

A Study of Fasting in the Scriptures and the Life of the Church

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It is quite evident that the practice of fasting for religious reasons has nearly (if not completely) disappeared among Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. If a person needs to be convinced of this, the final bit of evidence can perhaps be the new translation of Luther's *Enchiridion* that is currently being studied in our churches. In this new translation, Luther's statement that "fasting and bodily preparation is indeed a fine outward custom" has been streamlined to read simply: "There are some fine customs in preparing for Communion."

If this new version is accepted, no longer will it be necessary to explain to catechism students that fasting was once a common religious practice also among Lutherans, but that hardly anybody does it anymore. Thus, this last commonly available trace of fasting in our churches will have disappeared from our view.

What has happened to fasting in our churches is not what was envisioned by Martin Luther or our other Lutheran forefathers. Philip Melancthon wrote in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*: "We believe that God's glory and command require penitence to produce good fruits, and that good fruits like true fasting, prayer and charity have his command" (*Apology*, XII, 139.) And even stronger: "True prayer, charity, and fasting have God's command; and where they do, it is a sin to omit them" (*ibid*, 143). Even though the Confessions also have some negative things to say about fasting (as we shall see later), it is clear that they were not ready to dispense with the practice.

Nor will it surprise us greatly to hear that Luther recommended fasting, properly practiced. Commenting on Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees' showy fasting (Matthew 6:16-18), Luther wrote:

It is not His intention to reject or despise fasting in itself, any more than He rejects almsgiving and praying. Rather He is supporting these practices and teaching their proper use. In the same way it is His intention to restore proper fasting, to have it rightly used and properly understood, as any good work should be. (*Luther's Works*, Am. Ed. Vol. 21, p. 155).

Statements like these from Luther and our Confessions cause us to wonder whether our fathers unthinkingly were following the traditions of their religious upbringing in recommending fasting, or whether there really is sufficient reason, precedent, and Scriptural command for the practice. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether we have done the right thing in allowing the practice of fasting to die out in our churches. Should we be trying to *revive* fasting instead of allowing and encouraging it to disappear?

With that question in mind, we are ready to turn our attention to our topic: **A Study of Fasting in the Scriptures and the Life of the Church.**

Fasting in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word צוֹם (to do without food) is the most common word for fasting. A second expression עֲנָה נַפְשׁ (to humble the soul) is also used for fasting, but this expression also involves other practices besides restraining from food.

Although fasting was a common practice in many areas of the ancient world, there is no record that the biblical Patriarchs ever fasted as a religious exercise. The first mention of fasting in the Bible is the 40 day fast of Moses before he received the Ten Commandments.

Fasting does not play a major role in the Mosaic Law. Only one day a year the Day of Atonement, was a fast day in the Law of Moses. (Lev. 23:27-32). The purpose of this fast day was that the people should completely humble themselves (עֲנָה נַפְשׁ) on the day that atonement was made for their sins. Anyone who failed to keep the fast on that day was to be "cut off from his people" (Num. 23:29).

Much later, after the destruction of Jerusalem, four more days were added as regular fast days (Zech. 8:19), commemorating various stages in the destruction of the city. Israel continued to remember those traumatic days by means of fasting even after the return from Exile. Still later came the Purim fast, the origin of which is described in Esther 9:31.

Overall, then, fasting did not play an important role in the official ritual and worship of Israel.

On the other hand, however, there are many examples of individual and national fasting outside the official rites and ceremonies. Special fasts were occasioned by war or threat of war (Judges 20:26); sickness (2 Sam 12:16); mourning (1 Sam 31:13); penitence (Neh 9:1); and impending danger (Ezra 8:21). The idea behind most of these special fasts was that an individual or the whole nation was attempting, by self-discipline and self-renunciation, to make an impression on God, to quiet His wrath, to arouse His pity and compassion, and to move Him to grant the favor that was desired. We can see some of these motives very clearly in the story of how David prayed and fasted for his dying newborn child (2 Sam 12). After the child died, David's servants asked him why he had now *stopped* fasting (they thought of fasting as a mourning ritual). David answered: "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live'" (2 Sam 12:22). Quite apparently, David was fasting to support his prayers and to show the intensity of his concern that his need should be met.

