
The Practice of Fasting in the New Testament

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Is religious fasting a legitimate practice for today? If it is, how and why should it be practiced? This article studies each reference to fasting in the New Testament to seek answers to these questions.

Fasting as Practiced and Taught in the Gospels

Anna's fasting (Luke 2:37)

The first mention of fasting in the New Testament is in connection with the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple (cf. [Exod 13:2-15](#); [Num 18:15-16](#)). Two godly people, Simeon and Anna, were attracted to the infant. Anna's constant service to God is called "fastings and prayers" ([Luke 2:37](#)). *νηστείας* ("fastings") has the literal meaning of "not having eaten," "being without nourishment."¹ The word most generally has the special religious sense of fasting.²

In this instance fasting is looked on favorably. It is said to be one way of "serving" God (Anna was "serving night and day with fastings and prayers"). There is no indication that she was required to do this. Rather her "fastings and prayers" were prompted by a felt need. Perhaps she was so burdened that the Messiah come that she spontaneously devoted much of her time to

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία," by J. Behm, 4:924.

² William F. Arndt, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 95.

"fastings and prayers."

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Jesus' Fasting

Jesus practiced fasting when He was tempted by Satan ([Matt 4:1-11](#); [Mark 1:12-13](#); [Luke 4:1-4](#)). During these tumultuous 40 days of loneliness, satanic attack, and the presence of wild beasts, "He ate nothing" ([Luke 4:2](#)). The phrase *οὐκ ἔφαγεν οὐδὲν*, with the emphatic negations *οὐκ...οὐδὲν* and a constantive aorist, paints a strong assertion: total abstinence from food.³ But was this a fast? Luke did not use the word "fasting," but Matthew did. He used the aorist participle *νηστεύσας* ("had fasted," [Matt 4:2](#)), which Vincent contends is used throughout the New Testament to indicate "abstinence for religious purposes."⁴ This is true of verbs from *νηστεύω*, but not of the noun *νηστεία*. It seems doubtful that *νηστεία* is used in a religious sense in [2 Corinthians 6:5](#) and [11:27](#), where most English translations (except the KJV) render *νηστεία* by the word "hunger" or similar words such as "starving" or "gone without food."⁵ Arndt

³ Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), p. 52; cf. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 2:49; Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, 4 vols. (reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 1:98, 475; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribners, 1906), p. 72.

⁴ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1946), 1:288; cf. Wayne Barton, "Toward an Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament" (ThD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1954), p. 88.

and Gingrich list these two verses under the non-religious uses of νηστεία.⁶ Therefore one can say with relative certainty that Jesus was engaged in a religious fast. Every translation and commentary reviewed by this writer concurred that Jesus was fasting in a religious sense during the 40 days.

However, Jesus' fast was not a mere ascetic exercise of self-denial. [Matthew 11:19](#) makes it clear that Jesus never engaged in such practices.⁷ As with the Old Testament prophets, Jesus fasted when faced with a time of intense spiritual need. During the remainder of Jesus' public ministry He kept the Mosaic Law, and this

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would have involved a fast each year on the Day of Atonement. Aside from that, however, most feel there is not the slightest hint that Jesus fasted. Before Christ's terrible struggle in Gethsemane He feasted, rather than fasted,⁸ with His disciples. Therefore this writer cannot concur

⁵ In [2 Corinthians 11:27](#) the NASB translates λιμῶ as "hunger" and νηστείαῖς πολλάκις as "often without food." The KJV renders those words as "hunger" and "fastings."

⁶ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 538; cf. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία," by J. Behm, 4:925.

⁷ Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 38; cf. D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 40; and R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 58.

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία," by J. Behm, 4:932.

with Paul Martin when he contends that fasting was a key element in Jesus' spiritual journey.⁹

Jesus' Instructions on Fasting ([Matt 6:16-18](#))

The subject of fasting was not a central issue in the teachings of Jesus. He never commanded fasting or propounded any detailed regulations concerning the practice. Beyond question, however, Christ radically changed the way fasting was to be carried on as well as the relative importance of the practice.¹⁰ When He dealt with the subject, it was usually in response to the practice as observed by the Jews.¹¹ His instruction in [Matthew 6:16-18](#) is a case in point.

