

ABSTRACT

Sacred and Secular Affliction: Fasting in the History of the West and Western Christianity

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Fasting has been a part of human history from the very beginning. Whether involuntary due to a lack of food or voluntary due to a religious practice, fasting has remained a part of human culture; now, the practice has even found its niche in the health and fitness community and is resurging in Christian circles. This thesis explores the evolution of fasting in the history of medicine and modern culture, as well as the history of western Christianity. Works from historic giants such as Hippocrates, Saint Augustine, Avicenna, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Upton Sinclair, and C.S. Lewis show that fasting is a staple of western practice. Finally, it finishes with a look at the interplay between the two realms. Fasting, common to the human experience, can be used in a variety of ways; whether one uses the practice for holy purposes or for healthy purposes depends on the intent of the agent.

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SACRED AND SECULAR AFFLICTION: FASTING IN THE HISTORY OF THE
WEST AND WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

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PREFACE

As an underclassmen in my undergraduate studies, I had the heavy cloud of an abstract thing called an ‘Honors Thesis’ hanging over my head. Some people much older and much smarter than myself told me that I had the freedom to write a big research paper on whatever I wanted. As I matured in my college career, that cloud did not go away, but the time was approaching when I needed to begin researching and writing. “What will I write about?” I asked myself and others. The most common reply was another question: “Well, what are you interested in?” Sadly, my answer has always been “yes.”

I knew that I wasn’t interested in math or politics, but just about everything else imaginable could answer the question “What are you interested in?” As time passed by more and more, I began to realize that I needed to pick something to write about. As a junior in college, my main focuses were in the biological sciences, health and fitness, and the Bible. I had narrowed my scope down to three broad categories – sort of.

At the time, I practiced what is known as ‘Intermittent Fasting’ in the health and fitness world. One day I asked myself, “Why don’t I religiously fast as much as I fast to stay fit? In fact, why do none of my very spiritual friends religiously fast? What happened, aren’t we supposed to? How did we get to this point in time, where a spiritual discipline is used more in the secular realm than the spiritual? Can I do both at the same time? What about ‘fasting’ from my phone? Does anyone still do this?”

This thesis is an attempt to answer those burning questions that rushed into my head one day. I hope that you may find this brief look into the histories of fasting in the secular world and the sacred one enlightening, and that you may come out on the other side with a respect for the practice of fasting and how it has manifested itself over the span of human history. Fasting, from whatever angle you might approach it, is initially humbling. People may get ‘better’ at abstaining from eating food or a certain kind of food, but my prayer is that you will learn to keep humility at the heart of whatever discipline you practice in order to better both yourself and others.

Blessings,

Dylan Landis

INTRODUCTION

Fasting is as old as our species. If a person could not find food to eat, he or she could not eat. Furthermore, it is almost a universal cultural and religious practice. Fasting is observed all across the world in every major religion in some way, shape, or form. Today, the practice is a topic of intrigue in the health and fitness world as well as the scientific community. How, and when, did these religious practices form? Moreover, how and when did the scientific community take interest in such a practice? This thesis intends to answer the question for one religion, Christianity, and for the scientific community. Fasting developed over the centuries in both medical and spiritual use together; the reasons for which they are used may differ, but the practice nonetheless requires, and exercises, human self-discipline that ought to be used to better oneself and others.

The first chapter looks at the development of fasting in the history of medicine and modern culture in the West. Hippocrates, Galen, Upton Sinclair, and ‘fitness influencers’ will be used to show the evolution of the practice. The second chapter switches over to fasting in the Bible and the main ideas behind it. Passages from the Old and New Testaments will show two core ideas about fasting in the Bible. The third chapter looks at how fasting developed in the history of the western Church and where it stands today in Catholic and Evangelical circles. The fourth chapter briefly looks at interplay between fasting in medical and religious circles, and whether or not one can fast for spiritual and physical reasons simultaneously.

This thesis is not a complete history, and it separates medicine and religion by looking at them in different chapters. Significant contributors in major demarcations of time are used to show main ideas throughout history. Nothing occurs in a vacuum, and the practice of fasting is no different. This paper will show the disconnect in how the practice is used in two vastly different ways today, and to discuss whether or not they are compatible.

CHAPTER ONE:

The Development of Secular Fasting

Introduction

Fasting did not spontaneously appear as an idea. Before agrarian societies were established, people had to hunt and scavenge for food. Sometimes that worked, and sometimes it did not. In other words, the physiological responses of fasting are simply the body's response to starvation. In this chapter, we will take a brief look at the history of fasting in the West from a medical perspective and see how it has morphed into a health and fitness phenomenon. Special attention will be paid to the modern era, but we will also glance at the practices of ancient physicians and philosophers, medieval doctors, modern journalists, and fitness influencers to see how we got to where we are today.

The Ancients

What better place to start in a look at fasting from a medical, historical standpoint than Hippocrates himself? Hippocrates, as an historical figure, stands mostly as a mystery. He was born on the island of Cos around 460 B.C., and indeed worked as a physician.¹ The collections of writings attributed to Hippocrates are decidedly not his own works; rather, as G.E.R. Lloyd writes, “the Corpus is evidently the work of a large number of medical writers, belonging to different groups or schools.”² The value of Hippocrates comes more from the ideals he came to represent over the next two thousand

years, and the value of the Hippocratic Corpus comes from the insight it gives us into the medical world of Ancient Greece.

When treating patients, the Greek physicians seemed to pay close attention to the diet of the person, manipulating it based on sex, age, activity, and the kind of disease present. One of these manipulations of diet that appears often is either a restricted diet or complete abstinence from food. In the *Aphorisms*, found in the Hippocratic Corpus, the writer states that “when the disease is at its height, then the lightest diet must be employed,” and that “during a paroxysm the diet must be reduced, for an increase then would be harmful.”³ Further on in the *Aphorisms*, the writer argues that “old people bear fasting more easily,” due to their lessened activity.

Likewise, in *Instruments of Reduction*, another treatise found in the Hippocratic Corpus, the author states for minor ailments, “The treatment should be mild, but, not withstanding, with a restricted diet.”⁴ What we can gather from this is that, at least as early as the fifth century, the Greek physicians used fasting as a way to help remedy disease. Along with the ascetic philosophies of Stoicism and Cynicism, fasting had a strong foothold in society outside of the religious contexts of Judaism and Greek pagan practices.

This practice continued on into the Roman Empire as well. The most well-known Roman physician is Galen, and rightfully so. Born at Pergamum in 129 A.D., the physician received excellent medical education before becoming a physician for gladiators and soldiers during a deadly plague.⁵ He is primarily known for his humoralist notion of temperament, and is thought to have written more than 350 treatises on medicine, logic, and ethics.

When treating patients with prolonged fevers, Galen suggested that “Therefore, if it is not going to advance beyond the seventh day, we must fast the sick person completely provided we have determined that the capacity will be sufficient.”⁶ From this we can see that – 500 years after the time of Hippocrates – fasting was still a viable tool in the plethora of treatments ancient physicians would use in order to heal patients.

That being said, Galen also knew the limits of fasting, and when to refrain from using it. In Galen’s *Method of Medicine* Chapter VIII, he explains a case study concerning a feverish man who had seen doctors from other schools of medicine to no avail. Galen healed the man through what seems to be an increase of both eating and bathing; notably, he criticizes the other physicians for fasting the man for days on end. Galen observes that “those who think it right that they should go beyond the wondrous three-day fast, themselves create the most kakoethical fevers.”⁷ Clearly Galen believed that there were both good and bad times to fast patients. Again, these times depended on the disease and the age, sex, and temperament of the patient involved.

