

A Christian Approach to Nutrition

*To confess Christ as Saviour from sin, but to deny his relevance
and power in the realm of culture, is a denial of his kingship
over the believer and over the world.*

—Henry R. Van Til¹

Nutrition is likely a topic you have never heard addressed biblically. Has your pastor ever discussed eating to take care of your body? Is there any culture in your church of choosing different foods than what the rest of the world does?

When I do an online search for Sunday school snacks, I find all the same foods you would at any daycare or kids' party: Goldfish crackers, gummies, cookies. You can make them "Christian" though! A sleeve of Little Debbie Powdered Donuts with a note wrapped around them that says, "DONUT worry about tomorrow! Matthew 6:33–34" is one recommendation for a cute children's church snack. Or a Blow Pop that says, "We're so happy you POPPED in to join us today! We hope you CHEWS to come again" can be given to new visitors. Pinterest offers all manner of candy and snack creations for teaching VBS lessons, like a pretzel stick with a Fruit Roll-Up to represent Josiah's scroll. No one expects the treats offered at a church harvest festival to be any different from the candy children get anywhere else at Halloween. For most Christians, praying before a meal is the extent of connecting their faith to their diet. My search to find like-minded people or materials on the topic of biblical nutrition has returned relatively little, and what I have found is mostly focused on the purely spiritual aspect of a healthy relationship with food.

1. Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Baker Academic, 2001), 213.

There are a lot of reasons Christians ignore, or even shy away from, the topic of nutrition. Without any intentional effort to walk differently, we follow the world, and the world acts like healthy eating is not that big of a deal. Modern healthcare pays hardly any attention to it. Doctors can don their white coats after eight years of higher education with as little as three hours of training on the topic. Dozens of hospitals have fast-food restaurants like McDonald's and Chick-fil-A inside for staff and visitors, and the food served to their patients is typically not any better. Healthcare in the United States is about managing acute conditions with drugs, surgery, and other tools—not about anything we eat.

Most people have a vague idea that they should eat a balanced diet, avoid too much sugar, and get some fresh fruits and vegetables. When they see labels that say “organic,” “plant-based,” or “all-natural,” they may go for it. If they have children, they probably assume that an important part of parenting is trying to get their children to eat veggies. A health problem or excess weight may drive someone to start trying to eat better. They might go on a diet, start counting calories, or cut out gluten or dairy to test out a food sensitivity. They'll commit to the self-deprivation and start talking about foods they're not “allowed” to have. But constantly remaining a little hungry and craving foods that are off-limits just doesn't work on a family vacation, so they'll splurge at the restaurant. It doesn't work when it comes time to celebrate a birthday, so they'll buy the kids a cake and have some with them. It doesn't work when dealing with a stressful deadline at their job, so they'll grab some cookies from the store on their way to work. Then they may talk about how they feel “guilty” and try to compensate by eating even less, or they commit to their diet with more fervor. Alas, leaving themselves unsatisfied at every meal just doesn't work long-term, and the efforts are probably short-lived. Can you relate to any of this?

It's natural for our culture to have a poor relationship with nutrition as well as a low view of it when what has been advocated for seventy years now simply hasn't worked very well. Cutting calories might provide some short-term weight loss, but it becomes unsustainable, and nearly everyone gains the weight back, if not more. While people are trying to eat more vegetables, cut back on sugar, and consume less red meat, rates of every known chronic disease rise. So what's the point?

Christians in particular can end up ignoring nutrition because it pertains to our physical, earthly bodies. Shouldn't we be much more concerned with eternal matters, like souls, God's Word, and the gospel? Discussing any topic that is not explicitly spiritual, like food, can also arouse concerns

about legalism. There is good reason to be cautious about this. We have no business creating commandments where God has not, and the Bible warns about it strongly:

Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
and the writers who keep writing oppression. (Isa. 10:1)

Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens
hard to bear. (Luke 11:46)

Another concern is idolatry. Christians often discuss the potential for exercise, clothing, or hobbies to become idols. Many Christians would consider that a “health nut” is making their health an idol.

I’ve even seen Christians who don’t want to use nutritional strategies to resolve health problems because they believe they just need to have more faith in God’s ability to heal or else have more peace with His seeming unwillingness to do so. When it comes to losing weight, I’ve seen Christians refuse to adopt any kind of “fad” diet because they believe they just need to rely on God more for the strength to eat less. (What they don’t realize is that eating less is itself a diet—the calorie-restriction approach to weight loss is just one among many, and one that hasn’t proved very effective.)

