

The Why and How of Fasting

BY RACHEL MARIE STONE

Is fasting just a spiritualized form of self-denial, or is it essential to our discipleship? The theological reflections and cookbook reviewed here suggest fasting holds the promise of connecting us more deeply to God and to that which God cares about deeply.

Fasting seems so countercultural – for what could be less North American than voluntarily going without food? On the other hand, about forty-five million Americans each year adopt some form of dieting plan, and some of those diets, like Rick Warren’s *The Daniel Plan* and Don Colbert’s *Get Healthy Through Detox and Fasting*, claim to provide spiritual as well as physical benefits through their supposedly biblical patterns of fasting. Is fasting just a spiritualized form of self-denial – a not altogether worthless exercise in restraining our excessive consumption, but relatively unimportant to contemporary Christian life? Or is fasting more essential to our discipleship, holding the promise of connecting us more deeply to God and to that which God cares about deeply?

According to Kent D. Berghuis in *Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2007, 308 pp., \$19.95), fasting is never simply about physical health because in Scripture it is about many other things, such as repentance, humility, and holiness. Our fasting, he writes, should always be “centered on Christ” and “remember the corporate nature of the believer’s community” (p. xi). Berghuis’ project – an “integrative theology of fasting from an evangelical Christian perspective” (p. x) – provides a wide-ranging biblical, historical, and theological examination of fasting from ancient Judaism through the New Testament and Patristic Eras to contemporary times. Because the volume is essentially his doctoral thesis with minimal edits, it is, unfortunately, less than accessible to the general reader. Still, many of his insights – and his updated translation of the two

sermons *About Fasting* (Sermons 1 and 2) by St. Basil the Great – make the volume indispensable for those with a serious interest in the Christian tradition of fasting.

Scot McKnight's *Fasting* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009, 208 pp., \$12.99) also places the ancient spiritual practice into biblical, historical, and theological contexts, but in a more engaging and highly accessible style. Berghuis might take exception to some of McKnight's simplifications, but the heart of McKnight's thinking on fasting can be expressed by blending the first and last lines of the book: "Fasting is a person's whole-body, natural response to life's sacred moments" (p. xvi); "[it] is being with God and on God's side in the midst of [those moments]" (p. 169).

McKnight proposes that biblical and historically Christian patterns of fasting have an A→B→C structure, where "A" is a sacred moment (such as death, sin, or fear) that prompts the fasting, "B" is the act of fasting, and "C" represents the expected results of fasting (such as life, forgiveness, or hope). His is a *responsive* view of fasting; in other words, the fast is not initiated solely to obtain a desired result, but instead springs from a "natural" response to serious happenings. He notes, for instance, that during times of personal illness, at the death of a loved one, or when we are depressed by a national catastrophe, the desire to eat simply disappears.

To properly understand fasting, McKnight holds, Christians need a healthier body image. By this he does not mean that we need to feel proud of how we look but that we need an embodied spirituality – to understand being the *Eikon* of God in the world entails our whole beings – an "*organic unity* of heart and mind and soul and spirit and body" (p. 4). Until we understand this unity, it will be difficult for us to practice fasting rightly. A "unified perception of body, soul, spirit and mind creates a spirituality that includes the body. For this kind of body image, fasting is natural" (p. 11). Fasting, then, is the body expressing what the entire person yearns for: healing, wisdom, courage.

McKnight is inviting us to rethink fasting in the same way that other writers have urged us to rethink prayer: these practices are less about getting God to do things for us, and more about aligning ourselves fully with what God is doing in the world. Fasting, in particular, is not a display to God of how serious we are in requesting something from God or doing something for God, but rather is a natural response to grieving over what God grieves for. An example is the prophetic call to fasting in Isaiah 58:6-7, where fasting is a response to the presence of injustice and the condition of the poor. When we fast in response to grave issues of injustice, we suffer in solidarity with those who suffer – note that God desired the people to "share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house" (Isaiah 58:7a) – and we enter more fully into God's perspective on their suffering.

Fasting in the primary sense, according to McKnight, is abstention from all foods. That is, it is not just refraining from certain foods (as in certain

liturgical fasting), nor is it abstaining from other goods, such as television, books, or movies. The church year, of course, contains periods of feasting as well as fasting. This alternating pattern expresses our dual attention, McKnight suggests, as we live between Jesus' time on earth and in expectation of the full realization of Christ's kingdom. We move back and forth between feasting in celebration of Christ's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, and fasting in solemn hope for God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven."

Lynne M. Baab points out in *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 152 pp., \$15.00) that fasting from food can be problematic in a "diet culture," especially for women. As a woman who has struggled with an eating disorder and from obsession with a diet mentality, I can report that fasting from food inevitably triggers thoughts of weight loss. Furthermore, years of extreme dieting have rendered my stomach delicate and easily upset if I go too long without eating. So, to use Baab's words, "fasting from all food [draws] me into 'a diet place' rather than 'a God place'" (p. 27). That is why I appreciate her expanding the meaning of fasting to encompass more than just abstention from food; fasting involves "remov[ing] something habitual to experience something new," such as taking a break from listening to music in the car so as to make a space for prayer (p. 16).