Galen’s medical prowess made him quite popular in Rome, eventually leading to his appointment as the physician of Commodus, who was at that time the heir to the Roman Empire. In his *De Praecogn*, Galen tells of how he healed the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius of a stomach issue.⁸ Galen and Marcus Aurelius both knew that fasting was a useful tool, but they used it for different reasons.

In his *Meditations* the latter declares that he learned “to content [himself] with a spare diet, far different from the softness and luxury so common among the wealthy.”⁹ As a Stoic, Marcus Aurelius believed that abstaining from certain pleasures and practicing a disciplined lifestyle would lead to a greater happiness in the end, which meant keeping a

more plain, and more strict diet. From this, we can see that in both medicine and philosophy, fasting was still a practice used throughout the Roman Empire going all the way to the top.

The Middle Ages

Medical schools in the medieval West predated the founding of the university by several centuries. The town of Salerno in Italy has a long-standing tradition of medical education, dating back to Parmenides in the 6th Century B.C. In the eleventh century A.D., the Schola Medica Salernitana (“Salernan Medical School”) came to prominence¹⁰ and was renowned for its synthesis of Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Arabic medical practices. Because of its ties to the Greek Philosopher Parmenides, the school was primarily a Hippocratic humoralistic school. Even into the 13th Century, Hippocrates’ *Aphorisms* were used in the Salerno curriculum, which “served as the basis for the study of medicine up to the 18th century.”¹¹

The most notable text from the Schola Medica Salernitana is the *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum*, a Latin compendium of all the school’s medical knowledge. Many additions were made, but the beginning of the work is famous for its simple maxims that relate to diet, hygiene, and general health. In the beginning of the *Regimen*, it advises that in the absence of a doctor, one should “be happy, rest, [and] follow a moderate diet”¹² Considering the fact that the *Regimen* specifies a moderate diet for general health, along with the fact that the Salerno school used Hippocrates’ *Aphorisms*, fasting was likely used as a common treatment for various maladies.

Another important development in the Middle Ages was the recovery of Greek texts that were preserved in the East. Western medicine expanded its knowledge as

Arabic texts were brought back from the Holy Land and translated into Latin. One of the most important texts from the East that influenced Western medicine all the way into the 16th Century was the *Canon of Medicine* written by Avicenna.¹³ Avicenna was born in Persia in 980 A.D. and wrote over 450 treatises on various topics in philosophy and medicine. It was not until the 12th Century that his famous *Canon of Medicine* was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona; once it was, it was a staple of the Western medical curriculum.¹⁴

Avicenna based much of his medical theory on Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen. Thus, the basis of his treatments was focused on balance between the four humors in the body. Wherever there is an emphasis on balancing the four humors, fasting can likely be found as a part of specific treatments. For Avicenna, this idea holds true. In the *Canon*, while treating certain ulcers, the physician says that “if there be a transient sensation of nausea and satiety, these effects are counteracted by fasting.”

Furthermore, physicians that were humoralists sometimes thought it necessary to ‘evacuate’ the body of certain humors and toxins by defecation. Avicenna notes in his work that “It may happen that there is a need for evacuation, but something intervenes which forms an adequate substitute, such as fasting, sleeping, correcting the unhealthy state of the temperament which has been produced by the plethora.”¹⁵ The *Canon of Medicine* speaks often of diet and fasting, and their effects on the body. Because the *Canon* pervaded the curriculum of Western medicine for centuries, the practice of fasting carried on throughout the middle ages and into the Renaissance.

The Renaissance

The Renaissance Period is often depicted as the outburst of humanism and empiricism shining over the drivel that came before it in the Middle Ages. In regard to medicine at least, this was not entirely the case. As Noga Arikha says in her book

Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humors:

the new did not simply displace the old. The willful shedding of increasingly useless thought structures was all work in progress, and the human body did not yield its secrets and laws so easily. Faced with mortal lives, distressing illnesses, and repeated epidemics of plagues and other diseases, physicians continued to resort to the old, tried and tested treatments, bleeding their patients and prescribing enemas and remedies based on classical pharmacopoeia.¹⁶

As a result of this conservatism, Hippocratic and Galenic medicine continued to predominate in medical practice. While new treatments and ideas about the human body were being discovered, physicians carried on more or less as they had for centuries; thus, fasting was still a part of treating certain illnesses even while humoralism was being undermined.

Many new ideas contributed to the slow decline of humoralism, namely the rise of the sciences of anatomy and iatrochemistry, as well as empiricism as a school of thought. The study of anatomy revolutionized surgery and bodily theory as a whole, and was pioneered by Andreas Vesalius. Vesalius lived from 1514 to 1564 and worked as a physician at the top of his field, serving as a personal physician to various kings and working as a professor at Padua.¹⁷ As a professor, Vesalius performed cadaveric dissections that allowed him to gain a nearly unprecedented understanding of the body. The new anatomical discoveries directly contradicted Galenic syllogisms about different

structures and their functions, which earned Vesalius criticism. Regardless, Vesalius' discoveries as well as William Harvey's essay on the heart's role in circulating blood throughout the body in 1628 initiated the downfall of the Galenic mindset.¹⁸

The introduction of new theories into the realm of medicine caused confusion for the next few centuries as empirical observations and advances in anatomy and chemistry fought against the Galenic old guard. During this struggle, fasting seems to have faded into the background for much of medical literature and practice. Medicine at that time became a hodgepodge of different techniques, schools, and treatments where modern research was not immediately implemented and pharmaceuticals were not exactly safe. But this was not the end of fasting: it would come back with newfound resolve in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Modernity

In the nineteenth Century, more and more hospitals began to appear and medical training became increasingly common; the advancement of anesthetics and surgical techniques began to improve quality of care, and the beginning of what we would call modern medicine was right on the horizon. In this time period, one of the first men to re-popularize fasting was a man by the name of E.H. Dewey. Born in 1837, Dewey was a military surgeon and physician before writing his first famous work *The True Science of Living: The New Gospel of Health*.¹⁹ In this book, Dewey expounds upon his medical experiences and the way in which he came to see fasting as a cure-all. As pharmaceuticals were still new, Dewey rallied against the "superstitious faith of the

people in the power of drugs to cure disease,” arguing that oftentimes people get better no matter what treatment they were given.²⁰

Dewey’s contribution to fasting in the modern era comes from a haphazard discovery during a bout of sickness he was experiencing; he did not eat breakfast, and after a fast of nineteen hours, he told his audience, “I had a forenoon of such lofty mental cheer, such energy of soul and body, such a sense of physical ease as I had not known since a young man in my later teens!” The doctor provides numerous anecdotal accounts of his experiences, healing patients with conditions ranging from digestive issues to chest pains through the use of fasting. Along with the curative power of fasting, Dewey proposed an ‘attack on the breakfast table,’ arguing that skipping breakfast gave his patients “more physical and mental energy.” Dewey’s works gained popularity quickly, especially because the preface to *The True Science of Living* was written by George Frederick Pentecost, a famous evangelist of the time.²¹ Dr. E.H. Dewey claimed that his repopularization of fasting was based on independent discovery. Whether or not this is true is unknown; Dewey could have simply reverted to a more Galenic system of healing. Either way, Dewey brought fasting back into popular fashion.

One of the later acolytes of Dewey’s fasting cure was Upton Sinclair, the famed writer and journalist of the twentieth century. Sinclair, known for his prolific writing, released *The Fasting Cure* in 1911, which contained many articles he had written on his success with fasting and “a tabulation of the results of 277 cases of fasting.”²² After struggling with his own physical ailments, Mr. Sinclair tried his hand with fasting, and “began to read up on the subject – the books of Dr. Dewey” included in this study. Like

Dewey, Sinclair experienced a full recovery from his illness, and – as he comments in *The Fasting Cure* – he “had that marvelous, abounding energy.”

