

A “Weigh-Down” Christology

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Come with me into the Tenth Reformed Church on a Wednesday evening. The midweek events (children’s programming, youth groups, adult classes) are wrapping up. We find room 11, where a group of lively, enthused adults have just finished a session of the Weigh Down Workshop. We ask members of the group if they’d be willing to stay a bit longer and share their experiences of Weigh Down with us. This request immediately creates a sense of electricity in the room, as Gwen Shamblin’s converts eagerly share their dramatic testimonies of weight loss.

Andrew, a thirty-three year old man, begins. “I first heard about Weigh Down five years ago when I heard Gwen Shamblin being interviewed on a national radio program. Then I read part of *The Weigh Down Diet* book and lost fifty pounds! When *Rise Above* came out, I began a Weigh Down advanced class and lost an additional forty pounds. Now I weigh 178 pounds – down from 267 pounds! Praise God! I cannot believe how amazing God is! Talk about “more than we could ask or imagine”This is God’s grace to us. God is amazing! My heart is different; I want to help others find the amazing truth I have found.”

Christy, a size four woman who seems to be in her early thirties, began her journey with Weigh Down in 1999. “I began Weigh Down sixty-five pounds overweight. Having had a weight problem since college, I was pretty sick of dealing with it. One night, I finally went before God and cried out to him. I told him I would do whatever he wanted me to do in order to be free from this bondage. I knew he was leading me to Weigh Down, and I found a class starting that very week.

“I was so moved by the *Exodus out of Egypt* series that I lost twenty-six pounds during the twelve week course. I did the class two more times and lost an additional ten to fifteen pounds. About that time I got pregnant and used that as an excuse to start eating again. I also had people in my church telling me that God did not really care how much food I ate as long as I was obedient to the “bigger” commandments. I liked what they were saying. It allowed me to go back to worshiping my idol. I proceeded to gain sixty pounds in that pregnancy.

“In January 2002 I found myself pregnant again. My husband had been out of steady work for over six months and we had no health insurance. I was miserable. In the back of my mind I knew I was not being obedient to God. I opened my Bible, and my eyes fell on this verse in 1 Corinthians: ‘Therefore, my

dear friends, flee from idolatry.' I weighed 208 pounds and knew God was telling me to run from the food.

"Once again I felt the tug in my heart to go to Weigh Down. By now the Advanced Course was out. I called on a Monday and found a class starting on Wednesday. I started during my sixth month of pregnancy and lost six pounds in the first week. I could not believe it. I was so excited! I proceeded to lose twenty-five pounds in the last trimester of my pregnancy.

"Now I weigh 115 pounds with a total weight loss of 93 pounds. I am fifteen pounds lighter than when I started high school! I never dreamed that was possible.

"The principles of Weigh Down have completely changed my life and I will never go back! God is so good when we seek him with all our heart. He is so good to allow us the opportunity to get our lives turned around so that our hearts chase what *he* wants and not what we want. I thank God all the time for leading me to Weigh Down, and I love to share and encourage others with this good news!"

To close her story, she shares John 8:31-32: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

These stories are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to fervent testimonies about Gwen, God, and Weigh Down. Sometimes it's hard to discern who the "god" is. Is it Gwen? the "program"? the results of the ever-so-closely-watched scale?

To her followers, Gwen Shamblin can come close to God. She is the One who has turned lives around through her Bible-based weight loss programs and God talk. An overview of one of her seminars says,

"Exodus Out of Egypt" is teaching people on a daily basis how God can transform their hearts and minds so that they can rise above the magnetic pull of the refrigerator!

You will learn how to be delivered from the slavery of overweight. God can change your desire so that you do not want to eat the second half of a candy bar if you are not truly hungry.

This series teaches people that head hunger (the urge to eat when the body is not calling for it) is not true physiological hunger, but rather is spiritual hunger. You learn how to replace head hunger with the will of God so that you can transform this desire for a pan of brownies to that of hungering and thirsting after

righteousness. And you will learn how to eat regular food with control. In other words, the food content does not change, but the person does. This spiritual orientation toward weight loss resonates with many people, and Weigh Down Workshops have sprang up in many churches throughout the United States, numerous Reformed Church congregations among them.

