

# What About Fasting?

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What do these people have in common: Socrates, Plato, Hippocrates, Pythagoras, Confucius, da Vinci, Gandhi, Upton Sinclair, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, John Knox, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Charles Finney, and Matthew Henry? They all were fasters. The advocates of fasting claim fasting can produce tremendous results. The most frequently mentioned are clearer thinking, cleansing of the body, more energy, weight loss, release from addictions, better sleep, longer life. Almost every physical woe from allergies to varicose veins has supposedly been cured or relieved by fasting. A Dr. Nicolayev in Russia claims 70% of schizophrenics he treated with fasting improved significantly and were able to function again.

I have long been interested in fasting. Since I have been overweight most of my life fasting held out a potential panacea for my problem. The numerous fasting references in the Bible kindled my interest more. Every year the confirmands recite Luther's Small Catechism to me. "Fasting and bodily preparation is indeed a fine outward training." A member noticed a reference in the Apology which declared matter-of-factly "True fastings have God's command."<sup>i</sup> But the *coup de grace* came from my brothers in the ministry. They agreed fasting merited more study: They unanimously agreed I should do it. For those who suspect this paper comes from pride over my recent loss of weight, recall this paper was assigned in April when I was still a portly 210 pounds.

To fast (ἰνυ/νηστεύω) is to abstain from all food, and drink only water. If water is not consumed kidney damage and death may result. This definition rules out labeling as a fast the so-called "juice fast." It also disqualifies as a fast a diet which merely eliminates certain foods. I do not consider the grape-and-alcohol-free diet of the Nazarite a fast. When Daniel went vegetarian rather than eat unclean food, he was not fasting.

## Fasting in the Old Testament

One man counts eighty-six Bible references to fasting. Fasting is common in the Old Testament. We find great variety in the ways fasting is described. Individuals fast; the nation fasts. Believers fast; unbelievers and hypocrites fast. Fasting is done to obey the command of God or a leader; fasting is spontaneous; fasting is planned and voluntary. Fasting is begun with a vow; fasting is produced by great emotion. Fasting is miraculous; fasting is commonplace. The length of fasts stretch from a few hours to eighty days.

Intense emotions are closely connected with Old Testament fasting. Hannah's grief because she is barren causes her to weep, fast, and pray (1 Samuel 1:4-10). David fasted after the deaths of Abner (2 Samuel 3:35), Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:12). The men of Jabesh fasted seven days after retrieving the desecrated bodies of Saul and Jonathan (1 Samuel 31:13). Jonathan earlier refused to eat because his father was treating David shamefully (1 Samuel 20:34).

It is not surprising the grief of fasting was often sadness over personal sin or the nation's sin. Samuel's exhortation to Israel to put away foreign gods resulted in a day of fasting and the admission, "We have sinned against the Lord" (1 Samuel 7:6). You may remember Jonah's reluctant sermons to the Ninevites produced a city-wide fast. But did you know even the animals of Nineveh were made to fast? (Jonah 3:7) The fast was to express sorrow for Nineveh's sins and

beg God to spare their city. Ezra fasted lamenting over the intermarrying done by the Israelite exiles returned from Babylon (Ezra 10:6). Nehemiah wept, fasted and prayed before confessing his own, his family's and Israel's sins. The sad condition of the people and walls of Jerusalem moved him to such action. (Nehemiah 1:4-7). Daniel spoke a similar confession while fasting after he understood Jeremiah's prophecy that the exiles would be restored to Canaan (Daniel 9:3-6). Even Jezebel's hypocritical plot to accuse Naboth of blasphemy on a day of national fasting shows fasting goes hand-in-hand with sorrow over sin (1 Kings 21:9).

