhealthy and improper for Christians. In pursuing an understanding of how Christians should think about physical fitness in a biblically-informed way, Allred (2018) turns primarily to 1 Timothy 4:7-8 where the Apostle Paul compares training for godliness with bodily training. The verse reads: "Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Allison (2009) points out that Paul's words help us, "avoid two extremes: an overemphasis on physical fitness and an under-emphasis on physical fitness" (p. 174). Diet culture "tempts us to conclude that bodily training has *supreme* value," Allred says (2018, p. 179). But Scripture shows that exercise is to be placed properly below "spiritual training,

disciplines, and ministerial service” (Allred, 2018, p. 179). The pressure to over-exercise in an extreme way and to overemphasize exercise’s value are yet more reasons to reject diet culture.

Conclusion

Looking at what the Bible says about the body and food, as well as what science and research reveal about the effects of diet culture on people’s physical and mental wellbeing, provides ample evidence that Christians should reject the core tenets of diet culture. Diet culture “equates thinness, muscularity, and particular body shapes with health and moral virtue; promotes weight loss and body reshaping as a means of attaining higher status; and demonizes certain foods and food groups while elevating others” (Harrison, 2019, p. 7). As we have seen, an attitude of body hatred is unbiblical, and ascetic behaviors such as harsh body treatment and denial of pleasurable foods are not inherently righteous. That our bodies are “temples of the Holy Spirit” does not infer that Christians need to diet, pursue weight loss, or be thin (1 Cor. 6:19). Rather, we are called to faithfully steward the bodies God has gifted us. The Bible does not prescribe any specific diet, and the Bible’s warning of “gluttony” should not be directly equated to overeating or being fat or unhealthy. The Bible also makes it clear that there are no foods that are inherently more holy, sinful, clean, or unclean, and that believers should not attach morality, judgment, or shame to certain foods. Rather, the heart and motivations behind eating are what matter to God. Additionally, science and research reveal that lower body weight is not healthier than higher body weight; intentional weight loss through dieting is not effectively healthy; and our bodies do not respond well to strict dieting because they were created to protect us from famine and sudden weight loss. Dieting can also be deleterious to one’s mental, emotional, spiritual, and social wellbeing, in many cases leading to the development of eating disorders.

Thus, dieting for the purpose of weight loss is not the best way to steward our bodies after all.

Finally, diet culture pressures one to view exercise as more valuable than the Bible views it. For all these reasons, diet culture should not be promoted by Christians.

Though diet culture is entrenched in Western society, followers of Christ have the option not to simply “conform to the patterns” and beliefs of the popular culture (Rom. 12:2). For instance, local churches should not be places for weight loss challenges, heretical “biblical diets,” or sermons condemning people for eating certain foods or being in larger bodies—though these are patterns of the world. As one theologian says, “Christians are free from the dominating stories of their culture and free to do what God calls them to do—even if it means rejection” (McKnight, 2014, p. 107). Indeed, though Christians may be pressured by others to engage in restrictive eating and weight loss-related activity, we must remember that we are called to honor God in all that we do, including how we treat our bodies (1 Cor. 10:31).

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