

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMEPTATION: CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S LIFESTYLE BOOKS  
AND THE MORALIZATION OF HEALTH

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a Major in Sociology  
August 2023

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## ABSTRACT

Religious teachings and their connection to health and wellness rhetoric have received limited scholarly attention. This study explores the portrayal of the relationship between health and religion in contemporary Christian women's lifestyle books. The study employs a qualitative content analysis of fifteen popular books published within the last five years, aiming to identify patterns in their descriptions of health, accessibility of advice, treatment of weight and beauty standards, and the presence of direct or indirect connections between health and sin. Self-help rhetoric and religious discourses often depoliticize women's concerns and reinforce patriarchal structures, and these books have proven to be no different. Five major themes emerged upon conducting this qualitative analysis: connections to Eve and original sin, the importance of individual responsibility, creation in God's image, authenticity and relatability, and the fight between good and evil. While some of the authors made attempts to present women's bodies in a more positive light, nearly all of them portrayed weight gain as a moral failure, while rejecting the idea that maintaining thinness is a vain or aesthetic decision. By bridging the gap in existing literature, this study aims to shed light on the often-overlooked interaction between Christian rhetoric and the portrayal of health and morality in contemporary women's lifestyle books. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the implications and challenges posed by today's pervasive wellness culture, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of the connections between religion, women's experiences, and their beliefs about how their own bodies and the bodies of others should be maintained and presented.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Religious fundamentalism has had a long-standing but sparsely researched connection to health and wellness rhetoric. Ellen Gould White, a co-founder of the Seventh Day Adventist church, founded a number of health sanitariums where upper- and middle-class guests would seek respite and foster usually already good health. Those suffering from mental illness and communicable diseases were excluded, as their goal seemed more closely aligned with fostering the health of the already relatively healthy and well-off members of society. In her lifetime, White was a prolific writer who focused primarily on the connection between health, diet, and religious inclinations (Bailey 2019). Though she was one of the most prominent, Ellen G. White was far from the only member of the church to explicitly link health to moral righteousness and religious devotion. Those involved with this endeavor were also notably religious and often connected personal health to one's relationship with God. Her work with John Harvey Kellogg, for example, demonstrates a direct link between the rhetoric of the health and wellness industry and that of eugenics. Kellogg was known not only for heading what is now the Kellogg's brand in the name of optimizing health, but he was also a proponent of eugenic practices and would become an illustrious leader in the world of eugenics (Bailey 2019; Davis 2004).

It is important to understand the historical background of this phenomena as we move forward in this field. While Ellen G. White's health sanitariums may seem to be far removed from modern American life, the health and wellness industry is still booming today. A 2021 study by Statista estimates that its worldwide market size is over 4.4 trillion US dollars and is projected to surpass six trillion by 2025 (Gough 2022). No industry is exempt from criticism, of course, and my goal in this paper is to further examine how lifestyle books written by Christian women approach this culture of wellness, thinness, and traditional feminine beauty standards.

Christian fundamentalism has garnered a great deal of scholarly attention in the past. Its connection to health, however, stands out to me as a glaring gap in the existing literature.

Self-help literature has long been a subject of scrutiny as well, particularly concerning its portrayal of women and its focus on individual solutions rather than addressing systemic issues. Critics argue that self-help books often place blame on women for their own discontent, assuming that any problem they face can be solved through personal behavioral changes (Ebben 1993; Grodin 1995). One aspect closely tied to self-help rhetoric is the influence of religious discourses. These narratives often mirror religious narratives of sin and redemption, placing the onus on individuals for their perceived lack of self-control. This depoliticizes women's discontent and reinforces patriarchal structures, while also encouraging the adoption of masculine models of growth and implying that femininity itself is unhealthy. By indirectly blaming women's liberation movements, self-help literature can perpetuate traditional gender norms and maintain existing power structures (Ebben 1993).

Traditional beauty standards, deeply rooted in colonialism and influenced by media representation and advertising, play a significant role in women's perceptions of themselves and their self-esteem. Adherence to these standards is often associated with moral righteousness, while nonconformity leads to feelings of disgust and aversion. Western beauty ideals, primarily featuring thin, white, and conventionally attractive bodies, are promoted through media and advertising, shaping individuals' perceptions of beauty and desirability. The intersection between traditional beauty standards and the wellness industry becomes apparent when health-promoting behaviors are marketed as tools for achieving conventional attractiveness. The health and wellness industry, encompassing various sectors, places a significant emphasis on maintaining

hegemonic beauty standards. However, this focus often excludes women of color and promotes the notion that health is synonymous with conformity to these standards.

The discourse surrounding women's health tends to prioritize body size over biological health, perpetuating anti-fat biases and moralizing body weight (Pausé 2017). Weight is often viewed as a choice and a reflection of an individual's self-control, leading to stigmatization and discrimination against those with non-normative bodies. Such moral language reinforces societal expectations, while systemic factors influencing health disparities are overlooked (Gailey 2022). The moralization of health is deeply connected to Judeo-Christian moral hierarchies, which associate asceticism with moral virtue. The obesity epidemic is framed as a moral failing, and individuals are blamed for their weight, further stigmatizing non-normative bodies. Advertising and media representations capitalize on this moral association, commodifying women's bodies and reinforcing the idea that there is a singular correct way to live and care for oneself (Hoverd and Sibley 2007).

Overall, this study aims to critically examine the interconnectedness of self-help literature, hegemonic femininity, Christian morality, and how these influence the way these authors depict health and wellness. For the purpose of this thesis specifically, I have set out to explore how Christian women depict the relationship between health, beauty, and religion. I have done this by analyzing fifteen popular books written by Christian influencers. This qualitative analysis focuses on the largely overlooked interaction between Christian rhetoric and its depiction of what it means to be healthy, beautiful, and moral.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions I have used to guide this study are as follows:

1. What are the patterns in these books' descriptions of health, beauty, and wellness?

2. Is the advice accessible to most women?
3. What is the stated reason for seeking out health-promoting behaviors? Is it for aesthetics, biological health, some combination of the two, or other reasons?

Are there any direct or indirect connections being made between health and sin?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### SELF-HELP LITERATURE

Lifestyle and self-help books, frequently written specifically for women, have been heavily criticized by feminist scholars for many years. While it may prove fulfilling to some readers, the self-help genre generally presents individual solutions to systemic problems and purposefully distances itself from any political convictions (Ebben 1995). One of the most common criticisms among researchers of women's self-help and lifestyle books is that due to this focus on individual solutions, a great deal of blame is placed on women for their own discontent. Because of this, authors will often address their audience with the assumption that readers are operating on an equal playing field in which any problem they face is their own doing and can be solved through a simple change in their behavior (Ebben 1995; Grodin 1995; Lanier and Fine 2018). There are also benefits to this type of literature, however. Grodin (1995) explains that readers are able to retain agency and construct meaning in the way that they see fit. To operate under the assumption that women simply interact with self-help literature by blindly following its most harmful advice overlooks the reader's ability to critically interact with the text. Many women in Grodin's study found their experiences with self-help to be highly empowering, though a number of them also echoed these same concerns about pathologizing systemic issues.

Ebben (1995) clearly outlines the connection between self-help rhetoric and religious discourses. Using self-help for addiction as an example, Ebben explains that these narratives reproduce the biblical story of original sin. She demonstrates that self-help texts typically follow a pattern which reprimands the reader for a loss of self-control and giving in to gluttony and sloth while expecting the reader to reach a rock bottom from which they are seeking repentance. Sometimes this is explicitly religious in nature, while other texts follow a similar pattern without

alluding directly to religious practices (Ebben 1995). This practice, Ebben argues, works to depoliticize the discontent of women and reinforce patriarchal structures rather than acknowledging or challenging them. Grodin (1995) adds that this model of independence encourages women to adopt masculine models of growth, and in so doing implies that femininity is inherently unhealthy. Utilizing “backlash” indirectly places blame on women’s liberation movements for any problems being faced by women (Grodin 1995:124). These self-help texts are thought to capitalize on the bashing of women rather than challenging it. Lanier and Fine (2018) reinforce these ideas in their analysis of modern women’s career advice. In this advice, women are expected to conform to hegemonic systems in order to get ahead, rather than subverting or challenging these systems.

#### HEGEMONIC FEMININITY

In her seminal work *The Cult of True Womanhood*, Welter (1966) outlines the virtues which have historically defined what it means to be a “true woman.” Women’s strength has traditionally been constructed through their piety, asceticism, and purity. Any deviation from these values was viewed as, in some cases, a fate worse than death (Welter 1966). These traditional values, while being challenged by many aspects of modern life, are still upheld by many women. The four major aspects of “true womanhood” which came about in the nineteenth century, according to Welter, are religiosity, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. This value system places women as a central part of family life, and while it may seem outdated today, we can still see the ramifications of these standards being echoed in modern hegemonic femininity. Schippers (2007) was the first to use the term hegemonic femininity as a complementary framework to hegemonic masculinity, describing it as “consisting of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to

hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” This type of femininity serves to reinforce existing power structures and gender hegemony as a whole. Desire for the feminine object is symbolically constructed, and any non-normative expressions of femininity are classified as deviant and undesirable in order to maintain this hegemony (Schippers 2007). Both men and women who fit into traditional gender norms, then, have a vested interest in maintaining them in ways that maintain their positions of conformity and the safety which comes from this conformity. Schippers also offers the concept of *pariah femininities*, which includes any expressions of femininity which contaminate or disrupt traditional archetypes of masculinity and femininity. Behaviors such as physical violence, noncompliance, and homosexuality are cited by Schippers (2007) as types of pariah femininity. Hegemonic femininity is also maintained by upkeeping health-promoting behaviors and partaking in the wellness industry, which will be the focus of this discussion. Women with deviant body types or who do not maintain their image according to hegemonic beauty standards are perceived as possessing pariah femininity.