Some Christians will use the admonition in 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or the things in the world,” to argue that we should not be pursuing food for any purpose beyond meeting our physical needs. Enjoying food or the study of nutrition, they would say, is certainly not a spiritual pursuit, so it may even be wrong.²

The hippie-environmentalism movement that began in the 1960s did nothing to improve Christians’ relationship with healthy eating. As soon as health food stores and organic food made their debut, they became associated with New Age practices, Earth worship, animal rights, and left-wing values. In *The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God’s Creation*, Joel Salatin recounts an instance when the chancellor of his Christian university wrote an article for the school paper condemning anyone shopping at a health food store as having “just joined a cult.”³

What approach to nutrition does the Bible really point us to?

2. John MacArthur, “Do Not Love the World,” sermon, June 6, 2021, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, <https://www.gty.org/sermons/81-116/do-not-love-the-world>.

3. Joel Salatin, *The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God’s Creation* (FaithWords, 2016), 82.

A Biblical Case for Caring About Health

Above all else, we should care about our health because God does. The sixth commandment—*you shall not murder*—implies that God cares about life, of which health is an inextricable element. Health begets life. Without health, life will end, and health is necessary for life to reproduce. Twenty-six of Jesus’s thirty-seven recorded miracles were physically healing bodies.

In the words of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, our health is “the horse we have been given to ride” to carry out the universal commandments to love others, to be in community, to teach others, and to go and make disciples of all nations.⁴ If we live to old age but are in poor health, we will not be able to stay productive for God’s kingdom in the same way, to work with our hands and avoid reliance on others and the governments of this world (1 Thess. 4:11–12), or to serve others (Gal. 5:13).

And Christians do care about their health. In 2017, the Barna Group surveyed American Christians about the content of their prayers: 47 percent said they had prayed at least once in the last three months about their health and wellness, and 61 percent said they had prayed for the needs of their family and community.⁵ Anyone who has listened to prayer requests in church or a Bible study meeting knows how many of these “needs of family and community” relate to health. It breaks my heart to hear about the pain, infertility, digestive problems, metabolic problems, cancer, and other diseases that Christians are routinely dealing with.

When we pray about health problems, we are usually praying for supernatural intercession. But what if we also prayed for direction and resources to use the many avenues of healing God has already provided us? While God can and does work through miracles, there is a natural order to healing He has already provided in His creation. We see in the Bible that people are sometimes supernaturally directed to these natural means. The prophet Isaiah instructed King Hezekiah to “prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil” to bring about the healing God had ordained for him (Isa. 38:21 NIV). Paul tells Timothy to use some wine for his stomach and frequent ailments (1 Tim. 5:23).

4. Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Banner of Truth, 1966), 234.

5. Barna Group, “Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray,” August 15, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>.

What if we cared about health before we got sick? “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” Paul asks the Corinthians. “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (1 Cor. 3:16–17). Later in his letter he writes, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:15, 19–20). We do not have the right to abuse what is not ours and what we have been given stewardship over. The context of 1 Corinthians 6 is sexual immorality, but the truths about our bodies are universal. There is something to be said of the fact that sexual immorality is considered a uniquely harmful sin because of its effect on the *body*: “Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18).

Jesus has not only redeemed our souls but also our physical bodies, and both will be resurrected. Our physical bodies will be changed at the resurrection—one can only speculate how—but they have eternal value. It’s why the apostle John wrote to the church leader Gaius, “I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul” (3 John 1:2). R. J. Rushdoony describes the eternal value of the body by pointing out that “the word for salvation in the Latin is *salve*, ‘health,’ and both Old and New Testaments speak of salvation as the total health and restoration of man, in all his being, into the fullness of life in the Lord.”⁶

It turns out Christians will reference these verses and talk about health in these terms—but usually only in the context of addictive substances like cigarettes, marijuana, or overconsumption of alcohol. I will show you in this book that some common foods may be just as harmful and addictive as smoking and other drugs, if not more so. I challenge Christians to consider whether their willingness to condemn smoking—but not unhealthy foods—is based more on riding the tide of culture’s noncontroversial opinions rather than biblical truths applied to reality.

We don’t even need an explicit biblical case for caring about health to examine the topic of nutrition biblically. Food and health are topics worth considering from the perspective of our faith because they are practical

6. R. J. Rushdoony, *Faith and Wellness: Resisting the State Control of Healthcare by Restoring the Priestly Calling of Doctors* (Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2016), 72.

matters that interface with the lives of all Christians. Food affects us every day. Unless we are partaking in a rare, extended fast, eating is one thing we have done and will do every single day of our lives, probably three to eight times a day. Every time we eat, we make decisions about what foods to put into our bodies. We fall into habits and probably bring home more or less the same things from the grocery store every week, but a breakfast of whole wheat toast with unsalted butter and store-brand jam is a choice selected among literally millions of options. We know that at some level what we eat dictates our health, and we spend a significant amount of our resources caring for our health, whether it's routine doctor's checkups and dental cleanings or being forced into long hospital stays and crippling medical bills due to an unforeseen disease. Does our faith have any relevance?