These verses, part of the Sermon on the Mount, are part of a section in which Jesus dealt with what some have referred to as the three pillars of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting ([Matt 6:1-18](#)).¹² Wimmer rightly contends that these verses are a unit.¹³ However, he

⁹ Paul Martin, "The Benefits of Fasting," *Christian Century*, March 30, 1977, p. 299; cf. David E. Briggs, "Biblical Teaching on Fasting" (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1953), p. 20.

¹⁰ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία," by J. Behm, 4:931; cf. M. M. Fink, Jr., "The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 171, and *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (1927), s.v. "Fasting (Christian)," by A. J. Maclean, 5:765.

¹¹ Fink, "The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting," p. 273.

¹² D. C. Simpson, "The Book of Tobit," in the *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R. H. Charles, 1:197.

¹³ Joseph F. Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 66-67.

wrongly argues that almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-13), and fasting (vv. 16-18) are of equal importance.¹⁴ This view is unacceptable for two reasons: (1) Almsgiving and fasting are each mentioned in only three verses, whereas nine verses are devoted to prayer. (2) A cursory survey of the four Gospels reveals a tremendous amount of teachings, commands, and practices concerning prayer, while very little space is devoted to almsgiving and fasting. Of the three practices (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting), fasting has been the most disjunctive and debated in the history of the church.¹⁵

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Matthew 6:16 begins with ὅταν δὲ (“And whenever”). This indicates a change from one subject to another, but to a related one.¹⁶ Having given instruction on prayer, Christ turned to the subject of fasting. Implicit in the words “And whenever you fast” is the assumption that fasting would be a part of the religious life of the disciples, but Jesus never commanded the disciples to fast. He simply assumed that they would do so.¹⁷

Since the time of Moses the Israelites had been required to fast annually on the Day of Atonement (**Lev 16:29; 23:29**). The Old Testament also speaks favorably of other special fast days in which the entire nation humbled themselves before God (**1 Sam 7:5-6; Jer 14:12**). In fact at least

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁵ Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 2.

¹⁶ A. B. Bruce, “The Synoptic Gospels,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. R. Nicoll, 4 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 1:122.

¹⁷ Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 190.

once God even commanded emergency fasting (**Joel 2:12**).

By New Testament times, fasting had been encumbered by additional regulations. Some Jews fasted two days each week throughout the entire year (**Luke 18:12**). Such weekly fasts were observed on Thursdays and Mondays, because according to tradition, Moses ascended Mount Sinai on Thursday and descended on Monday.¹⁸

Jesus said the hypocrites ἀφανίζουσιν (“neglected”) “their appearance” (**Matt 6:16**). The idea in ἀφανίζουσιν is “to conceal or mask” the true visage, by a form of outward humiliation.¹⁹ To appear humble and sorrowful these hypocrites poured ashes on their heads, allowed their hair to become disheveled, and did not wash. So fasting, like prayer and almsgiving, was reduced to a hypocritical system. Some practiced this type of fasting as a means of seeking to gain the reputation of being godly.²⁰ “In order to be seen” (ὅπως φανῶσιν, v. 16), they disfigured their external appearance so as to appear to be fasting. This was deliberately planned hypocrisy.²¹

In response to all this hypocrisy, Jesus said, “They have their reward in full.” The verb ἀπέχουσιν is present in form but aorist in

¹⁸ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, Bible Students Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 135. Also see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἡῶστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία,” by J. Behm, 4:933; Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 73.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, p. 273.

²⁰ Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, 1:64; cf. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:45; Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 191.

²¹ Robertson, *Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament*, 1:55.

meaning.²² The verb ἀπέχω (“to have in full”) has a commercial sense: “to receive a sum in full and give a receipt for it.”²³ It means a person had received his due and was entitled to nothing else.