## TRADITIONAL BEAUTY STANDARDS

The standards of beauty that women compare themselves to are deeply rooted in colonialism which positions whiteness as the highest degree of conventional beauty. This is so deeply ingrained in our culture that there is still a booming multinational industry for skin-lightening products (Mady et al. 2023). Adherence to traditional beauty standards has consistently been found to be associated with moral righteousness, which is commonly referred to as the beauty-is-good stereotype. This has been observed not only as a social phenomenon but as a measurable response in neural processing. Studies conducted by neuroscientists such as Tsukiura (2011) and Lan et al. (2021) have demonstrated that the brain’s response to things that

an individual perceives as attractive or morally good will activate the part of their brain associated with reward and pleasure, while viewing unattractive faces activated the part of their brain associated with disgust and aversion. This provides evidence that our brains are wired to perceive physical attractiveness as a positive trait and unattractiveness as a negative trait.

The characteristics that our brains ascribe to beauty and goodness are shaped through Western beauty standards which have been created and upheld through a variety of social, cultural, and economic factors. Two of the major factors that have contributed to the development and perpetuation of Western beauty standards are media representation and advertising. Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006) describe how media representations of beauty tend towards homogeneity, featuring a limited range of body types, skin tones, and facial features. These representations can have a significant impact on individuals' self-esteem and body image, particularly for women who are bombarded with images of thin, white, and conventionally attractive bodies. Advertising often reinforces and amplifies media representations of beauty, using idealized images of thin, white, and conventionally attractive models to sell products (Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2002). This can have a powerful impact on consumers' perceptions of beauty and can reinforce the idea that certain types of bodies and features are more desirable than others.

The intersection between these beauty standards and the rhetoric surrounding health and wellness appears when health-promoting behaviors are used to bolster an individual's conventional attractiveness. The health and wellness industry spans a number of sectors including physical fitness, food and nutrition, retreats and spas, and even wellness tourism. These sectors coalesce to form a multi-trillion-dollar industry which is steadily growing (Gough 2022). On its face, this appears relatively harmless. These companies often assert that their

intention is only to help customers improve their lifestyle habits and overall wellbeing, but upon closer inspection, there is much more at play here. Yoga advertisements, for example, were found by Strings, Headen, and Spencer (2019) to focus their marketing increasingly on wealthy white women, even though the practice of yoga stems from the Indus Valley. People of color are forced out of the center as this marketing continues to hinge on women's performance of beauty and femininity. Yoga is marketed today largely as a tool for women to enforce control over their bodies and in the hopes of remaining slim in accordance with traditional beauty standards (Strings et al. 2019). Thin, white, and upper-class women are centered in advertising and marketing, as well as being the basis for which we often define health.

The discourse around women's health is often focused primarily on body size rather than biological health. Leaders in the study of anti-fat bias including Pausé (2017) and Gailey (2022) describe how discourse surrounding the "obesity epidemic" is materially harmful to those existing in non-normative body types. Much of this discourse treats fatness as a moral failure and an inability to perform self-control (Pausé 2017). While entirely fallacious, the belief that weight is a choice which can be controlled by the individual leads to the reinforcement of these attitudes. There are, like most issues, many systemic factors at play here. Gailey (2022) explains that fat women earn less money for the same work at the aggregate level than thin women and are less likely to be promoted than their counterparts who are thinner than them. It stands to reason, then, that women would internalize the fear of becoming fat due to the real and measurable ways that it can negatively impact their livelihood (Gailey 2022). There has been a recent shift in some circles to a "health at every size" framework, which Rodney (2018) chronicles as a movement from a restrictive and pathogenic way of viewing food. The health at every size movement instead considers food to be salutogenic and life-giving, but still often

centers thin women and can lack any meaningful critique of the moralization of health (Rodney 2018).

Health and wellness influencers such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Angela Liddon, and Ella Mills are able to capitalize on these beauty standards by promoting products which promise to help others gain the status provided by traditional beauty and health. Paltrow promotes products which promise the consumer “beauty, glow, and mighty cosmic flow” (Conor 2021). These benefits are intangible and immeasurable, promising social capital to the user. Ella Mills, who is described by O’Neill (2021) as a wellness entrepreneur, operates a similar brand titled *Deliciously Ella*. Her advertising is very similar to Paltrow’s - the promise of Mills’ health and wellness advice is that the user will “glow from the inside out.” Our dominant understanding of health and wellness is that it is a moral responsibility, and that healthy eating will largely prevent any physical or spiritual ailments. Mills portrays herself as simultaneously existing as a perfect feminine archetype while maintaining an image of relatability and accessibility so that other women will believe that they can easily gain these benefits as well (O’Neill 2021). The beauty and weight loss industries occupy a market share which is in the trillions and still steadily growing; because of the wealth and success these influencers have found, there is little motivation for them to change the way that they market these issues (Gough 2022).

#### HEALTH, MORALITY, AND SIN

The value placed on asceticism by Judeo-Christian moral hierarchies is largely at the root of how we culturally view health and thinness as moral achievements (Griffith 2001; Pausé 2017). The obesity epidemic continually places blame on individuals for their weight by characterizing it as both a social problem and a pathological one (Gailey 2022). The moralization of one’s body is closely linked to the rhetoric of Christian morality, and this connection can be

seen very clearly in the British House of Commons' decision to use the words "gluttony" and "sloth" in explaining the factors which cause obesity (Hoverd and Sibley 2007). Spoel, Harris, and Henwood (2012) describe how morality is closely linked to self-control, diminution, and consistent, linear self-improvement. Individuals in this study reported feeling guilt and distress over instances in which they did not adhere to this idea of health.

Two of the seven sins, gluttony and sloth, are directly rooted in this type of self-regulation. Because the body is viewed as an expression of the inner self (Bourdieu 1986), health is perceived as something which is outwardly visible and often based on a person's appearance and weight (Pausé 2017). All of the factors we have previously discussed intersect here in a way which allows for the moralization of "unhealthy" bodies and practices. Bacon (2013) and Evans (2006) make this direct connection between sin and public perceptions of health. Because religion provides clear outlines for how morality should be judged, this moral language surrounding sin is often mobilized in anti-fat rhetoric. Bacon (2013) argues that this language is then used to enforce conformity over women's bodies. Evans (2006) analyzed anti-obesity policy which utilizes this moral language and in so doing stigmatizes deviant bodies, in one instance going as far as to label them "remorseless." Along with presenting thinly veiled disdain and disgust toward fat and disabled bodies, this type of language reinforces the belief that health is within the control of the individual and that they have a moral responsibility to enact such control.

The association between health and morality runs very deeply in our culture. Anti-fat bias and prejudice against those living in any non-normative body is a clear manifestation of this. Because weight is viewed as a choice, for example, it is easier for others to feel vindicated in targeting those who they perceive as lacking the self-control to maintain their body size. The

“obesity epidemic” has operated as a moral panic which draws deviant body types to the center of public discussion (Evans 2006). Morality is associated with childhood obesity, for example, and blame is heavily placed on mothers rather than the systemic issues that may be causing health disparities. Lower class women and women of color, of course, take the brunt of this blame (Mannion and Small 2019).

America’s culture of exceptionalism and individualism is also helping to give rise to anti-fat bias and ableism, and these ideas are constantly reinforced by corporations. The moral language surrounding health has permeated into advertising to create what has become disdainfully called the “weight loss industrial complex.” This advertising commodifies women’s bodies and reinforces the idea that there is a correct way to live and care for oneself. Women’s bodies are under constant surveillance, as are their eating habits, exercise, and self-care routines. It is in the direct interest of our capitalistic society to maintain the stigmatization of fatness and non-normative bodies as this market continues to expand (Gordon 2021). Being perceived as “unhealthy” is often associated with sin, slovenliness, and an inability to perform self-control. Since most Western religions value asceticism and restriction, this is viewed as inherently immoral (Bacon 2013; Evans 2006; Hoverd and Sibley 2007).

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

#### FOUCAULT, SURVEILLANCE, AND CONTROL

Michel Foucault asks in *Power/Knowledge*: “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (Foucault 1980). What gives strength to power, he argues, is that power has the ability to create pleasure and provide knowledge. If a power structure is only oppressive and cruel in nature, it will not be able to grow to the same extent as a structure which can also be enabling and productive. Power not only seeks to constrain and limit individual behavior, but also to create and shape it. These power structures can, and often are, reproduced in all types of social relationships and interactions. Foucault's idea of power as productive and positive challenges traditional notions of power as purely repressive and suggests that power operates through a variety of mechanisms and strategies that can be simultaneously repressive and constructive. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of power, this theoretical framework invites us to be more critical of power relations in society and to question how they operate to shape our lives and our world. The goal of this study, then, is not to say that Christian women are being oppressed in a way that only causes them pain and discomfort. Alternatively, it is important to examine the ways in which they might benefit from upholding existing hegemonies and power structures that may, on their face, seem like they are acting against their own best interest.

In Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979), he explains a conceptual prison called a panopticon. This prison is circular with a single watchtower at the center, so that every cell could be surveilled at any time, but the prisoners cannot see into the tower to know if they are being watched. The idea here is that constantly living under the threat of surveillance will cause the prisoners to act as if they are being watched at all times. This threat of surveillance created

“docile bodies,” which have become passive due to the constant self-discipline they have learned to impose on themselves. According to Foucault, docile bodies also begin to act as a blank canvas onto which cultural fears may be projected (1979). Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) expanded on Foucault’s ideas through a feminist lens by pointing out that *Discipline and Punish* is a useful framework for understanding the constant surveillance of women’s bodies. Today, fat and disabled bodies are used as an object to scare others into compliance, which forces women into self-imposed cycles of restriction and control. Because women’s bodies are viewed as objects for public scrutiny, dieting and the maintenance of one’s body acts as a set of self-imposed rules which create docile bodies (Bartky 1990).

Foucault was also interested in the ways that institutions cause us to view ourselves as subjects through technologies of subjection. Our identities are constructed through institutions which exert power over us and our bodies, and the body is a site at which social meaning can be inscribed (Foucault 1979; Bartky 1990). The focus that we place on seemingly objective levels of measurement such as calorie counts, BMI, and clothing sizes have allowed the stigmatization of weight to flourish (Pausé 2017). These measurements are ineradicable from the way that we view our health and body size because they act as technologies of subjection (Bartky 1990). Fat women’s bodies are treated as objects against which thin women often construct their behavior around a fear of becoming them. Women experience immense pressure to maintain their appearance of health and thinness in a way that men traditionally do not. Weight-based stigma is faced by women in education, employment, interpersonal relationships, healthcare, and many other facets of their lives (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012). Because of this, it stands to reason that women quickly learn to enforce restrictions upon themselves in an attempt to avoid facing this stigma themselves. The wellness industry, especially when marketed to women, largely preys on

this internalized fear of gaining weight or being perceived as unhealthy. These perceptions tie back to the moralization of health, as many individuals view health-related behavior as morally superior to those behaviors which are seen as unhealthy (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012; Gordon 2021).

For Christian women, then, not only are they faced with societal pressure and surveillance over their bodies and appearances, but they also must face God's surveillance. The biblical narrative that God's omnipotent and watchful eye is always present, though it is described as good and holy, introduces an additional form of constant surveillance here (Lyon 2014). This all-powerful and all-knowing surveillance adds yet another layer of complexity to the way Christian women experience their bodies and the expectation to maintain them. If secular women must already grapple with the many technologies of subjection that impact the way they view themselves and their bodies, then it is possible for Christian women to experience this in a different way because of their relationship with God's surveillance. While this is expressed in Christianity as a loving and relational experience (Lyon 2014), it is not unlikely that this could be subverted as yet another tool for subjection.

#### STIGMA AND THE PRESENTATION OF SELF

In *The Presentation of Self*, Erving Goffman explains the idea of dramaturgy. In short, this theory outlines the ways in which individuals are actors performing their roles on a social "stage" of sorts (1956). Actors perform situationally in different ways, and those with more power and privilege are often less restricted in the ways they are able to perform. At the end of this chapter, Goffman makes the statement that the public demands actors to play their parts convincingly, and that there are precautions set in place to prevent individuals from straying outside of their existing roles (1956). Thinness and traditional beauty can be viewed as a part of

the personal front which is expected of actors, and deviation from this could present a threat to the actor's front. Not only does deviation from these norms threaten the individual's performance, but it can threaten the larger patriarchal power structure which expects conformance from its actors (Goffman 1956). Goffman's argument that appearance and manner are expected to be consistent with one another has a very useful application in this study. Part of what it traditionally means to be perceived as feminine involves the social capital of performing health and beauty rituals. These influencers, who are being held up within their social circles as exemplary Christian women, are under increased pressure to present themselves in a way that is consistent with the expectations of traditional womanhood.

In his second book titled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, Goffman explores the idea of stigma and what it means to live with a stigmatized, or "spoiled," identity. He explicitly states that physical stigma, resulting from deviant or non-normative appearances or body types, is a common form of social stigma (Goffman 1963). While he is writing to understand what it is like to go through the world as a stigmatized individual, this concept can also be used to understand the ways in which individuals will go to great length to avoid experiencing stigma. Stigma can be a determinant of health when it is experienced to the extent that healthcare and social support are largely inaccessible (Pausé 2017). When existing in a stigmatized body – whether that is because of weight, perceived unattractiveness, or any other type of deviance – can be linked directly to social isolation and material harm, it makes sense that others would do everything in their power to avoid stigma. Weight is in a unique position here because fat is a type of stigma that anyone has the potential to gain later in life, while race, for example, is unchanging. Because of this potential, it logically follows that women in thin bodies who realize they could potentially lose this position of power are so eager to cling to it.

## CLASS AND DISTINCTION

Pierre Bourdieu's theories are heavily centered around class distinctions and the ways which class is distinguished based on the taste of different classes. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) makes the connection between the presentation of the body - particularly its thinness and physical ability - and its relation to class taste. The body is viewed as a reflection of a person's innermost nature, therefore any existence in a non-normative body is viewed as a distasteful social failure (Bourdieu 1984:192). Simply allowing the body to exist in its natural state, particularly for women who are expected to be constantly changing themselves based on beauty standards and trend cycles, is perceived as slovenly and largely unacceptable. Diet and exercise have entered what Bourdieu calls "the new morality for health," as restriction becomes an essential part of what it means to embody traditional femininity. Overconsumption is viewed as distasteful, as the bourgeois values whiteness and thinness at the center of their beauty standards (Bourdieu 1984:198).

In relation to women's bodies specifically, Bourdieu also argues that women who adhere to traditional bourgeois beauty standards receive double assurance for their bodies. This double assurance comes from the fact that beauty is viewed simultaneously as something the individual is naturally born with and has actively worked for through the adornment of their body (Bourdieu 1984:206). In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986) also outlines the difference between social, cultural, and economic capital. To Bourdieu, social capital is derived from a person's social status and allows that person to exert power over others, and this type of power is inextricably linked to class as well. With this definition of social capital, it is closely linked to the reproduction of existing power structures as the individual is able to benefit from doing so. Beauty and wellness standards are inherently contradictory in the way that they are expected to

come naturally, but the expectation is also placed on others to be able to maintain the same type of wellness. Beauty, health, and femininity exist in relation to their opposites. These standards are inherently unattainable to the general public; if everyone were able to meet them, they would no longer bring with them the same social capital that they bring today (Bourdieu 1986). Women use health and wellness not to critique or object to the standards of hegemonic femininity, but rather to closely adhere to them and enforce the same expectations onto others.

The body as a class symbol can be seen clearly in the way that body shape and size come in a series of unattainable trends, which are adhered to only by those who have the money and time to be constantly changing the makeup of their bodies. The trend cycle around plastic surgery, for example, is constantly speeding up; the Kardashian family is often looked to as the marker for what body type is “in” and what is “out.” Fat redistribution to give the individual an impossibly small waist and wide hips is colloquially known as a Brazilian Butt Lift, and while this type of surgery is very dangerous to perform, it has become very popular in recent years in order to follow in the Kardashian’s footsteps (Tijerina et al. 2019). As this type of procedure became more popular, of course, the family has had theirs reversed and brought thinner bodies back into style. When too many people are able to achieve a standard, the members of the bourgeois and petit bourgeois quickly move on to something else so that the standard may remain unattainable.

Another direct correlation we can see between class status and body size is the fact that fat women make significantly less than thin women at the aggregate level (Gailey 2022). Women who do not fit into this beauty standard are consistently overlooked for promotions at work, have lower rates of graduation and completion of their academic goals, and may even be unable to travel for work and education related events. Advancement for women in fat or disabled bodies

is limited, and this may be linked in part to the perception that allowing the body to exist in its natural state is viewed as slovenly and unkempt by the upper classes (Bourdieu 1984). Because weight is perceived as a personal choice which is in the control of the individual, those who choose not to or are unable to change their bodies are characterized as unable to perform any restriction or self-control in any facet of their lives, even though this is categorically untrue (Gailey 2022).

Swartz (1997) explains how Bourdieu's theory applies to the "political economy of culture," which assumes that culture is built around the need to create profit. The drive for profit creates a reward-oriented system which manufactures cultural preferences based on which will lead to the greatest economic benefit. This would explain why the health and wellness industry has become such a large and influential sector of today's economy. Women are convinced that they must constantly partake in health-promoting behaviors, not because of genuine concern for measurable health benefits, but because our culture is consistently reinforcing the idea that doing so is a moral imperative. Wellness culture promises intangible benefits, such as Gwyneth Paltrow promising that Goop products will make the consumer "glow from the inside out" (Conor 2021). This type of rhetoric is wildly profitable, so there is no motivation for wellness influencers to change their approach to health or marketing.