Before the Exile, then, fasting was generally seen as a way in which a man could humble his heart before God and plead for help and mercy.

After the Exile and return, individual fasting increased in popularity. It became the most common expression of Jewish piety. The Gentile world thought of fasting as the characteristic mark of being a Jew. It was during this period that pious Jews voluntarily began fasting two days each week, Monday and Thursday (Luke 18:12). This was fasting without special occasion. Fasting became an important work in and of itself. It was an ascetic exercise to purify a person's emotions and desires and bring him closer to God in his thinking and life.

Fasting in the Old Testament usually meant complete abstinence from food and drink. This was true of the fast on the Day of Atonement, and on other important fast days in later years, it was a 24 hour fast, beginning on the evening of one day and extending to the evening of the next. Ordinary fast days (those proclaimed for a special purpose or those self-imposed) often lasted just for the daylight hours. Most fasts were for one day, but there are examples of fasting that continued for three or even seven days. Extended fasts normally involved only the daylight

hours. Fasting was prohibited on the Sabbath and on major festival days because these were days of rejoicing. Stricter forms of fasting included refraining from work, closing shops, and sleeping on the ground (2 Sam 12:16). The fast on the Day of Atonement included a prohibition against washing, anointing, putting on sandals, and marital intercourse. But there were also milder forms of fasting which involved only the refraining from meat and wine (Dan 10:3). So the word "fast"

עָנָה or the expression "to humble yourself" עָנָה נַפְשׁוֹ do not always connote the same practices. Most commonly, though, they meant the complete abstinence from food.

The prophets of the Old Testament do not condone fasting. They take it for granted. But there are a number of examples of prophetic condemnation of the idea that fasting has any value as an external act. Isaiah 58 shows that God was displeased with the way that Israel fasted while continuing to quarrel and fight and oppress the poor at the same time. God told Israel that the "fast" that He preferred was not abstaining from food but abstaining from wickedness (along with the positive good works of helping the homeless, the poor and the hungry). The prophet Joel expected fasting to continue, but God said through Joel that He wanted more than external show ("Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments" Joel 2:12-13).

Fasting in the New Testament Gospels

Jesus lived at a time when fasting was more popular than at any other time in Jewish history, ancient or modern., Jesus took fasting for granted. He agreed with the prophetic condemnation of external and insincere fasting. But He did not condemn the practice itself. Jesus Himself fasted for 40 days at the beginning of His ministry. Although we do not read that He fasted at any other time, He apparently also observed the national days of fasting since His opponents do not fault Him for failing to do so.

Jesus made two statements on the subject of fasting. The first is in Matthew 1:16-18:

(16) When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (17) But when you fast, put oil, on your head and wash your face, (18) so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and you Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

We see here that fasting is indeed neither commanded nor condemned. But when it is done (and Jesus apparently expects that it will be, v. 17), it is not to be done for show before other people.

Jesus' second statement regarding fasting is Matthew 9:14-15:

(14) Then John's disciples came and asked him, 'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' (15) Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.'

Here Jesus refused to make any rules for His followers about fasting. In fact, He de-emphasized fasting by saying that the characteristic of His kingdom was to be joy and feasting, not sorrow and fasting. And yet he anticipated a time when His followers "will fast." There is no command. But one can scarcely avoid saying that Jesus *anticipated* fasting among His followers. Even

though the disciples were enjoying the bridegroom right then, Jesus indicated (in John 16:20, for example) that there would still be times of weeping, lamenting, and sorrow for them. It was especially the words of Matt 9:15 ("then they will fast") that were used to promote and defend the practice of fasting in the Christian Church in the centuries after Christ.