What easily can be missed in this kind of popularized Christianity are the theological underpinnings of the founder. At the Weigh Down website, one can read about Gwen's theological beliefs. (Interestingly, these beliefs are also quoted word for word at the site of the "Remnant Fellowship Church," which gladly endorses their sponsor, "The Weigh Down Workshop.")

For those who value Reformed theology, two red flags quickly emerge. The first conflict is rooted in different understandings of our fallen state. Under "Frequently Asked Questions," Gwen answers that question, "What is the True Church?":

The true church gets all energy, money, and love from God and therefore wants no sinners in the church. The true church does not have to cater to man – they love man – but do not cater to him. The true church cannot afford sin in the church so it has to discipline and confront rebellion to God for fear of losing God, its energy source.

The counterfeit church runs off the energy of man and his resources. It cannot afford to upset man or correct man for fear of losing its source of everything. Sin is therefore left in the church and doctrine is taught accordingly. The great prostitute does not have answered prayers because *"We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will."* (John 9:31)

The gospel of Gwen asserts that we can – and should – attain a state of holiness (lack of sin), or "lose God." This belief is what drives the premise of Weigh Down. Obedience to God is to be practiced and perfected in every realm of life, including our mastery over food. To give in to an illegitimate culinary craving is directly defying God, and thus holds potential for "losing God."

Obviously, our Reformed convictions on sin would lead us down quite a different path. We do not strive toward a perfect state of holiness in this life. The reality of our fallen state requires us to confess acts of disobedience (is eating something when we're not *really* hungry one of them?), and then to engage in the process of sanctification. We do not expect to overcome sin entirely, but rely on forgiveness and grace as critical elements of our faith life. In this way, we are free to be truly human, while also finding assurance and expressing gratitude through the gift of God's love.

The other theological “glitch” that arises in Gwen’s theology is her rejection of the Trinity. Here’s what she says about the Nicene Creed:

Three hundred years past the death of Christ, a council met in Nicea, and they started developing a totally new concept that was both foreign to the Jews and the early Christians. There were not books written on the essence of God, nor were there any controversies, for everyone knew that God was God and that a Messiah would come. There was no discussion of three heads, three “persons” or three anything. God had never been referred to as a person or a “triune being.” There was no need for debate, given that this concept never crossed anyone’s mind until 325 AD. Since then, there have been volumes to explain this new creed. Why would it take volumes? The reason is because it is inexplicable in the light of the Word of God.

Understanding the essence of God is deemed a “mystery” by Trinitarians because, again, there are so many contradictions in the Word of God to what they are trying to teach. However, the most hypocritical practice of all is that a man-made mystery and creed (created in 325 AD and not included in the Word of God) is the “critical doctrine” for deciding who is “in” or “out” of Christianity.

Gwen continues to fill pages waxing on the *monotheistic* faith of the Jews and Jesus, the *lack of equality* between the Father and the Son, and the two completely separate natures and beings of God the Father and Jesus the Son – all of which cause her to eliminate the possibility of a triune God. This leads her to warn Trinitarians:

Repent now from believing that God and Jesus are the same being. This is an abomination. What has happened to the New Testament teaching? Why have we let over 17 centuries go by without putting a stop to this madness?God cannot bless such false teachings.

Gwen is not unique in her rejection of the Trinity. Those who observe oneness theology are known by several different names. They commonly refer to themselves as “Apostolic” or “Jesus’ name” churches. Most outsiders refer to them as “Jesus-onlys,” “modalists,” “monarchianists,” “Sabellians,” etc. By far, the largest oneness group is the United Pentecostal Church International (UPC or UPCI), which has over 700,000 members in the United States. Oneness Pentecostals see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as mere “modes” or “manifestations” of the one God in various activities (not three distinct persons). During the creation they see God as being in the “Father” mode; during the incarnation, they see God as being in the “Son” mode; and when working in

people, they see God as being in the “Holy Spirit” mode (from *Contending with Oneness Theology*; www.joywell.org).

Modalists would argue (as Gwen Shamblin does) that there is ample scriptural evidence against trinitarianism. For instance, when Jesus was baptized, the voice from heaven said, “This is my Son...with him I am well pleased” (Mt. 17:5). To modalists this is scriptural evidence that Jesus the Christ could not possibly be the same person as God the Father. (Otherwise, God would have said, “This is myself...with myself I am well pleased.)

