

Introduction

Fifty million Americans go on a diet every year, spending more than \$30 billion on programs and products. Believe me, I know the drill! As I write, I'm on my latest annual mission (impossible?) to shed a few pounds! A few days ago, while fantasizing about a cheeseburger and fries I pondered the impact of the diet industry on what everyone seems to be calling "this economy." What if everyone decided to forget the diet books and exercise programs and special pre-packaged food plans—what would that do to our shaky economy?

Studies reveal that the majority who go on a diet dream about losing a few unsightly pounds and being rewarded with a better looking, trim and thin body. Others go on a diet for internal, medical reasons. They are delighted to lose some excess flab in the process, but their main goal is their health. That's me, this time around.

At the beginning of 2009 I embarked on a hell-for-leather search for a healthy diet. Much to my surprise, I found that most nutritional programs that are designed to reverse a negative trend or prognosis share common, essential foods.

For example, without offering any definitive advice (which would be way out of my expertise!), I discovered that vegetables, whole grains, fish oil and occasional fish, along with specific supplements and regular exercise are the common denominator in the majority of nutritional diet plans.

On the other hand, there are common culprits that can lead to all kinds of maladies and illnesses. You are no doubt aware of the potential problems with sugar, sodium and excessive fats contained in red meats and chicken. Just as there are common denominators present in both beneficial and harmful *physical nutritional plans*, beneficial and harmful *spiritual nutritional plans* have their own common denominators.

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul is a 12-month grace diet that is concerned about your heart and soul. This is a plan that can enable you to shed religious fat. This 12-month radical grace diet is dedicated to opening up your spiritual

arteries so that your relationship with God is improved, enabling you to grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). Institutionalized, pre-packaged, processed, preservative laden, pre-digested spiritual comfort foods are detrimental to your spiritual health.

Many of those 80 million Americans who go on a diet every year first face reality that stares back at them when they waddle past a floor length mirror. There is a real and present, spiritually-dangerous parallel to the epidemic of physical obesity. We are what we eat, and our physical bodies have become the end product of sugars, fats and processed foods that inflate and eventually destroy our bodies, robbing us of health and vitality. Our hearts and souls are also being corrupted and destroyed, but the evidence of toxic religion is harder to detect.

Neighborhood fast food franchises that line the main streets of North America offer physical junk food. What about your neighborhood church? Is every local church, is every “place of worship,” serving up grace-based, Christ-centered good-for-you spiritual nourishment? No, sad to say, there’s a lot of bad news religion out there—junk food for the soul.

Christ-less religion is always adding something to the gospel. Religion is always attempting to improve God’s recipe of grace. Religion will never stop until attention is diverted from God’s grace to human performance. The meals that repressive religion serves are filled with religious activity, works and obligation. Religion is convinced that salvation consists of one part Jesus and one part human performance. God, on the other hand, tells us that salvation consists of *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*. He does not need human activity in his kitchen. Too many cooks spoil the broth!

Religious authoritarianism tries to convince us that we are obligated to work overtime in its spiritual kitchen, performing like a frenzied short-order cook, frantically mixing, blending, frying, baking and broiling.

But God has not invited us into his kitchen. He *never* hints that we are responsible for preparing and providing the spiritual food we need—spiritual nourishment he alone can provide.

Performance-based religion not only mandates that we must have a hand in producing the spiritual food on its menu, but also gives us strict lists and precise recipes that we must follow. Religion assures us that our compliance to its rituals, prescriptions, formulas and cookbooks will help us manufacture our own salvation. Religious ingredients vary, but they always focus on how often and how much we must do (and not do) specific things. In the end, all of this effort effectively cooks our own spiritual goose! We are doomed if we rely on religious kitchens and the legalistic concoctions whipped up in them.

By contrast to bad news religion, *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* is a twelve-month spiritual diet that will keep you centered on the pure, unadulterated, whole-grain, organic grace of God.

Let's change the metaphor (which, by now, I have not only stretched, but perhaps driven into the ground!) Europeans got their first taste of tobacco less than 500 years ago. Within two centuries of its introduction in Europe tobacco became a huge cash crop in North America, with slave labor being one of its deplorable byproducts. Pipe-smoking and chewing tobacco dominated popular use of tobacco at first, with cigars gaining interest about 200 years ago. Cigarettes became popular after the Civil War, less than 150 years ago.

At first, no one seemed to know or care about the negative effects of tobacco. Some actually felt that it had a positive impact on the human body. About 80 years ago studies about the adverse effects of tobacco started to surface. But the tobacco industry had a huge stake in hooking people on cigarettes. Advertisements painted an enviable lifestyle that tobacco addicts would enjoy. Finally, in 1965, Congress passed the Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act, forcing tobacco companies to print the Surgeon-General warning on each pack of cigarettes.