This expanded definition of fasting opens the practice to those (such as pregnant or nursing women, diabetics, the elderly, and individuals with a history of eating disorders) who would be excluded from it by McKnight's narrower definition. It also reflects the changing significance of food in Western consumer culture. Food is no longer the only or even the primary thing we recognize as necessary to our existence (as it was in the Bible and through much of the Church's history, and as it still is for many people today). Babb writes, "Today we can 'feast' in ways that involve so much more than food – an all-day movie extravaganza, a TV 'feat' during the Olympics, a big shopping trip – so it makes sense to build a fasting-feasting rhythm into many more areas of life" (p. 28). For example, Lauren Winner has described in *Girl Meets God: On the Path to a Spiritual Life* being challenged to 'fast' from reading during Lent; since the consumption of books filled her lonely and bored moments, removing that source of pleasure and distraction helped her turn to God in prayer with a new sense of urgency. The emptiness we might experience during such a television or music fast, Babb suggests, can lead us to "experience fullness and hope in Jesus Christ" (p. 32). Not incidentally, fasting also "gives us the freedom to feast" (p. 141).

A major strength of Baab's book is its stories relating the experiences of Christians today who fast in varied ways. But Baab does not focus inordinately on contemporary practice; her chapters on fasting in history and in the Bible are remarkably comprehensive and accessible. She notes that early in the life of the Church, fasting "connected Christians with God's heart of compassion for those in need" (p. 57). Furthermore, early Christians did not

fast in isolation; her chapter “Fasting in Community” offers a welcome corrective to the clichéd image of solitary “super-fasters.”

Given Baab’s enthusiasm for moderated forms of fasting that do not entail complete abstention from food, it is unsurprising that she admires the Orthodox fasting practices. The intricate patterns of Orthodox fasting provide the backdrop for Catherine Mandell’s excellent cookbook *When You Fast... Recipes for Lenten Seasons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005, 256 pp., \$24.00). Fr. Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, introduces the book with reflections that place Mandell’s recipes in theological context. “Orthodox Christians, like many others, believe that their spiritual lives start with their stomach,” he notes. “They believe that when peoples’ eating is right their spirits can be more open to God and more attentive to all that is good, true, and beautiful in life” (p. 9). Fasting in the Orthodox tradition involves selective abstention from meat, oil, dairy, eggs, and so forth, rather than complete abstinence from eating. A cookbook for “when you fast” is not, in this tradition, oxymoronic.

Mandell’s recipes are nicely illuminated by well-chosen quotes from the Bible and from Orthodox saints. They are clearly marked for the kind of fast days – e.g., a no-oil fast day, or a day that allows shellfish – for which they would be appropriate. The baked tofu with soy and ginger is good enough to convert tofu skeptics into tofu believers; less appealing is some recipes’ reliance on commercial products like “lenten” (that is, dairy-free) margarine and textured vegetable protein (TVP). But Mandell’s overall goal in this cookbook – to render the experience of the fast as delicious as possible – opens an interesting possibility: what if fasting itself can be a pleasurable and joyful experience? As Amy Frykholm has suggested in her essay “Fasting toward Home,” the Orthodox manner of fasting may well be a “form of nourishment.”†

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In the same essay Frykholm points out that attempting a fast (as she did) in the absence of a community that fasts is all but impossible. Thus Mandell’s brother, Fr. John Hopko, who is the Rector of Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church in Terryville, CT, writes in the Afterword to *When You Fast*, “Each and every person, usually together with the other members of his or her family and, if necessary, in consultation with his or

her parish priest, needs to make an honest and prayerful decision about how he or she is going to keep the fast" (p. 248). Mandell's abundant, appealing recipes for breads and soups are, therefore, appropriate: these simple foods are essentially communal.

The community of the fast is not limited to those who participate in it, for when we fast "we must also redouble our efforts in prayer and charity," writes Fr. John Hopko (p. 249). The ultimate goal in keeping the fast is to "love your neighbor." These remarks remind me of a note I received in response to an article on *orthorexia*—a pathological obsession with "correct" eating:

I've sat at more than one table where folk's intense predilection for certain foods destroyed whatever fellowship remained after Grace was said. A fond and lasting memory: In my tradition (Eastern Orthodox) we strive to fast from meat and other items during Lent. At a potluck following a service, a visitor brought in a huge pile of homemade fried chicken. As a newcomer myself, I was wondering how folks would react to the visitor's gift. I was impressed when the pastor helped himself to a thigh and, after smacking his lips, thanked the young man for participating in such a meaningful way.

Likewise, Fr. Hopko writes: "if we are presented with a situation where love requires us to break the fast, then we must do so" (p. 249). While fasting is a winding and varied journey, its destination is, across traditions, a greater love of God and neighbors.

NOTE

† Amy Frykholm, "Fasting toward Home," in Leslie Leyland Fields, *The Spirit of Food: Thirty-Four Writers on Feasting and Fasting toward God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 160-166, here citing 163.



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