It is a low view of Christianity to only let it pertain to purely spiritual topics. The Bible is brimming with encouragement to apply our faith and God's Word to all areas of our lives:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

And again [Jesus] said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." (Luke 13:20–21)

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. (2 Peter 1:3)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be healing to your flesh^[a]
and refreshment^[b] to your bones.. (Prov. 3:5–8)

We've already established that we have a biblical responsibility to care for our health, so then "all things that pertain to life and godliness" must include direction and provision for doing so. God's kingdom pervades every area of our lives. What would it look like to "eat . . . to the glory of God?" Surely it would mean to "acknowledge him" as a starting point. We

should note that the promise for acknowledging God and leaning not on your own understanding is literal “healing to your flesh.”

Some would appeal to the supremacy of eternal, purely spiritual pursuits to say that the gospel, Bible study, and evangelism are more important topics we should be focusing on instead. Both can be true. The gospel, God’s Word, and souls *are* more important. Also, health matters, and our faith can speak to the questions of what food is most beneficial for us. It does not diminish the importance of God’s Word or winning souls to talk about other areas of the Christian life as well. In fact, applying the gospel and our Christian faith to every area of our lives is a way to magnify the gospel and demonstrate its ability to reach beyond sanctification and eternal life, even to aligning the “secular” areas of life with spiritual purpose and truth. Indeed, if we ignore these less important physical matters, we are putting ourselves in a position where we may be forced later to put our health in front of important matters like community, serving, and ministry. As the popular quote goes, “If you do not make time for your wellness, you will be forced to make time for your illness.”

The twentieth-century theologian Henry R. Van Til encouraged Christians to seize what he calls “culture” in his classic book, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*. “Culture is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God,” he explains. “Culture is not a peripheral concern, but the very essence of life. It is an expression of man’s essential being as created in the image of God. Since man is essentially a religious being, culture is expressive of his relationship to God, that is, of his religion.”⁷

At the time of the New Testament’s writing, the Roman world had been heavily influenced by a philosophy called gnosticism, which taught a dualistic opposition of matter (the evil) and spirit (the good). It plays out as handling everything in the material world as a necessary evil while only considering spiritual things truly good. The epistles are full of warnings against this antithetical belief. More recently in history, some modern churches have fallen into a habit of preaching practical, seeker-friendly messages with only a smattering of feel-good Bible verses in order to appeal to large crowds. More Bible-focused churches have reacted by advocating a gospel-centered approach that ignores practical life matters if

7. Van Til, *Calvinistic Concept*, 10.

they aren't a "gospel issue." The result is that now we have ended up with a Christian culture that bears uncomfortable resemblance to the ancient heresy the New Testament writers warned about. The Gnostics would be proud of a statement like, "Only the soul is valuable to God, not the body." The answer, more so than finding a "balance," should be recognizing that churches always run into conflicts when they focus on being too "seeker friendly." John MacArthur identifies the issue with a seeker-friendly focus: "Subtly the overriding goal is church attendance and worldly acceptability rather than a transformed life."⁸ A church that relies on the sovereignty of God instead of salesmanship to witness can rigorously equip saints to understand the gospel and witness to unbelievers themselves. And then it can unashamedly apply God's Word seriously to all practical matters of life that affect believers.

Refusing to enjoy food is a sad and unnecessary misinterpretation of Scripture. "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (1 John 2:15) is written by the same God who Himself "loved the world" (John 3:16) and declared it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). What is meant by "the world or the things in the world" is described in the very next verse: "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" (1 John 2:16). MacArthur explains that the world we are supposed to hate "isn't the created world, it isn't the human world; it is the spiritual system of evil that operates in the physical realm. It is the system of evil that is opposed to God."⁹ Hating the "world" does not mean refusing to enjoy God's gifts. As Joe Rigney writes in *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts*, "Sin is not in the stuff. Sin resides in human hearts. And thinning out creation just makes us thin idolaters. We exchange indulgent sins for ascetic ones."¹⁰ There is no value to our spiritual or physical health in holding a low value of food as a "thing of the world."