Sorrow, sin, calamity. Those three elements are often present when the Old Testament mentions fasting. While Israel was at war, faithful Uriah refused to eat at Jerusalem (2 Samuel 11:11). Darius couldn't eat or sleep while Daniel was in the lion's den (Daniel 6:13). The Psalmist "eats ashes" and drinks tears and forgets to eat his food. All because of his affliction, his enemies, and his concern that the Lord hear his prayer to rescue him and Zion (Psalm 102:4). A national disaster threatened Israel when the Benjaminites refused to discipline one of their own. At God's command the rest of Israel went to war with Benjamin but suffered 22,000 casualties. Israel wept, fasted until evening and inquired of the Lord. The Lord heard their plea and 25,100 warriors of Benjamin lost their lives in a bloody lesson on "church discipline." (Judges 20:26). King Jehoshaphat of Judah sought help from the Lord and proclaimed a fast when the hordes of Ammon threatened. Ammon was destroyed by its own ally (2 Chronicles 20:3). Joel prophesied disaster and judgment on Israel. He begged the priests to "put on sackcloth...mourn...wail...declare a holy fast...call a sacred assembly...cry out to the Lord" ((Joel 1:13-14). Certainly this imminent disaster on apostate Israel also pictures the final judgment which only the penitent' will escape.

Fasting often accompanies intercessory prayer. The best known Old Testament example is probably David's prayer for his ill son by Bathsheba. Weeping David fasted and pleaded for the sick child's life. But when the child died on the seventh day David began to eat and accepted the Lord's will. Even though he fasted God denied his request for the child's life (2 Samuel 12:16-23). That same David even fasted when he prayed for his enemies:

When they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning as for my friend or brother. (Psalm 35:13-14)

Esther told Mordecai to get all the Jews to fast for three days with her and her maids before she would attempt to approach King Xerxes uninvited (Esther 4:16). Ezra proclaims a fast so the Jews can ask for a safe journey to Canaan (Ezra 8:21). Even wicked Ahab's prayer for mercy was answered when he put on sackcloth, fasted, and went around meekly (2 Kings 21:27). The judgment was postponed until his son came to power.

Before the Babylonian Captivity, the single, annual, mandatory fast day for all Israel was the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-30). God's people are told, among other things, to "afflict their souls." Some question whether this means "fast." Ezra 8:21 uses the same expression and says: "I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble (afflict) ourselves." And in Acts 27:9 the Day of Atonement is referred to as "The Fast." Later two fasting days of Purim were set aside by Esther and Mordecai's decree to recall the way God had spared the Jews from extinction (Esther 9:29-31). The Jews also fasted in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months during the Babylonian Captivity to recall their nation's calamity. But when this new fast is mentioned in Zechariah 7:5; the Lord chides his people: "Was it for me that you really fasted?" A chapter later he promises their fast days will become joyful festivals for Judah because he will deliver the captives (Zechariah 8:19).

The Old Testament prophets were well aware that fasting, like Cain's sacrifice, can be all show. People can have the form of godliness but deny its real power. But God can see whether fasting comes from a heart of faith. The Lord said he would punish unrepentant Israel. "Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry. Though they offer burnt offerings...I will not accept them" (Jeremiah 14:12). Jezebel was committing sin, not rooting it out when she proclaimed a fast to accuse Naboth (1 Kings 21:9). Ahab certainly wasn't repentant when he refused to eat until he possessed Naboth's coveted vineyard (1 Kings 21:4). But the most telling treatment of false fasting comes from Isaiah's pen. He quotes the Lord blasting away at hypocritical Israel

"Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" Yet on the day of your fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fasting I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that when you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

The Lord describes his "kind of fast" as a day to right injustice, free the oppressed, lift the burdens of the cumbered; share food with the hungry, shelter with the homeless, clothing with the naked, and do his will. Fasting without faith and its fruit is worthless.

Perhaps the most famous Old Testament fasts were the fasts of Moses and Elijah. Elijah's forty day fast is usually called miraculous. He was given a cake of bread and jug of water by the angel of the Lord. "Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kings 19:8). People fast forty days today also. But they don't eat "angel food." They also drink water or die. Recently two charismatics from New Castle, Pennsylvania died while attempting a forty day fast without water. One died on the thirtieth day, the other on the thirty-second. Each weighed about sixty pounds. It doesn't seem like Elijah stopped for water.

