

1535 Words

'Is fasting necessary for Christians?'

The Cambridge dictionary defines the term 'fast' as simply a duration of time in which one consumes no food. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019) This limiting and restricting definition fails to realise the complex history and nature of the practice of fasting. As a global cultural phenomenon, often a crucial religious ritual, in what context fasting is applied to a specifically Christian belief is fundamental. (Piper, 2013) Debates around the necessity of fasting, or even whether it should be practised at all, are a relatively recent occurrence on such a large scale – as pre-reformation fasting was often easily accepted as a part of the Christian lifestyle. Thus, it is key to reevaluate the Biblical and somewhat historical evidence for the practice before analysing its modern application. The reasoning and scriptural evidence behind fasting will hence be explored.

## What does the Bible say?

The Old Testament clearly displays the fundamental role of fasting in Jewish tradition, including Pharisaic Judaism which is further exemplified in the New Testament. The dietary laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy show a legalistic approach to food, forbidding the mixing of meat and dairy or consuming meats deemed to be 'unclean.' The reasoning for this is often argued, by those such as Grimm (1966), as having a separatist nature rather than the modern arguments of hygiene. By imposing specifically Jewish laws, Jews were prevented from dining with those of other faiths/traditions. Despite this reverence for rules, there is only one fast commanded by God in Mosaic Law, although the Hebrew word for fasting isn't directly used in stead of 'deny yourselves,' described as 'the day of atonement' in Leviticus 23:26–33 and Numbers 29:7–11. However, there are numerous examples of fasting by both prophets and others. In preparation for receiving God's Law, Moses fasted for forty days which shows one of the uses of fasting being preparation for experiencing God. The contrasting, and more frequent, displays of fasting are as an expression of sorrow, guilt, and desperation; that God may answer them in a time of need. For example, Moses' second fast in Deuteronomy 9:18 or of David and his men in 2 Samuel 1:11–13, and in various other cases where fasting is used as a tool to avert disaster or to gain approval in war. The ascetic use by the likes of monks is not yet developed. (Grimm, 1996) One can argue though, that the distinct prevalence of fasting in the Old Testament, as a traditional rather than a moral practice, leaves it to be overridden by the new covenant and the coming of Jesus in the New Testament.

## A New Covenant

The disqualification of the Mosaic food laws mentioned above can be generally attributed to the writings of St. Paul in the Pauline Epistles. In the Christianity of Paul, one's piety is not endangered by what's eaten. (Grimm, 1996) As restrictions on what types of food can be eaten are no longer necessary, why would when it's eaten be? The protestant reformers saw fasting as a legacy convention, something that was no longer necessary in the way Catholics or even the Orthodox believed. One of the cases at the forefront of this is that of Ulrich Zwingli in 1522, a leader in the Swiss Reformation, who was arrested for breaking the compulsory Lenten fast from meat without obtaining an exemption (which could be paid for). These reformers made point of the lack of regimented fasting in the New Testament or any

commands for such, nor dictating what can or cannot be eaten – it was entirely optional. Most importantly, how did this fasting aid in one's salvation? (Albala and Eden, 2011) This becomes especially relevant when considering the Five Solae stating one is saved through God's grace and belief, rather than 'good works' of which fasting would be categorised as; that materials were not linked to salvation. (Barnett, 2020) However, this logic is by no means against fasting, as that would be a gross simplification of Christian practices and spirituality on the whole, simply that it shouldn't be enforced and isn't necessary. St. Ignatius of Loyola illustrates this distinction, as a Catholic (Jesuit) he very much encouraged fasting in his earlier life and writes about undertaking many, but clearly emphasises the importance of one's physical health. For it should be remembered that the body is gift from our Lord and His property, and food a blessing from Him, and if one's fasts beyond their capability and causes damage, their spiritual health is sacrificed too. Praying is of ultimate importance in relation to worship (with communion etc), which cannot be done if overly tired. (Ignatius of Loyola and Munitiz, 1996) 1 Timothy 4:3-5 reinforces this by saying, in summary, that although food is good, God is better.

## Why fast?

With the above arguments, it is significant to explain the reasoning behind fasting. If fasting is merely optional, why should anyone do it? The inherent link between fasting and prayer, as seen in Psalm 53:13; Matthew 6:5-18 and 1 Corinthians 7:5, show its vitality to spiritual life. Abstaining from food, if the focus on God is correctly substituted in its place, is an enduring and outward expression of prayer and, if Matthew 17:21 is to be taken, can initiate spiritual power. (Falwell, 1981) The power of fasting is not the physical triumph of abstaining from food, but the faith that is manifested in the process; that we can fully offer ourselves to our Lord. Although the reward of 'self-mastery' is of course countered with the equal danger of pride. (Lewis, 2012) Throughout Christianity, and society on the whole, the importance of intention is acknowledged. Abba Poemen, a desert father, argues that for this reason complete fasting is unnecessary and often intended to be simply a display of physical triumph over the body. After all, to deny oneself food entirely is to deny sustenance and to disrespect God's creation. (Jotischky, 2011) Reformers and others critical of Catholic fasting, in which fish is permitted in stead of meat, saw what could be referred to as a transgression of the sanctity of the practice and dismissing the utility of fasting, which is self-denial. Elaborate feasts of fish were eaten, or fasting became a public matter in seeking approval (as is condemned in Matthew 6:16). (Albala and Eden, 2011) Public and private fasting should, however, be distinguished in that the former should be reserved for asking to be spared from widespread disaster and the latter taken upon in cases of spiritual need. (Ryrie, 2016) In light of its spiritual benefits, with fasting being such a well-known societal practice, what makes it a specifically Christian one? When fasting, are you truly following the Bible and God or simply continuing a tradition or a health fad?

## A Christian Fast

As fasting died out with the rise of Protestantism, particularly in the UK, it is crucial to consider the place of food in Christianity and societally. The civic benefits of fasting, in that it sustained the fishmongers and relaxed pressure on cattle farmers, are by no means uniquely Christian traits. (Barnett, 2020) Here

is where the importance of the words of Jesus Himself take precedence. In Matthew 9:14-17 Jesus directly responds to questions of fasting from John's disciples (who were taught to fast), in which He calls for a new form of fasting distinct from old Jewish practices: we need 'new wine' for the 'new wineskins' of the incarnation. Jewish fasting traditions are not entirely empty, but to long for the messiah who has already come is no longer necessary, and so it should be adapted. In the presence of God incarnate, why fast when fasting is for times of sorrow? After the ascension, one may fast to long for deeper knowing of God, but this is only possible since He was already among us. (Piper, 2013) 'And then shall they fast.' To draw closer to God and deny the temptations of the physical world, to distance oneself from gluttony, fasting is a necessary means. Fasting is about mortification of the flesh, not only in gluttony but lust and other earthly pleasures also, and thus the spiritual counterpart to such a practice is of immeasurable importance.

Perhaps the findings of this essay can be mostly surmised by 1 Corinthians 6:12, in which Paul writes, "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." In the right circumstances, it becomes obvious that fasting can be and is a tool of God that strengthens spirituality. The focus is of course the 'right circumstances' however, and the lack of objective call to fasting by no means diminishes it needs within the Christian spiritual life. Although fasting is not necessary, reinstating it into Protestantism in some manner would have countless benefits for the individual and what was once Christendom, collectively. That such a powerful means of worship is cast aside becomes increasingly intolerable in a society where consumerism and over-consumption is progressively established as the norm. The continuation of such in Orthodoxy and Catholicism show that there is a widespread need for fasting, even if it may need to be adapted to modern societal context.

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