Fasting in the Apostolic Church

There is evidence that Jewish Christians of the first century brought their fasting with them into Christian churches, Acts 13:2 tells us that while the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch (still strongly Jewish at this time) "were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." The next chapter of Acts tells us that "prayer and fasting" preceded the appointment of elders for the new churches in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23). First-generation Jewish Christians apparently did not discontinue fasting.

Yet it is significant to note that there are no references to fasting in any of the New Testament epistles. Paul, for example, never directs his readers to "fast without ceasing" or any such thing. (The KJV) word "fast" in 2 Cor 6:5 and 11:27 refers to involuntary fasting, or hunger; while the reference to fasting in 1 Cor 7:5 is textually doubtful.) This absence is particularly striking in the epistle to the Hebrews which lists prayer, thanksgiving, worship, and well-doing (but not fasting) as "sacrifices" which please God. And in Romans 14, where Paul discusses the related subject of "days" and "foods," he does not include fasting as an issue that was troubling the church. From this we can tentatively conclude that fasting was not the unanimous practice among first century Christians, particularly those of (Gentile or Hellenistic Jewish) background.

Fasting in the Post-Apostolic Church

Beginning as early as the second century, there was a decided return among Christians to the emphasis on fasting that prevailed in later Judaism. The *Didache* (8:1) exhorted Christians to fast two days a week (as did the Jews), except that Christians were to fast on Wednesday and Friday to show that they were different from the Jews (who fasted on Monday and Thursday). Another early indication that fasting became wide-spread in the early church is the fact that the words "and fasting" were inserted into the New Testament writings at various places where they had not been originally (Matt 17:21; Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Cor 7:5). This would hardly have taken place if fasting had not been a commonly accepted religious practice.

From early on, the most important fast day of the year among Christian was the so-called Easter Fast, the day before Easter. An appeal was made to Jesus' words in Mark 2:20: "When the Bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast *in* (or *on*) *that day*." This was interpreted to refer to the day after His crucifixion. Already in 200 AD this fast day was spoken of as being a tradition of long standing. At first the Easter Fast was limited to one day: Saturday. Later it became popular to fast for 40 hours (thought to be the time Christ was in the grave). In the third century the Easter Fast was extended to the six days of Holy Week, and by the fourth century, many were observing a 40 day Lenten fast (the length paralleled the 40 day fast of Jesus).

The purpose of the Easter (later, Lenten) Fast was not just to commemorate the sufferings of Christ. Just as important was the fact that baptisms were often administered on the Saturday before Easter, and part of the preparation for baptism included fasting. The practice of such an

annual fast gradually spread to the whole church as the devout laity strove to show that they were just as serious about their faith as these new converts. In addition, many Christians used this 40 day fast to relive the time when they, too, had been candidates for baptism.

As has already been noted, Wednesdays and Fridays were the traditional fast days among Christians throughout the year. At the beginning of the third century, Christians in Rome began to observe Sunday as a third fast day – possibly as a weekly commemoration of the day Jesus was in the grave (just as Sunday commemorated the day of His resurrection each week). The Saturday fast day, however, never became wide-spread; not did it last long even in Rome. Wednesday also gradually fell away as a common fast day, leaving only Friday. Friday retained this distinctive status for centuries, being observed as the day of Jesus' death on the cross. As He suffered, so also must His followers. Many other fast days were added to the church's calendar during the 1500 years after Christ such as the vigil fasts (before important church festivals), ember days (little "lents" in each quarter of the year), and rogation days. In the Greek Church calendar, the number of fast days stood, at one time, at 180 days each year.

Perhaps inevitably, fasting for many church members became a mechanical and unspiritual ritual. The church increasingly demanded fasting, perhaps in the hop of bringing a semblance of order and religiosity to the hordes of new church members who were baptized into Empire Christianity, but who knew little or nothing about their faith. The laity learned to keep the rules of fasting because they were the rules, but had little heart for them. Melanchthon later complained that the "people copy the outward behavior of the saints without copying their faith" (*Apology*, XV, 24). Under these circumstances, the people predictably imagined that such fasting was meritorious. By the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas plainly taught that "Fasting avails to destroy and prevent guilt" (quoted in the *Apology*, XV, 24).