Moses' fasting seems more miraculous. Not only did he fast forty days and nights without food or water, he did so twice, before and after the incident with the golden calf (Deuteronomy 9:9,18). It doesn't seem he stopped for lox and bagel in between. Moses was communing directly with God. God didn't need food and drink to keep Moses alive for eighty days.

One last interesting Old Testament reference to fasting. In Psalm 69:10, a direct Messianic psalm (Jesus himself is speaking), we hear: "When I weep and fast I must endure scorn. When I put on sackcloth people make sport of me." We know of no incident in the New Testament where Jesus' fasting practices prompt such mockery. But since fasting was required on the Day of Atonement, it would fit well into the life of Jesus made "under the law." Hebrews 5:7 says of Jesus: "He offered up his prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." It would be fully in keeping with what the Bible says of fasting to suggest that Jesus may have fasted on such occasions in addition to the Day of Atonement.

### **Fasting in the New Testament**

The New Testament says relatively little about fasting. We will survey what it does say.

The first faster we meet is Anna, the prophetess. "She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37).

The synoptic gospels record Jesus' forty day fast in the wilderness. It is the only fast of Jesus we have described for us in the gospels. If Jesus drank no waters it was a miracle. He may not have. Many people call it a miracle. But the words do not tell us whether he drank water.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican has demonstrated the fasting practices of the sect of the Pharisees. Not only did they fast on Thursdays (the day tradition says Moses went up Mt. Sinai) and Mondays (the day Moses was to have descended), they tried to make sure everyone knew they were fasting. The Pharisees considered their fasting to be a work of special merit which earned God's favor. Because it was done without faith, it was of no spiritual benefit. The publican went home justified rather than the Pharisee (Luke 18:14).

It's no wonder Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount to keep their fasting a private matter between them and God. But notice Jesus expects his followers will fast. "When you fast," he says. Not *if* you fast. Jesus was against the abuses of fasting, not fasting itself. In the same sermon, he sought to correct abuses in giving and praying. He did not seek to do away with alms, prayer, or fasting.

In Matthew 9:14 Jesus was asked why his disciples didn't fast although the Pharisees and John's disciples fasted often. Jesus said you can't expect the guests at a wedding to mourn while the bridegroom is with them. That part is easy enough. Don't expect my disciples to fast and mourn while I'm with them. Let them rejoice. Don't criticize them. But his next words are more difficult: "The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast" (Matthew 9:15). He then tells the parable showing the folly of pouring new wine into old wineskins. What did he mean? His disciples would fast for grief when he would suffer and die? Christians would fast regularly after he was gone until his return? Both are possible. The followers of Christ probably didn't feel much like eating on Good Friday, Holy Saturday, or Easter morning. And there are examples of devout fasting in the book of Acts. "Then they will fast" does not eliminate either interpretation.

It should be obvious Jesus is not described in the Gospels as an ascetic or monastic model. He fasted forty days. He urged self-denial and moderation: "Be careful or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation...and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap" (Luke 21:34). But he also attended a wedding feast, enjoyed domestic life in Bethany, and accepted the hospitality of many. He was even falsely accused by his enemies of being a glutton (Matthew 11:19). His attitude toward fasting can be summed up in this way: Jesus sanctioned fasting but did not make it mandatory. He did not lay down rules on the nature or frequency of fasting. He didn't demand it even of the crowds who had followed him for several days but performed a miracle and fed 4,000 because he didn't want the crowd to collapse on the way home "fasting" (νηστεις).

Fasting occurs several times in Acts. Paul was blind and didn't eat or drink for three days after his conversion (Acts 9:9). The Holy Ghost somehow told the worshipping, fasting believers at Antioch: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). After they fasted some more and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Paul and Barnabas similarly fasted and prayed when they appointed elders (pastors) for the young churches in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23). But lest anyone declare that fasting must accompany all call meetings, seminary assignments or ordinations, remember fasting is nowhere mentioned when the new apostle, Matthias, was chosen (Acts 1:12-26). They prayed; they drew lots; they may have fasted. But the Word doesn't specify that they did or that we must. Prayer also is mentioned with the laying on of hands when the seven deacons were chosen. Fasting is not. The Scriptures dare not be forced to require fasting in all such situations. Acts 27:9 mentions

“the Fast,” the Day of Atonement, but doesn’t tell us whether Paul observed it or not. It is used more to show that the time of year was dangerous for sailing.

