

What Relationship Does Fasting Have to Christianity?

By Louis Rushmore, Editor, Gospel Gazette On-Line

Amusing myself at least, I have contemplated from time to time that contemporary Christians often add an “e” to “fasting,” resulting in “feasting.” Certainly, the favorite type of fellowship freely observed by Christians today involves a fellowship *meal*. We love to cook, and we love to eat! First century fellowship, though, also included being “fellow workers” (Romans 16:3), “fellow prisoners” (Romans 16:7), “fellow citizens” (Ephesians 2:19), “fellow heirs” (Ephesians 3:6), a “fellow soldier” (Philippians 2:25), a “fellow servant” (Colossians 1:7) and a “fellow laborer” (2 Thessalonians 3:2). Christian fellowship includes a partnership with the Godhead (1 Corinthians 1:9; Philippians 2:1; 1 John 1:3), a partnership in the Gospel (Philippians 1:5), a partnership in worship (Acts 2:42) as well as a partnership with the children of God (Galatians 2:9; 1 John 1:7). Fellowship may also include participation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:10).

Fasting, however, differs from feasting and other aspects of fellowship. “Fasting, deliberate abstinence from food for stated intervals, and undertaken as a religious exercise, has long been practiced by man” (Woods, Volume 1, 252). “...Fasting is a Bible subject. It is mentioned quite frequently in the Scriptures” (Ashlock 2). In practice by the Jews during the time of the ministry of Jesus Christ, our Lord regulated the action rather than implemented it as a feature of Christianity. Regarding Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus “...removed fasting from the realm of public activity and classified it as a matter of private devotion” (Woods, Volume 2, 146). “Fasting for the Christian is strictly a voluntary matter” (Jackson 2).

That fasting was not intended to be observed under all circumstances, and that its chief purpose was to strengthen us in times of trial and adversity, and on occasions of sorrow and grief, is evident from an induction of passages dealing with the subject in the New Testament (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; 1 Corinthians 7:6; Acts 13:2; 2 Corinthians 6:5). (Woods, Volume 2, 146)

We may, therefore, properly conclude that (1) Christ did not enjoin fasting upon the church as a public duty; in his reference thereto, he merely regulated a practice already obtaining among the Jews; (2) he taught that (a) it is to be observed, if at all, in private; (b) without revealing it to others; and (c) for the good of one's own soul. Fasting is not an ordinance of the church; it is not commanded in the Christian dispensation nor are there penalties given for failure to conform therewith; there is no special virtue in it so that all disciples must engage therein; one may find it a blessing, another may not. (Woods, Volume 2, 147)

Dozens of instances of Old Testament and New Testament biblical words translated as some form of fasting, in addition to other references, reveal that God's people practiced fasting from the time of Moses onward. "We must discern from the New Testament whether or not fasting is a command for Christians for all time" (Ashlock 2). Especially some of the New Testament citations about fasting are memorable, such as Jesus fasting for 40 days after His baptism (Matthew 4:2), Zacchaeus fasting twice weekly (Luke 18:12), Cornelius fasting (Acts 10:30) and fasting by prophets when Saul and Barnabas were selected as missionaries (Acts 13:2). Yet, "it does not appear that our Lord instituted any fast days for the church, nor did he indicate that the disciples were, by divine direction, to continue to observe the regulations touching fasts which obtained during the former dispensation" (Woods, Volume 1, 253-254).

Furthermore, when the Pharisees criticized Jesus and His disciples for not fasting, our Lord spoke parables about not patching old garments with new cloth as well as not putting new wine in old wineskins (Luke 5:33-39). "Is there not here the clear intimation of our Lord that the Pharisees were in error in suggesting that the old patch of Jewish practices should be affixed to the new garment of Christianity; or that the old wine of the ancient order should be poured into the new receptacle of the gospel dispensation?" (Woods, Volume 1, 254). There are reasons for which individual Christians may fast in "private devotions" (Woods, Volume 1, 255), but fasting is not a church ordinance.

"Fasting was practiced in connection with great and important events. ...Fasting was observed in connection with the solemn task of appointing elders to oversee the flock of God (Acts 14:23)" (Jackson 3). "Proper fasting" has several benefits, providing "a token of deep sincerity" and opportunities for "concentration" (Jackson 3). Biblical purposes of fasting show sincerity of repentance for sin (1 Samuel 7:6; Daniel 9:3-5; Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 1:3-4), encourage one to think on the will of God and strengthen a person's self-control. Fasting permits people to distance themselves from seeking the things this world has to offer and instead to focus on God and His Word. Sometimes even the children of God need an interruption to the normalcy to which they have become accustomed in this physical world to redirect their attention to the spiritual world for which every child of God hopes; fasting can help us with that.

Though not contending that fasting should be a public church function, some brethren in years past firmly affirmed that fasting was an individual Christian "duty."

I think the Scriptures teach very plainly that it is the duty of Christians to fast. The Savior, in the Sermon on the Mount, gives directions for giving alms (Matt. 6:1-4), for praying (verses 5-15), and for fasting (verses 16-18). The three duties are treated here exactly alike, as though they are equally binding. ...scriptures give no specific time for fasting yet they show that Christians should fast when tried and tempted, when affliction and sorrow come upon them, when they grow cold and lukewarm in the service of God, when the flesh gains the ascendancy and they become forgetful of their duties to God and indifferent to their spiritual condition or that of the world. ...it should be done quietly, as a service rendered to God, not to be seen of men. ...The object of fasting was to give spiritual strength in times of weakness, temptation, and trial. ...In seasons of sorrow and distress for sin, in temptation and trial, when we are deeply and earnestly seeking help from God, we should come and with our prayers fast. (Lipscomb and Sewell 228-231)

“Religions and philosophies that practice fasting include: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Jainism, and Hinduism” (“Fasting Around the World”). Despite as widespread over so long a time that people have practiced fasting, the New Testament Scriptures neither command fasting nor stipulate consequences for not fasting. If anyone fasts today, it is a private, personal matter and neither announced nor practiced publicly. “...Fasting is in the matter of private, personal devotions...” (Ashlock 2).

“Individual fasting is regulated by Jesus as recorded in Matthew 6:16-18. And we read in Acts 13:1-3 that members of the church in Antioch fasted, so we find no fault in this practice” (Elliott 17). Even long after the commencement of Christianity, the apostle Paul apparently entertained personal fasts (2 Corinthians 11:23-33). “If we fast, we are not to do anything in order to impress others that we are

fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)" (Olbricht 9). Though fasting is not commanded under Christianity, the New Testament assumes that from time to time Christians will and ought to fast privately.



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