

Fasting as a Christian Tradition and According to Calvin – Part II

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Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice, multifaceted in its meaning. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is often a sign of repentance, a way of turning to God, turning away from evil, and seeking God's will in a time of trouble (e.g., Joel 2). Fasting is sometimes a way of expressing or embodying grief over some tragedy (Nehemiah 1) or one's own sinfulness (Jonah 3). Fasting could also be a means of disciplined preparation, as Moses fasted when he received the law of God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 34) or Elijah fasted before meeting God in the wilderness (1 Kings 19).

Having said this, we must acknowledge another tradition around fasting in the Hebrew Scriptures: the fiery prophetic critique of empty displays of religious piety that lacked genuine repentance or compassionate concern for the poor. The prophet Joel said, "return to [God] with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing" (Joel 2). Isaiah said: "Is not this the fast that [God chooses]: to loose the bonds of injustice Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" (Isaiah 58). Isaiah insisted that feeding the hungry was actually a more important spiritual discipline than traditional practices of fasting. And Amos said: "[God takes] no delight in your solemn assemblies. ... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5)—words that were echoed by the contemporary prophet Martin Luther King Jr.

Jesus picked up on this stream of prophetic criticism from the Hebrew Scriptures. He said "whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting" (Matthew 6). The important thing, Jesus said, was not an outward display of piety, but a sincere desire to seek the will of God. Again, like the prophets of ancient Israel, Jesus calls us to a new kind of fasting: acts of justice and mercy for the last and least among us, saying whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick or the prisoner, we do so to Christ himself (Matthew 25). And in the beatitudes of Luke's gospel, he promises: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled" (Luke 6). Alongside these powerful words, there are the eloquent actions of Jesus, who was famous in his time for giving bread to the hungry and notorious for eating with the outcasts of society. I'm convinced that Jesus learned all this at his mother's breast, from the revolutionary lullaby that Mary sang, the Magnificat: "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1).

Elsewhere in the New Testament there are accounts of fasting as a way of preparing for ministry. In the gospels, we read that, immediately after his baptism by John, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to fast for forty days (Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 4). This was a time of testing, as Jesus prepared to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing, feeding the hungry, liberating the captives, and proclaiming the realm of God. In Acts 13, the church at Antioch fasted and prayed in preparation to lay hands on Paul and Barnabas, and commission them for ministry. In turn, Paul and Barnabas taught other Christian communities to pray and fast as they appointed elders for leadership in the church (Acts 14). Fasting is again a way to discern the will of God and to prepare for ministry.

John Calvin on fasting

John Calvin actually writes quite extensively and eloquently on the virtues of fasting in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He says that, “according to the need of the times, [pastors] should exhort the people either to fasting or to solemn supplications, or to other acts of humility, repentance, and faith” (4.12.14). Calvin elaborates on the “need of the times” as follows: “whenever a controversy over religion arises ... whenever there is a question about choosing a minister ... whenever ... any difficult matter of great importance is to be discussed, ... or [in times of] pestilence, war, and famine” (4.12.14).

Calvin defines fasting as follows: “we do not understand it simply as restraint and abstemiousness in food, but as something else. Throughout its course, the life of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible it bears some resemblance to a fast. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, temporary in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily. This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity” (4.12.18). Basically, for Calvin this means, for certain periods of time, to avoid delicacies and eat more sparingly, “only for need, not also for pleasure.”

Calvin identifies three purposes of fasting: (1) as a personal spiritual discipline, to control the appetites of the body; (2) as preparation for prayer and meditation, which can either be a public or private practice; and (3) as testimony of our repentance before God and our reliance on God’s provision and strength, which can also be a public or private practice (4.12.15). On the idea of fasting as an appropriate accompaniment to prayer, he says: “Surely we experience this: with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God that it can be drawn to prayer with a serious and ardent affection and persevere in it” (4.12.16). As for the notion of fasting in a time of public disaster or crisis, Calvin points to examples from scripture (noted above), concluding: “What reason is there why we should not do the same?” (4.12.17).

As one might expect, Calvin is highly critical of any practices of fasting that, in his view, smack of hypocrisy, superstition, or works of merit. The point is the same one that the prophets of ancient Israel made: that fasting is primarily the embodiment of an inner disposition—a reorientation of the heart, which includes true repentance, self-examination, and humility.