Jesus then told His followers how to engage in fasting that would meet God’s approval. They were to anoint their heads and wash their faces. In Jewish thinking anointing one’s head and washing one’s face was not done for daily hygiene or cosmetic reasons. Rather they were reserved for joyous occasions.²⁴ So unusual religious sorrow within should be compensated for by outward signs of an opposite sort.²⁵ Reality in the sight of God rather than appearance in the sight of man must be the believer’s desire.²⁶

The words “your [singular] Father,” used twice in verse 18, point to the personal relationship between the individual and God. This is elsewhere expressed powerfully by the use of the Aramaic term ’’Αββα, which can be translated, “Daddy” (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15). Wimmer correctly concludes, “The same familiarity is found

²² Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 75; cf. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament*, 1:55.

²³ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 84.

²⁴ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Anoint,” by S. Szikszai, 1:138–39.

²⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p. 11; cf. Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 191.

²⁶ Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, 1:64; cf. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, p. 135, and Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 62.

in the expression ‘thy Father’ of this verse.”²⁷ His observation seems all the more tenable when it is remembered that with Aramaic being the common language of Palestinian Jewry, Christ probably spoke these words originally in Aramaic. Acts of piety such as fasting must be performed solely and exclusively for the disciples’ “Father” with no concern for one’s reputation before others.²⁸ God “is in secret,” and He “sees in secret.” The double use of ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ in Matthew 6:18 emphasizes the hiddenness of virtuous acts in order to be performed for God alone.²⁹

These secret acts are noticed by God and will be rewarded by Him. The passage closes with the assuring words ἀποδώσει σοι (“will reward you”). The concept of rewarding good and punishing evil was clearly taught in the Old Testament, but the method of reward is somewhat mysterious and complex. The concept of reward and punishment being accomplished after death in eschatological

times was not spelled out until in the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 7:9–36.³⁰ The idea of eschatological reward is seen in the future tense of ἀποδώσει (“will reward”). The rest of the New Testament emphasizes this concept of reward in the life to come.³¹

As with almsgiving and prayer, Jesus’ follow-

²⁷ Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 64.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

³¹ Cf. Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 2:436–44.

ers could and would practice fasting as an act of private piety. His main concern was their inner spirit with which fasting was performed. They were to be pure in motive as they fasted and not to fast as a means of gaining approval from others.

Jesus Questioned regarding Fasting (Matt 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39)

When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast, He gave them a powerful and intriguing answer. On the surface this answer seems straightforward and simple, yet more has been written on this incident than about any other New Testament reference to the practice of fasting.³²

In Matthew's account the questions are asked by the disciples of John the Baptist. He was noted for his severity regarding food (Matt 11:18; Mark 1:6; Luke 7:33), and it is quite understandable that his disciples would have fasted.³³ Luke depicted the questions as coming from the Pharisees (Luke 5:30, 33) and Mark wrote that the questions came from both groups (Mark 2:18).

Whereas Matthew and Mark record a question that calls for an answer, Luke's account records a simple statement that has the force of a question. In all three accounts there is the clear assumption that Jesus' disciples were doing something wrong.³⁴ The phrase οἱ δὲ σοὶ ("but yours," Luke

³² Fink, "The Responses of the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting," p. 199.

³³ Charles H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 139-41.

³⁴ Charles B. Cousar, "Luke 5:29-35," *Interpretation* 40 (January 1986): 59; cf. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

5:33) indicates a sharp contrast in conduct between Jesus' disciples and those of John and the Pharisees.³⁵

An important observation is that Jesus and His disciples did not conform to the common customs of traditional Judaism. Their conduct reveals a clear-cut breach with existing religious practice.³⁶ This

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one issue concerning fasting brought into focus the whole question of Jesus' attitude toward Jewish tradition.³⁷ This is also evident in the two following analogies of placing a new patch on old cloth and putting new wine in old wineskins (Matt 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-38). Christ's teaching could not be blended with rabbinic traditions. It was not a question of "both/and" but of "either/or."