Sinclair’s legacy stems mostly from his exposé of the meat industry in the early twentieth century and his association with the Socialist party around the 1930s; *The Jungle* was published in 1906, and *The Fasting Cure* was published 5 years later. This means that Sinclair’s popularity was already established by the time that he published his collection of articles and letters on fasting, and the number of people who corresponded with him show it. Sinclair notes in his preface that his purpose in writing this book was to refer people so that he would “not have to answer half a dozen ‘fasting letters’ every day for the rest of [his] life” and so that he can attract “sufficient attention to the subject to interest some scientific men in making a real investigation of it.”²³ Sinclair’s call for research into fasting has led to two interesting routes that lead into the present day: fasting in health and fitness pop-culture and a slowly emerging library of scientific literature on the subject.

Sinclair asked for research, and he got it. Two experiments and a case study will highlight the research on fasting versus semi-starvation: The Carnegie Experiment in the late 1910’s, The Minnesota Experiment in 1945, and case studies from the 1970’s. The Carnegie Experiment was published in 1919, and was conducted partly in response to the food shortages found in Central Europe at the time. The study used two groups of twelve healthy young men. The goal was to reduce their body weight by ten percent in order to observe changes in metabolic rate; the researchers opted for a semi-starvation diet instead of fasting in order to mimic the conditions of famine in Central Europe.²⁴

Unfortunately, this experiment was horribly uncontrolled; the caloric restriction was eye-balled based on portion sizes in a mess hall, physical activity was not monitored, and the groups had multiple-week long breaks over the holidays, allowing for them to over-consume food during the experiment. Despite the poor methods of the experiment, the experimenters still found very significant decreases in the basal metabolic rates of the subjects due to the semi-starvation and a general irritability that lasted throughout the experiment. The results were shoddy, but the value of the Carnegie study comes from the fact that it was a step in the right direction towards research on fasting, in which case studies were already beginning to arise.

Much like the Carnegie Experiment, the Minnesota Experiment came about as a response to the starvation of people in prison camps and occupied territories during World War II; scientists sought knowledge of starvation mechanisms in order to formulate proper rehabilitative re-feeding programs. Picking from healthy conscientious objectors to the war, the experimenters ended up with thirty-two men who volunteered and successfully completed the experiment. The experiment was much better controlled, and it involved a twelve week control period, a twenty-four week semi-starvation period, a twelve week restricted rehabilitation period, and a further eight-week unrestricted rehabilitation period.²⁵

As well as a major decrease in basal metabolism, muscle wasting was a problem, and the semi-starvation effect had many negative “changes on personality, attitude, social behavior,” and the like.²⁶ Compared to the reports from Dewey, Sinclair, and many of their contemporaries, this was quite a different story. Furthermore, each of the proponents of fasting had hundreds of testimonies reporting that there had been minimal muscle

wasting as well as improved mood and energy. These differences were intriguing to say the least, and posed an important contrast to the proposed benefits of fasting. That being said, there are a few major differences between these semi-starvation studies and fasting case studies. Notably, the protocols of the caloric restriction were done over very long periods of time on generally healthy men; one the case studies mentioned below will be about obese men over varying amounts of time.

In 1915, one of the first longer-term fasting case studies was reported about a man who fasted for thirty-one days. In contrast to both the Carnegie and Minnesota Experiments, this man, who consumed no food for a whole month, “was able to exist in a fairly normal mental condition” while his body was in a fasted state.²⁷ The lengthy report on this man contains a staggering amount of data about the physiological changes that occurred to sustain him. The report also contains case studies of an earlier ‘professional faster’ named Succi, who fasted for more than thirty days on multiple occasions; reports on Succi showed little to no decrease in strength during his fasts, as well as good mood and high spirits.²⁸

The 1960s and 1970s brought about case studies on obese patients who underwent remarkably long fasts for treatment. The most famous case involves a world record. Angus Barbieri fasted for 382 days, which is the longest recorded fast.²⁹ Barbieri began his fast at 456 pounds and ended at 180 pounds. After 5 years, his weight remained at 196 pounds, which is impressive because obese patients tend to regain weight.³⁰ The scientists used their findings to conclude that starvation therapy was – in contrast to previous papers – a safe way to combat obesity.

The Present Day

Today, fasting continues to keep itself in the eye of the public, both in the scientific world and in the health and fitness industry. There are many preliminary studies currently being done relating to fasting, type 2 diabetes, and cancer. In the realm of health and fitness, methods of fasting are used specifically to reduce caloric intake and lose body fat – any other benefits are auxiliary. One popular ‘type’ of fasting is termed ‘Intermittent Fasting,’ which is a broad term used to indicate that a person will fast for a set time period before breaking that fast. Technically, every human intermittently fasts – the only difference is the duration. Typically, Intermittent Fasting is usually spoken of when the fasting ranges anywhere from 16 hours to a few days.

Arguably the most successful company to capitalize on the popular interest in fasting is Kinobody[®], which boasts that its programs have been “used by over half a million men and women.”³¹ The founder of the company, with his suave looks and lavish lifestyle, sells fitness programs that all contain the golden thread of Intermittent Fasting. For the most part, people tend to think it works well, and it is an attractive way to incorporate caloric restriction into their lifestyles. Other proponents of Intermittent Fasting for weight loss use the 5:2 diet, which is a schedule of eating where one eats five days a week and fasts twice a week. One person who has written about the diet has a membership of over 65,000 people that adhere to the 5:2 program.³² These fasting protocols have helped people achieve greater biomarkers and ideal bodyweights, which has perpetuated the popularity of the overall practice. More than ever it seems, fasting has become a popular practice in the West, completely separate from the world of religion. This popularity, in turn, has likely affected the amount of research done on the practice.

The majority of the scientific research on fasting done today is in relation to type 2 diabetes and cancer. One of the main contributors to type 2 diabetes is insulin resistance, and some studies suggest that Intermittent Fasting increases sensitivity to insulin, which is a good thing for type 2 diabetics. A study comparing caloric restriction versus alternate-day fasting concluded that the fasting group, although weight loss was similar, had much greater effects on insulin resistance.³³ This suggests that there might be a use for fasting in treating diabetic patients. So far, one case study supports this hypothesis.

The Intensive Dietary Management clinic in Toronto used different fasting protocols on three different patients, all who had been type 2 diabetic for over a decade and were using exogenous insulin. In less than a month, all three patients were no longer using insulin and had better health biomarkers.³⁴ However, not all physicians are ready to buy in just yet. In an article published in the April edition of *Nutrients*, physicians conceded that fasting can be done relatively safely, but that there are few human trials on which to base treatment; most of the research has been done on animals, which – although they are good models – is not sufficient to proceed directly to human practice.³⁵

The case with cancer research is similar. Two separate studies have yielded preliminary findings that show potential, but not necessarily concrete results. The first study done in rodents used a ‘Fasting-Mimicking Diet’ with great results:

Periodic bi-weekly FMD cycles had a significant impact on the development and progression of multiple cancer models while allowing the preservation of lean body mass even at old age and extending longevity in healthspan study. As a treatment modality, FMD cycles alone significantly reduced tumor progression and sensitized various cancer models to chemotherapeutic drugs.³⁶

Furthermore, a study looking at ten human patients claims that “fasting in combination with chemotherapy is feasible, safe, and has the potential to ameliorate side effects caused by chemotherapies.” The study did not conclude that these results were concrete, and encouraged more study.³⁷ That being said, an article in the French Journal *Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism* pushed back against these studies, saying that “these regimens can not be recommended for the moment, in the absence of methodologically satisfactory clinical studies.”³⁸ Because the research is still in its early stages, these benefits suggested cannot be shown to be completely true.

