



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Advent Fast
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 41-46)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Advent Invitation
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 79-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Advent Fast

As we recover and creatively appropriate the tradition of fasting during Advent, we identify with and proclaim God's narrative of love in a counter-cultural way. We resist the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony that increasingly characterize cultural holiday celebrations.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 58:6-8 and Luke 2:22-38

Reflection

"The earliest celebrations of Advent, from the fourth century, involved some form of fasting," Thomas Turner notes. "The wisdom of the Church is simple: the gravity of Christ's Incarnation beckons us to feast and rejoice, but only after a period of preparation that includes fasting. Just as a wedding feast requires the bride and groom and their families to devote months of sacrificial effort to carefully planning and preparing for the celebration, so we are called to prepare ourselves for the joy of Christ's coming through a time of sacrificial fasting."

Eastern Orthodox traditions continue to encourage the Advent fast. Yet it is uncommon among congregations in the West where Advent is too often submerged in the secular holiday season running from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, "a festival of overeating and gadget purchasing," Turner notes. "Advent is no longer a prelude to a holy banquet [of Christmas], but a foretaste – like lavish appetizers – of a grand secular meal."

Turner commends recovering and creatively appropriating the Advent fast as "a prophetic, redemptive rejection of the personal instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony exhibited in cultural holiday celebrations."

- ▶ *Rejecting personal instant gratification.* We'd prefer to skip the patient preparation and waiting for Christ's advent. "Fasting teaches us to push back against this desire through setting aside something important in our lives and filling that sacrificed time with reflection and prayer – orienting our bodies and souls toward dependency on God," Turner writes. He takes Israel's yearning over the centuries for the coming of the Messiah as a model for our corporate preparation during Advent. Simeon and Anna are remarkable examples of Israel's patient longing. Simeon travels to the Temple to await "the Lord's Messiah" who would be the "consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25-26); daily prayer and fasting from food are important parts of Anna's preparation (Luke 2:37).
- ▶ *Rejecting materialism.* Bishop Kallistos Ware observes that "The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God." This insight can extend to fasting from other good things, like material possessions, which when we improperly desire or carelessly use them, can distort our relationship to God. Turner suggests that "fasting from possessions during Advent would allow us to step back from what most threatens to control us – the deluge of advertising, hype of the latest technological gadgetry, and incessant hustle and bustle of shopping – in order to reclaim the season as a time of spiritual attunement and discipleship."



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► *Rejecting gluttony.* “Fasting from food during Advent can be a counter-cultural witness that we will fight hunger, resist waste, and eat mindfully so that those who are less fortunate can partake of the bounty of healthy food that is available,” Turner writes. “Using the food or other resources that we do not consume to help the poor makes the Advent fast a communal and missional act” that takes seriously God’s desire that our fasting will “loose the bonds of injustice” and lead us “to share [our] bread with the hungry” (Isaiah 58:6-8). “The point is not to flaunt the abundance of our own lives, but to become more fully engaged in the continuing story of God’s redemption of the world through Christ by working to correct the imbalance of hunger and poverty. The Advent fast calls us to join with all God’s people in hopeful waiting for the Lord and to stand in solidarity with them by resisting the unjust patterns of this world.”

In an Advent fast, whether we cut back on food or possessions, we join other disciples in taking “a small step to greet the Christ who is graciously coming to us and (this is the mystery) has been drawing us to himself. The spiritual effects of fasting are like those of lighting the Advent wreath,” Turner concludes, “we open our hearts to God’s presence in the world.”

Study Questions

1. From the earliest celebrations of the season of Advent, why was fasting from food an important part of the Church’s preparation for Christ’s coming?
2. Why, according to Thomas Turner, would it be appropriate today to extend the Advent fast to include cutting back on material possessions?
3. Discuss how the tradition of the Advent fast has been creatively appropriated by the Advent Conspiracy movement, created in 2006 to “make Christmas a revolutionary event by encouraging their faith communities to Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All.”
4. Consider how the final two “O Antiphons” emphasize that in Christ, God is restoring the created unity of humanity. How would an Advent fast bear witness to this truth?

Departing Hymn: “O God Among Us, Come” (vv. 6 and 7)

O King of Nations, come.
The hope and cornerstone
who makes from many, one,
you fashioned us in Eden—
your earthen vessels, save.
O God Among Us, come.
Great king, who gives the Law
to gather nations nigh,
O Lord our God, Redeemer,
to save your children, come.

Latin, 8th century, tr. Robert B. Kruschwitz (2010)

Tune: O ANTIPHONS

The Advent Fast

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the historic practice of the Advent fast.
2. To consider how fasting from food or material possessions can be a prophetic, redemptive rejection of the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony in holiday celebrations.
3. To discuss the theme of restoration of humanity in the “O Antiphons.”