By contrast, religion has been addicting and enslaving people for thousands of years. But, we have been warned against toxic religion! Some 1980 years ago Jesus placed his own "Beloved Physician's Warning" on religious institutions, traditions and rituals. For example consider his strident warning about toxic religion in Matthew 23.

Can you imagine what the religious industry would look like if religious institutions and corporations were required to warn the unsuspecting about the deadly spiritual toxins contained within their innovations, fabrications and teachings?

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul can help you cut through the fog and smog that obscures authentic, Christ-centered faith. *Spiritual Soup...* is all about cleansing your spiritual system from religious pollutants, whether they are likened to toxins you have ingested from physical food, or whether you are choking and gasping for a breath of fresh air, given the byproducts that bad news religion has been spewing into the spiritual air we breathe.

If you have done some hard time in an unhealthy religious environment, you need the radical diet contained within *Spiritual Soup...* If it walks, quacks and looks like a religious duck, chances are it is, and you need help. *Spiritual Soup...* can help you grow closer to God while you become an irreligious Christian.

The facts are simple. The comfort food of religion may taste great, but it damages your relationship with God. Spiritual junk food might make you feel good, it may seem to be fast and cheap, and it may be what everyone you know is ingesting—but is it filling the spiritual void in your soul? I invite you to take the *Spiritual Soup...* challenge.

Join me on a detox program. Join me for a 12-month sabbatical from religious rituals, regulations, pills and potions. Get rid of unwanted and unnecessary religious junk that clogs your spiritual system and leaves you tired and depressed. Get rid of those run-down feelings you have, which may have been caused by that religious truck that left tire marks all over your back.

If you are tired and hungry for spiritual nourishment, the grace diet of *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* can hit the spot!

My experiences with toxic religion lasted over 35 years. By God's grace, I came to realize that his amazing grace is the absolute foundation and cornerstone of true faith, and that Jesus is the only healer who can cleanse our spiritual systems from all religious toxins. Eventually I left institutionalized Christianity behind. Through my ministry I start-

ed to communicate with, meet and come to know more and more religious refugees like myself. Over time I came to believe that there is a need in our culture to provide, in Jesus' name, grace-based spiritual nutrition to people who are presently enslaved by, or in the process of emerging from, dark spiritual places.

In February 2006 *Christianity Without the Religion* (CWR) opened its electronic doors. CWR was a response to many who believed that something was missing in their worship of God. A number of years earlier I started inviting questions, via email, about God, faith and religion. It was the beginning of tens of thousands of conversations about God I have had, via the Internet, with people I have never met in the flesh.

I listened to those who told me of their alienation from organized religion due to their hell-on-earth experience with a group of people who attempted to represent God. Others told me another familiar story, a story that involved just “going through the motions” at their church. Some said that they still attended church to please family members—“to keep the peace”—but they “got nothing out of it.” And others explained that their past experiences with “organized religion” had left them so completely demoralized, beaten and abused that they would not be walking through a church door ever again.

There was one common ingredient that came through in all these cries for help. People said that they were hungry to hear more about God's love. Many cried out to hear about God's amazing grace, explaining that they were spiritually dying, in and out of churches. They had heard all about rules and rituals, all about deeds and creeds, and all about condemnation and criticism. They had heard about programs and building the church and planting new churches and urgent appeals to meet a virtual witness “quota” by bringing “new people” to church with them. But somewhere, in all of the busy-ness of church business, they felt that their personal relationship with God had been overlooked.

Many told me that they were skeptical of the way in which their relationship with God had been organized and institutionalized. When I asked what I could do more of to help, the responses boiled down to this: “We want to come

to know God—give us less about the business and teachings of religion, and more about God. We need more Jesus, but less religion. Would you please give us some weekly messages, teaching us authentic Christianity, without all the religious stuff?”

The people who contacted me lived all over North America, not to mention a number in Europe, Africa, Australia, the Caribbean and Central and South America. I discussed these requests with our Plain Truth Ministries (PTM) staff, and eventually we determined to provide a weekly teaching ministry on the Internet, which we decided to call *Christianity...Without the Religion (CWR)*.

Since many of my conversations about faith, religion and God had taken place in cyberspace, we decided to provide *CWR* on the Internet. As we grew, and as more and more people joined us, we started to provide CDs and cassette tapes, and, as our budget allowed, we added a few radio stations to our electronic teaching ministry. We were thankful for the wonderful response from so many who appreciated this service, and disappointed by the mean-spirited resistance from some quarters within the religious establishment.