The many days of fasting that were prescribed by the church of the Middle Ages probably makes it obvious that the kind of fasting that was practiced was not very strict. In the early post-apostolic church, fasting generally meant abstaining from all food until evening, or eating only one meal which was to be as simple as possible. At first this simple meal meant only bread, salt, and water. Later, fruits and eggs were allowed, sometimes fish and even poultry. But the rules regarding fasting had become so lenient by the time of the Reformation that Melanchthon complains: "Their fasts are more luxurious and sumptuous than other's feasts" (*Apology*, XV 48). Luther, in typical fashion, contends:

In the papacy I never saw a genuine fast. How can I call it a fast if someone prepares a lunch of expensive fish, with the choicest spices, more and better than for two or three other meals, and washes it down with the strongest drink, and spends an hour or three at filling his belly till it is stuffed...But it was the holy fathers, the bishops, the abbots, and the other prelates who were really strict in their observances, with ten and twenty courses and so much refreshment at night that several threshers could have lived on it for three days" (*Luther's Works*, *ibid*, p. 157.)

Indeed, to this day the rules of fasting in the Roman Catholic Church are extremely lenient. A fast day is a day when one full meal is allowed, plus two meatless meals which together equal less than one full meal. The full meal should be such that it does not last for more than two hours, but it may be a "heartly meal." An evening "collation" should be limited to 8 ounces of food. A morning snack is also permitted, consisting of a beverage plus a morsel of bread or cracker. Finally, throughout the fast day a person is allowed to take drinks (no limit)

like lemonade, ginger ale, soda water, wine, beer, and similar drinks, although he should not take honey, soup, milk or broth which constitute food (he may have the latter at mealtime). It should be noted that the church today makes a distinction between a fast day and a day of abstinence. A day of abstinence (formerly all Fridays) is a day when meat is not to be eaten. A fast day is a day when only one full meal is allowed, plus the two smaller meals.

One fast that formerly was strictly observed was the fast before communion. Until quite recently, all food and drink was forbidden after midnight on the day of communion. Later this was eased by allowing a person to drink water during this time. The most recent legislation has reduced the Eucharist Fast to just one hour, the hour to be computed from the actual time when a person expects to receive the Sacrament in the service. One may drink water during this one hour fast but must abstain from food. "Food" is anything that is commonly said to be eaten. We are relieved to find that "non-digestible matter, such as paper, fingernails, or tobacco, does not break the fast" (*The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. V, p. 847). Nor is it broken by "food remaining in teeth from a previous meal" (*idem*). Because of the obvious peril to those engaged in strict fasting, we are again relieved to learn that none of this strenuous self-discipline applies if you are "in danger of death" (*idem*). These new rules were approved by Pope Paul VI in 1964, recognizing the "notable changes introduced by the social and economic conditions of modern society" (*idem*).

When reading all the rules and regulations which govern fasting in the modern Roman Church, one is amazed by the thoroughness and complexity of the legislation. The "casuists" have certainly found "a tempting field to exercise their ingenuity," as the 1927 *Concordia Cyclopedia* says (p. 252). It seems to be with considerable justification that *The New Shaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1912) concludes: "The Church of Rome cares less for the amount of fasting than for the act of obedience performed by its members in observing its rules on this point" (vol IV, p. 283). And the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912) itself remarks: "No student of ecclesiastical discipline can fail to perceive that the obligation of fasting is rarely observed in its integrity nowadays. Conscious of the conditions of our age, the Church is ever shaping the requirements of this obligation to meet the best interests of her children" (vol V, p. 791). And yet, a Roman Catholic book of instruction boasts (after teaching about fasting): "It is surprising that non-Catholics do not look upon Catholics even with admiration, since they must know that Catholics are doing more for God and for their own souls than any other class of people" (*Father Smith Instructs Jackson*, pub. 1956, p. 124). And again: "It is a wonder that Christians of all denominations do not do as much for Jesus" (*ibid*, p. 199).

