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## THOU SHALT NOT BLOAT; Many Christians spurn nutrition and exercise

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Dr. Don Colbert says studies make it clear to him that Christians need a lot of help taking off the fat.

"You can almost say that Christians are probably the most unhealthy persons in the world," the Longwood, Fla., family physician says.

One study that Colbert was referring to was done by Purdue University researcher Kenneth Ferraro, who compiled the incidence of obesity among people in various religious groups.

It was released last year and was a follow-up to his similar 1998 study.

The new study found that Baptists were the most likely to be obese, at about 30 percent. They were followed by evangelicals, such as Pentecostals, and then by Roman Catholics, United Methodists and members of the African Methodist Episcopal church.

Low levels of obesity were found among groups whose beliefs include dietary and health guidelines. They include Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

\ Pudgy in the pulpit

Colbert, in practice for 20 years, is founder of the Divine Health Wellness Center and author of several books, including *What Would Jesus Eat?* and *The 7 Pillars of Health*. He also sells a line of health products.

He said Christians preach against drinking, drugs and womanizing but not excessive eating. Obesity "is like an untold sin that they don't want exposed in the church."

Many overweight clergy members set a bad example for their flocks, Colbert said.

"The church is really like sheep. They will do what the pastor does," he said. "If they see the pastor not exercising, they won't exercise. If they see his bulging waistline, they think it's OK for them to have a bulging waistline."

In the New Testament, Paul writes that people should glorify God with their bodies, but that "doesn't mean we need to weigh 300 or 400 pounds," Colbert said.

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Religion can play an important role in getting people to shed weight, he believes.

"Just like the word of God says, we're to be living epistles," Colbert said. "We're to be the light of the world. People should look at us and see a difference. They shouldn't see us with bulging bellies."

Lou Toscano, an elder and a Seventh-day Adventist official at the denomination's state office in Mount Vernon, said his church lives by the biblical mandate to care for the body because it is the "temple of the Holy Spirit."

"We live in a world where obviously bad things happen to good people," he said. "And no matter what kind of diet they're on or what kind of exercise program they're on, they can die of some terrible disease. That's the kind of world in which we live.

"But we do feel we have a responsibility to do all that we can" to keep fit.

Many Seventh-day Adventists are vegetarians, he said, adding that the Bible says that practice was a mandate from God until the great flood of Noah's time wiped out plants. Meat eaters are urged to avoid species considered unclean in the Bible, such as pork; they also are encouraged to exercise regularly.

A study done several years ago in Alameda County, Calif., which has many Seventh-day Adventists, showed that members live an average of seven years longer than other Americans.

Obesity is not seen as a sin for which a person would be removed from a congregation, because it is not considered to be a willful violation of God's law, Toscano said. Rather, it is viewed as lapsing from a church principle.

\ Unwelcome words

At the First Church of God on the South Side, this is the "Year of Freedom," which, among other things, is emphasizing getting fit.

Oleatha Waugh, manager of the church's fitness center, said the Christian church has been "an unindicted co-conspirator in the obesity epidemic in the African-American community."

Preachers don't bring up obesity "because it's so uncomfortable," he said, adding that church people only want to hear what makes them feel good.

"There's a man in the Bible named John the Baptist, who lived in the woods eating locust and honey," he said. "And his whole life was devoted to telling people to repent because they were involved in things that were detrimental to them. And people don't want a John the Baptist as a pastor."

If people want to get healthy, Waugh said, they must not only exercise but also be careful about what they eat.

\ Baptists' struggle

The Purdue obesity study prompted Southern Baptists to make a push to get members trimmer.

Douglas Day, an official with the denomination's GuideStone Financial Resources, said church leaders recognize obesity as a problem. But it's hard to get the message to local churches, he said.

"We have autonomy in Southern Baptist life," he said. "And so that disconnect makes it more difficult to communicate."

Among the services GuideStone provides to members and affiliates is health insurance. It presents a wellness program each summer at the national convention.

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Day said one reason his denomination ranks high in obesity is that 85 percent of its churches are in the deep South, where diet, such as a lot of fried foods, makes a lot of people overweight.

"It does become cultural," he said. "And you're also seeing it as we've got ethnic-related growth in Southern Baptist life.

"And some of those people, from a cultural perspective, that's been a history for them as well."

Colbert said he is contacted more these days by congregations wanting his help in shaping up, which signals a changing attitude.

"I do believe it's beginning to start, that we're going to see a major shift," he said.

"And I think that eventually the Christians are going to be the healthier group of people."

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