

Why Is the Church So Fat?

Have you noticed that we don't fit in the pews anymore? God's people are packing on the pounds, but His Word is clear about how we can reclaim our health.

Look around the next time you're in a shopping mall—or at church—and you'll notice right away that excessive body weight has become an epidemic in the United States. Obesity and overeating cause or contribute to more than a dozen illnesses, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and arthritis.

But obesity brings with it more than just sickness. It also brings death.

Estimates indicate more than 400,000 deaths each year are attributable to improper diet and inadequate exercise. If current trends continue, by next year this number will exceed 500,000, making obesity and being overweight the leading causes of preventable death—surpassing tobacco use.

Obesity is a complex problem influenced by a number of factors ranging from the obvious (our sedentary lifestyles and lack of knowledge about food types and food preparation) to the complicated (depression, anxiety and stress). Genetics plays a role, but it is not responsible for this recent rapid increase because our genes haven't changed much in only one or two generations.

And there's no sign that this epidemic is coming under control. Despite an ever-increasing awareness of the benefits of maintaining a healthy weight, between 1990 and 2000 the percentage of adults who were either overweight or obese rose from 60 percent to 64 percent.

Although some groups are affected more than others (African-American women, for instance, have more obesity than women of other races), the disease and death attributable to excess body weight affects every segment of society irrespective of race, age, socioeconomic status—or religion.

Born-again Christians have not been spared this epidemic. In fact we actually lead the pack!

According to a study by Kenneth Ferraro of Purdue University, obesity is most prevalent in states with the strongest religious affiliation. Of the people he surveyed, Southern Baptists had the highest average body weight and Jews and non-Christians had the lowest.

Unlike other medical conditions that may strike without reason, obesity and being overweight are greatly affected by our own choices of behavior and lifestyle. How is it, then, that Christians are afflicted more than other groups?

It seems the opposite should be true—that our willful submission to the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to make the right decisions, ought to spare us from a condition so heavily influenced by personal choice. But this is not the case. And as a result, when it comes to health and preventable illness, rather than standing out as “a peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9, KJV), we look much like the world.

It seems the local church has nurtured our souls but neglected our bodies. Of course I believe that where we spend eternity is infinitely more important than the quality of our health during the few short years we’ll spend on Earth.

But as believers, we cannot ignore the reality that we are complete entities who comprise body, soul and spirit. As such, we cannot choose to ignore one key component of our being—our physical lives—and expect to walk in total victory.

I have been blessed to care for hundreds of overweight and obese Christian patients and have spent more than a decade examining this problem from both a medical and a biblical perspective. During this time, I've made a few observations about why the church is struggling in this area.

Though my assessment here is not all-inclusive, these four reasons—Recognition, Separation, Temptation and Subjection—give insight into why the church is entrenched in this health crisis.

Recognition

No matter what the situation, we are unlikely to address a problem without first recognizing it. When it comes to obesity in the church, we have failed to acknowledge the problem and, more important, we've ignored the spiritual issues relating to it.

In other words: We're fat but we won't admit it!

One reason we haven't acknowledged the problem is desensitization. We are less likely to respond to the familiar, and there is reassurance in numbers. And because the majority of the Christian community—both laity and leadership—is either overweight or obese, it's easy to see how this problem goes unrecognized.

But even as the country is now heeding a wake-up call to become more aggressive at addressing the health consequences of obesity, so now is the time for Christians to examine how this crisis affects us.

When we fail to recognize the problem, we suffer on many fronts. First, our testimony is weakened. We gain great opportunities for witnessing when friends and family see us trust in the Lord to bring our weight under control.

But when we continue to walk in defeat, gaining weight instead of losing it, declining in health instead of improving, leaving each doctor's visit with more prescriptions than when we arrived, our witness to the power of the Holy Spirit is marred. God forbid the unsaved say of us, "If God can't help her close the refrigerator, how powerful can He be?"

Another consequence of not recognizing this problem is we inadvertently contribute to skyrocketing health-care costs. I believe God's people should be a blessing to their families, employers, communities and even their nation. But as long as the church fails to recognize the full spectrum of this health crisis, we risk becoming financial liabilities to society.

Obese and overweight people require the spending of far more health-care dollars than their normal-weight counterparts, costing more than \$75 billion annually for weight-related illnesses. In addition, weight-related medical conditions contribute to decreased productivity and increased absenteeism in the workplace.

Jesus was a blessing to society. As His followers, we ought to be mindful of the many ways we may influence our surroundings,

and strive to be a blessing.

Finally, a failure to recognize the problem keeps some in a state of addiction, bondage and idolatry. The church must recognize that addiction extends beyond tobacco, alcohol, drug use and gambling and that many obese and overweight Christians are, in fact, addicted to food.

Food can indeed become an idol, dictating our behavior and making us say yes when the Holy Spirit would have us say no. For the food addict, the attraction to food, the loss of control over food and the mental preoccupation with food can be just as intense as the drug addict's desire for his or her substance of choice.

