

A Call to Fasting and Prayer

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Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, the fifty-third General Assembly overwhelmingly approved Overture 50, calling for a solemn day of fasting and prayer throughout the Presbyterian Church in America for the revival and renewal of the church. This summons from the church's highest court – to humble ourselves and seek the blessing of heaven's highest throne – should stir our hearts with hope for the future. As we call upon the Lord for a powerful movement of his grace, let us urge one another to seize this opportunity, confident that God will hear our prayers. We have his promise: those who wait on the Lord will never be put to shame (Psa. 25:3). To help us prepare for this day, we need to understand what fasting is, its Scriptural background and importance, its purpose and integration with prayer, and some guidelines for observing the day to the greatest spiritual benefit.

FASTING

Fasting is a spiritual discipline in which a believer abstains from food and drink (with the exception of water) for a period of time in order to devote himself or herself to the pursuit of God in prayer and devotion. "Solemn fastings... upon special occasions" are acts of religious worship (WCF 21.5; Lk. 2:37). Intermittent fasting has lately become a popular diet and health trend with various physical

benefits. As a spiritual discipline, however, the focus and goal of Christian fasting is the benefit of the soul not the body.

Fasting is a means to humble us before the Lord. The first mention of fasting in the Bible, and the only reference to the practice in the Pentateuch, occurs in connection with the Day of Atonement when the Lord instructed the Israelites to afflict themselves (Lev. 16:29-31; 23:26-33). This affliction took the form of refraining from food. It involved a physical hardship designed to bring the people of Israel to a realization of and sorrow for their sins as well as to focus their attention on the hope of forgiveness offered through sacrificial blood (cf. Lev. 16:19, 30, 34). David stands out as an Old Testament example who afflicted himself with fasting (Psa. 35:13), and we should follow his example to assume a posture of lowliness before the Lord, our great king.

By humbling us with hunger, fasting reminds us of just how dependent we are upon the Lord. Without his provision of daily bread, our bodies soon become weak, and that weakness strips away every false notion of self-reliance. Fasting also reminds us that, while we need daily bread, we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God's mouth (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4). When we fast, the Lord intends for our physical appetite to stimulate our spiritual appetite. Like Job, we must learn to treasure the words of his mouth more than our necessary food (Job 23:12). We should use our natural desire for food and drink to prompt our souls to hunger and thirst for all the gifts and graces that accompany the kingdom of God. Physical hunger should lead us to a

deeper understanding, appreciation, and experience of what it means to taste and see that the Lord is good (Psa. 34:8). Fasting is the opposite of feasting but when properly understood and practiced it offers an unparalleled opportunity for our souls to discover delights far greater than any earthly banquet. Writing to his friend Marion M'Naught after she had recovered from a serious illness, Samuel Rutherford reminded her, "The Bridegroom is with you yet; so fast as that also you may feast and rejoice in Him."

When the Bible discusses the topic of fasting, abstinence from food is always the subject. Our Reformed forefathers, however, saw a broader principle at work in the Scripture's teaching on this subject. In the original 1645 *Westminster Directory for Public Worship*, the chapter devoted to "Public Solemn Fasting" encouraged believers to abstain from "all worldly labour, discourses, and thoughts, and from all bodily delights, and such like..." While it may not be possible for us to take a day off work or refrain from other conversations during the day, we should ask ourselves if there are other areas, in addition to food, where abstinence would be a spiritual benefit to us. Perhaps the overuse of our phones and social media would be a good place to start.

FASTING AND PRAYER

Holy Scripture often links the practice of fasting with prayer, and where the connection is not explicit one could argue that it is implicit. One of the purposes of fasting is to reclaim the time you would otherwise use for a meal

and devote it to praise, intercession, and supplication. Prayer and fasting are twin graces in the pursuit of God and his blessings.

When we survey the practice of prayer and fasting in the Bible, we can see the various ways in which God's people have engaged in these disciplines for specific purposes. Scripture most often associates fasting and prayer as a response to some great sorrow. For example, when Nehemiah received the news of Jerusalem's desolation, he "wept and mourned for days, and... continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4). He was brokenhearted over the condition of Zion. Overture 50 reminds us of "the persistent divisions and relative spiritual poverty of the church" as "a source of great grief to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ." Our day of fasting and prayer should be an occasion of mourning over the state of the church. We should weep for the PCA but also for every Bible-believing denomination and congregation for our widespread lack of power and effectiveness.

