

THEOLOGY JOHN CALVIN: INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, VOL. 1

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CHAPTER 12 THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH: ITS CHIEF USE IN CENSURES AND EXCOMMUNICATION

14. PUBLIC AND MUTUAL PRACTICE OF PENANCE The remaining part of discipline, which is not properly contained within the power of the keys, is where the pastors, according to the need of the times, should exhort the people either to fasting or to solemn supplications, or to other acts of humility, repentance, and faith—of which the time, the manner, and the form are not prescribed by God’s Word, but left to the judgment of the church. Also, the observance of this part, as it is useful, was always customary in the early church, even from the days of the apostles themselves. However, even the apostles were not the first authors, but took their example from the Law and the Prophets. For we see there that whenever anything grave occurred, the people were called together, and supplications and a fast appointed [Joel 2:15; Acts 13:2-3]. The apostles, therefore, followed what was not new to the people of God, and what they foresaw would be useful to them. The explanation of other exercises is similar; by them the people can either be aroused to duty or kept within duty and obedience. There are examples scattered through the sacred histories, which there is no need to collect. To sum them up: whenever a controversy over religion arises which ought to be settled by either a synod or an ecclesiastical court, whenever there is a question about choosing a minister, whenever, finally, any difficult matter of great importance is to be discussed, or again when there appear the judgments of the Lord’s anger (as pestilence, war, and famine)—this is a holy ordinance and one salutary for all ages, that pastors urge the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayers. If anyone declines to accept the testimonies which can be cited from the Old Testament, as if inappropriate to the Christian church, the fact remains that the apostles also followed the same practice. Concerning prayers, however, I think scarcely anyone will be found who would raise a question. Let us, therefore, say something about fasting, since very many, while they do not understand how useful it is, regard it as not very necessary; others also, considering it superfluous, completely reject it. And, since its use is not well understood, it can easily lapse into superstition.

15. THE PURPOSE OF FASTING Holy and lawful fasting has three objectives. We use it either to weaken and subdue the flesh that it may not act wantonly, or that we may be better prepared for prayers and holy meditations, or that it may be a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess our guilt before him. The first objective does not generally have a place in public fasting, because all bodies do not have the same constitution, or the same state of health; therefore, it is more appropriate to private fasting. The second is common to both. For both the whole church and every individual believer have need of such preparation for prayers. The third is common likewise. For it sometimes will happen that God will strike a nation with war, or pestilence, or some calamity. Under this common scourge, the whole people ought to accuse themselves and confess their guilt. But if the hand of the Lord should strike any individual, he ought to do this alone or with his family. The matter lies primarily in the motive of the heart. But when the heart is affected as it ought to be, it can hardly help breaking into outward testimony. And this especially happens if it tends to common edification, so that all together, by confessing their sin openly, render praise to the God of righteousness, and urge one another, each by his example.

16. FASTING AND PRAYER Accordingly, fasting, as it is a sign of self-abasement, has more frequent use in public than among private individuals even though, as has been said,^{F424} it is common to both. In so far, therefore, as it concerns the discipline which we are now discussing, whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer. Thus, when the Antiochenes placed their hands upon Paul and Barnabas, the better to commend their ministry to God, a ministry of great importance, they joined fasting to prayer [^{<441303>}Acts 13:3]. Thus, both of these afterward, when they appointed ministers to churches, were accustomed to pray with fasting [^{<441423>}Acts 14:23]. Their sole purpose in this kind of fasting is to render themselves more eager and unencumbered for prayer. 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. So are we to understand what Luke relates concerning Anna, that she has served the Lord in fasting and prayers [^{<420237>}Luke 2:37]. For Luke does not set the worship of God in fasting; but he means that the holy woman has in this way trained herself to sustained prayer. Such was Nehemiah's fast when, with earnest ²³⁶zeal, he prayed God for the liberation of his people [^{<160104>}Nehemiah 1:4]. For this reason, Paul says that believers act rightly if they abstain for a time from the marriage bed, that they may be left freer for prayer and fasting. There he joins fasting with prayer as an aid to it, and warns that it is of no importance of itself except as it is applied to this end [^{<460705>}1 Corinthians 7:5]. Then, when in the same passage he instructs married couples to give one another mutual consideration [^{<460703>}1 Corinthians 7:3], it is clear that he is not speaking of daily prayers, but of something demanding more serious attention.

