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LA Canada Valley Sun

Does this pew make me look fat?

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Q. Romans 14:17 says, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” but that message appears to be missed by some. A study by Northwestern University claims there is a link between regular church attendance by young people and obesity in middle age. The study tracked 2,433 men and women for 18 years and found that, of those aged 20-32 years with a normal body weight who attended a religious function at least once a week, 50% were more likely to become obese by their 50s than those who were not religious.

The study’s authors admit they don’t know why this is, but lead investigator Matthew Feinstein said, “It’s possible that getting together once a week and associating good works and happiness with eating unhealthy foods could lead to the development of habits that are associated with greater body weight and obesity.”

Previous studies of religious people’s health, such as one done by Purdue University in 2006, have discovered the same thing, although other reports have claimed that religious people are healthier overall because they have less of a tendency to smoke. But while drink, drugs, coveting your neighbor’s wife and other bad behaviors are preached against from the pulpit, overeating rarely is. Courtney Parker, the catering manager for the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, said that in years gone by, many things were taboo — but never eating.

Another reason may be that many evangelical groups are most opposed to federal anti-obesity programs such as Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” initiative, which they see as government trying to control their actions and curb their freedoms. On the other hand, Saddleback Church in Southern California recently launched The Daniel Plan, a year-long program designed to help its congregants adopt a healthy lifestyle. Almost 9,000 people had signed up for the plan by the beginning of February.

Do you think religious people are more susceptible to obesity? If so, why? Or is this just part of the wider societal trend toward corpulence?

Answer:

I do not believe that there is any theological explanation for the results in a recent study showing that people who are active participants in religious activities are more likely to be obese than others. I am convinced that this discrepancy has its basis in the lack of community many people in our current society are feeling in their lives, not the fact that consumption of food is not forbidden in the same ways that alcohol, infidelity and other immoral things are.

There has been a great deal of research investigating this sense of alienation, notably reported in such books as “Bowling Alone” by Robert Putnam. In this book, Putnam gives numerous examples of the decline of what he calls “social capital.” He reveals that people today are not finding the same connections with others they used to gain through clubs and other group activities.

Even families often do not spend a lot of time together. However, religious groups can provide people with a sense of community, and their activities often include food – simple refreshments at a meeting or class, potluck dinners before or after services or celebrations of some sort to mark milestones in the lives of congregants. The kinds of gatherings formerly held by extended family groups are now being provided for many by churches, synagogues and mosques.

Throughout our history, food has been a common measure of hospitality. And the words “comfort food” suggest memories of warmth and connection to good times in the past. It is not surprising then that churches would want

to provide the kinds of comfort that give people a sense of well-being.

But here is the catch. The kinds of foods that are provided, particularly at potlucks, in religious settings may not include the most healthful alternatives. So the opportunity for congregations is to make sure the food provided at such gatherings is healthy and encourage their members to find social connections that nurture their lives without adding weight to their bodies.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

It's hard to argue with statistics (if they're valid), but my suspicion is that obesity among religious people has more to do with culture than it does with faith.

People from different regions of the country and different ethnic groups enjoy different diets. For example, many Korean churches enjoy meals together, but their diet tends to be healthier than what we would call traditional American food. Religious people in the South will tend to eat traditional (often unhealthy) Southern food when they dine together.

Churches also tend to preach more against immorality, drinking and smoking than we do against overeating, so I suppose that gluttony is considered more "acceptable" these days. It may be that people who struggle with substance abuse can still use and "fit in" with the church when food is the substance that's abused. Using food as a "drug of choice" is less conspicuous than using cocaine.

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free" says Galatians 5:1 regarding legalistic dietary laws and religious rules. But in addition to giving his life on the cross for the full payment of our sins, Jesus also wants us to live in freedom from every form of bondage and addiction, whether it's to food or drugs or immorality or false religious systems.

Even of allowable indulgences Paul wrote: "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12). When we're born again, God sends the Holy Spirit to live in us eternally, and one of the things the Spirit produces is self-control.

So I suppose the message is: "Be filled with the Spirit, belly up to the potluck with your friends and don't overdo it."

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

My guess is that the church is reflective of the wider corpulent society, although I do like the idea that behaviors railed against from the pulpit have not historically included overeating. Also, in ancient times when the scriptures were written, food was often scarce, and words such as "fatness" appear to be a blessing. So it may never have occurred to those writing what we now consider Holy Writ that there would ever come a time when it was possible to have too much of a good thing.

Perhaps we preachers should rail against obesity; we have a scriptural basis. St. Paul talks about our bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19). He makes the point that such a “temple” should not be joined with a prostitute, and I think most of us would agree! But he also says that our bodies are not our own but gifts from God.

If we believe our bodies are gifts from God, it would seem not too big a stretch to realize that just as we should not join ourselves with prostitutes, we probably also shouldn't join ourselves with too much chocolate pie. (If chocolate pie doesn't tempt you, then choose your poison!)

Seriously, I'll defer to Aristotle here, who urged the mean between the extremes. Said another way, be moderate in all things. Having one piece of pie is probably not a sin, but having four or five just may be!

I know it sounds funny to think that overeating might be a sin, but maybe we need to rethink just exactly what sin is. Drunkenness is condemned; shouldn't seeking a sugar high be also?

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

I suspect it's all just part of the national trend toward obesity. I'd also guess that those between ages 20-32 who attend religious functions do so because they're settling into marriages or relationships, which also correlates to weight gain. And finally, I'd say that if there is a direct correspondence, it might be because religious people have a fondness (or a greater ability, if you prefer) for sedentary stillness. To put it another way: We spend a lot of time sitting around on our ... prayer rugs.

