

I survived "Christian" Asceticism

by Jill Barrett

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Three years ago, when I was 25 and starved for some "Titus 2" mentoring in my life, I met a woman in her late 30s, gentle of speech and manner, whom I'll call Marion. At that time, I had already begun to try to improve my diet-eating more whole grains and drinking more water to cure constipation and irritable bowel and eating less sugar to break the yeast infection cycle. These "food remedies" seemed to work very well. Therefore, when Marion told me of her family's unorthodox dietary practices, I was predisposed to believe that these were a route to even better health.

Marion informed me that God had never intended his children to eat meat or dairy products. She based this on Genesis 1:29, in which God gives "every seed-bearing plant" to man for food. Meat and dairy consumption, she said, were a result of the Fall, and Christ had taken away the curse associated with the Fall and freed us to return to an Edenic diet. Human beings were designed to digest only plant foods, not meat or dairy, she said-and most health problems were a result of toxins from huge, undigestible meat and dairy molecules. No one in her family had been to a doctor in eight years, including her six children, she said.

As a result of Marion's influence, I began to attribute every physical malady to dietary causes. I read every book on nutrition, herbs, and homeopathy I could find. I became a voracious reader of labels and discovered fearsome carcinogens in everything. I joined an organic and natural foods co-op and pleaded with my husband to spend \$20 for raw nuts and \$15 for cold-pressed olive oil. The few bulk foods that we could afford spoiled rapidly because we lived in a small apartment with no

extra refrigerator or freezer space. My precious \$8.00 bag of organic basmati rice contained organic larvae, which promptly hatched into organic black bugs and overran the kitchen.

Eschewing meat and dairy products while breastfeeding a baby, avoiding every additive and preservative like the plague lest it contaminate my breast milk as Marion warned, took its inevitable toll. I began to lose weight. By the time my baby took his first steps, I had dropped from 130 pounds to 118 on a 5'10" frame-seven pounds less than my driver's license weight taken at age 16.

I had been wary of sharing with my husband Marion's gentle reproofs in another area-sex. While Marion and I both desired large families, my babies were 17 months apart; hers average two and a half years apart. She attributed this wider spacing to her holier sex life. "Bill and I come together only in the Spirit, not the flesh," she said. I knew what response I would get on this score from Tim: He would hand me his Bible and say, "Jill, chapter and verse," and that would be that. But my change to a purer and Godlier diet didn't involve my husband's cooperation. I just ate my food, and he and the children ate his. More often than not, since my food took three times as long to prepare and I had two small children to take care of, I just ate fruit and salads, and baked potatoes with no butter (dairy) or margarine (trans-fats). Not even so much as a pinch of ordinary salt Tim said that the sea salt I wanted, with all its added trace minerals, was a waste of money. After several months of this, my husband told me that I looked terrible. "I don't know what you're doing," he said, "but cut it out. You look like a concentration camp

victim."

I began to wonder-had I heard both sides of the story about diet? If I was eating so well, why did I feel so lousy? I knew I needed more protein, but I couldn't eat hot dogs, with all those nasty nitrites, or ground beef, with all that fat and hormones. Every protein source that we could afford on a law school budget was taboo. There wasn't money for those unsprayed raw almonds in this month's budget, but maybe next.

Finally, I borrowed two books *from* the library: *Fear of Food: Environmentalist Scams, Media Medacity, and the Law of Disparagement*, by Andrea Arnold, and *The One Hundred Percent Purely Organic, Cholesterol Free, Megavitamin, Low Carbohydrate Nutrition Hoax* by Elizabeth M. Whelan, M.D., and Fredrick J. Stare, M.D. If these authors were correct, I had been sold a bill of goods-not to mention some extremely overpriced groceries. Now for the acid test: I sat down with the Word of God and verses leapt off the pages: "Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food-but God will destroy them both" (I Corinthians 6:13, NIV). "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' for the pagans run after all these things..." (Matthew 6:31, 32a, NIV). And the clincher: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do *not taste!* Do not touch!'...such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self imposed worship, their false humility and their *harsh treatment of the body*, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." (Colossians 2:20-21, 23, NIV, emphasis added).