Unfortunately, a food addiction often goes unrecognized. Overeating does not alter our mental faculties, it is not illegal, and in this day and age of super-sized french fries, stuffed-crust pizzas and all-you-can-eat food bars it has become the socially acceptable norm.

But whenever we seek the provision of God first, we run the risk of idolatry. Remember the story of the Hebrew slaves and their miraculous escape from Egyptian bondage? It was not long before they found themselves craving the foods of Egypt—the very foods that should have reminded them of centuries spent in slavery (see Num. 11:4-6).

Addiction clouds reality, preventing us from recognizing the condition of bondage. Instead of cutting calories and restricting or eliminating those foods that contribute to poor health, a food addict craves them, never associating them with bondage to illness, medications and hospitalizations.

The solution to any addiction is deliverance. But the first step in deliverance is recognition.

Separation

Jesus said of His followers, “‘They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world’” (John 17:16, NKJV). Our faith in Christ is manifested in a sanctified lifestyle—one that is set apart and distinct from the world.

The sad truth, however, is that we are falling short of this call. In many ways we look exactly like the world, especially in the areas of indulgence and excess.

The world system encourages us to yield to the carnal nature through satisfying our flesh and yielding to our cravings. This is evident in such advertising slogans as “Have It Your Way,” “Can’t Stop Eating ‘Em” and “Obey Your Thirst.”

Even though excess and indulgence are the norm for the world’s system, the Word of God admonishes us to control our appetites. We are encouraged to crucify these tendencies and choose a lifestyle marked by sobriety and moderation. Many Christians struggle with obesity for no reason other than an unwillingness to reject the worldly tendency toward self-indulgence and excess.

How do you know if this is your problem? Examine your behavior.

Is the first serving never quite enough? Are you compelled to eat in response to the sight, smell or taste of food in the

absence of real hunger? Are you reluctant to set dietary restrictions—even at the advice of a nurse or physician—if it means sacrificing enjoyment?

I have treated many born-again patients with weight-related illnesses who call on the Lord as “Jehovah Rapha” (The Lord My Healer) in their prayers. This is a good thing. God is our healer and He responds to the prayers of His children.

But we must understand the entire passage from Exodus 15:26. When God identified Himself as Jehovah Rapha and assured us of protection from disease, it was under the conditions that His children separate themselves from worldliness.

The promise made at Marah was a conditional agreement, with protection from disease contingent upon steadfast obedience to God. My point is this: If we expect God to respond to our infirmities as Jehovah Rapha, the least we should do is keep our part of the agreement.

Temptation

The third reason the church is experiencing an increase in obesity and weight-related illnesses is that we are not serious enough about temptation. Satan has relied on the power of temptation since the fall of mankind. We should never make light of the devil’s schemes when it comes to temptation, but remember he is not the only source.

James 1:14 says, “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.” So we must be vigilant at revealing the devil’s destructive plans and just as determined to protect ourselves against our own lusts.

The blood of Jesus covers our sins, but too often we get cozy in this grace, to the extent that caving in to temptation doesn't really grieve us. David's description of a good man—"though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand" (Ps. 37:24, NIV)—seems to have made us dangerously comfortable with stumbling.

But God's grace should not be used as a security net. Sin is destructive and usually bears consequences, even for the grace-covered believer. Many Christians stand in total forgiveness today for the years they spent yielding to tempting foods, but they nevertheless pay the consequences in the form of poor health or even an early grave.

We must take 1 Corinthians 10:13 to heart: "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able" (NKJV). This wonderful promise serves as our assurance that no matter how intense the temptation, if we are experiencing it, we must be equipped to endure, otherwise God would not allow it to take place.

Our problem is we succumb to temptation without much of a struggle, sometimes with no struggle at all. Don't allow the knowledge of God's grace to persuade you to take temptation lightly. You won't know total victory until you get serious about resisting!

Subjection

Simply put, subjecting the flesh means I am in charge—not my body. Even though my flesh pleads with me to respond to the carnal, undisciplined nature, it is my regenerated mind that

makes the decisions and determines how my flesh will behave. An unwillingness to subject the flesh contributes to obesity in two ways: gluttony and laziness.

I've already alluded to the issue of gluttony in terms of self-indulgence and excess. In the Catholic tradition, gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. In the Protestant tradition, it's virtually ignored.

The book of Proverbs speaks of the glutton right alongside the heavy drinker (see Prov. 23:21). Though the church is quick to identify a drunk (and quick to condemn him), the glutton goes largely unnoticed. In many congregations, for instance, "fellowship" meals have become little more than food orgies.

Subjecting the flesh also requires exercising. Advances in technology have made our lives more sedentary. We drive instead of walk, and we work seated at desks instead of toiling in fields. Even our entertainment choices—movies and video games—are passive.

Our bodies, however, were designed by God for movement. Regular exercise is vitally important for weight control and good health. So what keeps us from exercising? Many times, it's just a refusal to subject the flesh because of laziness.