Because of this need to constantly increase profits, there will never be a motivation for the wellness industry to encourage women to allow their bodies to exist in their natural state. Femininity is necessarily built around the decoration and adornment of the body; Bourdieu argues that the body existing in its natural state is always viewed as a socially unacceptable way of straying away from bourgeois beauty standards (1984). Women are told constantly that in order to be sufficiently feminine, beautiful, or socially acceptable, that they must be thin. If they

are not already thin, the expectation placed on others is that they should be actively trying to become thin. Fatness is excusable only if the individual is reassuring the public that they are taking the necessary steps in order to change themselves (Gailey 2022). This is a direct reflection of the way Bourdieu conceptualizes the body, culture, and the economy. If women were to accept their bodies as they naturally are, the wellness industry would lose out on a multi-trillion dollar market (Gough 2022). Instead, this industry has a vested interest in reproducing existing social expectations.

Bourdieu's theoretical approach to the body as a symbol of class is a very important framework through which we can understand how and why thinness has come to be such a valuable ideal in Western culture. Women are expected to be healthy and thin, and those who are unable to or choose not to adhere to this ideal are associated with the moral failure of the lower class. The wellness industry has an economic interest in reinforcing these stereotypes because so much of their income relies on women who would do anything and spend any amount of money to avoid gaining weight. As cultural intermediaries, these influencers create and reproduce these standards which the masses are then expected to adhere to.

## IV. METHODS

### CONTENT ANALYSIS

Because my interest is in how these influencers depict health, wellness, and beauty, as well as the discourse that may surround these topics, I chose to approach this research as a content analysis. I believe that qualitative research is the best method for us to gain a deeper understanding of how these concepts inform or are informed by these women's religious beliefs. While some of these books spend more time on this than others, each of these texts takes a clear stand in the way they go about discussing these issues. Using an unobtrusive method is useful here because all of these entries were written by Christian women and marketed to other Christian women, so the depictions of these themes are created by and for women in this demographic without the obstruction of an outside observer. My interest is in analyzing how these messages are being portrayed and if there are any points of contention between different authors, or if they are relatively unified in their messaging.

Content analysis is useful here because, as outlined by Hesse-Biber (2016), is a useful way to closely examine content or pieces of media – lifestyle books, in this case – to understand them as relics of the culture that produced them and examine how certain themes are depicted by them. In this study, I am interested in depth of information rather than breadth or generalizability. Textual analysis gives us insight into the dominant ideologies depicted by prominent Christian authors over the past few years and will allow for examination of how the themes of health, wellness, and beauty are being discussed in the Christian zeitgeist.

### TEXT SELECTION

When selecting these texts, I have eliminated any books that were poorly reviewed or had received very few reviews at all. I have decided to do this because I am interested in examining

the most common themes that are being discussed within this subculture. I would like to establish a baseline of the most common talking points, whose voices are most often being centered, and whose voices are not being heard in these popular texts before examining any dissenting or deviant viewpoints.

In order to conduct this study, I have selected fifteen books authored by prominent Christian women. All of these works have at least 500 reviews posted and average 4.5/5 stars at minimum, meaning they have been largely well-received and have a relatively large reach within the audience they are marketing to. I wanted to ensure that these books are reaching their intended audience and have been generally accepted by that audience. As these are all lifestyle books marketed toward Christian women, these will be a useful tool for understanding how these themes are being depicted among this population and any common consensuses or notable disagreements between them. These books are listed in the appendix. After conducting a preparatory literature review, I have then fully immersed myself in the texts by reading all of the books in full and focused on the content related to beauty, health, or weight, and their experiences with those themes as Christian women.

## CODING PROCESS

After reading the books, I then reread them using an open coding method, followed by direct closed coding in order to tease out these themes and find the passages which best encapsulate them. This approach has been utilized by many before me; notably by Hesse-Biber (2016). My notetaking was initially focused on themes and general observations about things such as which Bible verses were being referenced and which chapters focused the most on health and morality in particular. I have continually checked and cross-checked my work while

searching for any data which might contradict the results I have found in order to ensure that my findings are not influenced by any personal biases.

After doing this initial coding, I have laid out five main themes within these texts: Eve and original sin, individual responsibility, creation in God's image, authenticity and relatability, and the fight between good and evil. My hard copies of these books are highlighted and color-coded in a system which I then transferred to Excel. In Excel, I separated the quotes I pulled from each author into these categories and ensured that they were color-coded and separable by author. Notably, many of these quotes could fit into multiple categories. I've placed them into the category that fits them the most explicitly, though there is unavoidable overlap in some of these themes. Then, the passages that most clearly demonstrate these themes for the purposes of this paper have been included in the results section. Many of these texts were very repetitive in their talking points, so for each statement included here, there are many more in my coding spreadsheet and highlighted within the physical copies of the text that echo the same rhetoric. I feel confident that I have reached saturation with this selection because many of these statements were repeated nearly verbatim across several of these books.

## V. FINDINGS

After conducting this extensive coding, five major themes have emerged: Eve and original sin, individual responsibility, creation in God's image, authenticity and relatability, and the fight between good and evil. The authors consistently connect the story of Eve in the book of Genesis to the perception of women, temptation, and sin. While some authors defend Eve's struggles with temptation, others openly vilify her. The books also emphasize individual solutions, urging readers to take personal responsibility for their actions and make immediate changes for self-improvement. The advice given often lacks accessibility and disregards systemic barriers, as Ebben (1995) and Grodin (1995) predicted. The authors also highlight the importance of self-control, both in terms of personal health and in influencing the behavior of others, particularly within the family.

The concept of being created in God's image is explored, with a focus on the responsibility to maintain physical health and appearance as a reflection of one's spirituality. Fasting is presented as a holy practice tied to asceticism and self-discipline. The books promote traditional beauty standards while condemning vanity. They also express opposition to nontraditional gender roles and exhibit transphobic and homophobic views. These texts actively reinforce Christian values and maintain traditional gender roles and beauty ideals while addressing women's health and spirituality.

The authors share personal experiences and anecdotes to provide advice to their readers, often using a conversational tone to connect with them. However, these authors lack an intersectional lens, failing to consider the accessibility of their advice for those in different socioeconomic positions. They also frame health and wellness as a moral battle against sin, often characterizing food as inherently evil. There is a complete lack of acknowledgement of the

capitalist structures which inform these expectations and directly benefit from their reinforcement. They consistently highlight the importance of prioritizing God over worldly concerns and warn against idolatry, be it in the form of food, appearance, or other distractions. They employ language related to war and slavery to emphasize the severity of these struggles, but this imagery may overlook the potential harm it can cause. Overall, while these authors share their personal journeys, their generalizations and limited perspectives can perpetuate harmful rhetoric and neglect the structural influences that impact individuals' health and well-being.

#### EVE AND ORIGINAL SIN

“After all, the very downfall of humanity happened around a circumstance where a woman was tempted with food,” states Terkeurst (2022:128). The connection between sin and the book of Genesis was made very clearly in all but one of these texts. Rachel Hollis was the only one who did not mention the story of Eve directly. Terkeurst puts this connection into words very concisely here, though this same sentiment was echoed throughout her work as well as the other texts utilized in this study. In Genesis, Adam and Eve exist in the garden of Eden without sin or shame until Satan appears to them as a serpent and tempts them to eat the forbidden fruit. Eve, upon giving in to this temptation, is instantly filled with shame. Canonically, this act is the source of all sin and human suffering as we understand it today in the Christian tradition. The central thesis of Sarah Jakes Roberts’ book is that she wishes to come to the defense of Eve because all women struggle with temptation: “The truth is there was no one to blame for the toxic pattern that infected my soul with fear, anxiety, and depression. I was very much complicit in the experiences that attempted to destroy my worth and value. Like Eve, I knowingly ate from a tree I knew would end in misery” (Roberts 2021:5). Roberts is critical of

the way Eve is perceived by the public. She does not, however, go as far as to criticize the broader rhetoric surrounding temptation and sin.

Terkeurst and Shamblin do not come to Eve's defense, and instead they openly vilify her for her decisions. On her decision to perform restrictive eating, Terkeurst states: "I'm not on a diet. I'm on a journey with Jesus to learn the fine art of self-discipline for the purpose of holiness" (2021:113). Ciuciu also echoes this sentiment towards the beginning of her book:

"We will turn to anything and everything besides God to fill that void inside of us.

Starting back in the garden of Eden, humans have been trying to be self-sufficient and autonomous but have failed miserably every time, because trying to mask our need for God with food is like trying to pound a nail in the wall with an orange; we'll only end up frustrated and hurt" (Ciuciu 2017:39).

Ciuciu also argues that "in fact, Satan spoke the first lie in the history of the universe, and wouldn't you know it – it centered on food" (2017:59). The connection between women eating and original sin is constantly being reinstated by these authors. Fitzpatrick utilizes similar rhetoric about original sin, plainly stating:

"Don't forget - your eyes are a powerful channel for temptation. Observe the way Eve was tempted in the Garden of Eden: 'When the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food ... she took from its fruit and ate'" (Fitzpatrick 2020:148).