Jesus responded, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" (Matt 9:15). Then He added, "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." He viewed fasting as a sign of mourning, which is inconsistent with the joy of the bridegroom's presence.³⁸ Jeremias noted, "It is

House, 1961), p. 313.

³⁵ Robertson, *Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament*, 1:78.

³⁶ Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," 1:152.

³⁷ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία," by J. Behm, 4:933; cf. Robert Alan Cole, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 71, and Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 75.

³⁸ Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 123;

generally accepted...that...the...bridegroom stands allegorically for the Messiah.”³⁹ Certainly a natural reading of the Gospels gives the impression that Christ so designated Himself in this passage.⁴⁰ It has been suggested that the Lord was possibly deliberately adopting John the Baptist’s own metaphor ([John 3:29](#)). This would have been of special interest to John’s disciples.

In the Old Testament the relationship of Yahweh and Israel is often presented in terms of matrimony. Surveying these passages Jeremias concludes, “This is all the material there is and none of the passages cited contains a clear instance of the Messiah/bridegroom allegory.”⁴¹ However, there seems to be little doubt that those Jews who heard this parable would conclude that Jesus, as the Bridegroom, was making a veiled claim to deity. However, this should present no great problem because He did this on a number of occasions ([John 8:58](#); [10:30](#); [14:9](#); [18:6, 8](#)). In fact the Jews accused Him of this

cf. J. O’Hara, “Christian Fasting, [Mark 2:18–22](#),” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 19 (July 1967): 93; *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, s.v. “Fasting,” by F. Homes Dudden, p. 579; Alistair Kee, “The Question about Fasting,” *Novum Testamentum* (July 1969): 163.

³⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “νύμφη, νυμφίος,” by J. Jeremias, 4:1101.

⁴⁰ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 210; cf. Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 62; Werner Georg Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1957), p. 77; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961), p. 89.

⁴¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “νύμφη, νυμφίος,” by J. Jeremias, 4:1103.

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

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very thing ([10:33](#)). So for the evangelicals who believe in the inerrant, verbally inspired Bible, no problem exists. However, for the biblical scholars who do not approach the Scriptures with this perspective, the problem is knotty.⁴²

Possibly Jesus did not intend to give a precise symbolism to the “bride,” the “bridegroom,” and the “wedding feast.” He was simply making the point that when things were going well there was no reason to fast, but in times of sorrow His disciples would indeed fast. Similarly in the story of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:29–37](#)) it is not necessary to look for a symbolic meaning for each person involved (“certain man,” “priest,” “Levite,” and “Samaritan”). Jesus was simply answering the question, “Who is my neighbor?” ([Luke 10:29](#)). So in this instance ([Matt 9:14–17](#)) Jesus was simply answering the question about why His disciples were not fasting.

The phrase “so long as” ([Mark 2:19](#)) indicates that the wedding condition would not be permanent. When “the bridegroom is taken away from them,” there would be a time of mourning for “they will fast” (v. 20).⁴³

Regardless of how ἀπαρθῆ (“taken away”) was understood by the audience, Jesus’ point was clear. He presented a contrast between wedding-like joy and funerallike mourning. The words “then they will fast” are a prediction, not a com-

⁴² For a discussion of various attempts, see Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” pp. 202–7, and Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, pp. 89–97.

⁴³ J. A. Ziesler, “The Removal of the Bridegroom: A Note on [Mark ii:18–22](#) and Parallels,” *New Testament Studies* 19 (1973): 192; cf. O’Hara, “Christian Fasting, [Mark 2:18–22](#),” p. 91.

mand. Nowhere does the New Testament command fasting.