One of the great sorrows over which the men and women of the Bible fasted and prayed was the tragedy of sin and its consequences. Israel fasted at Mizpah and confessed their sins (1 Sam. 7:6). Daniel anchored his moving prayer of repentance for the sins of Israel in the steadfast love and covenant faithfulness of God, but he poured out his prayer with "pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:3). The people of Nineveh also clothed themselves with sackcloth and called for a fast when they heard and believed the message that God was going to judge their sin (Jon. 3:5-7). The General Assembly

has called upon us to humble ourselves “before the LORD, fast and pray, and seek his mercy in heartfelt repentance over ministerial sins, the sins of officers, members, and whole congregations.” Like Daniel, we must pour out our sorrow for our transgressions. The Lord intends for the ache in our stomachs to aid the ache of our hearts for his mercy.

God’s people fasted and prayed during times of famine as well. Judah mourned and languished during a time of drought (Jer. 14:1-12). Joel summoned God’s people to lament, wail, and consecrate a fast for the desolation caused by an invasion of locusts (Joel 1:13-14). Amos reminds us, however, that the greatest famine is the lack of hearing God’s word (Amos 8:11-12). As we repent of ministerial sins, we should lament the widespread lack of true, biblical preaching across the land. Furthermore, we should seek the Lord to bless our own pulpits so that the preaching of the PCA will be faithful to the Scriptures and nourishing to the saints. As Overture 50 urges, “earnest prayer should be made for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the blessing of heaven on the preached word, the conversion of the lost, the planting of faithful churches at home, and the success of the gospel in our communities, on college campuses, and on the mission field around the world.”

Though sorrow and repentance play dominant roles in the practice of fasting and prayer, the Bible offers several other reasons that God’s people should engage in these disciplines. When his enemies came against him in battle, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout Judah to seek help from the Lord (2

Chron. 20:3). When we face spiritual assaults from the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:12), we can call upon the help of heaven. Like Ezra who fasted on his journey to Jerusalem, we should bring our needs to the Lord assured that “the hand of our God is for good on all who seek him” (see Ezra 8:21–23).

The greatest example we have of fasting is our Lord Jesus Christ. After his baptism, the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and nights (Matt. 4:1ff.). That period of intense spiritual devotion as well as fierce temptation prepared him for his public ministry. Emerging from his fast he began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (v. 17). While Christ’s ministry was unique, his example demonstrates the role of fasting and prayer as means of preparation for the faithful and powerful preaching of the gospel.

The church in Antioch, after fasting and praying, laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them out on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). The practice of fasting and prayer led to kingdom expansion. When those men retraced their steps at the end of that journey, they appointed elders in every church and “with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23). The practice of the early church demonstrates the importance of these disciplines for our evangelistic outreach as well as for the health of local congregations.

When the disciples of John questioned the Lord Jesus about fasting, they wondered why they and the Pharisees observed this practice, but the disciples of

Jesus did not. The Savior replied, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15). Our Bridegroom has been taken away. The Father has received him into glory as the ascended and reigning Lord of the church. Now is the time for us to fast and express our longing for his return.

GUIDELINES

When you fast, you should observe some guidelines, both spiritual and physical. Spiritually, your fast should be for the Lord (Zech. 7:5). It should be a sincere expression of your heart’s desire for him and his blessing. So, dedicate the fast to him with the intention that he receive all the honor for it and every answer to prayer that flows from it. Whether we eat, or drink, or refrain from both, we must do all for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Next, do not draw attention to the fact that you are fasting. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us not to be hypocritical when we engage in this discipline (Matt. 6:16-18). A two-faced approach to fasting looks sad and disheveled without but proud and boastful within. The self-righteous fast says, “Look at me and see how spiritual I am.” A godly fast leads you instead to comb your hair, wash your face, and guard your heart. We must mortify the flesh by the power of the cross, lest a Pharisaical attitude rise within us to boast of its achievements (Lk. 18:12). In fasting, what matters most is not what others see but

what the Lord observes when he looks at your heart. On a church-wide day of fasting and prayer, others may assume you are fasting, but you should not draw attention to it. Let your devotion be the sincere, inward dedication of your heart, even when you gather with others to pray.

Along with guarding your soul, it is also important to care for your body during a fast. Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated and avoid or at least limit caffeine. When you break the fast, eat a little light or soft food, something like fruit or soup, before having a normal meal. If you have diabetes or a chronic illness such as heart, kidney, liver, or lung disease, consult your physician before fasting, as should women who are pregnant or nursing. And, if you have any history of an eating disorder, you should also consult a healthcare professional as well, since fasting may trigger harmful behaviors such as anorexia or bulimia.

In Psalm 65, David lifted his voice to the Lord: “O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come” (v. 2). We have been called to come to this great God and call upon him—to come with fasting, approaching him in humility with our supplications and pleas. Let us lift our hearts before him. Let us seek his face. Let us cry out, “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation” (Psa. 85:6-7).