The epistles are just about void of direct references to fasting. Paul mentions his frequent fastings when listing his sufferings, but the context seems to suggest these were times when he went without food involuntarily as he was persecuted for Christ (1 Corinthians 4:11; 2 Cor 11:27). Prayer is encouraged and praised throughout the epistles; we are surprised to find fasting is not. We find exhortations to keep control of the body (1 Corinthians 9:25-27), to eat and drink to God’s glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). But we are also told that hypocritical liars order people to abstain from certain foods (1 Timothy 4:1-4). A Christian is not to be judged in regard to food (Colossians 2:16), or let someone bind his conscience with a forbidding, “Do not taste.” Of such commands Paul says:

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Colossians 2:23)

The New Testament is not the place to go for support of mandatory fasting. Romans 14 talks about whether a Christian can eat clean or unclean food, vegetables only or also meat. Some of its statements can be applied equally well to fasting: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men” (Romans 14:17-10). An earlier verse states: “He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God, and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God” (Romans 14:6).

### **Fasting in the Early Church**

Fasting was encouraged by many of the early church fathers in the days after the apostles.

Polycarp (156 AD) a disciple of John, urged: “...let us give up the vanity of the crowd and false teachings and return to the Word handed on to us from the beginning...being sober unto prayer and persevering in fasting.”<sup>iii</sup> *The Shepherd of Hermas* suggested a “fast” of bread and water with the money normally spent on food to be given to the poor.<sup>iii</sup> The writer of 2 Clement (100-140 AD) wrote: “Fasting is better than prayer, almsgiving than both.”<sup>iv</sup>

The Easter or Pascha (Passover) fast was the first widely observed public fast in the early church. Eusebius said it had apostolic tradition. Justin in 155 AD already called it a tradition “of long standing.” This fast began at 6 a.m. on Saturday and was broken when Holy Communion was received on Easter Sunday at 3 a.m. Soon candidates for baptism and confirmations who were receiving instruction and were also being carefully scrutinized during the Roman persecutions were required to fast: “And prior to baptism, both he who is baptizing and he who is being baptized should fast, along with any others who can. And be sure that the one who is to be baptized fasts for one or two days beforehand.”<sup>v</sup>

The length of the Pascha fast slowly increased from a few hours to forty, from several days to six; from six days to two weeks. thirty-six days, and finally, forty days. The thirty-six day fast was thought to be a tithe of the days of the year. But as the duration of the fast increased, the severity of it declined proportionately. The Sundays were considered feast days. The hunger veil, hung at the front of the churches at the start of the forty days of fasting, was drawn back on Sundays. With the Edict of Toleration in 313 AD the careful scrutiny of the confirmands was relaxed. The whole congregation was encouraged to take part in the catecheses and fast to prepare for Easter. It was only an afterthought to connect the forty days of Lent with Jesus’ fast

of forty days before his baptism. Ash Wednesday wasn't observed until the late seventh or early eighth century. The catechetical instruction was on the chief teachings of the faith, not just about Jesus' sufferings and death.

We can see how the push for more Pascha fasting was intensified in three Easter letters of Athanasius of Alexandria to his flock. In 329 AD he asked his people to fast the week before Easter. In 336 he asked them to fast for the forty days before Easter. In 339 while at Rome he begged them to observe the full forty days, "lest while all the world is fasting we in Egypt be mocked because we alone do not fast."<sup>vi</sup>