The attitude of the Reformers toward fasting

As has already been indicated, the Lutheran Reformation did not condemn fasting in itself. Our Confessions assumed that fasting would continue in evangelical churches. Fasting was recommended as part of "good order" (*Apology*, XV, 13), and as a necessary means to restrain the sinful flesh. Speaking of mortifying the flesh in general, Melancthon writes: "We should undertake these exercises...as restraints on our flesh, lest we overcome by satiety and become complacent and idle with the result that we indulge and pamper the desires of our flesh" (*idem*, 47). Luther agrees: "The only purpose of fasting is to discipline the body by outwardly cutting off both lust and opportunity for lust" (*ibid*, p. 162). And again: "If necessary, it should be practiced continually to hold a tight reign on the body and to get it used to enduring discomfort, in case it should be necessary to do so" (*idem*).

Nevertheless, the Augsburg Confession observed that "much harm" had resulted in the church because of the fasting practices of the day. In Article XXVI ("The Distinction of Foods"), three specific abuses are catalogued.

In the first place, it (the prevailing opinion concerning human traditions, including fasting) has obscured the doctrine concerning grace and the righteousness of faith, which is the chief part of the Gospel...The teaching of Paul has been almost wholly smothered by traditions which have produced the opinion that it is necessary to merit grace and righteousness by distinction among foods and similar acts of worship (*Augsburg Confession*, XXVI, 4,6).

The second way that human traditions have caused harm in the church is that they:

Obscure the commands of God, for traditions were exalted far above the commands of God...the commands of God pertaining to callings were without honor – for example, that a father should bring up his children, that a mother should bear children, that a prince should govern his country. These were regarded as secular and imperfect works, far inferior to those glittering observances. This error greatly tormented the consciences of devout people who grieved that they were bound to an imperfect kind of life...and admired the monks and others like them, falsely imagining that the observances of such men were more pleasing to God" (*ibid*, 8-11).

Thus, the reformers saw that human traditions (including rules about fasting, though probably not fasting itself) were replacing true good works commanded by God.

In the third place, ever sympathetic to the tormented consciences of the devout, Melancthon writes that

Traditions brought great dangers to consciences, for it was impossible to keep all traditions, yet men judged these observances to be necessary acts of worship (*ibid*, 12)...The learned men in the churches exacted these works as a service necessary to merit grace and sorely terrified the consciences of those who omitted any of them (*ibid*, 3).

The point here is that anyone who did not follow every rule or even suggestion about fasting would have a guilty conscience about his failure.

The Lutheran Confessions and Martin Luther himself both recommended fasting, then, as an aid against the flesh. But they emphasized again and again that fasting should never, never be considered a meritorious service to God.

Is fasting for us?

How about today? Is there a place for fasting in our churches? Should fasting be recommended? Should it even be talked about as a possible options? The Scriptures do not command us to fast nor to forbid from fasting. Therefore it would seem that we are free to choose whether to fast or not to fast. What should we do?

A case can be made for the practice of fasting. As we observe the current religious scene, also in our own congregations, we can see many signs of comfortable and lackadaisical Christianity. How many are really excited about their faith? How many are willing to take up the

cross and follow Jesus? Where is self-sacrifice? Where is the servant image? Who really thinks all that much about his religion except on Sundays? Fasting has always been used as an external exercise both to promote and also to prove devotion to a cause. If we recommend periodic or regular days of fasting (Luther suggested that, *ibid*, p. 159), would this perhaps help today's Christians (us!) to be more conscious and aware and serious about our faith?

In addition to the evident signs of weakness in today's church, we also remember that we Christians are citizens of a hedonistic society. We have mind-emptying entertainment and diversion at our fingertips, at the flick of a switch, at the turn of a key. Our senses are saturated with the sounds and sights of opulence. Our diets are full of delicacies. We experience and expect instant gratification, instant heat, instant warm-up on transistor equipment, instant dinners, instant coffee, instant pictures, instant credit, instant cooking with microwave ovens, and the like. In spite of our cries of poverty, our lives are crammed with conveniences and luxuries.