Another such example comes in Luke 22:42 when Jesus is in the garden and prays, “Not my will, but yours be done,” (rather than, “Not my will, but my will be done.”) Such verses indicate to the modalists that Father and Son cannot be one God, as Trinitarians claim.

Such interpretations require oneness believers to reject the Trinitarian belief that God has revealed God’s self in three distinct persons, yet equal in nature and of one being. Adherents of oneness theology are convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity was a humanly constructed falsehood, which has taken hold in the church and continues to deceive Christians throughout the world.

In fact, there is ample scripture leading to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity and causing it to become one of the bedrock beliefs of Christianity. The Council of Nicea, Christian orthodoxy, and theological debates about the Trinity are, for most people, far removed from their conscious, everyday experience. It is not surprising that Gwen Shamblin once commented, “People don’t care about this, they don’t care about the trinity” (from www.christianityonline.com).

Surely there is some truth to that. It’s hard to find people willing to critique the theology of a program which leads them into smaller clothing sizes and greater holiness. Can we (should we) expect people to become passionate about the errant beliefs behind the weight-loss guru – much less about Trinitarian orthodoxy?

Perhaps not. Subtle nuances and deeper issues of theology may never become an important focal point for parishioners who are attracted to popularized Christianity.

For church leaders to respond to popularized Christianity requires the on-going work of equipping the people in the pews to care about their beliefs. Proactively addressing who we are may come in the form of teaching and preaching, that are rooted in orthodox Christian beliefs.

Then a second step must carry believers into “owning” this theology for themselves. This step, I believe, is acknowledging the relevance that it holds (or not) in their own lives. The question: “What does this belief really mean to *you*?” moves abstract theology into practical theology.

In the writing of this article, I asked numerous people the question, “Does the doctrine of the Trinity matter to you? Why?” After the person had time to absorb the question and give it a bit of thought, there were responses such as these:

“Because the Bible often refers to ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,’ I think it’s important to think through what that means. In thinking about our beliefs of the Trinity I move more deeply into understanding the mystery of God. I experience the different persons of the Trinity in my daily life. I sense the Holy Spirit in prayer; I can touch and experience Jesus in our life as a church body. For me, the church—its people—is actually the body of Christ, doing God’s work on earth.”

“The Trinity matters to me because it informs my faith. I’ve always believed in the Trinity as one being, three separate persons, because I was never exposed to any other way of thinking. But these beliefs about the Trinity have been confirmed through my faith experience. I experience the movement of the Holy Spirit, who prompts me to know Jesus better. When I was younger, I focused mostly on Jesus because that’s who “saved me.” Now I understand the wholeness of the Trinity better. A part of that increased understanding comes through our worship. We often refer to the Trinity: in hymns, scripture, creeds, benedictions... “I think this has helped me to be conscious of the triune God in my life.”

“To me the Trinity speaks to the mystery of God. I am very attracted to this being who we cannot know fully, yet comes to us in very personal ways. I feel the different persons of the Trinity coming to me when I pray. There are times that I experience the Holy Spirit. This is a mysterious sense of the presence of God with me. There are times when it is Jesus who comes to me in person. Jesus is always a very tender, compassionate presence who comes in a more physical sense. And there are times when it is God who comes to me. This is God who transcends everything and is connected to everything. So, when I think of the triune God, I have a real sense that there is this oneness of God who ties everything together, and of the different persons who come to me in distinct ways.”

“The Trinity shows me how God, in God’s very nature, is a relational God. God is not one who relates only to humans, but within God’s self as well. I understand that I can “talk to myself,” even though there is only one “me.” I understand that I can cooperate with my self, or I can work against my self. While the Trinity is a great mystery, it is also something that makes sense to me,

and from which I receive assurance. For instance, in God I see three beings who cooperate, fellowship, and love one another. This is the purest model for how I would like to be with myself, and also how we as a Christian community may be with one another. The Trinity sets the ideal for Christian community.”

Of course, there were some people who were unable to articulate anything at all about the practical meaning of the Trinity (except, perhaps, that we should believe it because we always have). If people have no relevant understanding of basic Christian beliefs, it seems a nearly impossible task to expect them to accept or a reject a self-help program on the basis of its theological orthodoxy.

Perhaps if orthodox Christians can find inspiring ways to translate correct belief into correct *action and meaning*, the Gwen Shamblins of the world won't stand a chance!