The first fasting rules were said to have been set down by the heretic Montanus at the end of the second century. It was here that the "stations" (tour of guard duty) developed. Two days were set aside for fasting. The *Didache* explains why Wednesdays and Fridays were observed. "But do not let your fasts fall on the same days as the hypocrite who fast on Monday and Thursday. Rather you should fast on Wednesday and Friday."<sup>vii</sup> First the orthodox despised this new fangled custom. Later they adopted it. The Wednesday fast gradually faded away but the Friday one long continued. However, the "fasting" came to be less and less strenuous. The fast could be broken at 3 p.m. on a "fast day." One moderate meal could be eaten. In the later Middle Ages even beer and wine could be consumed at meals. Although the Montanists played a large role in netting this all rolling, it is interesting to note that Tertullian, who had definite Montanist leanings, nevertheless called the Pascha fast the only fast of apostolic institution. It alone, he wrote, was obligatory. All other fasts are matters of private devotion and personal choice.

As years passed fasting was required not only in Lent, but also on twelve "Ember Days" each year, on vigil days before all major festivals, during Advent in some localities, and on other designated days. It was believed the church had been given the authority to give God's people such commands. Fasting was considered a work of merit. Excommunication was practiced against those who violated fasting laws.

Thus, from the largely individual, voluntary observance of fasting in the days of the Apostles a complex system of mandatory fast days gradually arose. The spiritually beneficial side of fasting was crowded out by the devilish notion that God's pleasure could be earned by the act of fasting. And as the true spirit of godly fasting was lost, the practice of fasting became an empty shell with more and more hypocritical exceptions worked in to make it less difficult to earn the merit points by fasting.

### **Fasting in the Confessions and Luther**

The Lutheran Confessions have bad and good things to say about fasting. The corruptions and abuses of forced, fixed fasting are listed in several places. The Augsburg Confession charges that "new fastings were daily instituted, and the teachers in the churches did exact these works as a service necessary to merit grace and did greatly terrify men's consciences, if they should omit any of these things."<sup>viii</sup> Some of the damages of such fasting are:

- the doctrine of grace is obscured<sup>ix</sup>
- repentance is thought to consist of works of satisfaction, not of faith<sup>x</sup>
- human traditions have been placed above God's commandments<sup>xi</sup>
- people think the monks are better able to please God than they can in their callings<sup>xii</sup>
- the conscience of the person who can't or doesn't follow these fasts is terrified and some even take their own lives<sup>xiii</sup>

The Confessions also recommend proper fasting: “Every Christian ought to train and subdue himself with bodily restraints, or bodily exercises and labors, that neither satiety nor slothfulness tempt him to sin...”<sup>xiv</sup> “And such external discipline, however, ought to be urged at all times, not only on a few and set days.”<sup>xv</sup> Repeatedly the theme returns: Fasting helps restrain the flesh. Article XV of the Apology repeats the benefits but sounds the caution:

These exercises are to be undertaken not because they are services that justify but in order to curb the flesh, lest satiety indifference overpower us and render us secure and indifferent, the result of which is that men indulge and obey the dispositions of the flesh. This diligence ought to be perpetual, because it has the perpetual command of God. And this prescribed form of certain meats and times does neither.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is this “true fasting” that is urged by Luther in his Small Catechism as a “fine outward training.”<sup>xvii</sup> A special benefit is seen for the communicant in fasting “that the body may keep and bear itself modestly and reverently towards the body and blood of Christ.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Since fasting may be of benefit to some but dare not be forced on others it lies in the area of adiaphora. In fact, the words of Irenaeus about fasting are cited several times in the Confessions to illustrate that churches should not divide over different church rites: “Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.”<sup>xix</sup> If your church observes certain fast days and mine does not, that should not divide us, provided we agree in our doctrines and use of the sacraments.