She goes on to argue that marketing and popular media are showing the reader imagery of other women eating so that they will be tempted to do the same. Fitzpatrick invokes the tenth commandment – thou shalt not covet – and tells the reader that if they are to be swayed by fast food advertising, it is not because they are hungry or actually want the food, but because they have been influenced by Satanic forces to covet their neighbor.

Sandra Bartky's *Femininity and Domination* (1990) is highly applicable here as a theoretical framework. The very meaning of what it is to be a woman is rooted in the ability to practice self-control. Eve eating the forbidden fruit is a story which remains central to Christian ideology, as we have seen demonstrated across many of these texts. Approaching health from this foundation of restriction indicates that temptation is meant to be resisted and that there is an inherent moral implication to consumption. Bartky argues that dieting and exercise act as disciplinary practices to create what Foucault calls docile bodies. Both are regulations imposed upon the body in order to impose what she labels the "tyranny of slenderness" (Bartky 1990:66). What Bartky describes as tyranny, these authors present as moral righteousness. "Satan told Eve... Did God *really* say you cannot eat that food?" (Shamblin 2018:217). The association between temptation and restrictive eating is made very clearly here. Temptation is meant to be resisted, and overeating is characterized as a failure to resist this temptation, just as Eve failed to resist temptation when presented with the forbidden fruit.

Connolly's book, *Breaking Free of Body Shame*, offers a different perspective. She expresses frustration with her own experience in the church, which has been directly in line with the way the other authors discuss temptation and shame as it relates to health and the body. "I believe mainstream Christianity tends to be terrified of freedom in our bodies in general. ... Historically, the church has seen body freedom as sinful" (Connolly 2021:24). On the next page, however, she goes on to argue that members of the church already struggle with gluttony and overconsumption. Her argument is not that these things are not sinful, but rather that the church should love and accept those who struggle with these sins.

The fact that original sin is caused by a woman's decision to eat a "forbidden" fruit is necessary to consider when we are looking at the relationship between Christian morals, health,

and anti-fat bias. While the story of Genesis is not always the explicit source of this rhetoric, I believe we would be remiss in ignoring this connection altogether. References to Eve's choice in the garden of Eden are, as we have seen, used by most of these authors to vilify women for submitting to temptation. Even the authors such as Jakes, Maher, and Speer, who come to Eve's defense when describing the story, only go as far as to defend her because they believe that they, too, are susceptible to temptation. None of these texts took the time to ask whether these types of temptation should be more readily accepted or suggest that "overeating" may not actually be sinful. Goffman's "abominations of the body" describe anything which violates the ways in which we expect individuals to present themselves, and weight is so often conflated with a person's ability for self-control that it makes sense that these women would go to such lengths to distance themselves from what they view as outward displays of a lack of self-control (Goode 2015). The stigma that is faced by those in deviant bodies is so great that rather than challenging this stigma, they consistently reinforce it so that they may end up being perceived as "normals" (Goffman 1963).

#### INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

As Ebben (1995) and Grodin (1995) aptly predicted, all of these books are focused entirely on individual solutions. The texts follow a pattern of conclusions including advice about how the reader may start changing their behavior today so that their life will be improved instantly. For many of the more "body-positive" authors, such as Clark, Connolly, Roberts, Maher, and Speer, the intent of this advice is for the reader to detach themselves from worldly concerns such as their body size and how others perceive them, though they are still careful to recommend that the reader do so while adhering to their ideas of health as closely as possible. One of Alexander's suggestions for behavioral change is to "eat organic food as often as possible

... I was raised on it and know that I don't want to consume foods with preservatives and toxic chemicals" (2016:205). She consistently repeats that if the reader does not eat fresh, organic foods, their health will rapidly decline.

Alternatively, for the authors focused more explicitly on fasting and body size, their advice is explicitly about weight loss and health promoting behaviors. No matter which direction they decide to take with this advice, however, the message is the same: your problems are self-induced and can be overcome through hard work and self-discipline. "You have the ability to change your life ... There is no easy way out of this; no life hack. Just you and your God-given strength and how much you desire change" (Hollis 2018:210). The implication here is that to solve any of your problems, you simply need to want it badly enough. The authors of these works do offer sympathy for factors which may hold an individual back from taking their health advice, though that sympathy is only extended up to a point. Hollis even makes the argument throughout her book that a woman who cannot care for herself and her own body cannot be trusted and is suffering from a slew of character flaws:

*"I'll work out tomorrow became I'm not working out anytime soon - because honestly, if you really cared about the commitment, you'd do it when you said you would. What if you had a friend who constantly flaked on you? ... Every three Mondays she announced a new diet or goal and then two weeks later it just ended? ... Y'all would respect her?"* (Hollis 2018:12).

Terkeurst, Shamblin, Fitzpatrick, Ciuciu, and Epstein take this to the farthest extreme. These women state that viewing oneself as a victim is a trap which will keep you from reaching your full potential, and that simply changing your mindset and behavior will directly change the shape and size of your body. Terkeurst mentions the common adage that 3,500 calories is equivalent to

one pound of fat, stating that “this is as true for me as the next person” (2022:96). These texts do not cite actual nutrition or health research, of course, and this idea has actually continually been proven untrue by researchers. Weight gain and loss are much more complex than this, and exact calories are very difficult to track accurately in the first place; the 3,500-calorie rule is simply conjecture which was suggested by Max Wishnofsky in 1958 (Thomas et al. 2014).

There is a common thread among these books which comes from the conflation of physical weight and emotional weight. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to lose the extra weight you may be carrying around,” states Speake (2019:82), “whether the extra load comes from literal pounds or from pounds of pain.” Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective that the physical body is commonly viewed as an outward expression of a person’s inner character is reflected directly across these texts. Hatmaker makes this comparison when discussing her experience fasting and cutting down on her material belongings:

“This adventure was something like being morbidly obese and unable to schedule a life saving surgery until losing weight first. We had to shed and cull and purge before God can even remotely begin to deal with the serious issues” (Hatmaker 2020:325).

Epstein (2018:78) also outlines this idea of external weight being representative of internal struggles very clearly: “If you are honest with yourself, you know your eating addiction is an outward expression of your inward troubles.”

In *Her True Worth*, Maher and Speer take a more body-positive approach than many of the others, though they ultimately emphasize individuality in a similar way. They state that it is wrong to value the way others view you or your body more than you value God’s word and go on to tell the reader that God’s love will rescue you from insecurity surrounding your body “if you’ll let him” (2022:70). Jess Connolly reaches a similar conclusion in her final chapter titled

“Freedom Starts Today” (2021:199), outlining a series of recommendations to the reader so that they can alter their thinking and behavior in order to move past insecurity and shame. The lived experiences of fat and disabled women, however, are not only centered around these feelings. Activists in these areas are pushing for structural reform, not simply to feel beautiful or secure in their bodies. While these things are also important, the most significant barriers being faced are systemic in nature. Fat women are barred from many employment opportunities, access to inclusive healthcare, and even academic opportunities (Gailey 2022). These are not issues which can be solved by simply feeling confident in your own skin without any structural change along with it.

### *Control of the Self*

Within these discussions of individual responsibility, these authors tend to take two (often contradictory) stances. As a woman, it is your responsibility to exhibit self-control and take sole responsibility for your own actions. As a mother and therefore the matriarch of your family, however, you should be expected to control the actions of others as well. The discussion around self-control often overlaps with the need to care for yourself because you will be expected to care for others as well. The idea that is repeated across all of these texts is that as an exemplary Christian woman, one must be able to maintain her body and keep up appearances so that she may also serve those around her. In *Habits of a Godly Woman*, Meyer asks: “How can I truly love my husband if I never want to do anything for him?” (2020:96). The expectation to serve others, particularly one’s family, is reinforced consistently across these texts. Women are painted as poised, willing servants who ask for little to nothing in return because pleasing God is reward enough.

At the same time, however, women are depicted as being constantly on the verge of a complete loss of self-control. “Allowing ourselves to have whatever we want, in whatever quantity we want, whenever we want, it will lead to excess and the slavery of gluttony” (Fitzpatrick 2020:131). The sentiment here is that, if left unchecked, women will necessarily overconsume and fall victim to vanity and their hedonistic impulses. Ciuciu echoes this idea in this passage:

“It was as if another person inhabited my body for those five to ten minutes it would take me to wolf down a plate loaded with treats - a person who lacked self-control, long-term vision, and common sense. And glancing around the room at my friends, I knew I wasn’t the only one having this out-of-body experience. Many of them looked just as ashamed and disappointed as I felt” (Ciuciu 2017:23).

To describe eating dessert at a baby shower as a shameful and “out-of-body” experience is incredibly strong language for something that could be, to others, a rather ordinary occurrence. These texts consistently echo the idea that women are constantly fighting their own sybaritic, self-indulgent impulses, and that to give in to these impulses would be morally ruinous.