17. FASTING AND THE PRACTICE OF PENANCE Again, if either pestilence, or famine, or war begins to rage, or if any disaster seems to threaten any district and people—then also it is the duty of the pastors to urge the church to fasting, in order that by supplication the Lord's wrath may be averted. For where he causes danger to appear he warns that he is ready and, so to speak, armed for vengeance. Therefore, as in ancient times the accused were accustomed to abase themselves as suppliants with long beard, unkempt hair, and dark clothing, in order to appeal to the mercy of the judge—so, when we stand before God's judgment seat, it redounds to his glory and to edification of the people, and is also profitable and salutary for us in humble garb to pray that his severity be averted. And it can be readily inferred from the words of Joel that this was the custom among the Israelites. For when he orders a trumpet to be sounded, an assembly to be called, fasting to be appointed, and the things that follow [^{<290215>}Joel 2:15-16], he is speaking of matters received as common custom. A little before, he had said that the trial of the people's shameful acts was set, and announced that a day of judgment was now at hand, and had summoned the accused to plead their cause [cf. ^{<290201>}Joel 2:1]; then he cries out for them to hasten to sackcloth and ashes, to weeping and fasting [^{<290212>}Joel 2:12], that is, to prostrate themselves before the Lord also with outward testimonies. Indeed, sackcloth and ashes were perhaps more appropriate to those times; but there is no doubt that meeting and weeping and fasting, and like activities, apply equally to our age^{F425} whenever the condition of our affairs so demands. For since this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ²³⁷ancients did in similar need? We read that not only the Israelite church, formed and established on the Word of God [^{<090706>}1 Samuel 7:6; 31:13; ^{<100112>}2 Samuel 1:12], but also the Ninevites, who had no teaching but the preaching of Jonah [^{<320305>}Jonah 3:5], fasted in token of sorrow. What reason is there why we should not do the same? But, you object, this is an external ceremony which, together with others, ended in Christ. No, it is an excellent aid for believers today (as it always was) and a profitable admonition to arouse them in order that they may not provoke God more and more by their excessive confidence and negligence, when they are chastised by his lashes. Accordingly, Christ, when he excuses his apostles for not fasting, does not say

that fasting is abolished, but appoints it for times of calamity and joins it with mourning. "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them." [[400915](#)>Matthew 9:15; [420534](#)>Luke 5:34-35.]F426

18. THE NATURE OF FASTING But to avoid any error in the term, let us define what fasting is. For here 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. By time, I mean that we should carry out those acts of fasting for the sake of which that fast is appointed. As, for example, if a man fasts for the sake of solemn prayer, he should come to it without breaking his fast. Quality consists in that all elegance should be absent, and that, content with common and baser foods, we should not whet our palate with delicacies. The rule of quantity in this is that we should eat more sparingly and lightly than is our custom; only for need, not also for pleasure. 238 (*Danger of superstition, notions of merit, and hypocrisy in fasting and the observance of Lent, 19-21*)