CWR was, from the beginning, a teaching ministry. *CWR* is, at the very best, a “different kind of church experience.” We are a “church without walls.” We are a ministry that is available “whenever you are”—teaching that “comes to you.” And from the get-go, we had people who said they wanted to join our “church.” But some, including some pastors of what I call “brick and mortar” churches, seemed to be threatened by the services we provided.

“You’re not saying you are *a* church, are you?” demanded the host of a radio program as he interviewed me. “By your definition, no, *CWR* isn’t *a* church,” I responded. “We don’t meet in a geographical location, inside a building, surrounded by four walls. We can’t possibly officiate at baptismal ceremonies, or at marriages or funerals for our “congregation” (assuming you would *allow* us to call those who worship with us a congregation). We are not, by that definition, *a* church. But surely you,” I said to the radio host, “are not trying to say that we, and the many thousands of people we serve and represent, are not part of *the* church? We

are just as much a part of the body of Christ as anyone.”

CWR is part of *the* church. No religious cartel has the power to exclude *CWR*, or anyone else, from fellowship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Part of the resistance that *CWR* has encountered from the traditional, brick-and-mortar churches is somewhat like the threats the Internet once represented to retail outlets, stores and shopping malls. “The Internet cannot be trusted,” said traditional, entrenched “we’ve-always-done-it-this-way” retail trade owners and establishments. “You can’t see and feel or try on Internet merchandise before buying it.” The brick and mortar stores further objected to Internet sales, “How could you trust someone enough to make a financial transaction over the Internet?”

That was then—this is now. Today, as you know, for better or for worse, people pay their bills, buy cars, obtain airline tickets, book hotels, send flowers, purchase books, select and buy furniture, meet a prospective life partner and order their groceries on their computer. People are also finding spiritual nourishment and discovering God’s grace in cyberspace. PTM thanks God that we can be a part of this new way of serving people around this world.

Have you ever heard the phrase “time-tested tradition”? What exactly does that mean? On the one hand it may mean that the tradition in question has been proven to be appropriate, helpful and healthy, through time. But it also may mean that the tradition under discussion has come to be accepted, and perhaps revered, merely because no one has ever asked critical questions about its authenticity, relevance and necessity. Some time-tested traditions are great, but some are in critical need of reform, refreshing and renewal. I contend that much of religion today is Christ-less religion and Christendom desperately needs transformation. We need religion-less Christianity. We need more Jesus, less religion. We need *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is alive, it’s dynamic. It needs to be proclaimed within cultures, within the predicaments, limitations and technological capabilities of those who are in need of God’s grace.

Chances are, if you’re still reading, you don’t need to be convinced of the need for *Christianity Without the Religion*.

You may have served your time on a religious chain gang—on a long stretch of 40 miles of bad road. You may have suffered in a religious swamp, treading polluted and contaminated water in the breeding grounds of bad news religion.

Our world today finds itself in slavery to authoritarian religion and seriously in need of God’s pure, unadulterated grace. Hundreds of millions are oppressed by ignorance, superstition and fear. God’s amazing grace, God’s unconditional love, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is the solution.

As *CWR* prepares to enter its fifth year of teaching ministry, we now regularly serve many thousands of people around this world, many of whom are in contact with us, many others who choose to remain anonymous (perhaps understandably so, given their previous experiences!). We don’t “count heads” to check on attendance, but given the hits of our *CWR* page on our PTM website, we have some idea about the number of those who regularly join us. We have taken surveys to find out more about those we serve. We pray for those who request it, and we encourage communication. *CWR* is, of course, just one part of the spiritual nourishment provided by PTM, and we’re always trying to increase the effectiveness of our service. This book, *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul*, is yet another way we hope to be of greater service to God’s kingdom of grace.

Join me on a year-long journey as we travel through the seasons of the year together. You can use *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* as a spiritual resource as you encounter the challenges of the year. You can join “the year in progress” at any time, of course, but we’re going to begin with January, and move through the year.

As I first started to prepare this collection of messages I have given at *CWR*, I had no idea about how much extensive editing was needed to the original notes of *CWR* messages to make them “read.” In some cases the written manuscripts that follow may barely resemble the original spoken teaching. But God’s grace remains the absolute core of all of these messages. This is a grace-based, Christ-centered, devotional-like resource that can provide spiritual nourishment as you walk, step by step, through the year. Join me now for this journey of *faith alone, grace alone, and Christ alone*.