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-12 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Advent Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“A sad realization we reached in our congregation recently is that this holy Advent season...is co-opted by the season of Tinsel—a season of selfishness, as we drop broad hints about the gifts we want for Christmas, and then drive to the ‘After Christmas Sales’ to purchase for ourselves what our family failed to give us,” writes Larry Parsley, Senior Pastor of Valley Ranch Baptist Church in Coppell, Texas. “It is a season of stress, as our calendars are overbooked and our credit cards are overtaxed.”

He continues, “Several years ago our congregation was blessed to discover the Advent Conspiracy movement that mourns the fact that our obsessive, consumption-focused Decembers cause us to sleep through Advent. This movement conspires against the forces of consumption and stress, creating time and space to *worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all*” (*Advent Ethics*, p. 80-81). The congregation’s determination to “fast” from excessive consumption gave members new focus. They began, as the Apostle Paul says, “to wake from sleep” (Romans 13:11) and notice the distortion in themselves and suffering in the world around them.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to identify with and winsomely proclaim God’s narrative of love during the Advent season.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Isaiah 58:6-8 and Luke 2:22-38 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study suggests ways of recovering and creatively appropriating the tradition of fasting during the Advent season. Thomas Turner extends the Advent fast to include cutting back on material possessions. For concrete ways of implementing this and similar practices that resist holiday consumerism, he and Larry Parsley (“The Advent Invitation”) commend the Advent Conspiracy movement (www.adventconspiracy.org). Encourage members to discuss how they can nurture these practices in their families and congregation.

The Advent fast is still practiced within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where the fasting season from November 15 to December 24 is called the Nativity Fast (as a time of preparation to celebrate Christ’s birth) or

St. Philip's Fast (since the season begins after that saint's feast day on November 14). For more information, see the page on fasting at the Orthodox Church in America's website, www.oca.org/OCFasting.asp.

Study Questions

1. Thomas Turner mentions several important reasons for the Advent fast. He agrees with Scott McKnight that fasting in general is "a person's whole-body, natural response to life's sacred moments." Specifically, the Advent fast is a way to sacrificially "get ready for the great feasts to come – the Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth that follows it in the church year, and the heavenly banquet that Christ promised." Second, in the context of the perpetual feasting that dominates cultural celebrations, the Advent fast is a counter-cultural way to present the gospel – pushing back against the personal instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony. Third, when we share with the poor the food or other resources that we save, the Advent fast becomes "a communal and missional act." Finally, fasting orients "our bodies and souls toward dependency on God."
2. The fourth reason above – that fasting makes us fully attuned to our dependence on God – suggests the Advent fast should be extended to "fasting from other good things [like our material possessions] that, when we improperly desire or carelessly use them, can distort our relationship to God" Turner writes. "Fasting from possessions during Advent would allow us to step back from what most threatens to control us – the deluge of advertising, hype of the latest technological gadgetry, and incessant hustle and bustle of shopping – in order to reclaim the season as a time of spiritual attunement and discipleship."
3. Thomas Turner and Larry Parsley commend the Advent Conspiracy for providing concrete ways for congregations to practice an Advent fast from material possessions. Turner describes his church's experience: "When Cornerstone Christian Church in Wyckoff, NJ – located in an affluent part of the New York City metro area – joined the 'conspiracy' in 2009, each member purchased one less gift and donated the money they saved toward building a well, medical center, and community center in Gulu, Uganda. The success of Advent Conspiracy has helped the church build a year-round partnership with a ministry in Uganda." Larry Parsley says, "We have asked permission from family members and friends to not buy them gadgets they will never use, instead making gifts of money in their names to drill water wells in Kenya. We have also emphasized giving handmade and relational gifts. A couple years ago, in addition to modest gifts under the tree, I gave each of my children an index card. On one side of the card I wrote what I admired most about them; on the other side I wrote about an activity I hoped to do with them in the coming weeks."

Encourage group members to discuss the value of the "conspiracy" and brainstorm how they might join it.

4. The sixth antiphon praises Christ for unifying his disciples; making his Body "from many, one," Christ refashions the humanity ("earthen vessels") that was marred and shattered by the Fall. The final antiphon repeats the theme of the nations coming to their true King.

Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) said the Advent fast was instituted so that "when all the ingathering of the crops was complete, we might dedicate to God our reasonable service of abstinence, and each might remember so to use his abundance as to be more abstinent in himself and more open-handed towards the poor." Turner notes, "The point is not to flaunt the abundance of our own lives, but to become more fully engaged in the continuing story of God's redemption of the world through Christ by working to correct the imbalance of hunger and poverty. The Advent fast calls us to join with all God's people in hopeful waiting for the Lord and to stand in solidarity with them by resisting the unjust patterns of this world."

Departing Hymn

The piano accompaniment for "O God Among Us, Come" is on pp. 64-65 of *Advent Ethics*. A version with the melody only is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.