19. MISCONCEPTIONS OF FASTING But we must always take especial precaution lest any superstition creep in, as has previously happened to the great harm of the church. For it would be much more satisfactory if fasting were not practiced at all, than diligently observed and at the same time corrupted with false and pernicious opinions, into which the world repeatedly falls, unless the pastors meet it with the highest faithfulness and prudence. The first point is that they should always urge what Joel teaches, that they are to "rend their hearts, not their garments" [[290213](#)>Joel 2:13]; that is, they should admonish the people that God does not greatly esteem fasting of itself, unless an inner emotion of the heart is present, and true displeasure at one's sin, true humility, and true sorrowing arising from the fear of God. Indeed, fasting is not otherwise useful than when it is joined as a lesser help to these. For God abominates nothing more than when men try to disguise themselves by displaying signs and outward appearances in place of innocence of heart. Therefore, Isaiah very severely inveighs against the Jews' hypocrisy in thinking they were satisfying God when they had only fasted, whatever impiety and impure thoughts they harbored in their hearts. "Is this the fast that the Lord has chosen?" [[235805](#)>Isaiah 58:5-6, conflated], and what follows. Hypocritical fasting, then, is not only a useless and superfluous weariness but the greatest abomination. Another evil akin to this, and to be utterly avoided, is to regard fasting as a work of merit or a form of divine worship. For since fasting is in itself a thing indifferent, and should have no importance except for the sake of those ends to which it ought to be directed, a most dangerous superstition is involved in confusing it with works commanded by God and necessary of themselves without any other consideration. Such was the delusion of the Manichees of old. Augustine, in refuting them, teaches clearly enough that fasting is to be judged solely by those ends which I have mentioned, and that it is approved by God only if it has reference to this.F427There is a third error, not indeed so impious, but still dangerous: to require it to be 239 kept too strictly and rigidly as if it were one of the chief duties, and to extol it with such immoderate praises that men think they have done something noble when they have fasted. In this respect, I dare not wholly absolve the ancient writers from having sown certain seeds of superstition and having furnished the occasion of the tyranny which afterward arose. In them one sometimes comes across sane and wise statements about fasting, but later one repeatedly meets immoderate praises of fasting, which set it up among the chief virtues.

20. DEGENERATION OF FASTING IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH At that time the superstitious observance of Lent had prevailed everywhere, because the common people thought that in it they were doing some exceptional service to God, and the pastors commended it as a holy imitation of Christ.F428 On the contrary, it is plain that Christ did not fast to set an example for others, but to prove, in so beginning to proclaim the gospel, that it was no human doctrine but actually one sent from heaven [<400402>Matthew 4:2]. And the marvel is that such sheer hallucination (which is refuted so often and with such clear arguments) could creep upon men of keen judgment. For Christ does not fast often—as he would have to do if he had willed to lay down a law of yearly fasting—but only once, when he girded himself for the proclamation of the gospel. Nor does he fast in human fashion, as would have been fitting if he willed to arouse men to imitate him; but he shows an example rather to transport all men to admiration of him than to arouse them with zeal to imitate him. Finally, his reason for fasting was not different from that which Moses performed when he received the law at the Lord's hand [<022418>Exodus 24:18; 34:28]. For since that miracle was manifested in Moses to establish the authority of the law, it ought not to have been omitted in Christ, lest the gospel seem to yield to the law. But since that time it never entered any man's mind, on the excuse of following Moses, to establish such a form of fasting among the people of Israel. And none of the holy prophets and patriarchs followed it, even when they had enthusiasm and zeal enough for all pious exercises. For the statement that Elijah went forty days without food and drink [<111908>1 Kings 19:8] only served to apprise the people that he had been raised up to restore the law, 240 from which almost all Israel had departed. It was, therefore, mere wrongheaded zeal,F429 full of superstition, that they justified and painted fasting as the following of Christ. However, there was amazing diversity in the manner of fasting, as Cassiodorus relates from the ninth book of Socrates' history. For the Romans (he says) had only three weeks, but for them the fast was continuous, except on Sunday and Saturday. The Illyrians and Greeks had six; others, seven; but fasting was at intervals. They differed as much in choice of foods: some ate only bread and water; others added vegetables; still others did not abstain from fish and fowl; others made no distinction in foods.F430 Augustine also mentions this difference in his second letter to Januarius.F431

21. DEPRAVED INDULGENCE IN SEASONS OF LASTING Worse times then followed, and to the misdirected zeal of the people was added the incompetence and lack of training of the bishops, as well as their lust for mastery and their tyrannical rigor. Wicked laws were passed which bind consciences with deadly chains. The eating of meat was forbidden, as if it would defile a man. Sacrilegious opinions were piled upon one another, until the depth of all errors was reached. And not to overlook any depravity, they began, with a completely absurd pretense of abstinence, to mock God. For the praise of fasting is sought in the most exquisite delicacies; then no dainties are enough; at no other time is there greater abundance or variety or sweetness of foods. They think that they are duly serving God in such and so elegant trappings. I forbear to mention that they who wish to be esteemed the most holy of men never glut themselves more foully. To sum up: for them the highest worship of God is to abstain from meats, and in their place to abound in all sorts of delicacies.