If we condemn any pursuit that is not purely spiritual as "idolatry," we can end up just condemning excellence. In the past, the church led culture in its accomplishments in architecture, music, and art—the relics of which still stand today as cathedrals, classic hymns, and displays in art museums. Now, "Christian" movies are expected to have bad acting

8. John MacArthur, "Seeker-Friendly Churches," *Grace to You*, n.d., <https://www.gty.org/articles/A255/seekerfriendly-churches>.

9. MacArthur, "Do Not Love the World."

10. Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Crossway, 2014), 67.

and trite storylines, Christian music is relegated to its own radio stations, and many church buildings do not look any different from an industrial warehouse. Is it possible that part of what got us here was telling Christians they were making art, architecture, music, or movies an “idol” if they cared about them too much and that they should be reading their Bibles instead, rather than directing those interested toward God’s glory?

Idolatry is a serious sin that the Bible warns about all throughout the Old and New Testaments, so what makes something an idol? Using the direction in 1 John 2:16, a useful definition of *idolatry* in this context may be “valuing something to the extent that we would be willing to sin for it.” If in a pursuit of healthy eating we would judge others, neglect community, or put our hope and trust in health rather than God, then it would be fair to say that it has become an idol. If eating is so important that your god becomes your belly (Phil. 3:19), then it is idolatry. But putting time, effort, and money into caring for your and your family’s health and pursuing excellence in the matter of understanding food and the human body is not idolatry.

Speaking about nutrition biblically is also not a prosperity theology. We are no more guaranteed good health by looking to the Bible for direction about what to eat than we are guaranteed wealth by following God. We should expect that a diet founded on biblical truths will lead us to health better than one founded on false worldviews, but nowhere does the Bible give us an *assurance* of good health, nor give the impression that health is an ultimate end. Illness can even be ordained for the purpose of glorifying God. In John 9, Jesus’s disciples asked him whose sin was responsible for a man’s blindness. “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him,” Jesus answered (John 9:3). In this case, Jesus healed the man’s blindness to display God’s power, but another disease might be for the purpose of demonstrating God’s provision or drawing someone into greater dependence on Him.

From time to time, Christians have tackled nutrition from a biblical perspective, but unfortunately, nearly every example I have found succumbs to one of several problems. Either it tries to fit current, preconceived beliefs into a biblical framework, the approach vastly oversimplifies the Bible’s application to food, or it simply misinterprets Scripture.

The Maker’s Diet, published in 2004, reads like a biblical spin on the trending nutrition advice of the time: lower carbohydrate intake, whole

grains, limited red meat and dairy, and lots of vegetables.¹¹ This was the time of low-carbohydrate Atkins diet popularity, the tail end of the low-fat movement, and peak fascination with the Mediterranean diet.

Sometimes a biblical approach to nutrition is simply to advocate “natural, whole foods” as “*God-given*, natural, whole foods.” There is some truth to this, as a lot of our health problems can be attributed to “fake” foods, and God has given us much in His creation that is best in its natural, unaltered form, but this is really just a rebranded version of the evolutionary worldview’s perspective that says we are nothing more than animals and should be impacting the world as little as possible. “Natural” is a good starting point for a biblical approach to nutrition, but it’s not the whole story, as chapter 4 will discuss.

Last, you can find plenty of examples of Scripture simply being misinterpreted to justify different diets. The Daniel Fast is a classic example that I will cover in chapter 5. Sometimes verses are taken out of context, like the command in Leviticus 3:17 that “you must not eat any fat” (NIV), which will be explained in chapter 8.

Biblical nutrition does not mean trying to eat the same way everyone in the Bible did. We should expect that as God’s chosen people living in God’s promised land, the Israelites had good food that would provide them with good health, but by and large, their diet was simply a representation of the food available in that part of the world at that time. It’s overly simplistic to consider the foods mentioned in the Bible as the only foods that can make up a healthy diet, or even necessarily the best foods.

A biblical approach to nutrition also does not mean following the Levitical dietary laws. There are valuable things we can learn from some of the practical purposes of these laws, which I will discuss in chapter 5, but when we understand the reasons they were given and the context they were given in, the takeaways we can apply most effectively to our health in our world today are more nuanced than simply adopting them, and they are far from the only thing the Bible has to say about diet.

Food Is Not Spiritually Neutral

Up until this point I have referred to food as a practical matter of life, but let me say, undeniably and unequivocally, that *food is not spiritually neutral*.

11. Jordan S. Rubin, *The Maker’s Diet: The 40-Day Health Experience That Will Change Your Life Forever* (Destiny Image, 2004), 23.