Fasting has come a long way since the time of Hippocrates. Outside of religious practice, it has been used mostly for medicinal purposes under the context of a Galenic view of the body. Due to the enormous impact that both Hippocrates and Galen had on the medical world, fasting was used in conjunction with other treatments for centuries. It was not until the Renaissance, when scientists finally began pushing back against the Galenic and Hippocratic views of the body, that fasting began to fade out of use.

The practice, sustained primarily through religious tradition, came back into the forefront of the Western populace through the work of Dr. E.H. Dewey, and later Upton Sinclair and his peers. Around this time was when the first inklings of research appeared, though mostly for treatment of obesity and rehabilitating people that had been starved in the World Wars. Modern research shows great promise in the fields of diabetes and cancer treatment, though its findings are still inconclusive. Furthermore, as people search for wholeness in healthiness, fasting has become a powerful tool for hundreds of thousands of people worldwide through fitness influencers and companies.

One topic of interest is whether or not secular fasting is completely independent of fasting in the world's various religions. Since the early 1900s, fasting has had almost a religious following, with its "preachers" proselytizing people eager to get rid of all of their problems. The fact of the matter is that fasting does not exist in a vacuum. In the next chapter, we will explore where fasting in the religious realms and the secular realms have overlapped, and discuss the implications of these areas.

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CHAPTER TWO:

Fasting in the Bible

Introduction

This chapter is intended to look at fasting throughout the whole of the Bible, both the Old and New Testament. The aim of doing so is to shed some light on questions like “Why did the Jews fast? What did Jesus say about fasting? Should Christians fast today?” Looking at every passage in the Old Testament pertaining to fasting could be a chapter in itself, while looking at every passage in the New Testament is a fairly quick task. Rather than examining every passage closely, I attempted to construct arguments on what the purpose of fasting was for both the Jew and the Early Christians, who were struggling to reconcile their Jewish identity with their newfound hope. This chapter and the next would not have been possible without the work of Dr. Kent Berghuis, whose dissertation on Christian fasting worked as a basis for me to begin my research into this topic.

The Old Testament

The main idea of fasting in the Old Testament is connected closely with the concept of “afflicting oneself” or “humbling oneself”.¹ This concept then further manifests itself in different situations, most notably in prayer, grief, and repentance. When someone in the Old Testament fasted, it was likely because his or her situation was dire; fasting showed a need for God’s divine sustenance and intervention. The purpose of fasting in the Old Testament sets the groundwork for fasting in the New Testament, though the eschatological frameworks might be different.

Although some view the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden to be the first notion of a fast in the Bible, we will view Moses on Mount Sinai as the first biblical fast, as he truly abstained from food or drink for forty days. When Moses ascends Mount Sinai again in Exodus Chapter Thirty-Four, the text states that “he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.”² Not eating for forty days is something that most people are quite capable of doing (this will be discussed in a later chapter), but not drinking any fluids for forty days shows that Moses was supernaturally sustained by his encounter with God.

Although Exodus only explicitly speaks of one event where Moses does not consume any food or water, Dr. Berghuis points out that the book of Deuteronomy “actually contains three incidents of Moses engaged in forty-day fasts from food and water on Sinai.”³ These inaugural accounts of Moses fasting from food and water for forty days already point out some of the central functions and features of Old Testament fasting. The ninth chapter of Deuteronomy states that Moses, when receiving the Ten Commandments, had no food or water. Because the Israelites had formed the golden calf, the prophet says “I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that [the Israelites] had committed.” These instances show a deep connection between fasting and prayer in desperate times and also connect fasting as a physical sign of dependence on God’s sustenance.

Fasting in times of desperation shows up commonly throughout the Old Testament through the concept of ‘afflicting oneself’ or ‘humbling oneself,’ seen in

passages such as Deuteronomy 8:3, Leviticus 16:29-30, Daniel 10:12, and Psalm 35:13, to name a few. A central theme of the Jewish story is rebellion from God and repentance in a perpetual cycle, and fasting is part of the story of humbling the Jewish people in times of petitionary prayer. As Proverbs 3:34 says, “to the humble He gives favor.” Thus, humbling or afflicting oneself was used as a way to show God the desperation of one’s state and the severity of one’s situation in hope that the Lord would remove the affliction. Three notable examples of this concept will help to further illustrate this idea: The Day of Atonement, Hannah’s affliction, and David’s prayers for his soon-to-be deceased son.

The Day of Atonement, more commonly known today as Yom Kippur, is one of the most important days of the year on the Jewish Calendar. The sixteenth chapter of Leviticus outlines the details of the Day of Atonement, including blood rituals, burnt offerings, and a scapegoat ritual.⁴ Notably for our purposes, Leviticus 16:29-31 shows the importance of afflicting oneself. The passage reads as such:

And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves^[b] and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. ³⁰For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins. ³¹It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.

Twice is the phrase “afflict yourselves” used when describing the nature of the Day of Atonement. Although the main focus of Yom Kippur was on the rituals and sacrifices performed, the whole of Israel was to take a humbled posture before God; common Jewish practice was to fast in order to achieve that posture.⁵ This posture of affliction was one more way to show God their desperation for deliverance.

The birth of Samuel is another instance of using fasting to show one’s desperation in hope of God’s deliverance from affliction. Hannah, Samuel’s mother, was barren while

her husband's other wife gave him many children. Because of this, 1 Samuel 1:7-11 tells us:

As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

This passage explicitly states that Hannah afflicted herself – which included fasting – as she prayed to God. Hannah's prayer shows that afflicting oneself was used to attract the attention of God. The line "look on the affliction of your servant and remember me" indicates that Hannah's affliction was primarily used to rouse God to action on her behalf.

Immediately after this passage, Hannah is told that her prayer will be answered and she conceives. Notably, when the priest tells her that her prayer will be answered, the book of 1 Samuel says that "then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad." When her prayer was answered, she no longer afflicted herself, showing that this posture is only used in times of desperation. Hannah's affliction is yet another instance of fasting and affliction paired with prayer.

Finally, the story of David contains an interesting passage regarding fasting and affliction. The prophet Nathan confronts David about his murder of Uriah and his adultery with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12. David confesses his sin

and Nathan tells him that God will spare his life, but not his child's. 2 Samuel

12:16-23 says:

And the LORD afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm." But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead." Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

David understood the severity of his sin, as he had confessed to the prophet just before.

He further understood the severity of his consequence, and because of this he knew that he needed to assume a posture of humility and affliction to appeal to the Lord.

The peculiar portion of this passage, though, is his cessation of afflicting himself after his child died. Clearly his servants were confused as to why David seemingly flipped the order of his fasting, as fasting often occurred when mourning the dead.⁶ In light of the fact that affliction is used to help rouse God to hear a petition, David's actions make sense. David afflicted himself in order to better plead for the child, and when his plea was not answered, he had no reason to continue his fasting; so, he got up and ate.

Old Testament fasting was a public and physical appeal to God's sovereignty that was deeply connected to prayer. Jeremiah 14:11-12 says, "The LORD said to me: "Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry," suggesting that fasting is an auxiliary action to prayer. The fasting found in the stories of Moses, Hannah, David, and the Day of Atonement all show that fasting was a way to humbly show a need for God's intervention in affliction.

