

The gospel of personal responsibility and obesity

By [Rachel Marie Stone](#)

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While I was away a few weeks ago, regular reader and fellow blogger [Charity Jill](#) tweeted to me about speaker/blogger Shane Blackshear's post ["It's Probably Time We All Talked About Obesity and the Church"](#).

Shane's post is not particularly unique in its outlook; over a year ago, Marcus Thompson, a pastor in Oakland, CA, published a piece on *Relevant* called ["The Immorality of Gluttony"](#) that expresses very similar concerns. (I responded to it [here](#) .)

In the post, Shane seems to think that churches haven't done much to assert that "gluttony" is a sin; we may trot out the "body is a temple" verses for smoking or alcohol abuse, says Shane, but we don't care about healthy eating, and we should.

This is actually a big point where I have to disagree with Shane, because I think it's pretty unlikely that *anyone* in or out of church in America hasn't been duly informed of the "obesity epidemic" and the dangers thereof.

In fact, American Christians have been linking healthy diets with spiritual health for at least 100 years and probably closer to 200. As Lynne Gerber demonstrates in her excellent book *Seeking the Straight and Narrow* (see [my Christian Century review here](#)), fatness is a "sin" than Americans of all religions and no religion seem to agree on. For example, a popular church-based weight-loss program, First Place, sits comfortably within mainstream culture's weight-loss discourse; in Gerber's estimation (and mine) the Bible provides "window dressing" but no real challenge to the principle of fat as "secular sin."

Shane asked Charity Jill (and me) on Twitter how the church can address obesity without it being absorbed as criticism or shaming. Charity Jill got at a big part of it in her post with the subtitle ["It's Not About the Fat."](#) As I wrote last year:

American culture already [demonizes fat](#) and worships [thinness](#). Claiming that people who are overweight are therefore sinful isn't only unhelpful, it's also unfair. Body

types vary greatly: some people are just plain bigger than others. Some people can't exercise due to disabilities. Some people have hormonal imbalances that keep them overweight despite their efforts to the contrary.

[Besides, lots of things that Americans love are 'sins' that no one seems to get too enraged over. Like loving money! And gossiping. But getting upset over fatness? That's for people of every faith and no faith.]

The other thing I have to say about obesity in America is that I don't think it's the result of a lack of personal responsibility/willpower/determination. I think it's the result of a food industry that's bent on profit above all else. Have Americans suddenly lost "self-control" in recent decades, or are there simply more ways to eat more food more often?

To those who might disagree, I offer two book recommendations: [*The End of Overeating* by David Kessler](#) and [*Appetite for Profit* by Michele Simon](#). Both demonstrate how obesity and diet-related disease are at least as much the fault of corporations who exploit our innate cravings for profit. It isn't Ayn Rand-ian of me to say so, but I think that the food environment that Big Food Corporations have created is probably more to blame than the mythical "individual" who can make "personal choices."

Beyond that, my own contention about food and faith is that the Bible says nothing about eating for health.

Instead, food, in the Bible—and in our lives—represents God's gracious gift. In the beginning, in Eden, God delights to feed the people God has made. A Biblical understanding of food recognizes that food doesn't come from the store, or from money—it comes from the soil, the sun, and the sustaining, gracious hand of God.

I think that's worth remembering.

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