The main point is that fasting should not be practiced because Jewish or church tradition demands it, but fasting should be practiced in times of sorrow. Since believers today are not under the Mosaic Law, there is to be no regularly scheduled fasting. Christian fasting should not be compulsory. It may be practiced because of a felt need, not out of the requirement to observe a rigid command. When practiced as a feat of religious superiority or merit (Luke 18:12), fasting is an odious bit of self-righteousness.⁴⁴ Initially the early church observed fasting as a voluntary religious practice, but soon it degenerated into a supposedly meritorious obligatory formality.⁴⁵

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Fasting as Practiced and Taught in the Book of Acts

Fasting Following Saul's Conversion (Acts 9:8-11)

Possibly the first reference to fasting in the Book of Acts is in connection with the dramatic conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. After his unusual experience Saul was left blinded. He was led into the city of Damascus, where for three days he was "without sight, and neither ate nor drank" (Acts 9:9). Because νηστεύω, the usual word for religious fasting is

⁴⁴ James Morrison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), p. 51; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), p. 198.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

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not used in Acts 9, many have concluded that Saul was either unable to eat or did not think about eating because he was suffering from shock.⁴⁶

True, the verb νηστεύω is always used in the New Testament of religious fasting. However, religious fasting may sometimes be referred to in other ways. In Luke's account of Jesus' temptation, he wrote that "He ate nothing during those days" (Luke 4:2). Yet Matthew clearly stated that Christ "fasted" (Matt 4:2). Since Luke referred to Jesus' fasting by the words, "He ate nothing," this same writer could also have described Saul's fasting as a time in which he "neither ate nor drank." Many consider those three days experienced by Saul as a time of religious fasting.⁴⁷ Apparently it was voluntary, having been dictated by an

⁴⁶ Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 1:100; cf. David Brown, "Acts-Romans," in *A Commentary Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, 6 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 6:43; and Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 3:118.

⁴⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 358; cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 170; Gotthard Victor Lechler, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, by John Peter Lange, 12 vols., vol. 9: *John-Acts* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 167; Frederic Randall, *The Acts of the Apostles in Greek and English* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1897), p. 227; and Robert H. Smith, "Acts," in *The Concordia Commentary*, ed. Walter J. Bartling and Albert E. Glock (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 150.

inward impulse.⁴⁸

In a time of crisis, in a time of felt need, Saul voluntarily fasted. This is precisely what Jesus practiced and taught ([Matt 9:14-15](#)). In this instance fasting was accompanied by prayer.

Fasting Associated with the First Missionaries (Acts 13:1-3)

[Acts 13](#) begins by stating that the church at Antioch was served by a group of prophets and teachers.⁴⁹ Antioch at that time was a

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significant city, the capital of Syria and the chief seat of eastern civilization.⁵⁰ Luke wrote that the church there was “ministering” (λειτουργούντων, [Acts 13:2](#)). Given the breadth of this Greek word, why was it necessary to add “and fasting” (καὶ νηστευόντων)? Perhaps it was because the church, burdened for the needs of the world, gathered on this occasion for special prayer with fasting.⁵¹ As a result of their ministering and fasting, “the Holy Spirit said [either directly, or as most feel, through one of the prophets⁵²], Set apart for Me Barnabas and

⁴⁸ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 170.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵⁰ Melancthon W. Jacobus, *Notes on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Carter, 1859), p. 235.

⁵¹ Brown, “Acts-Romans,” p. 86; James M. Stifler, *An Introduction to the Study of the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1892), p. 75; Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 3:178; and Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 216.

⁵² R. J. Knowling, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 2:235; cf. Jacobus, *Notes on the Acts of the*

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

Saul...”

Before they were officially commissioned by the laying on of hands, there was a period of fasting and prayer. This combination of fasting and prayer was common in Judaism, but in New Testament times the two seldom occurred together among Christians. On only four occasions in the New Testament were the two linked. Two of these refer to commissioning or ordination services, one refers to the practice of the godly woman Anna ([Luke 2:37](#)), and another is in connection with Saul’s conversion ([Acts 9:9-12](#)).