What effect does all this have on the soul and on the spirit? Is all this good for the inner man? Or are we living in an age where it becomes almost impossible to "set your minds on the things above, not on earthly things" (Col 3:2). How many can say with Paul, "I beat my body and make it my slave"? (1 Cor 9:27). Are we not more accustomed to *feeding* our bodies and giving ourselves nearly everything that is on the market and that this world values?

Maybe fasting would help. Luther wrote:

True fasting consists in the disciplining and restraining of your body, which pertains not only to eating, drinking, and sleeping, but also to your leisure, your pleasure, and to everything that may delight your body or that you do to provide for it and take care of it. To fast means to refrain and hold back from all such things, and to do so only as a means of curbing and humbling the flesh. This is how Scripture enjoins fasting, calling it 'afflicting the soul' (Lev 16:29), 'afflicting the body,' and the like, so that it stays away from pleasure, good times, and fun (*ibid*, p. 160).

Again and again Luther speaks of "punishing the body," "withholding from it whatever pleases and gratifies it," living a "moderate, sober, and disciplined life," and the like. If Jesus anticipated it, the early church practiced it, Luther recommended it, and our Confessions say that it is a sin to omit it, how can we be indifferent toward fasting as a tool also for us? Maybe fasting would help. Maybe we ought to be recommending fasting once again instead of dropping the reference to it from our Catechism. Maybe this is the place to begin to turn back our attachment to the things of this world.

Maybe. But I for one do not think so. If our survey of the history of fasting has taught us anything, it should have demonstrated how susceptible this practice has always been to abuse. The three abuses of fasting that Melanchthon spelled out 450 years ago still need to be considered. First there is the danger of work-righteousness connected with fasting. Father Smith tells Jackson (in the Roman Catholic instruction manual referred to earlier): "There are different ways of doing penance, but no method so pleasing to God as that by fasting and abstinence...Hence we fast and abstain in order to make satisfaction for our past sins" (*ibid*, p. 188). This is the voice of human reason. If fasting were encouraged in our churches, could we keep ourselves and our members free of such thoughts? Work righteousness is deeply embedded in every sinful heart and nature. We should also not that those two periods of biblical and

Christian history where fasting was practiced most widely are the same two periods when work righteousness dominated religious thinking most noticeably (Judaism after the Exile and Roman Catholicism of the Middle Ages).

Secondly, there is the danger of paying attention to fasting to the neglect of the works of God that have been truly commanded, and of substituting the self-imposed cross of fasting for a real one, imagining that the act of fasting is more pleasing to God than being faithful Christians in our common, everyday duties. Are we really succeeding so well in those works which God has commanded (witnessing, stewardship, charity, etc) that we need to look around for new worlds to conquer?

Thirdly, people who, in freedom, were less strict about fasting would almost surely begin to feel the pressure to conform to the arbitrary practices of the "super saints" who might be very strenuous in their fasting. If they did conform, these would be works grudgingly performed and destructive to the spirit. If those less strict about fasting did not conform to the stricter practices, they would almost surely experience additional twinges of conscience.

For these reasons, then, I do not believe that fasting should be publicly recommended or encouraged in our churches. If one person or the other should decide to practice fasting on a private and personal basis, this can be properly done. But encouragement toward fasting, especially when given to an entire congregation (to people at all different levels of spiritual maturity), would surely result in the above mentioned abuses.

There remains yet for us the problem of how we can glibly dispense with fasting when our Confessions say that "it is a sin to omit" it (*Apology*, XII, 143). Can we say that here is a case where the Confessions do not speak for us? Can we say that, on this point, our Confessions are simply a product of the thinking and practice of their own day and do not apply to us? Can we say that here is a place where they are wrong? The implications of such statements are very serious, especially in view of our *quia* subscription to the Confessions.

Nevertheless we see that all mention of fasting seems to be on the way out in our churches. And there do not seem to be convincing reasons to try to halt the trend.

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