The New Testament

The New Testament speaks of fasting primarily through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and secondarily through the Acts of the Apostles and the Early Church. Interestingly, the Epistles and the other books of the New Testament remain silent about fasting, save for a few contested passages. This is not to say that fasting was not and is not an important Christian practice, as we will soon see. The teachings of the New Testament reveal that fasting is still a vital practice for the believer that should be used to bring inward humility for an eternal reward and to aid in prayer.

Matthew 4:1-2 states that "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." This is the first instance of fasting in the Gospels, and the mention serves a few purposes. Jesus' temptation in the desert occurred directly before He began His official ministry, so the fasting again served to humble Christ in order to prepare Him for the work to come. Furthermore, the time frame is important from a Jewish standpoint. Fasting for forty days and nights alone sounds awfully similar to Moses' encounters with God on Mount Sinai in the Pentateuch. Luke also includes the fact that Jesus fasted during his forty days in the

wilderness, affirming the importance of the act in his preparation for ministry. Thus, Jesus was fasting in the classic Jewish vein of humbling Himself before the Lord, and identifying Himself as the new and greater Moses.

Along with fasting on His own, Jesus also taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7. After instructing the crowd how to pray, Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:16-18,

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The phrasing here is important, for Jesus says “when you fast” twice. Clearly Jesus, being steeped in the Jewish tradition Himself, understood the value and importance of fasting. The Messiah is cautioning against using fasting as a works-based way to boast in one’s own self-proclaimed holiness – see Luke 18:9-14 for a cautionary tale of self-righteous fasting. The end of the passage also indicates a reward for fasting with a contrite heart, contrasting the earthly reward with the pharisaic fasting at the start of the passage. This idea is further expanded upon immediately after in Matthew 6 when Jesus tells the crowd to store up their treasures in heaven; fasting must be one of the ways to accomplish this. One might be concerned that Jesus is teaching that fasting can only be a private and personal practice, but as we will see later in the Book of Acts, that is not the case.

Jesus’ other lesson on fasting comes from Matthew 9:14-17, which brings with it an eschatological question: now that the Messiah has come, do we need to afflict ourselves the way the Israelites did? The passage reads:

“Then John’s disciples came and asked him, ‘How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’ Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.’”

Jesus is saying that the disciples have no need to fast since their Savior is present; but, there will come a time when He is not with them, and then they will fast. The question is whether this time was between Jesus’ ascension and Pentecost or if the time is in the present as we await the Second Coming of Christ. The Book of Acts also seems to provide the answer to this question, as we see the Early Church after the Day of Pentecost fasting.

The mention of new wineskins and new wine speaks to a new age and a new covenant. Being directly after Christ’s words on fasting, one can conclude that there must be something inherently different about fasting now that Jesus has dwelt on the Earth. The Early Church had the bridegroom taken from them and they needed guidance; fasting now became a way of mourning and humbling themselves to show a longing for Christ’s presence. This distinguishes itself from fasting in the Old Testament because the Messiah has already come. In the typical past, present, and future framework, Christ came, has come, and will come again, which means that fasting is now both sorrowful and hopeful. Fasting shows sorrow for the bridegroom being taken away, but also shows a hopeful yearning for the return of Christ.

The first mention of fasting in the Book of Acts is the conversion of Saul in Acts 9. The conversion of Saul involves a complete humbling of the man. When Jesus

appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:9 says that “for three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.” Saul’s vision was taken away and he consumed nothing for three days; to put it differently, his physical assets were stripped away, giving him the opportunity to commune with God and spiritually see the error of his ways. In verses 18 and 19 of Acts 9, when Saul receives the Holy Spirit, “something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.” This is coherent with the Old Testament way of fasting, as his time of affliction was then over. He was afflicted and humbled, and once he had communed with God, he ate and began to preach the Gospel.

The final true mentions of fasting in the New Testament are in chapters 13 and 14 of Acts, and they both add a new element to fasting: prayer and fasting for commissioning and guidance. Acts 13:2-3 says, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” Here fasting is paired both with worship and with prayer. During the first instance of fasting, the Early Church receives guidance from the Holy Spirit on what to do. By receiving such guidance, this indicates that the Early Church was yearning for the return of the bridegroom, as He was not there to guide them by sight. Furthermore, once they knew what to do, they fasted and prayed as they sent off Barnabas and Saul. Likewise in Acts 14:23, “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” Through fasting, the Early Church showed humility in

submitting their decisions to God, and asking for supernatural guidance as they waited for the return of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This chapter has not been a complete look into every passage of Scripture that includes a reference to fasting, but it has delved into the most important passages to construct a general view of fasting in both the Old and the New Testaments. Fasting in the Old Testament was used as an aid in prayer by hopefully stirring God to action to remove one of his people from affliction. The concept of afflicting oneself is prevalent throughout the Old Testament, and fasting was a key action that became synonymous with humbling and afflicting oneself.

In the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus and the Early Church Fathers intended for Christians to fast, continuing in the Jewish vein of humbling oneself, but bringing a new eschatological framework to it. Because of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, something has inherently changed in how followers of Jesus fast, evidenced by Matthew 9:14-17. This new framework is a mourning for the loss of the bridegroom, and a hopeful longing for the bridegroom's return. Fasting now looks back with grief and looks forward with hope.

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CHAPTER THREE:

Fasting in Western Church History

Introduction

Fasting in the Old and New Testament follows a path of humbling or afflicting oneself in order to gain favor in the eyes of God during difficult times. Because the practice is still around today, it is important to look at how it has developed since the life of Christ and to see how it has been used. This chapter is intended to look at how important figures in the history of the western church like Saint Anthony the Great, Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, and C.S. Lewis have viewed fasting, and to see how it is used today.

The Early Church

One of the earliest Christian documents in history, created even before the canonical gospels, is the *Didache*.¹ The *Didache* is a First-Century document that early Christians looked to for guidance on how to live out The Way. Many of the recommendations for living in small Christian community match up with what is found in the New Testament. The document mentions fasting in regard to baptism:

(And) prior to the baptism, [1] let the one baptizing fast; [2] and [let the] one being baptized; [3] and if any others have the strength, [let them fast also]. Order, on the other hand, the one being baptized to fast during one or two [days] prior [to the baptism]. (And) let your fasts not stand with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and on the fifth [day] of the week. You fast, on the other hand, during the fourth and during the [Sabbath] preparation [day].¹

The *Didache* is much more of a practical document than a theological one, so it does not explain why fasting should be paired with baptisms. From the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, it can be inferred that the impetus to fast was to humble both the one performing the baptism and to humble the one being baptized; this affliction would hopefully bring blessings upon the new Christian. Furthermore, the latter half of the passage above – like Jesus in Matthew 6 – implies that fasting is a necessary part of following The Way. The Christians here are instructed to fast on Wednesday and Friday. This connects them to the sufferings of Christ, with His betrayal on Wednesday and His crucifixion on Friday of the liturgical Holy Week. Furthermore, it sets Christian fasting apart from Jewish fasting, as the document itself mentions. This separation shows how important it was for the Early Church to create a distinct Christian identity with its own foundations and practices.

Starting around the third century A.D., the tradition of asceticism from the Desert Fathers came to be. One of the greatest of the Desert Fathers was – naturally – Saint Anthony the Great, whose life was recorded by Athanasius. Anthony is often praised for his renunciation of his wealth as a young man, his focus on retreat from society, his psychosocial battles with demons in his solitude, and his willingness to teach and mentor, even as a hermit.²

According to Athanasius, Anthony was born into a well-off Christian family in Egypt. His parents died when he was a young man, and he was left in charge of their estate and his little sister. Anthony sold all of his estate, gave most of the money away, and put his sister in the care of a convent. From then on he devoted himself to a life of

asceticism, withdrawing eventually to an abandoned fort and later to his “Inner Mountain,” from whence he would venture out to give pilgrims holy counsel.