Just in time for the conception of my third child, God intervened and brought me back to my senses. Once pregnant, you can probably guess what I craved. Chili dogs. Pizza with extra cheese. Chinese restaurant buffets, every dish laced with sodium and make that *fried* rice on the side, if you please. My full gestation weight topped out at 160-a 42-pound gain. My body, fearing another apparent famine during lactation, took advantage of the massive calorie influx and striped my thighs with bulging ripples of cellulite, which I will no doubt wear high unto death.

In the years since, I have learned to recognize and reject legalistic bondage in all its forms. I have learned not to "run after all these things" like the pagans. I have learned that in trying to sanitize God's good earthly gifts in an attempt to make them more "spiritual," one falls into the trap of becoming obsessed with the state of one's flesh and ignoring true spirituality altogether. I have even begun to question what Eden was really all about. Was it about keeping things pure, pristine, and undisturbed, and if so, why did God tell Adam to tend the garden at all? Wasn't the primary characteristic of the Edenic diet *lack of effort required to obtain nourishment*--a perpetual harvesting which case preservatives, additives, pesticides, and convenience foods bring us closer to Paradise in a sense? Maybe Christ does expect His people to return to an Edenic diet in time-but through the Godly use of technology, subduing the earth so that we can feed those who fill it.

The addition of meat and dairy to the human diet after the Fall overcame a big problem-what do you do when you're hungry *right now*, in a fallen world with its thorns, bugs, blight, inhospitable soil, and brutal weather? Go ahead: plant something. Anything. By the time harvest time rolls around, you'll have starved to death. God's solution? Instant nutrients in the form of fresh foods and milk. If you can catch a clean animal, then kill or milk it, and God said, *bon appetit!* The pagans want to delude themselves into thinking that there was no Fall; that they can "go back to Eden" without the atoning work of Christ, which is why they scorn God's gifts of flesh and milk for food. Unfortunately, their asceticism has crept into the Church like an infectious disease. If we think that the curse no longer has any bearing on man's ability to obtain food, we're fooling ourselves.

Our modern ability to be picky about what we eat is a luxury that has been almost unheard of throughout history. Advanced capitalism has brought us plentiful food from all over the globe, and we look upon it with suspicion. I hope God doesn't decide to give us famine-the real thing, not the self-imposed variety to see if we like that any better.

Quotations designated (NIV) are from THE HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV.

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Ed's Story

In the late 1970s, I too went through a health-food kick. I was not as strict as Mrs. Barrett. I kept eating meat, but steered more toward chicken, fish, and other low-fat meats. My wife, Jeanne, and I tried to have our children eat more fruits and vegetables, instead of sweets. For a while, I took vitamins at several times the Recommended Daily Allowance.

What we quickly discovered was that we could not afford enough "health foods" for our four children's appetites, even on a salaried physician's income. The Oreos(TM) made a vigorous come-back at a fraction of the cost of "health foods." Today, I have four healthy grown children who have competed as outstanding athletes in various sports. Just think what they could have been if I had sacrificed for the "health foods" world champions?

I have a simple formula for diet.

Eat a wide variety of foods from the four food groups. Otherwise, eat whatever you want, whenever you want, and as much as you want just don't gain weight excessively. Exercise helps to burn calories, make some cellular processes more efficient, and makes you feel better.

I wonder if all the worry that some people (and Mrs. Barrett did above) have over a "healthy lifestyle" actually cancels, if not exceeds, any benefits gained from such choices. "Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?"

If one is concerned about health, a vigorous spiritual life is far and away more preventive than any diet or exercise. More than a decade ago, I began to say that Biblical preaching is the most effective preventive and curative form of "medicine." Such preachers are the true physicians. Those of us in the healing professions are applying only Band-aids(TM) and Steri-strips(TM) comparatively.

Paul put all this in perspective (in addition to the quotes from Mrs. Barrett): "Exercise yourself rather to godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (I Timothy 4:8, NKJV).