For Lori Alexander, this exhibition of self-control and physical health and appearance is taken one step further. She details the story of her mother being plagued by numerous health problems, only finding relief when she began eating exclusively whole, unprocessed foods. Both Alexander and her mother firmly believe that their eating habits are singlehandedly responsible for their health. Alexander explains that her only health problems have been due to physical injuries and believes that if she were not so set on eating fresh fruits and vegetables, she would be plagued by disease: “I shudder to think what my health would be like if I didn’t pay close attention to what I eat” (Alexander 2016:210). She gives a great deal of health advice which

places the locus of control entirely on the individual. When health problems cannot be explained by eating or exercise habits, Alexander offers this advice: “When we are unable to discover a cause for an illness or a chronic condition, focus on trusting the Lord with the situation. He tells us that all we have to do is ask Him for wisdom, and He will give it” (2016:211).

### *Control of Others*

For many of these authors, especially Alexander, Hollis, Shamblin, and Meyer, who focus heavily on their role within a family, this type of self-control is also expected to be enforced onto others. Hollis (2018) and Shamblin (2018) consistently bring up a woman’s role to feed her husband and children, and continually ask the reader whether they would willingly feed their family as poorly as they are presumably feeding themselves. Alexander (2016) tells a story of her only real consistent fight with her husband, which is over his habit of eating fast food. She believes that if he continues to eat this way, he will die prematurely because of it and worries that she will be forced to carry this burden as the only one in the family who knows the “truth” about the correct way to eat. Rather than explicitly suggesting that a woman should be in control of her family unit in this way, Meyer suggests the opposite. To her, a wife should “make them the focus, not yourself” (2020:141). She suggests that personal relationships can be saved by relinquishing control altogether. “I encourage you to swallow your pride and save your relationship. Stop being a martyr ... make them the focus, not yourself” (Meyer 2020:142). This approach to control in relationships is much different than that of these other authors, who expect that a woman should exert control in the areas of her home and her family relationships where a woman is traditionally expected to excel.

## CREATION IN GOD'S IMAGE

The creation of individuals in the image of God presented a divisive theme across all of these texts. Even within the same book, it was common for the same author to state in one chapter that it is a moral imperative to love yourself because you are God's creation, and then to argue in the next that it is your responsibility to do right by God in the form of making healthy decisions. "Does your Creator love you as you are? Yes! But he gave you a body with all of its strength as a gift. It is an offense to your soul to continue to treat yourself so badly," argues Rachel Hollis (2018:183). This theme is demonstrated repeatedly throughout her work, as she continues to argue that "unhealthy" choices are a direct affront to God. There is also an implication here that Hollis's own idea of what it means to be healthy is objective and generalizable, though in reality health often looks very different to different people and can vary greatly between cultures. "Let's not be so quick to escape to heaven that we treat our bodies like disposable paper bags," says Ciuciu, "because our physicality has repercussions on our spirituality and vice versa" (2017:191). Bringing Christian teaching into the way we view the responsibility to be healthy and maintain a socially acceptable body size adds a new layer of complexity. Not only is "unhealthy" behavior viewed as an individual moral failure, but it is also viewed as a direct failure of the responsibility given to us by God. While Gregory's book is written as a weight loss guide, she states: "God lovingly created you on purpose, and He is molding you into exactly who He wants you to be" (2015:66). The implication later being reinforced here, however, is that while you are molded intentionally by God, he did not intend for you to gain weight.

Though each goes about it in their own way, these authors present the idea that they are battling a constant competition to be the best Christian, or at least be perceived as such. In their

interpretations of their faith, existing as God's creation seems to bring with it a great deal of responsibility. The ideal Christian woman, according to Terkeurst and Shamblin, is one who has perfected self-control and asceticism. Because this body and this life are a gift from God, deviations from normative health, lifestyle, or appearance, are viewed as a rejection of this gift. Even Connolly, the most outwardly body-positive of these authors, states: "So shouldn't you take care of your body to honor God? Absolutely" (2021:165). While separating health and body size, there is still morality being attached to "healthy" behaviors here. These attitudes prevail across all of these works, and Bourdieu's theory of the body as a reflection of internal morality was continually reinforced across all of these readings. According to Bourdieu (1986), the body is also closely linked to class, which would suggest that the onus of responsibility may be greater upon these upper-class women because thinness is used as a clear symbol of their status. Structural constraints are ignored here, and the expectation is that any women, regardless of any external factors, will be able to follow their advice and achieve the same results they have.

### *Fasting as Holy*

The connection is often made between asceticism and the restriction of food intake with instances of fasting in the Bible.

"Remember that Jesus had fasted for days and was hungry when the devil suggested turning stones to bread, but He did not give in to Satan's schemes. Jesus promises that we can trust His Word for sustenance in times of trial" (Epstein 2018:53).

This passage again reinforces the idea that rather than turning to food for nourishment and comfort, those things should be received instead from the reader's relationship with God.

Hatmaker encourages the reader to cut down on not only food, but all earthly possessions in order to strengthen their spirituality by "exchanging the needs of the physical body for those of

the spirit” (2020:14). This sentiment alone, of course, is not intended to be harmful and is helpful to many who partake in spiritual fasting. In congruence with the way women are already expected to heavily restrict and shrink themselves, however, this type of thinking can slide into disordered eating relatively easily. Hatmaker goes on to say that “the Isaiah 58 fast is not about the mechanics of abstinence; it is a fast from self-obsession, greed, apathy, and elitism” (2020:91). Self-obsession and vanity are often referenced in these texts as sinful, to the extent that Maher and Speer even argue against self-care as a practice altogether (2022). Fasting is referenced as a practice that will allow the reader to put God first, rather than herself or her own looks.

### *Traditional Beauty and Gender Essentialism*

The main thesis of the Clark sisters’ *Girl Defined* is that womanhood is a God-given role which is inherently different from a man’s role. Women should be naturally beautiful, but not vain. They should keep their weight down and eat well, but also accept themselves the way God created them. They are expected to serve God and their families because that is what they were created to do, and any further ambitions are sinful because they draw their attention away from this purpose. Because women are created by God in this way, to care about physical beauty is painted as idolatry. The Clark sisters discuss their brief experiences in the modeling industry and argue that participating in this industry drove them to sin because it caused them to care about their outward appearances: “Beauty had become an idol in my life. My attention had shifted from being Christ-focused to being self-focused. ... As Proverbs 1 1:2 says, “when pride comes, then come disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom”” (2016:123). While denouncing modern beauty standards, the sisters also include long passages about how nontraditional gender roles are harmful to society. “The results of throwing out God-defined gender roles have been devastating

to our society. Men don't know how to be men anymore. Women don't know how to be women anymore" (Clark and Baird 2016:63). Their argument about beauty and body size is that it is naturally God-given, and to seek out any artificial changes goes against this creation. Notably, the authors of this book (and all of these books) are conventionally attractive and their photos on the book's sleeve depict them with highlighted hair, makeup, and self-tan.

Most of the other authors speak out against vanity as well. Fitzpatrick argues that "seeking after thinness merely for appearance's sake is not a godly goal. That's because it falls into the categories we've already been discussing - such as the pursuit of outward beauty (what the Bible calls vanity) and all of its attending futility" (2020:50). The subtitle of Fitzpatrick's book, however, is "Breaking the Bondage of Destructive Eating Habits." These authors are consistently toeing the line between the promotion of thinness, weight loss, and natural beauty, while reprimanding anything that resembles vanity. Gregory argues that "a well-nourished and adequately hydrated body takes on a healthy glow. This is the type of beauty planned by God" (2015:68). Because women are created by God, uniquely from men but in God's image, they are expected to exhibit natural, effortless beauty without actually expressing any concern for the way they look.

This idea that men and women's roles should be distinct and separate also led into a great deal of transphobia and homophobia in these texts, particularly in *Girl Defined* and *Eve in Exile*. Merkle states that "when women reject their duty of submission, the glory fades. This is why the cultural fruit of feminism is as intentionally ugly and barren as lesbianism" (2016:11). Clark and Baird argue that "society is subtly promoting the idea that gender doesn't matter. ... Instead of promoting our beautiful and unique design as women, we're told it's really not that special" (2016:63). These authors continually use the existence of queer people and the advancement of

their rights as an example of how they believe women's roles and beauty standards have been corrupted in modern society. Goffman's dramaturgy is applicable here because all of these authors are clinging tightly to the roles that they feel they are expected to play, even when those roles seem to contradict each other. They express disdain and even fear towards queer people and women who are single, sexually active, or represent some other form of "counterfeit femininity" (Clark and Baird 2016:48). These authors seem to be speaking out against this type of "other" as a way to solidify their own identities as Christian women. Health and natural beauty are used as indicators as their superior character here as a type of subcultural boundary maintenance.

#### AUTHENTICITY AND RELIABILITY

Individual experiences are generalized into universal advice in different ways by each of these authors. They tell personal anecdotes about how they have "overcome" their struggles with insecurity, unhealthy eating, and exercise. They write in a style that is intended to make the reader feel like they are being spoken to as a close friend. Many sentences start with "girl," "sister," or "friend." Even the title of Hollis's book - *Girl, Wash Your Face* - utilizes this tone. Both Shamblin and Connolly include personal stories from friends after each chapter of their books. By including the accounts of others with similar stories, they are able to reinforce the idea that this advice should be applicable to everyone. Shamblin includes "success stories" here of women and families who have lost weight by following her advice. Terkeurst (2022) makes an attempt to appear relatable by stating that she was 167 pounds at her heaviest, while Hollis discusses how wildly out of place she felt when moving to Los Angeles as a size ten (2018:179). They tell these stories in a tone which implies that they are letting the reader in on a dirty secret - that they *used* to be a few pounds heavier, but they have since overcome this. Before outlining

how she restricted herself to eating only seven foods, Hatmaker says that if she can do it, anyone can: “Some people eat to live, but I live to eat” (2020:25).