The temptation of Saint Anthony by demons is near legendary, evidenced by the amount of art depicting it by artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Matthias Grünewald. Anthony’s ministry was mostly to monks that visited him, and much of his advice concerned how to combat these demons that caused him so much pain. In the *Life of Saint Anthony*, Athanasius records Anthony saying:

The demons, therefore, if they see all Christians, and monks especially, labouring cheerfully and advancing, first make an attack by temptation and place hindrances to hamper our way, to wit, evil thoughts. But we need not fear their suggestions, for by prayer, fasting, and faith in the Lord their attack immediately fails.³

Furthermore in Athanasius’s recording of the saint’s early life, Athanasius records that Anthony would “fortify his body” against the attacks of the devil by prayer and fasting. This is a new development in the meaning of fasting, now branching out from mourning and humbling oneself to strengthening one’s faith. That being said, this development is not without a scriptural basis; the apostle Paul says in the ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.⁴

This fasting, though, did not evolve in a vacuum. As Christianity developed, Judaism too was evolving, navigating its way through the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. by the Romans. As Eliezer Diamond points out, “we have seen that fasting as an ascetic discipline, although almost unknown in biblical Israel, was an integral part of Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism,” mostly “as a substitute for both sacrifice and Naziritism.”⁵ The *Didache* explicitly states that Christians were trying to

distance themselves from Jewish asceticism, but it is an inescapable fact that Christianity arose from Judaism of which Paul was well-acquainted. Both forms, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple, had a component of mourning: Judaism for the destruction of the Temple, Christianity for the departure of their Savior.

Saint Anthony's life is just one introductory look into the centuries-long period of Egyptian Christian ascetics. These ascetic believers focused often on withdrawal, but eventually monastic communities began to arise from figures such as Pachomius, bringing with him his self-denying practices.⁶ By incorporating fasting and other ascetic ideals into these monastic communities, fasting became even more strongly associated with holiness and Christian living, leading to its propagation.

In the middle of the fourth century, Saint Augustine of Hippo was born. Originally a Manichaean who had mastered the art of rhetoric in Rome, the saint had a miraculous conversion. From then on, he turned his attention to preaching, teaching, writing, and debating Manicheans, Pelagians, and other heretics of the church. Augustine is remembered for his mind and his prolific writings.⁷

By the time of Saint Augustine of Hippo in the mid fourth century, Paul's idea of taming the flesh became rooted in ascetic practice. Thus, Augustine thought it would be proper to write about fasting in a sermon titled *The Usefulness of Fasting*. In it, Augustine argues for the goodness of fasting in that it frees our minds to look upward to God, and that it causes us to sin less by bringing the body into submission.

In the third chapter, Augustine argues that fasting for the Christian still has to do with the concept of afflicting oneself. Giving a counterargument to the idea that if fasting is what God wants, then God is cruel, Augustine says "I take vengeance upon myself so

that He may come to my aid, so that I may be pleasing in His eyes, so that I may delight in His graciousness.”⁸ For Saint Augustine, the concept still deserves attention in the mind and the life of the Christian.

After arguing that afflicting oneself is an important part of the faith, the saint advocates for the idea of taming the flesh in order to be more holy in chapters three, four, and five. In the third chapter of his sermon, Augustine compares his flesh to a “beast of burden” on which he is “making a journey.” Of that beast that is sinful flesh, Augustine says “often, it hurries me along and tries to turn me from my path.” Because of this, he asks “Shall I not restrain my flesh by fasting when it becomes unmanageable in this fashion?” By comparing his body to a beast of burden, Saint Augustine leans into the term “taming the flesh,” giving it further meaning and further distinguishing between body and soul.

Although comparing the body to a beast of burden seems harsh, the saint does not disdain the body entirely. In fact, Augustine fights against this dualistic thought that pervaded Gnostic and Manichaean thought during his time; this is evident at the start of the fourth chapter when he says “Let not your holiness think that the flesh is at odds with the spirit as if there were one creator of the flesh and another of the spirit.” The flesh, though fallen, is still worthy of love. Augustine argues that fasting is a way to make the flesh obedient to the spirit, saying, “You subdue your son so that he may obey you. Do you hate him?” The answer to the rhetorical question is – of course – “No.”

Finally in the fifth chapter, Augustine expands upon the idea of taming the flesh as a way to keep oneself away from sinning. He says that “it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding

to illicit joys.” Fasting, by abstaining from eating, keeps one from gluttony and reminds one in the future to be wary of it. Most importantly, though, Augustine points out that both Jews and pagans fast as well. What should set the Christian apart, he argues, is the life that the believer chooses to live. He asks, “Are you taming your own members rightly when you are tearing asunder the members of Christ?” and “will your fast be approved when you do not recognize your brother?” This point is similar to the point the prophet Isaiah makes in his book, which will be explored later.

The Middle Ages and the Reformation

One of the other great minds in the history of Christianity in the West is Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was born in Italy during the thirteenth century, and is known to be one of the most influential Catholic philosophers and theologians. Another prolific writer, Aquinas is known for his seminal textbook *Summa Theologica*; he was named a Doctor of the Catholic Church in 1567.⁹

In the *Secunda Secundae*, the second part of the second part, of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas answers seven questions in regard to fasting. The question of whether or not one ought to fast is not addressed, as it was well-established in the Church by the thirteenth century; this was due to the writings mentioned above, as well as other monastic writings and orders of the Church, with Lenten fasts becoming uniform across the Church after the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.¹⁰

Important to this discussion now is the first question on whether or not fasting is an act of virtue. In short, the Doctor answers ‘yes,’ and cites three reasons for fasting: taming the body, helping the mind contemplate God, and atoning for sins.¹¹ On taming the body, Aquinas says that “fasting is the guardian of chastity” and that “lust is cooled

by abstinence in meat and drink.” Because it helps one abstain from other vices, fasting is seen as an act of virtue. Directly after, Aquinas follows Augustine’s teaching that fasting helps the soul approach God in contemplation. The saint says that fasting helps the mind “arise more freely to the contemplation of heavenly things,” citing the fact that Daniel “received a revelation from God after fasting for three weeks.” Finally, in a return to Jewish thought, Aquinas argues that fasting is a way to atone for sins. He does so by connecting the common pairing of fasting with mourning, citing the book of Joel, “Be converted to Me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning.” He also cites another sermon from Saint Augustine, who says that “fasting cleanses the soul” thus ridding it of sin. The other six questions are mainly in regard to how and when Christians would fast, and have less to do about the ideas behind why Christians fast; we will leave these behind for now to press on to the Reformation.

In regard to fasting in the Reformation, things get convoluted. Martin Luther, the famous Augustinian turned Reformer, is known as the key figure in the Protestant Reformation. Luther believed that the Church had focused too heavily on works, and argued that salvation comes by grace through faith alone. Because of this, Kent Berghuis notes, Luther “grew very suspicious of any human work or attitude that smacked of garnering merit before God... he viewed fasting skeptically, and he often railed against abuses he saw of the practices in Catholicism.”¹²

Though skeptical of good works, Luther is somewhat sympathetic towards fasting, again as a way to tame the flesh. In his 1520 work *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther lays out his argument for justification by faith and the renunciation of good works as a way towards salvation. Although he says that justification is by faith alone, Luther

says that the Christian “must control his own body and have dealings with men. Here the works begin...he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline[s].”¹³ In saying so, Luther maintains his main tenet of justification by faith while incorporating good works into his framework.

