

Fasting

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(Written upon request to be read before a church Bible class, denomination unknown.)

I. Distinction must be made between practices under the Old Testament (law of Moses and the New Testament (law of Christ)

- A. The Old Testament was temporary, given to govern and lead Jews to the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Testament, to which all today should be subject. (Gal. 3:24-25, Heb. 9:15-16)
- B. Transition from the old to the new took place at the cross of Christ, taking the old “out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Col 2:14), and putting the New Testament in force “For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.” (Heb. 9:17)
- C. Tendency to justify and insist upon practices based on the law of Moses rather than Christ, having all authority in the New Testament was a problem of the New Testament church. Some of Jewish heritage sought to bind certain Old Testament practices, such as circumcision, saying “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1) In response, Peter asks, “...why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10) Paul later exhorts those being thus pressured, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” (Gal. 5:1) The problem is also reflected in his admonition to Christians at Colosse. After reminding them that ordinances of the Old Testament had been nailed to the cross, he admonished, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days” (Col. 2:16) It was wrong not only to impose practices of the Old Testament, but to allow such to be imposed upon oneself.
- D. To justify a practice on the premise of Old Testament authority:
 - 1. Opens the door to many other practices not authorized in the New Testament, such as observance of an annual day of atonement, a limited Aaronic priesthood, animal sacrifices, laws of defilement, rites of purification, laws of meal offerings, peace offerings, trespass offerings, etc., etc., etc.
 - 2. Constitutes a practical denial of the completeness of authority in Christ and the New Testament – “the perfect law of liberty.” (Jam. 1:25) “Perfect” (from the Greek) indicates “completeness,” “fullness to its end” to govern Christians in matters pertaining to life, worship, and service to God.

II. Fasting under the *Old Testament* (not for authority, but for the benefit of inspired historical consideration)

- A. Many instances, apparently without specific command, but natural human action in foregoing food on momentous spiritual occasions: in times of distress, mourning, temptations, confession of sin, etc., with pleadings in prayer. Examples:
1. Moses in the mount "...was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments." (Ex. 34:28)
 2. Children of Israel upon loss of 40,000 men in battle (Judges 20:26)
 3. Samuel and the people confessing sins at Mizpah (1 Sam. 7:6)
 4. David in mourning over the death of Saul, Jonathon, and people in battle (2 Samuel 1:11-12) and when his child by the wife of Uriah was stricken (2 Samuel 12:16)
 5. Nehemiah upon hearing the distress of survivors of the captivity and the breaking down of the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:3-4)
 6. Elijah in despondency fleeing the wrath of Jezebel (I Kings 19:1-10)
- B. Special fasts of the people were sometimes proclaimed by human initiative. Examples:
1. Jehosaphat, king of Judah, "proclaimed" a fast, in fear of invading armies (2 Chron. 20:1-4)
 2. Ezra, the Scribe, upon leading a contingent back from captivity, proclaimed a fast that they might humbly seek the right way from God (Ezra 8:21-23)
 3. Esther, in peril of her life in going before the king on behalf of her people, made request of fasting for her by all Jews in Shushan (Esther 4:16)
- C. Few instances are recorded of absolute specific command to fast in the Old Testament. Examples:
1. Moses only commanded one particular annual holy day of fasting, the great day of atonement for sin, with all its rituals and sacrifices. (Lev. 23:28-32, 16:1-34) "Afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:29) was considered to imply fasting. Other regular fasts, however, were evidently approved of God, such as on the 4th, 5th, 7th, and 10th months when properly observed. (Zech. 7:1-7, 8:18)

2. God did later give specific command to impenitent Judah, being warned of impending terrible retribution: “Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.” (Joel 2:12-13) From this it is clear that anyone turning to God in repentance, humility, fasting, and prayer without a specifically directed command was approved in so doing.