To imply, as some do, that fasting is an essential ingredient in effective prayer cannot be substantiated biblically. In the New Testament much is said about prayer but very little about fasting. Prayer is commanded but fasting is not. The Book of Acts refers to many instances of prayer where no indication of fasting is mentioned. In one of the most powerfully dramatic prayer meetings recorded in the entire Bible ([Acts 4:23-31](#)) there is not the slightest hint of fasting. When the apostles delegated some of the affairs of the infant church, it was to enable them to devote themselves “to prayer, and the ministry of the word” ([6:4](#)). They did not say, “We will devote ourselves to prayer, fasting, and to the ministry of the word.”

Why then did the believers fast when they commissioned Barnabas and Saul as missionaries? Carter and Earle suggest that fasting on that occasion emphasized “a state of uninterrupted concentration which made it possible to ascertain the will of the Lord.”⁵³

Apostles, p. 233; and Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (1870; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1979), 2:5.

⁵³ Charles W. Carter and Ralph Earle, *The Acts of*

However, since the will of God had already been clearly revealed ([Acts 13:2](#)), why did they need to fast to discern the Lord's will?

There is no record of fasting and laying on of hands in connection with the appointment of Matthias as an apostle ([Acts 1:24-26](#)). Likewise at the appointment of men to help with the distribution of food the believers prayed and laid hands on their heads, but no mention is made of fasting ([6:1-7](#)). Yet here ([13:3](#)) at the commissioning of foreign missionaries and again at the ordination of elders in local churches ([14:23](#)), fasting was involved.

Was the fasting practiced to demonstrate to God the gravity and solemnity of this occasion? Was it done to indicate humility and inadequacy with respect to the task to which Paul and Barnabas were being sent? One cannot be sure. But clearly Christ taught that fasting should be motivated by a serious felt need ([Matt 9:14-15](#)).

Fasting at the Ordination of Elders (Acts 14:23)

After Paul and Barnabas completed the first officially church-sponsored foreign missionary effort, they visited each church they had established to be sure proper leadership was set in place. This became a pattern for the Apostle Paul.⁵⁴

In connection with the ordination of elders in each church, Paul and Barnabas, "having prayed with fasting...commended them to the Lord" ([Acts 14:23](#)). The word used for prayer is προσεύχομαι, the broadest term for prayer in the

New Testament. It can include petition and intercession as well as praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. Since this praying was with reference to commending the churches (or the elders) to the Lord, it was probably intercessory in nature.

The prayer of committal was done μετὰ νηστειῶν ("with fastings"). This grammatical structure indicates in both Greek and English that fasting in this instance was secondary to the praying.⁵⁵ This accords with the place of fasting elsewhere in the Book of Acts.

What was the purpose of the fasting? Lenski ventured the opinion that fasting was an aid to the praying.⁵⁶ However, if this were the case, why was fasting not mentioned in connection with the choosing of the seven ([Acts 6:6](#)) or in connection with the replacement of the 12th apostle ([1:24](#)), which was of greater significance than the ordination of elders? If fasting is an effective aid to meaningful prayer, why then is it mentioned in the same context with prayer in the entire New Testament on only four occasions?

As has been demonstrated, fasting was in response to a felt need

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of some sort. Perhaps in this case Paul and Barnabas, realizing the immense problems facing these young churches and elders in a demonically dominated pagan environment, felt burdened to the point of fasting as well as praying on these occasions.

Thus fasting is presented as an accepted observance in the church in the Book of Acts.⁵⁷ Yet the

the Apostles (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 175.

⁵⁴ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 216.

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

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⁵⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 587.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

fact that fasting is mentioned in only three chapters would seem to indicate that fasting was the exception and should not be presented as the generalized picture of the church in its early beginnings. Munch feels that [Acts 2:42-47](#) more accurately sets forth such a generalized picture.⁵⁸

Fasting as Practiced and Taught in the Epistles

The New Testament Epistles say nothing about religious fasting. Even [Hebrews 13:16](#), which mentions praise, thanksgiving, and well-doing as sacrifices pleasing to God, does not include fasting.⁵⁹