The Confessions put fixed fasting in the realm of adiaphora, but I frankly still do have a problem with the passage of the Apology which seems to say other fasting is commanded by God:

And true prayers, true alms, *true fastings*, have God’s command; and where they have God’s command, they cannot without sin be omitted. But these works, in so far as they have not been commanded by God’s Law, but have a fixed form derived from human rule, are works of human traditions of which Christ says, Matthew 15:9: In vain they do worship me with the commandments of men, such as certain fasts appointed not for restraining the flesh, but that, by this work, honor may be given to God, as Scotus says, and eternal death be made up for; likewise, a fixed number of prayers, a fixed measure of alms when they are tendered in such a way that this measure is a worship *ex opere operato*, giving honor to God, and making up for eternal death.<sup>xx</sup>

My problem is this: I know where God’s Word commands me to pray. I know where God’s Word commands me to give to the Lord and to others. I don’t, however, know where God’s Word commands me to undergo a fast which “cannot without sin be omitted.” The closest I find to such commands are the Old Testament ceremonial command to fast on the Day of Atonement, Jesus’ remark “they will fast,” and the many examples of God-pleasing fasting cited in the Bible. The only way I can reconcile this passage of the Apology with my understanding of Scripture is to define “true fasting” as any attempt to seek moderation in eating and drinking. That does have God’s command, even though it still is a highly individual matter.

Luther also strongly condemned fasting for merit before God. He described it as “hitting Christ in the mouth and trampling him underfoot.”<sup>xxi</sup> To one contemplating fasting he would say

But above all you must see to it that you are already pious and a true Christian and that you are not planning to render God a service by this fasting. Your service to God must be only faith in Christ and love to your neighbor, simply doing what is required of you. If this is not your situation, then you would do better to leave fasting alone.<sup>xxii</sup>

Luther's warning goes unheeded by many today who say that fasting helps the soul get cleaner.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Luther says the type and severity of fasting ought always be left to the individual since people vary in physical strength and the amount of curbing that passions of the flesh require. He himself often fasted while translating the Bible. It seems he included more in his definition of fasting than most would:

True fasting consists in disciplining and restraining of your body, which pertains not only to eating, drinking and sleeping, but also to your time, your pleasure, and to everything that may delight your body, or that you do to provide for it and take care of it. To fast means to refrain and hold back from all such things, and to do so only as a means of curbing and humbling the flesh. This is how Scripture enjoins fasting, calling it "afflicting the soul" (Leviticus 16:29), "afflicting the body," and the like, so that it stays away from pleasure, good times, and fun. Such was the fasting of the ancient fathers.<sup>xxiv</sup>

It is easy to see why Luther mocked the fasting of the papists for its pretense:

How can I call it a fast if someone prepares lunch of expensive fish, with the choicest spices, more and better than for two or three other meals, and washes it down with the strongest drink, and spends an hour or three at filling his belly till it is stuffed? Yet that was the usual thing and a minor thing even among the very strictest monks.<sup>xxv</sup>

Luther also objected to buying special exemptions from the church to avoid participating in such fasts.

Luther thought two kinds of fasts good and commendable. One could be called a secular fast. It is ordered by the government and would forbid the eating or selling of meat one or two days a week. The main purpose would be to prevent waste and save food for hard times. He also liked the idea of general spiritual fasts of a few days before the three major festivals: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. But even here he wanted Christians to do them willingly and not by compulsion.

### **Personal**

I have had my own experiments with fasting. In my college days I foolishly went without food or water for three days to kick off a new diet. Another time I went on a week long fast to see if I could outlast a fasting competitor. This summer I tried to have a more spiritual fast to gain insight for this paper. I originally wanted to fast 40 days. I finally settled for eight days – a new personal record. Both my wife and I filled out daily evaluation sheets. I drank plenty of water.

The major benefit of the fast was that I had more time to read my Bible. You may be surprised how many hours a day it takes to prepare, eat, and clean up after food. I counted eight hours reading in four days. I didn't find it any easier to pray. I didn't notice any tremendous



spiritual insights – although there were some (as there generally are when the Word is read). I was able to run nine miles per week. Some fasting authorities discourage exercise. But Dick Gregory ran the Boston Marathon while on a long fast. I did get nauseous on the third run, but the temperature was very high.