Through the years, my patients and the participants in my weight-loss classes have given me a litany of excuses for why they can't exercise. Some are valid, but most are not. The majority of them reflect an underlying need to discipline the flesh.

One common excuse I hear is there is not enough time. But the

issue is not really time; it's prioritizing time, especially considering the fact that most adults watch several hours of television each day. If there is time to sit in front of a television, then there is time to exercise.

Yet many of those who complain about a lack of time actually own exercise equipment with a television in full view. The "lack of time" excuse also won't explain why we're willing to wait on an elevator rather than climb the stairs or why we drive in circles to search for a parking space just to avoid walking a few yards.

In several passages of Scripture, Paul likens the Christian walk to that of an athlete in training. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 he describes his method of subduing the flesh: "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection." Like it or not, we will never gain control of our weight without bringing our flesh under subjection.

The apostle John told his dear friend Gaius, "I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 2, NIV). Good health is indeed a blessing to enjoy.

As children of God, we are entitled to receive His blessings, but we have hindered the flow because of poor choices when it comes to our lifestyles. Commit today to make a change. Let the Holy Spirit take full control of your entire life—body, soul and spirit—and begin walking in the blessing of better health.

She's the Expert on Fat

Dr. Kara Davis knows there's a link between emotional problems and weight gain. Her dieting advice is based on spiritual truths—not fads.

As a student of internal medicine, Kara Davis was trained to fight disease. But it wasn't until she accepted Jesus as her Savior that she began to make a spiritual difference in the lives of others.

A graduate of the University of Illinois College of Medicine, Davis was led to the Lord by her husband during her final year of medical school in 1987.

"After accepting Jesus, I had the peace of the Lord in my heart, which enabled me to respond in a godly manner to challenging situations at work," says Davis, who considers her spiritual insights and Christian attitude a witness to other physicians.

Davis deems it necessary to take a bold stand for Jesus, especially in a profession where so many are skeptical of God, faith and anything supernatural. Though she says there are "a lot of saved physicians," the Chicago native admits it can be a challenge witnessing to people with a scientific background.

"We doctors can give you a scientific explanation for how clouds produce rain, but when I became a believer, I couldn't give an explanation for what happened to my heart," she says.

Today, Davis shares the pastorate with her husband, Bishop Lance Davis, at New Zion Christian Fellowship in the Chicago suburb of Dolton. Former members of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Spirit-filled couple started an

independent ministry last year with 250 people. The fledgling congregation has more than doubled in size since it opened some eight months ago.

As a mother of four children—Grace, 12; Andrew, 8; Lance, 5; and Natalie, 4—Davis also works in private practice in Hammond, Indiana, not far from her hometown. Patients come to her with a variety of illnesses, many stemming from emotional problems that often have led to overeating.

Davis is concerned about America's rising rate of obesity, which she considers alarming. Her concern prompted her to focus her practice on helping patients improve their health by confronting the emotional struggles that are linked to poor eating habits.

"According to research, more people are dying from obesity than ever before," Davis told Charisma. "It's reaching epidemic proportions," she adds, noting that thousands of Christians are included in the figures.

The author of *Spiritual Secrets to Weight Loss* (Charisma House), Davis helps readers adopt a new attitude and lifestyle toward food—one with Christ at the center. Chapters such as "Depression: The Joy Snatcher"; "Hope in God"; "The Fruit of the Spirit Is Love"; and "Loving Ourselves," prompt readers to dig deep for answers.

Danita Brent, a Florida woman who has lost more than 77 pounds in two years after a rigorous lifestyle change, considers Davis' message a tailor-made fit for believers.

"So many of us have found secular solutions to diet concerns

to be temporary and even damaging,” Brent says. “They fail to address the spiritual and emotional roots that surround our inordinate attachments to food. Kara Davis has the insight, the training and the anointing to tackle one of the most critical issues facing women today—weight control.”

During the time Davis worked as assistant professor of clinical and internal medicine at her alma mater, she noticed that an unusually high number of African-American women were obese. That finding prompted her to take an aggressive step toward educating women of color about emotions and lifestyles that trigger overeating.

“Inadequate exercise and improper nutrition are major causes of premature death and disease,” Davis told Charisma. She says there are examples in Scripture in which God rebuked Israel for turning to idolatry and self-indulgence. The root issues grieve the Holy Spirit, she says.

For Brent, whose life has been transformed by Davis’ love for people struggling with obesity, Davis is a godsend.

“Kara Davis is compassionate, extremely knowledgeable and well-equipped to give us the spiritual tools we need for lasting change,” she says.

“She promises no quick and easy answers, just sound medical advice and spiritual wisdom you can really live with.”

Valerie Lowe

Kara Davis, M.D., is an assistant professor of clinical medicine and an internist at the University of Illinois. She

is also the author of Spiritual Secrets to Weight Loss,
published by Charisma House.