When discussing how she took up running marathons, Rachel Hollis takes this approach by delineating all of the times she tried to start exercising and eventually gave up. In her description of the first half-marathon she completed, she says this: “And for once I didn’t beg off or get lazy or stop trying... I did it!” (Hollis 2018:209). In their lifetimes, most people will never run marathons or earn a multi-million dollar net worth like Rachel Hollis. To imply that the exception should be treated as the rule overlooks the structural influences and individual differences which make these goals out of reach for many - if not most - readers. It is important to consider whose voices are being centered here. Health looks different for everyone, and the voices at the center of this discussion are notably those of thin, wealthy women, and all except Sarah Jakes Roberts are white. None of these women were even considered plus sized at their heaviest, and all of them are relatively wealthy and conventionally attractive. The plight of someone who feels that they have fifteen pounds to lose is very different from the experience of someone who has been disabled or classified as “morbidly obese” for their entire life. For these authors to generalize their experiences as universal can be materially harmful rhetoric. Anti-obesity policy is informed directly by the idea that weight is completely within the control of the individual (Bacon 2013; Evans 2006; Gailey 2022; Hoverd and Sibley 2007; Pausé 2017). Generalizing the anecdotes of wealthy, straight-sized women into universal advice works to reinforce this idea.

All of these authors are deeply lacking in an intersectional lens when it comes to the accessibility of their advice. Lori Alexander, for example, offers this advice for those who cannot afford to buy organic produce in the grocery store:

“Another great idea, if you have the space, is raising your own chickens and cultivating a backyard garden. Producing your own food is a wonderful project to be involved in for your family” (Alexander 2016:206).

This suggestion, of course, is profoundly out of touch with the lived experiences of those in poverty. Rather than being understanding of the fact that not everyone has the money or time to prepare organic whole food meals three times a day, Alexander says that she “would much rather eat fruits, vegetables, and meat just the way God created them than consume foods filled with toxic chemicals not fit for the human body” (2016:206). All of these texts suggest in some way that the things that are accessible to the author must be accessible to anyone who would want to follow their advice, with little to no acknowledgement of outside factors that would make this difficult or even impossible.

#### THE FIGHT BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

“Good health and long life are obviously connected to righteous living, and illnesses are clearly connected with sin” (Shamblin 2018:150). Bourdieu’s argument that the body is viewed as a reflection of a person’s internal morality could not be put into words more plainly than this. The belief that Satan is presenting the reader with temptation as an act of evil and defiance against God is central to many of these texts. Whether it is watching too much television, eating fast food instead of cooking at home, or, paradoxically, caring too much about your appearance, anything which takes your attention away from God is characterized as a trick presented by the devil. “Food is an enemy, a thief, a parasitic leech slowly sucking the life out of you. First, it robs you of your spiritual relationship with God. ... It robs you of your time, your mind. ... So food is not a friend. It is a false comfort, it is a false help, it is a false god” (Shamblin 2018:103). The entirety of this passage goes on for much longer than I will include here; Shamblin goes into

great depth about all the ways that food is a false god presented by Satan himself. To characterize food - which is, in reality, life-giving rather than life-destroying - as inherently evil is very dangerous language. At the beginning of her book, Terkeurst asks bluntly: “Is it possible we rely on food more than we love and rely on God?” She goes on to state that “God never intended for us to want anything more than Him” (2022:10), and even makes the argument that having an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia is also morally wrong because it still emphasizes the importance of food over all else.

This moral fight, in which these authors heavily utilize comparisons to war and slavery in order to reinforce this point, is depicted as an inalienable truth. They build on the story of Eve and temptation by disparaging any behaviors which might bring the reader to focus on any worldly thoughts or objects more than they are focused on God. Most of these authors state explicitly that the most dangerous temptations are overindulgence, slovenliness, and too much focus on food. Shamblin clearly outlines that her goal is for the reader to lose their passion for food so that they may focus that passion on God and their spiritual practices (2018). Gluttony, sloth, and greed are mentioned again and again as sins which must be overcome in order to grow closer to God and turn away from temptation presented by the devil. The “enemy” is mentioned again and again across all of these texts, most often in relation to what they believe to be sinful temptations.

Maher and Speer also reinforce the idea that concern with anything other than God is sinful, albeit in a different way. They call weight a “worldly tool we tend to use to measure our worth” (2022:28) and explain that this measure of worth has become an idol in many women’s lives. This is presented as a lie fed to us by Satan in an attempt to divert attention away from religious practices. Connolly has a similar approach, arguing that Satan is campaigning against

women's self-worth so that they will be caught up in earthly measures such as weight and appearance, and that these measures keep them from realizing their full potential in their relationships with God (2021). Roberts echoes this idea by making the argument that stress, low self-esteem, and struggles with work ethic are "waging war against your ability to produce" (2021:63).

### *Idolatry and Straying from God*

The word "idolatry" is used by Maher, Speer, Connolly, Jakes, and Clark to describe these measures of worth, while Terkeurst, Shamblin, Fitzpatrick, Ciuciu, Epstein, Gregory, and Speake call overconsumption of food the true idolatry instead. Hollis continually states that God wishes for the reader to be healthy, rather than thin, but then goes on to reinforce the same ideas that overeating and lethargy will eventually draw the reader away from God. Regardless of whether the stronghold is food, indolence, or low self-esteem, the message that these strongholds are being presented by Satan in order to disrupt your relationship with God is consistent among all of these books. There is a consistent vilification of women and the things that might consume their thoughts and influence their actions without any real critique of the social and political structures which cause those things to be so important to women. Ciuciu states this quite plainly, claiming that "at its core, food fixation is an issue of idolatry, just like any other addiction, because it doesn't just affect our health, our relationships, and our lives, but it hinders our relationship with God" (2017:31). Alternatively, Clark and Beale focus more on vanity and attempts to live up to modern beauty standards as the most common idol worshipped by young girls.

## *References to Slavery and Bondage*

There is an interesting use of language that I found repeatedly across all of these books. When discussing the strongholds of vanity or overconsumption, these women almost always describe experience as slavery. Maher and Speer sum this up very clearly in their argument that “spiritual chains keep us in bondage, enslaved to whatever is holding us prisoner” (2022:130). Speake states that “sugar has become the master and you have become the slave” (2019:184). Fitzpatrick echoes a similar sentiment, stating: “Eating habits become sinful when the habitual practice of them places us in bondage again - a bondage to sin from which Christ died to free us” (Fitzpatrick 2020:124). Ciuciu directly relates this to Satan, believing that “he was using my cravings to keep me chained to the desires of my flesh so I wouldn’t let Spirit take complete control of me” (Ciuciu 2017:24). Merkle argues that feminism has caused women to be enslaved to their vanity and sexual relationships, crassly stating that women’s magazines teach them to please men “the way a slave would” (2016:117). Not only is this language horribly misplaced, but it also shows just how far these women are willing to go to drive their point home.

This imagery came up again and again when reading these books. To compare eating dessert to slavery demonstrates just how heavily they feel these strongholds are impacting them, and clearly how little they are considering the ways that their words could come across or negatively impact their readers. This is not to say that they aren’t experiencing these issues as strongly as they say they are, however. The strict boundaries placed on Christian women and the ways they are expected to perform this role could lead them to feel this strongly. They write in a way that conveys deep anxiety about the enemy leading them towards temptation - which could, to them, lead their inner world to crumble as they have come to understand it.

## VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As we have seen throughout these texts, there seems to be discourse between these authors and the way they choose to connect health, weight, and beauty to morality and righteousness. The story of Genesis is strategically used to reinforce the idea that women must participate in strict asceticism and self-discipline, and the authors continually make appeals to authenticity to suggest that because they are able to do this with relative ease, everyone else should be expected to do the same. If there is one conclusive thesis that can be found across all of these works, it is the reader's moral imperative to serve God by resisting temptation, and the idea that Satan is waiting in hopes that they will fail to do so. To be the best servant of God, however, fits conveniently in line very well within today's social expectations. As Bourdieu and Foucault's theoretical frameworks have predicted, being morally good is closely aligned with one's ability to be a productive member of a capitalist structure by valuing hard work and denial of immediate gratification. Previous research in this area has garnered similar findings, though a good deal of this research is becoming out of date as social trends quickly change and the body positivity movement continues to gain prominence.

Goffman's work has also proven very relevant in these texts, as we have seen a great deal of boundary maintenance being done within these social groups by women who are doing everything in their power to perform the social role that is expected of them. While there is no explicitly stated recognition of the stigma that comes with living in a non-normative body, these women clearly express fear of becoming overweight, disabled, or conventionally unattractive. Regarding the connection between Eve and original sin, the authors examined in this study consistently reinforce the idea that Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden is the source of all sin and human suffering. They often vilify Eve for her actions and use her

story to criticize women for submitting to temptation. Even authors who defend Eve, such as Roberts and Merkle, only do so because they believe that all women are susceptible to temptation and should be forgiven for this. The association between women eating and original sin is repeatedly made throughout these texts, perpetuating the notion that temptation should be resisted and overeating is seen as a failure to resist temptation.