True, the noun *νηστεία* is used by Paul in [2 Corinthians 6:5](#) and [11:27](#). However, in both verses the context of the terms clearly indicates that they are used in a nonreligious sense. Along with beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, sleepless nights, hardships, thirst, cold, and exposure, Paul also experienced hunger. In this context the word *νηστεία* does not mean “fasting” but simply that on occasion Paul went hungry.⁶⁰

The absence of references to religious fasting outside the Synoptic Gospels and Acts implies that the practice was not considered significant in the church so long as the Apostles were alive.⁶¹ Paul did not even mention fasting as a form of

⁵⁷ Barton, “Toward an Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament,” p. 163.

⁵⁸ Johannes Munch, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1967), p. 22; cf. Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 190.

⁵⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “νηστis, νηστεύω, νηστεία,” by J. Behm, 4:933.

⁶⁰ Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 147.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

religious piety.⁶²

In [Romans 14](#) and [Colossians 2](#), Paul discussed ascetic and ritualistic tendencies in the churches, but said nothing about fasting. This leaves the impression that the question did not even arise, at least in the Hellenistic congregations.⁶³ Equally significant is the fact that the General Epistles (Heb.; James; 1 and 2 Pet.; 1, 2, and 3 John; Jude) and Revelation make no mention of fasting.⁶⁴ Especially amazing is

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the lack of any reference to fasting in Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter, which were addressed to Jewish Christians.

Again, fasting was practiced in the early church. Clearly it has a place in Christian piety, but that it had a frequent place is open to serious question.

Fasting in the Postapostolic Church

Amazingly Christianity quickly departed from the personal, inward, and spiritual emphasis found in the New Testament. Fasting is a case in point. The earliest hints in post-New Testament writings indicate a return to the external, legalistic, ritualistic practice of fasting. Evidently as time elapsed after the death of the Apostles, the church succumbed to the religious pressures of the Jewish and pagan world around them, and fasting became a full-blown practice.⁶⁵ This is not to say there was no objection to such a system,⁶⁶ but from the second century on, “there is

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 265-66.

⁶³ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “νηστis, νηστεύω, νηστεία,” by J. Behm, 4:933.

⁶⁴ Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 148.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

no longer any clear awareness of the way in which Jesus viewed fasting.”⁶⁷ Almost all the church fathers encouraged the practice of fasting.⁶⁸

A graphic illustration of the postapostolic church’s effort to support their excessive emphasis on fasting can be seen in the attempt to add the word “fasting” to the original text of Scripture. Most textual critics (both liberal and conservative) since Tischendorf agree that the word νηστεία (“fasting”) was added in [Matthew 17:21](#); [Mark 9:29](#); and [1 Corinthians 7:5](#) and that νηστεύων (“fasting”) was added to “praying” in [Acts 10:30](#).⁶⁹ These textual additions clearly indicate the church’s growing interest in the practice of fasting after the first century.⁷⁰

The church began to establish mandated periodic fasts. They simply took over the Jewish practice of fasting two days a week, changing the days from Mondays and Thursdays to Wednesdays and Fridays.⁷¹ They observed numerous collective fasts including the paschal fasts, and they often elevated the fasts to the status of a

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church ordinance. Even their individual fasts were caught up in the growing ascetic tendencies of the time.⁷²

⁶⁶ Barton, “Toward an Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament,” pp. 57-58.

⁶⁷ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “νηστιας, νηστεύω, νηστεία,” by J. Behm, 4:935.

⁶⁸ Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 52.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the textual questions regarding these passages, see Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” pp. 121-43.

⁷⁰ Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 94.

⁷¹ *The Didache* 8. 1.

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

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With the Reformation and its return to the Bible as the only source of faith and practice, a large section of Christendom extricated itself from the estimations of fasting that prevailed during the Middle Ages.⁷³ Concerning fasting, Luther said, “We do not, therefore, object to fasting itself, but to the fact that it is represented as a necessary duty and that specific days have been fixed for its performance.”⁷⁴ It appears that Protestant Christianity today may have gone to the extreme of almost totally disregarding what the New Testament says about fasting. In fact one writer proclaims that the examples of the practice and teaching of fasting found in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts “do not appear to be in keeping with the original intents of the New Testament authors.”⁷⁵ Apparently many evangelicals have received no instruction on the subject. This too is unfortunate.

