

How many of you have ever fasted for religious reasons?

I have to confess that I have never fasted. I have dieted from time to time to lose weight. There have been times when I retreated, so to speak, from the world for prayer and the study of Scripture. But I have never really fasted. I imagine that few of us have really fasted for a religious purpose. The practice of fasting has nearly ceased among most American Christians.

Yet here lately it seems to me that fasting is having a modest revival. Last Wednesday I received the Presbyterian Layman magazine which called upon the United Presbyterian Church to observe a day of fasting and prayer on the first Friday of each month for the General Assembly of our church which meets at the end of May, and for the reformation and spiritual renewal of our church. Last year, our Bicentennial year as a nation, many Christian government leaders and ministers called upon the people of the United States to observe a day of prayer and fasting for our country. At recent Presbytery meetings we have been served soup instead of a full course meal for lunch. This modified fast is to remind us of the problem of world hunger. When I was in seminary the student body periodically observed days of fasting for the end of the

war in Viet-Nam. And just yesterday Kay and I received a letter from her college room-mate saying she had just read a book entitled, "How to Be Happy and Healthy by Fasting". All of this seems to point to a modest revival of the spiritual discipline of fasting.

At one time fasting was a serious part of religious life. We are drawing near to the end of the Lenten season. Today is Palm Sunday. Lent will come to an end on Easter morning. Originally Lent was a time of fasting and prayer. Christians were supposed to think about the meaning of the death of Christ, to examine their lives for hidden sins, to repent, and to prepare themselves for new life which comes with the resurrection of Christ. Today Lent isn't really taken seriously as a time of fasting. Sometimes people give up cigarettes or candy for Lent. But few people really take the Lenten fast seriously today.

Fasting used to play an important part in the life of Presbyterians. Presbyterians never used to observe the Lenten fast but they did set aside days of prayer and fasting quite often. If you were to read over the old session minutes of our church you would see that fasting was a serious part of our religious heritage. The West-

minster Larger Catechism calls fasting a religious duty.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states that solemn fasting is a part of true religious worship.

The custom of fasting can be traced to the Bible.

Fasting in the Bible generally means going without all food and drink for a period of time. God commanded the whole nation of Israel to fast on the Day of Atonement. This was Israel's most solemn holy day. All work was forbidden and a strict fast was observed by all the people. (By the way several years ago the Arab nations attacked Israel on the Day of Atonement when all Israel was observing this fast. That was the Yom Kippur War. Yom Kippur means the Day of Atonement War.

The Day of Atonement served as a reminder that the daily, weekly, and monthly sacrifices made at the altar of burnt offering were not sufficient to atone for sin. On this day the high priest brought the atoning blood of a lamb into the inner most sanctuary of the temple where it was offered to God as an atonement for the sins of the people. This was the only day of fasting that God commanded the Israelites to observe.

When we come to the New Testament we find no direct commands about fasting. We are commanded to be baptized,

to observe the Lord's Supper, to confess our sins, to pray, to love God and our neighbor, and many other things but no where are there any guidelines laid down as to when we should fast or how often. Bishop J.C. Ryle comments, "It is a subject about which we find no direct command in the New Testament. It seems to be left to every one's discretion, whether he will fast or not.... It is a matter in which every one must be persuaded in his own mind, and not rashly condemn others who do not agree with him.-- One thing only must never be forgotten: those who fast should do it quietly, secretly, and without ostentation. Let them not 'appear to men' to fast. Let them not fast to man, but to God."

I think that the best way to understand this old custom of fasting is to ask ourselves, "What are the things that make us lose our appetites?" I sometime lose my appetite when I have difficult and momentous decisions to make. My mind is so occupied with the consequences of my decisions that I lose interest in eating. Has that ~~ever~~ happened to you?

We find this happening in the Bible. Fasting was observed when men and women were facing some difficult decision. Paul and Barnabas fasted when they were faced

with the important and difficult decision of appointing elders for the churches. Jesus fasted forty days and nights when he was faced with the difficult decision as to how he would carry out his ministry.

When we have difficult decisions to make; decisions which are so momentous that we lose our appetites, do we earnestly seek God for guidance? Each one of us must make terrible and difficult decisions. Will we choose marriage or the single life? If we choose marriage how can I know God's will with regard to a marriage partner? Which job should I take? What shall I do with my life? What shall I do with money? Will I commit my life to God and will I receive Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior? These are all momentous decisions. The important thing is not whether you fast or whether you lose your appetite. The important thing is that you seek God's guidance in the Scripture, and through a committed Christian friend or minister. Fasting then is an occasion for earnestly seeking God's guidance.

Another thing that makes people lose their appetites is grief; especially grief at the lose of someone we love. All of us suffer some kind of heart-breaking loss in our lives. You might lose your husband or wife. Your father

or mother dies. Or maybe one of your children dies. That's one of the most heart-breaking experiences we go through. For awhile we lose all interest in eating. What is food compared to the emptiness we feel inside?

We also find this happening in the Bible. King David fasted while his infant son lay dieing. When King Saul and his son, Jonathan, were killed in battle the men and women of Israel fasted for seven days. Once some men asked Jesus why his disciples didn't fast. Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." By this he meant that when he died, then the disciples would fast and mourn over the loss of the one they had come to love so much.

On Godd Friday we observe the death of Jesus. He is the bride-groom and we, the church, are the bride. Imagine the grief of a bride losing her husband? Wouldn't that cause such grief and sorrow and loss of appetite beyond most people's ability to imagine? But whenever we sin we break off our fellowship with Christ. Have you ever mourned over some special sin which has you in its grip, which has broken your fellowship with God or with someone

you love? Can you identify with the words of William Cowper's hymn,

"Return, O holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn
And drove Thee from my breast."

We lose our appetites when we lose someone we love. Have you ever lost your appetite because your sin has broken your fellowship with God and driven his Spirit from you?

There are other reasons that make us fast and that cause us to lose our appetites. We fast when we are overweight and we call it a diet. That has great value for our physical welfare. But do we take the same care of our spiritual lives? Have you ever gone on a spiritual diet to lose the excess baggage we carry around with us and which weighs us down with worry and anxiety; which keeps us from running the race that God has set before us?

We all fast at night when we are sleeping. In the morning we get up and we break our fast. That's why we call our morning meal "breakfast". We break our fast in order to have strength for a new day. If we are ever going to wake up spiritually and begin a new life in Christ we must first go through that dark night of the soul where we realise we are in the dark concerning **God**

apart from a vital faith in Jesus Christ crucified for us. We can not feed on Jesus Christ through faith unless we have first become aware of our spiritual darkness, our dreadful spirutal lethargy and slumber, our spiritual hunger.

In the beautiful hymn of the Virgin Mary which we know as the Magnificat we read, "He has filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he has sent empty away."

If we want God to fill us, if we want to be filled with the life giving Holy Spirit, we must first be empty. Fasting may or may not be the means which brings you to the place where you realize the emptiness within apart from a life committed totally to Jesus Christ. But it may be that fasting might be what we need to make us aware that we have a gnawing spiritual hunger which can't be filled with meat, potatoes, vegetable, and alcohol; or money, sex, popularity and power.

It isn't really important whether or not you actually fast. The important thing is that we come to the place in our lives when we realize we have an emptiness within that can be filled by Jesus Christ alone? Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." As we

prepare ourselves for Holy Communion next Thursday evening ask yourself, "Do I know from my own personal experience what Jesus is talking about? Will I let him fill the emptiness I feel within my life?"

So fast or do anything if it will help you to feel your spiritual hunger. And then come to Jesus. He invites you to break your fast. "Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled." "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost."

AMEN