The continual emphasis on individual responsibility and control when it comes to health and body image cannot be overstated here. The authors of these texts predominantly advocate for personal transformation through self-discipline and self-control. They present weight loss and health promotion as individual endeavors that can be achieved through hard work and determination. The underlying message is that the reader's problems are self-induced and can be overcome if they truly desire change and have a strong enough relationship with God. Any struggles with weight or, alternatively, with vanity and caring too much about appearances, are depicted as sinful. Women who suffer with their health or their relationship with their appearance are thought to be susceptible to deceitful tricks presented by Satan.

These highly individualistic approaches overlook the systemic barriers faced by fat and disabled individuals, such as discrimination in employment, healthcare, and academia (Gailey 2022; Pausé 2017). Structural reforms are necessary to address these issues, but these issues are not acknowledged at all in the texts examined. Jen Hatmaker was the only author to acknowledge her position of privilege, and she only did so briefly and as a setup for her narrative about how thrilling she found it to “live like the poor” as a sort of emotional and physical fast (Hatmaker 2020). These texts are so deeply lacking in an intersectional understanding of these issues that the most common way that food and other “earthly pleasures” were discussed was in metaphors relating to slavery.

These authors also have a tendency conflate physical weight with emotional weight, suggesting that one's outward appearance reflects their inner character. This perspective aligns with Bourdieu's notion that the physical body is viewed as an expression of a person's worth. They repeatedly argue that controlling one's physical appearance is essential to serving others, particularly within the family. Women are expected to exhibit self-control not only in their own actions but also in managing the actions of others. The woman's place in the family unit is depicted as simultaneously submissive and focused on servitude, while they are also expected to be the manager and the voice of reason in the family. This contradictory expectation places a heavy burden on women to simultaneously prioritize self-care and care for others, while being expected to balance all of these things effortlessly.

Notably, the focus on individual responsibility continually overshadows the need for structural change in every aspect of these texts. While some authors touch on body positivity and self-acceptance, the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups are not adequately addressed. The lived experiences of fat and disabled individuals are shaped by structural discrimination and require more than just individual mindset changes to achieve equality. These books rely heavily on personal anecdotes and individual experiences to provide universal advice and are written in a way that conveys genuine belief that anyone reading will have access to the same resources that they have. These authors use a conversational tone and often address the reader as a close friend, fostering a sense of relatability. Their experiences and perspectives are obviously limited, however, as they predominantly represent thin, wealthy, and conventionally attractive women. To generalize these experiences as universal advice can be harmful, as it overlooks the diverse realities and struggles faced by individuals who do not fit into these narrow categories.

Regarding the fight between good and evil, the authors of these books frame health and body image issues as moral battles. There are many references to a literal embodiment of Satan who is actively using food, advertising, and even modern women's liberation movements to tempt Christian women into straying from their relationship with God. While being gaining weight is depicted as morally corrupt, so is outwardly caring about your weight too much. Shamblin (2018) includes a chapter about eating disorders and outlines the ways that she thinks disordered eating distances the individual from their spirituality, despite the fact that her suggestions throughout the rest of the book often reflect disordered eating patterns. This perspective is dangerous to relay to readers, particularly young women, as it labels food as inherently evil and creates a moral hierarchy where worldly thoughts or objects are portrayed as distractions from religious devotion.

Overall, the relationship between health and morality has been thoroughly reinforced in the way they are depicted by the authors I have studied here. The messages being portrayed are important not only because of whose voices are being centered, but also because of the voices that are being left out of this discourse. The "obesity epidemic" and the use of fat bodies as folk devils at the center of this moral panic has directly harmed those living in non-normative bodies, and it is important to consider how this rhetoric may contribute to or perpetuate this harm. To focus solely on individual responsibility, as most lifestyle books often do, is to overlook the larger social structures which have brought us to this point. The advice being presented here is notably similar to secular self-help advice, despite the anecdotes and justifications being highly religious in nature. Traditional self-help texts are also highly individualized, depoliticized, and can reinforce class distinctions and gender norms in a similar way (Ebben 1995; Grodin 1995).

These findings have revealed that there seems to be some tension between different schools of thought when it comes to this relationship between health, vanity, and sinfulness. Most of these texts were quick to shame readers who may struggle with weight and health behaviors, while a few others attempted to approach this issue through a more positive lens, still falling short in terms of intersectionality and recognizing their privileged positions. The authors also discussed their relationships with their bodies in gender-essentialist terms, many expressing fears over how queer people and nontraditional families may threaten their social positions and understandings of themselves. These disagreements between different authors have shown an area which is deserving of more research moving forward.

On a structural scale, it is unsurprising that these authors would be so quick to reinforce these traditional standards of health and beauty. The wellness industry is worth trillions and continues to grow rapidly. Every one of these authors has been able to capitalize on this by repackaging the same teachings. Even the few who have challenged these traditional norms have been able to profit from these debates and the popularity of diet and wellness books. This type of rhetoric serves to benefit existing power structures and entirely depoliticize women's issues. These books are unique, however, because while they repeat traditional secular wellness advice, they are backing it with divine sanction. The moralization of health and the maintenance of women's bodies is greatly increased by the fact that it is justified not only socially or "scientifically" but because God has ordered it. Readers who do not or cannot follow their advice are then framed as morally corrupt or deficient in some way. The individualization of systemic problems, while highly marketable in this type of book, serves to benefit hegemonic structures while reinforcing guilt and shame onto individual readers searching for actionable help and advice.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research is, of course, not without limitations. I want to acknowledge that different readers may interpret these texts differently, and that this type of research can lead individuals into different conclusions and interpretations. I have continually checked and cross-checked this work and the themes I have outlined here, however, and I believe that anyone who were to repeat this study would find nearly identical results. Because this is a selection of only fifteen books, they may not represent the entirety of this type of self-help literature. In the future, more books within this subgenre should be analyzed to look for any contrasting viewpoints and make for a more nuanced and overall balanced analysis of this subject. This paper focuses primarily on the experiences and perspectives of female authors and their targeted female audience. While this is a deliberate choice to examine the representation and impact on a specific demographic, it limits the generalizability of the analysis to a broader population. Future research could explore the self-help genre from diverse cultural, gender, and identity perspectives to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

While content analysis is a valuable starting point, and the most useful type of analysis to study these books, future research could branch out into different types of analysis in order to explore if and how these themes appear. Now that we have this preliminary data, it could be used to guide in-depth interviews of Christian women and allow them to speak directly about their experiences with their bodies and how this relates to their religious affiliation. Quantitative analysis could also be used to gauge attitudes and perceptions towards this type of rhetoric and might offer insight into a larger and more generalizable sample. Overall, this research has offered a new and unique insight into a connection between Christian women's experiences with religion

and the way they view their own bodies, as well as the bodies of others, which will be a useful outline for guiding future research in this area.

## APPENDIX

| <b>Author</b>                         | <b>Title</b>   | <b>Year</b> | <b>Publisher</b>            |
|---------------------------------------|--|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Lori Alexander                        | The Transformed Wife   | 2016        | Turning Page Books          |
| Kristen Clark and<br>Bethany Baird    | Girl Defined: God’s Radical<br>Design for Beauty, Femininity,<br>and Identity                                    | 2016        | Baker Books                 |
| Asheritah Ciuciu                      | Full: Food, Jesus, and the<br>Battle for Satisfaction  | 2017        | Moody Publishers            |
| Rhona Epstein                         | Satisfied: A 90-Day Spiritual<br>Journey Toward Food<br>Freedom  | 2018        | Harvest House<br>Publishers |
| Susan Gregory                         | The Daniel Fast for Weight<br>Loss: A Biblical Approach to<br>Losing Weight and Keeping it<br>Off                | 2015        | Tyndale Momentum            |
| Jen Hatmaker                          | 7: An Experimental Mutiny<br>Against Excess (Updated and<br>Revised)   | 2020        | Convergent Books            |
| Rachel Hollis                         | Girl, Wash Your Face   | 2018        | Thomas Nelson               |
| Brittany Maher and<br>Cassandra Speer | Her True Worth   | 2022        | Thomas Nelson               |
| Rebekah Merkle                        | Eve in Exile: The Restoration<br>of Femininity   | 2016        | Canon Press                 |
| Joyce Meyer                           | Habits of a Godly Woman  | 2020        | FaithWords                  |
| Sarah Jakes Roberts                   | Woman Evolve: Break Up<br>With Your Fears and<br>Revolutionize Your Life   | 2021        | Thomas Nelson               |
| Gwen Shamblin                         | Weigh Down Works   | 2018        | Remnant Publishing          |
| Wendy Speake                          | The 40-Day Sugar Fast: Where<br>Physical Detox Meets Spiritual<br>Transformation                                 | 2019        | Baker Books                 |
| Lysa Terkeurst                        | I’ll Start Again Monday: Break<br>the Cycle of Unhealthy Eating<br>Habits with Lasting Spiritual<br>Satisfaction | 2022        | Thomas Nelson               |

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