Conclusion

As in almost all religions, people in both Judaism and Christianity have viewed fasting as an “ascetic exercise’ which serves to purify man and bring him closer to God.”⁷⁶ Closely related to

⁷² Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 93; cf.

Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 287.

⁷³ Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 287; cf. Barton, “Toward an Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament,” p. 61.

⁷⁴ *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, s.v. “Fasting,” 3:492.

⁷⁵ Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 283.

⁷⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Fasting and Fast Days,” 6:1194; cf. Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 117; and Paul Martin, “The Benefits of Fasting,” *Christian*

this, many view fasting as a way to make their prayers more effective.⁷⁷ Wimmer states that this was emphasized by the church fathers. He approvingly quotes Augustine as saying, “Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving.”⁷⁸

No doubt because of Christ’s response to the disciples concerning a difficult case of demon possession, many say fasting makes prayer

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more effective. When the disciples said that they had been unable to exorcise the demon, Christ said, as recorded in the King James Version, “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” ([Matt 17:21](#); [Mark 9:29](#)). However, as discussed earlier most textual scholars agree that the word “fasting” was not part of Jesus’ original statement. [James 5:16](#) states, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” Paul reported that Epaphras was “laboring earnestly...in his prayers” ([Col 4:12](#)). But in neither of these nor in any other of the many New Testament passages pertaining to effective prayer is fasting discussed.

Even a cursory survey of fasting in the Old Testament demonstrates that the “widest purpose by the nation or individuals was to avert or

Century, March 30, 1977, p. 300.

⁷⁷ Briggs, “Biblical Teaching on Fasting,” pp. 400-441.

⁷⁸ Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament*, p. 114; cf. Glenda Hope, “Why Fast for Lent—or Anytime?” *The Witness*, March 1987, pp. 12-13; Martin, “The Benefits of Fasting,” p. 298; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “νήστις, νηστεύω, νηστεία,” by J. Behm, 4:934; and Barton, “Toward an Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament,” p. 18.

(1990). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147.

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terminate a calamity by eliciting God’s compassion.”⁷⁹ When calamity struck, a fast was proclaimed. It was a spontaneous reaction to emergencies. In the Old Testament a fast was a means of demonstrating a humble heart, a repentant spirit. A fast without true humility and repentance was “valueless and senseless.”⁸⁰ Demonstrating humility and repentance was true of the mandatory fast on the Day of Atonement. On that day the Israelites were to “humble [their] souls” ([Lev 16:29, 31](#)).

Since fasts in the Old Testament were in response to calamities and were to demonstrate humility and repentance, it would seem that the same purpose and attitudes would hold true for New Testament believers. Jesus hinted that this should be the purpose for fasting among His disciples. His disciples would fast after the bridegroom was taken away ([Matt 9:14-15](#); [Mark 2:18-20](#); [Luke 5:33-35](#)). The removal of a bridegroom from his bride would normally be looked on as a tragedy that would evoke a felt need. In times of tragedy and heartache, Jesus’ disciples would fast.

Fasting then is a legitimate response to dangers, trials, heartaches, or sorrows. “That which seems to characterize Christian fasting in the New Testament was abstinence during crisis experiences.”⁸¹ In times of physical or spiritual need Christians realize their inadequacy and in humility and repentance look to the Lord. These

⁷⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Fasting and Fast Days,” 6:1190; cf. Fink, “The Responses in the New Testament to the Practice of Fasting,” p. 194.

⁸⁰ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Fasting and Fast Days,” 6:1194.

⁸¹ Barton, “Toward an Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament,” p. 171.

emotions may be demonstrated by private fasting. On the other hand, if there is no felt need of a serious nature, fasting does not seem to be required of believers.