Because of the emphasis on personal faith, Protestant fasting became dependent on individual discretion rather than certain dates ordered by the Church. Other famous reformers like Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox, “came to reject the mandatory practice of Lenten fasting.” This was done to emphasize that holiness was not found simply in the act of fasting, but rather in the intent of the person fasting.¹⁴

Modernity

After the time of John Wesley in the eighteenth century, there is a general consensus that there has been a decline of fasting in the modern era; Richard Foster could find no books on Christian fasting in Evangelical circles from 1861 to 1954.¹⁵ Dr. Kent Berghuis notes that “there are some Catholic, Orthodox and liturgical books that deal with fasting during that period,” but even within those circles, the general lack of enforcement paired with the decline in required fast days allowed for personal comfort to triumph over the practice.¹⁶

After Vatican II, Pope Paul VI released the Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini*, a short document concerning fasting and abstinence in the Catholic Church in 1966. The constitution beautifully praises the merits of fasting and abstinence, and states that:

The church – while it reaffirms the primacy of the religious and supernatural values of penitence (values extremely suitable for restoring to the world today a sense of the presence of God and of His sovereignty over man and a sense of Christ and His salvation)(55)—invites everyone

to accompany the inner conversion of the spirit with the voluntary exercise of external acts of penitence.¹⁷

The Catholic Church also reduced the amount of required fast days significantly, and gave bishops the ability to substitute other penitential acts for fasting and abstinence, such as charity and prayer. The Church, like the Reformers, sought to emphasize personal decision in penitence; this came with repercussions similar to those that followed the Protestant emphasis on personal decision. One commentator points out that “the attempt at reform ultimately destabilized the established structures of penance without replacing them with social structures that would better facilitate ... penitential practice.”¹⁸ This decision led to a vast decline in fasting in the Catholic world, both officially and unofficially.

Around the same time, Evangelicals found a renewed interest in the spiritual disciplines, including fasting. C.S. Lewis, one of the most popular Christian writers of the twentieth century, has this to say in his work titled *The Problem of Pain*:

Fasting asserts the will against the appetite – the reward being self-mastery and the danger being pride: involuntary hunger subjects appetites and will together to the Divine will, furnishing an occasion for submission and exposing us to the danger of rebellion. But the redemptive effect of suffering lies chiefly in its tendency to reduce the rebel will.¹⁹

Lewis harkens back to the Platonic argument that Augustine put forth over fifteen hundred years before Lewis’s time. Fasting, Lewis says, is beneficial to the believer for its ability to tame the flesh; the danger, though, is the false hope of complete mastery over the self, and the lie of total self-reliance. Pride as a danger of fasting is ironic, as fasting has been Biblically associated with ‘humbling oneself.’ The concern seems valid as those who are seasoned fasters may not see much difficulty in the act and, as the Gospels warn, tempt those who do fast to

think themselves s better or ‘more spiritual’ than others because of the act rather than the intent.

The Present Day

Two books come to the forefront of the Evangelical dive into the disciplines: Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* and Dallas Willard’s *Spirit of the Disciplines*. These books point toward not only a life that includes fasting, but more so a life that imitates the practices and disciplines that Jesus Himself performed. Fasting, solitude, silence, and prayer are among the disciplines discussed. Dr. Berghuis points out with regard to these two that “It is clear, at least from the writings of Willard and Foster, that this evangelical resurgence has been aware of and borrowed from the broader heritage of church tradition, including monasticism.”²⁰

There seems to be something to this, as some evangelical churches are returning to sermons that follow the liturgical calendar and Lenten fasts. The famous Reformed pastor John Piper wrote *A Hunger for God*, a book that emphasizes fasting as an exclamation point on the end of poignant prayers over major social issues of our day. An article from the *Dallas Morning News* in 2017 reported that an Evangelical megachurch of over ten thousand people, The Village Church, would begin to structure their worship schedule around the Liturgical calendar and that other churches are following suit.²¹ The author of the article, Ryan Sanders, also asserts that it may be part of today’s push-back of consumerism and big name brands. He quotes Dr. John Dyer, who says:

People are reacting to digital music by buying vinyl records, or reacting to Budweiser by drinking craft beer. There's a desire to connect with something authentic and real, not manufactured. A reaction against big-box consumerism, but also against big-box Christianity.

Protestants, after a rough break with the Catholic Church, understandably did not want to adopt many Catholic practices that they saw being misused. It would be hard to argue that at least the practice of fasting was not misused around the time that the Reformation began. The one meal allowed each day for many monks during a fast ended up being more gluttonous than if the monk had never fasted at all; but maybe, after five hundred years, Protestants are beginning to see some of the original value of the practices that were so misused all those centuries ago.²²

Conclusion

The discipline of fasting has been a part of Christian identity from the very beginning. From its Jewish roots, Christian fasting has continued to use fasting as a way to humble oneself before God and aid in prayer. In the early days of Christianity, fasting developed as a way to keep oneself temperate, and when one fasted was an important part of distinguishing oneself from Judaism. Fasting took hold in ascetic and monastic life, and eventually became a staple of the Catholic Church, finding a home in the writings of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Reformation muddled things for Christian fasting. Protestants had to navigate a disdain for good works associated with Catholicism while still trying to live good and faithful lives. Over time, a seeming laxity of enforcement from the Catholic Church and the inability to hold people accountable in Protestantism led to a decline in fasting as a spiritual practice. In the twentieth century, fasting made a resurgence in the Church, finding a return to its roots with an Evangelical interest in spiritual disciplines. With a newfound respect in Evangelicalism, it seems as though fasting and other spiritual disciplines have a place in today's society.

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CHAPTER FOUR:

Piecing Things Together

Introduction

At this point, we have seen how history has evolved over time both religiously and non-religiously. The question is, did both religious and non-religious fasting evolve in a vacuum, completely separate from one another? Knowing these histories has opened up a vast number of questions, and this chapter will attempt to answer the interplay of religious and non-religious fasting as well as a few questions that are relevant to fasting in the present day.

Christians and Healing: the Intersection of Fasting

The area of most overlap and interplay between religious and non-religious fasting is in the ministry of Christian physicians and healers. One of the first great Christian healers beyond Jesus Christ Himself is Saint Basil the Great. Born into a remarkably pious family in 330 A.D., Basil received an outstanding classical education before becoming a monk.¹ In 370 A.D., he became the Bishop of Caesarea. As the Bishop, “he built a new town called the Basiliad, which included a church, a hospital, and a guest-house with the necessary doctors, nurses, and artisans.”

Though he was not himself a healer, he did found an early hospital in Caesarea for the sick and the poor; he furthermore preached sermons regarding fasting. Basil argues that fasting is a strong combatant of sin and a powerful tool to learn self-discipline. In his sermons, he often refers to fasting as a medicine in both the spiritual and physical sense.

In the spiritual sense, Basil says “You who are sick, receive her as the mother of health. You who are in good health, receive her as your prescribed good medicine.”² In the physical sense, the Saint says “it will have all kinds of bodily benefits for every activity, and it will go along well in houses and fields, by night and by day, in cities and wilderness.” Basil does not shy away from the proposed benefits, but rather leans into them as a latent function of spiritually fasting. The order of these benefits is important; one does not pepper in some spiritual benefit when fasting for health.

Another Christian healer that has come to recent academic attention is Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth century mystic, prioress, and healer. Hildegard was born near the Rhine in 1098, and began to see visions at a very young age.³ Because of this, Hildegard became an anchoress before becoming the prioress of a convent. She recorded her visions with papal authority in the *Scivias*, wrote the virtue play *Ordo Virtutum*, and most notably for our discussion, wrote *Causae et Curae*, her own book of folk healing and herbal medicine.