Now for the negatives. I often got lightheaded. My ears pop when I fast. The breath of a faster gets slightly foul. The tongue is coated. I didn't notice my head getting clearer and clearer as the proponents of fasting suggest. My ability to work fluctuated from normal to good to rotten. So did my social graces. On the third day my wife noted I was much more introspective and removed. I was very crabby and irritable on the fourth day until a prayer session calmed me down. I had trouble adjusting to problems on the fifth day after a restless night (very unusual). On various days the thought of food (not hunger) was almost overwhelming. The fourth day always seems to be my roughest. I beg my wife and try to convince her I really ought to eat again.

When I break such a fast. I usually don't follow the experts and drink liquids for several days. I'm usually ready for the foods I've been dreaming about. When I eat I'd better not be more than thirty seconds from the bathroom. My weight loss may be as much as 17–20 pounds a week. But after the water weight is regained, I've actually lost 3-4 pounds during a week's fast.

Without knowing about the ancient custom of the Pascha fast my wife has fasted from noon on Good Friday to Easter Sunrise for several years. She lists time for Bible reading and thoughtful consideration of the meaning of Holy Week as the major benefits she derives. In fact her fast includes even a "conversation fast." She makes it custom not to talk to anyone or watch TV during that period. She says the "conversation fast" is more beneficial to her than the food fasts.

### **Conclusions**

The Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions certainly warn us against fasting to merit God's forgiveness, fasting for show or sham fasting without faith at its center. A pastor warns that fasting not controlled by the Spirit can open the mind and the body to the control of evil spirits. Another warns the only times on his travels he was approached by prostitutes have been times of fasting. Yet fasting itself is not sin. Done wisely (especially under a doctor's care) it is not risking death or tempting God. The Old Testament, Jesus, the apostles, the Early Church, Luther and the Confessions all see positive benefits or purposes in fasting. Among them are expressing grief, confessing sin, calling on God for aide or guidance, and subduing the flesh.

Scripture also demonstrates a group or nation may be asked to fast. But generally the fasts of Scripture are spontaneous acts of individuals. It seems best to avoid promoting group fasts because of the variety of physical and spiritual strengths a group contains. Jesus encouraged fasting secretly.

Since fasting is an adiaphoron, a person who does not fast should not be made to feel like a second class Christian unqualified to be Christ's disciple. It is my perpetual duty to "keep under my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Maybe I can do that well without fasting. Maybe fasting can help me give my flesh a message it can't refuse.

A person who fasts should not be ridiculed or accused of being a work-righteous pietist or crazy. The faster is in pretty good spiritual company. Perhaps our fear of the dangers of fasting and our lack of Scriptural or experiential knowledge about fasting has led us to say too much negative and too little positive about this subject. In this difficult area too may we "preach

the whole counsel of God” by not only sounding the cautions against ungodly fasting but also by presenting the spiritual benefits fasting can bring.

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<sup>i</sup> Apology VI:42, *Triglot*, 295.

<sup>ii</sup> Polycarp VI, 7:2, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Jack Sparks, ed., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1978, p. 132.

<sup>iii</sup> Hermas, Similitude V, 3:7, *ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>iv</sup> 2 Clement VI, 16:4, *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>v</sup> Didache II, 7:4, *ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>vi</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Westminster: Dacre Press, 1947, p. 355.

<sup>vii</sup> Didache II, 8:1, *loc. cit.*

<sup>viii</sup> Augsburg Confession XXVI:2, *Triglot*, p. 71.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 4.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 7.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 8.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 11, p. 71.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 13, p. 72.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 33, p. 75.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 34, p. 75.

<sup>xvi</sup> Apology XV:47-48, *Triglot*, p. 327-29.

<sup>xvii</sup> Small Catechism 10, *Triglot*, p. 557.

<sup>xviii</sup> Large Catechism 36, *Triglot*, p. 761.

<sup>xix</sup> Augsburg Confession XXVI:44, *Triglot*, p. 75 and Formula of Concord, Epitome X:7, *Triglot*, p. 831.

<sup>xx</sup> Apology VI:46, *Triglot*, p. 295-297.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol, 21, p. 158.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>xxiii</sup> J. Harold Smith, *Fast Your Way to Health*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979, p. 15.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol, 21, p. 160.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

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