

Can You Tell Me? The Place and Purpose of Fasting Today

Question: Scripture speaks of fasting in both the Old and the New Testament. How can this be applied to the life of a Reformed Christian?

Answer: In reaction to formalism, Reformed Christians have gone to the extreme of almost totally disregarding what the Bible teaches about fasting. What is fasting? The Biblical teaching is that, for certain spiritual reasons men and women abstain from food. Through fasting a Christian expresses to God that he/she is humbly waiting on Him alone. In the Sermon of Mount Jesus makes it quite plain that those who belong to Him faithfully observe the practice of fasting, but He enjoins them to do it in secret (Matt. 6:16-18). When our Lord excuses His disciples from fasting, He does not say that it was abolished, but it is appointed for times of calamity and mourning. (Cf. Matt.9:15; Luke 5:34-35)

Christians in all ages and in all places have not only believed in fasting, they have practiced it. The apostles practiced fasting. When facing certain important decisions, the early Church recognized the need for fasting before deciding to set out on a mission. The church in Antioch, when it sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first preaching tour, did so only after a period of prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2f). Indeed, on important occasions, when faced with a vital decision, the early church always seemed to give themselves to fasting as well as prayer. Thus fasting is linked with prayer and openness to the leading of the Lord. Almost all the church fathers encouraged the practice of fasting. Augustine said: "Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving." The Protestant Reformers taught the value of fasting. Concerning fasting, Luther said, "We do not, therefore, object to fasting itself, but to the fact that it is represented as a necessary duty and that specific days have been fixed for its performance." Calvin said that the sole purpose of private fasting is to render ourselves more eager and unencumbered for prayer. "Sure 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." He also wrote, "...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 to fasting, in order that by supplication the Lord's wrath may be averted." In the days of the Reformation, prayer services were accompanied by fasting. A modern illustration is the devotional practice of Pastor Hsi of China. When Hsi was confronted by some new or exceptional difficulty or problem, he invariably had a period of fasting as well as prayer.

How should we apply the principle of fasting in our Reformed devotional practice? Fasting should be done now and then for a spiritual purpose.

Whenever a special need is felt for an entire concentration of our being upon God and our worship of Him, fasting is a means to reach a higher spiritual realm of prayer. In time of danger or sorrow, of physical or spiritual need, Christians realize their inadequacy. In humility and repentance, they look to the Lord for their help and strength. This may well involve a time of private fasting.

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