Hildegard more or less followed a humoralist system, and thus used fasting as a tool to cure illnesses. *Hildegard of Bingen’s Medicine*, a systematized look into Hildegard’s herbal remedies and recommendations, evidences this in its chapter on diet, saying “when fever is present, total fasting is recommended.” The book also cites the *Scivias* and how “for twenty-nine vices...Hildegard suggests fasting as a universal remedy in order to achieve spirituality.”⁴ Hildegard also saw the merits of fasting in the realms of both physical and spiritual health, though she may not have fasted for both reasons simultaneously.

How Religious and Non-Religious Fasting Fit Together

As stated earlier, the fact that people can use fasting for spiritual and physical health begs the question of whether or not the two endeavors can be combined into one simultaneous fast. It seems to me that the answer is “yes,” but there is a very fine line that must be walked, and that line is based on intent. It is fine to fast for completely spiritual reasons. It is fine to fast to stay healthy. If one wants to do both simultaneously, it seems to me that the physical benefits of the fast ought to be the latent function of a spiritual fast and not vice-versa; in other words, one can spiritually fast and reap the physical benefits, but it is unlikely that one would physically fast and gain spiritual rewards.

Part of Basil’s sermons quoted above would help evidence this. As quoted above, he says that fasting “will have all kinds of bodily benefits for every activity, and it will go along well in houses and fields, by night and by day, in cities and wilderness.” He undoubtedly touted these benefits as an incentive to get more people to participate in the discipline. After all, it is likely better to fast for a less important reason than to not fast at all. One can still exercise self-discipline when fasting for physical benefits, thus allowing the one fasting to practice a virtue. If that self-discipline is used to better oneself in other areas of his or her spiritual life, then there is merit to it.

Harkening back to the New Testament, much of Jesus’s criticism of the Pharisees was based on their intent. They followed as much of the Law as they could, missing the point of it all. In the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells his followers:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.⁵

From this, it is clear that for Jesus there is nothing special in the very act of fasting; the intent behind the act carries all of the weight.

This is further evidenced in the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah. The Jews ask the Lord, “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” The Lord replies:

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Seeking something else – in Isaiah, it was their “own pleasure” – during a fast is a dangerous departure from an act that ought to be wholly devoted to God.

Notably, fasting in the time of Isaiah was focused on afflicting oneself before God to foster aid, and the idea of taming the flesh was not yet emphasized. Even so, the point still stands. The reason why one fasts is accounted for by a jealous God. Thus, I would argue that it is better to fast with the intent of humbling oneself before God and taking the physical ramifications as a latent function of the act itself.

Alternate Fasts

Another popular trend in younger Christian circles today is a sort of ‘alternate fast’ during Lent. This alternate fast may be abstinence from social media or television, and often foods such as dairy or added sugars. Do these fasts confer the same kind of benefits that the classical idea of fasting does? In some ways, yes; but in other ways, no.

From the near beginning, members of the Catholic Church have practiced abstinence from meat on Fridays, so abstaining from certain foods is nothing new.⁶ The practice extended to other heavier foods that push the flesh toward lustful desires, so

abstaining from certain foods has long been a way to tame the flesh. Again, simply abstaining from certain food groups for forty days sounds dangerously close to the Whole30 diet. Isaiah fifty-eight is proof that fasting and abstaining should not be a “forty days to a new you!” scheme.

Social media is a different topic. Though certainly beneficial, a social media ‘fast’ does not confer the same benefits that classically defined fasting does. Keeping off of social media is a good exercise in mild self-denial, and is especially good when social media is replaced with prayer or reading of Scripture. That being said, it does not involve the act of afflicting oneself or of taming the flesh. Though mentally difficult for some, staying off of social media does not involve the physical difficulty that comes with fasting.

One more alternate fast is found in Isaiah fifty-eight: justice. The Jews cry out to God, asking why he will not acknowledge their fasting. The Lord answers:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’⁷

God seems to be saying that afflicting oneself will not garner any favor if that person is afflicting others at the same time. More importantly, God is saying that over and above denying oneself is giving oneself in service to others. What good is self-denial if that which is denied goes unused? Clearly, anyone who fasts is not a perfect being; but again, the intent here is important. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke

chapter eighteen comes to mind. The Pharisee that fasted twice a week and thanked God for his own goodness did not have his prayer heard. Instead it was the tax collector that was justified because he cried “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Conclusion

From the examples of Saint Basil the Great and Hildegard of Bingen, it is clear that fasting religiously and fasting non-religiously were not completely separate from each other. Basil used the idea of improving one’s health as a way to draw people to the practice. Hildegard, a prioress herself, fasted spiritually and prescribed fasts for her patients. That being said, fasting in medicine and fasting in Christianity and other religious circles seem to have stayed in their own lanes, parallel to each other. Hildegard and Basil the Great are two examples of people that used both, but no synthesis occurred, likely for a reason. Understanding how one might be able to fast for spiritual and health benefits is a tough trail to navigate.

Truth be told, it is probably better to fast for only one reason or the other; but if one wants to incorporate both reasons, it is better to primarily fast for spiritual purposes, counting on some health benefits as a latent function of the spiritual fast. Alternate fasts proposed today may give the Christian some inkling of self-discipline and denial and are certainly not bad, but they are no replacement for the difficulty of a classically defined fast. The alternate fast in Isaiah points out the fact that self-denial and self-affliction are useless if one is afflicting others. Afflicting oneself and taming the flesh requires work, discipline, and most importantly a contrite heart.

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CONCLUSION

In these four chapters, we have seen many different historical characters and the part they play in the development of the practice of fasting. Fasting has been used in medicine since the time of Hippocrates, and was a mainstay in a humoralistic framework. Fasting made its way through the Middle Ages in places like the Schola Medica Salernitana, and found a newfound interest in the nineteenth century from Dr. E.H. Dewey. In the twentieth century, scientists looked at the physiological effects of starvation and fasting in order to understand how to best treat people that were subject to famines that occurred from the World Wars. Today, fasting has a strong foothold in the health and fitness industry as a calorie restriction tool, and scientists are researching its potential benefits in treating chronic illnesses such as diabetes, Alzheimer's, and cancer.

The Bible contains many stories of characters that fasted, starting with Moses. The Old Testament purpose of fasting was to humble or afflict oneself in order to receive aid from God. Fasting is almost always paired with prayer in the Bible as an exclamation point on the end of it. In the New Testament, the idea of humbling oneself is carried through, and the concept of mourning the physical loss of Jesus and hoping for His eschatological return is introduced.

Fasting can be found in the Church from the very beginning. The *Didache* gives explicit instructions on when to fast in order to create a specific Christian identity separate from the rest of the Jews. The ascetic Desert Fathers solidified fasting as a Christian practice by making it a staple of monastic living. Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas both speak of the merits of fasting and its ability to assist in 'taming the

flesh,' the idea that by gaining self-discipline in when one eats, he or she will have better control of one's other bodily lusts. The Reformers admired fasting, but overall did not emphasize it as it was too tied up with Catholic practices. The twentieth century brought about newfound interest in the practice in both Catholic and Evangelical circles. Vatican II, C.S. Lewis, and Dallas Willard gave new life to the ancient practice. Today, there is a desire for a return to Christian roots, and fasting is a part of that.

Fasting is a practice that requires discipline, regardless of why one is doing it. The religious and non-religious realms are not mutually exclusive, and people like Saint Basil the Great and Hildegard of Bingen show that. It is important that when one fasts – for whatever reason – that self-denial does not become fruitless. Fasting is by nature quite humbling, and the experience ought to make one want to serve others in that same self-denying fashion.

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