- D. Christ, living as a Jew under the Old Testament, “fasted forty days and forty nights” in severity of temptation in the wilderness. (Matt. 4:1-2) Since he was “without sin” (Heb. 4:15) and “sin is the transgression of the law” (I Jn. 3:4), we infer that Christ fasted on the day of atonement in keeping with the law of Moses (and would have expected his disciples to do likewise. There is no record of Christ commanding his disciples to fast, but a stern warning against hypocrisy and outward show when they did: “...when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast.” (Matt. 6:16)

Note: Since survival appears biologically impossible after 40 days and nights without food and water, we conclude that divine sustenance was involved in the cases of Christ, Moses, and Elijah.

III. Fasting under the New Testament (which came into force with Christ’s death (Heb. 9:15-17) (“Fasting” can have reference to being without food (Matt. 15:32), but generally abstaining from food. “Meat,” generally is used of food, but occasionally of flesh food (1 Cor. 8:13).)

- A. There is no requirement of fasting, such as was commanded under the Old Testament, or such as proposed and imposed by men and churches since the completion of the New Testament. Fasts, such as at Lent , extending from “Ash Wednesday” to the celebration of “Easter,” is totally of human authority. So also with all other present day prescribed religious fasts: full, partial, or limited to certain food on proscribed days. The seriousness of commanding what God does not is clearly seen in the apostle Paul’s warning of a coming apostasy: “...when some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits....Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.” (I Tim 4:1-3) While not speaking specifically of fasting, yet the principle is the same in commanding to abstain from meat (food) in fasting which God does not command. Furthermore, it is remarkable that such has happened along with “forbidding men to marry,” which the New Testament says “is honorable in all.” (Heb. 13:4)

B. Instances of fasting mentioned in the New Testament all appears voluntary; not commanded or mandated. Examples:

1. Cornelius, a lost Gentile army officer, “fasted and prayed in his house” (Acts 10:30) before Peter arrived to tell him “words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.” (Acts 11:13-14)
2. Prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1) on a momentous occasion: “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.” (Acts: 13:2-3) “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” was a command of the Spirit. Fasting and praying was not commanded, but was appropriate on such a solemn occasion.
3. Paul and Barnabas “...when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord...” (Acts 14.23) Ordaining qualified elders (also called bishops) in every local church as overseers is an apostolic command. (Titus 1:5-9, I Tim. 3:1-11) What was occasion for praying and fasting then rarely takes place in most churches of today because they neglect or ignore the New Testament order of congregational oversight.
4. The apostle Paul, with other prisoners, shipmen, and soldiers (probably not Christians) in a life-threatening storm of many days at sea. “...besought them all to take meat saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing. Wherefore I pray you to take some meat: for this is for your health: for there shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you.” (Acts:27:33-34)
5. “The fast” to which Paul refers as “now already past” (Acts 27:9-10) is considered to refer to the day of atonement (Lev. 23:28-32, 16:1-34), which some Jewish Christians continued to keep with other practices of the Old Testament. (See marginal note in the New American Standard Bible).
6. Paul, voluntarily in the course of preaching the gospel “...in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings” (2 Cor. 6:4-5. “In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” (2 Cor. 11:27)

7. Voluntarily acceptable in consensual temporary suspension of marriage duty: “Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency. But I speak this by permission, and not commandment.” (1 Cor. 7:5-6)

Some practices commanded under Moses are voluntarily permissible, but not by command, under Christ. “...in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.” (Gal. 6:15) Knowing this, Paul took Timothy and circumcised him. (Acts 16:3) But when under pressure to obey the command of Moses, Titus “was not compelled to be circumcised.” (Gal. 2:3-5) Abstinence from food commanded by Moses is permissible under Christ, not command. Paul says, “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.” (Rom. 14:21) And again, “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.” (1 Cor. 8:13) Thus, it is one thing to engage in a practice as mandatory and another thing to do it by permission voluntarily.

IV. Conclusions

- A. Fasting under Christ is permissible, not mandatory as commanded under Moses.
- B. Coupled with prayer, fasting can be natural, desirable, and in order in certain circumstances.
- C. Fasting must be totally voluntary, not by imposition of others.
- D. Fasting must be with sincerity of heart before God and void of outward show to be seen of men, as Christ forewarned.