Think of all of the usual spiritual activities: prayer, meditation, journaling, reading scriptures, gazing at candles and icons, sitting in pews on Sundays, sitting around in small groups and classes, sitting on the back patio thinking about life. Sitting, sitting, sitting – sedentary, every one of those activities.

There's walking meditation, I guess, with or without the aid of a labyrinth; and it's not uncommon for spiritual types to also be into yoga, hiking, cycling, daily walks and other forms of exercise which free the mind for rumination. But most of the spiritual life involves, and even asks for, physical stillness.

It's not such a bad thing, when you see it as stepping away from the constant frenetic pace of the world and its craziness – it's not so bad being able to slow down, stop and just be for a while. But maybe it's not so good in terms of optimal physical conditioning.

Kudos to Rick Warren and the Daniel Plan – there's some really good stuff on that website. Good for him for leading the way on giving people plans and ways to practice the wellness we preach.

But I've been sitting here writing this for a while now. Time to get off my, um, prayer rug, and go for a walk!

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

Gaining weight en masse isn't limited to religious groups. A 2007 New England Journal of Medicine study of more than 12,000 people over 32 years documented the existence of an "obesity epidemic."

Individuals in a social network "catch" being overweight from their friends and associates. A network member being obese made it 57% more likely that a friend would also.

Smoking and a few other behaviors were also tracked in the study. ("Are Your Friends Making You Fat?", an excellent article in the New York Times Magazine for Sept. 10, 2009 examined the original study, along with subsequent comments, critiques and analysis.

There are bigger questions to be asked here. To me the serious problems with our whole food system, of which increasing corpulence is just one result, pose moral challenges for all of us. I can name four right off the top of my head.

Unequal access to quality food and lack of nutrition knowledge means that low-income populations are more likely to be obese and/or poorly nourished (the two aren't mutually exclusive) than the better-off.

Raising beef, then transporting it long distances to be consumed in vast quantities as cheap, low-quality, high-fat fast food, in addition to making us unhealthy enacts huge costs on the earth's environment. Odds are that a piece of meat we buy at the supermarket came from a factory-farmed animal that lived in pain and died in terror. (This is probably true of eggs as well.) And especially the already unacceptably large, yet ever-growing, number of people who go hungry among us.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

America as a whole is well considered the fattest nation on earth, although I understand Kuwait has just recently overtaken us in that unsavory categorization. We're also considered predominantly Christian, so if the study says anything, it says it to most of us, but I don't see how one thing really has to do with the other unless it means to imply that infrequent potlucks upset metabolism or that religious folks are just generally gluttonous.

People get fat by taking in more calories than they burn. We live in a modern world of computer cubicles and fast food, so if we aren't careful we can easily turn into blobs. This seems to be the universal American case.

If it can be proven that Christians are particularly fatter than others, it would only show that we aren't following our own faith. Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins, but it's the one that's most obviously violated and, therefore, conveniently under-preached. After all, what minister wants to indict his entire congregation or draw attention to his own clerical corpulence?

And there is an oft-repeated, tongue-in-cheek excuse for making multiple trips to the potluck casserole table. It points to St. Paul's admonition to "buffet" our bodies (1Co 9:27 NAS). Buffet (buf-fit) is an old-fashioned translation for a word meaning "discipline." The joke is in pronouncing the word "buf-fay," as in "smorgasbord."

But be assured that as our plump parishioners let out on Sunday morning, we will be pouring into the local street festival to join all the husky and plus-sized, non-churchgoing, sausage-munching, mochaccino-sucking population that already has a head start on us!

As an American, I don't want the government legally banning bacon or butter, though I would endorse campaigns to increase nutritional awareness and physical fitness. My desire would be that our people model moderation and so retake a positive lead in world civilization. Do we care if the words "American" or "Christian" conjure only images of fat oafs in the perception of others?

As my granny used to say, "Eat to live, don't live to eat." Sainly advice.

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

I don't know many details about the Northwestern University study and so cannot verify its accuracy. It may very well be true that people who attend religious services are more prone to obesity, but the insinuation that religion or prayer services somehow cause over-eating and indulgence is, in my opinion, disingenuous. Most religions counsel self-discipline and encourage both restraint and modesty, and in many cases the designated days of celebration and consumption are counterbalanced by periods of fasting and denial.

In any given situation, there can be many factors that lead to obesity, and inherited genetics is often a major cause of corpulence. I could easily conclude that children who are raised in religious homes are more likely to attend religious services, and if their parents were overweight then they will likely be overweight as well—hence the trend toward obesity among those who are spiritually inclined. Mystery solved!

Our country is blessed with agricultural abundance to the point where hunger is minimal. The unfortunate flip-side of this blessing is Americans' tendency to indulge in this bounty and consume processed foods loaded with unhealthy ingredients. I feel that it is incumbent upon religious leaders and organizations to help society face the challenges of overeating. The fact is that while practically every vice is discussed and frowned upon in religious circles, overeating is usually not given much attention. The sad reality is that Americans are steadily growing in girth, and this trend is alarming.

According to various studies, illnesses linked to obesity pose the single greatest challenge to the American healthcare system today. We are now more aware than ever of the dangers of obesity, and the clergy should lead the way in safeguarding their congregations by informing them of the dangers that lurk on a dinner plate. Life is a gift from God, and the Bible in Deuteronomy 4:15 cautions us to be very careful to properly safeguard our health. Ultimately, a healthy body provides a sound foundation for a healthy mind, which is then more receptive to the positive message of spirituality.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center