



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 Lent as a Season of Responsive Fasting
(*Lent*, pp. 27-33)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Why and How of Fasting
(*Lent*, pp. 82-86)

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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Responsive Fasting

Fasting in the Bible is almost always focused on a grievous condition. It is primarily a response to something rather than a means to something else. Lenten fasting, then, is a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life.

Prayer

Responsive Scripture Reading (based on Joel 2:1-2, 12-14 and Psalm 70)

The word of the Lord that came to Joel:

hear this all who live in the land.

Put on sackcloth mourn and cry.

Wear it all night for we are neglecting God.

Declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.

Gather the community and cry out to God.

Make haste, O God and deliver me.

O Lord, make haste to help me.

Reflection

The characteristic disciplines of Lent really cut “against the grain of American culture [and]...of personal spiritualities of all sorts,” Scot McKnight notes, because they require us to be honest about our sinfulness and turn to God for forgiveness and correction. We resist these disciplines in many ways, sometimes by twisting their meaning. For instance, we can misconstrue fasting as an instrument to purge our bodies of bad foods, become intimate with God, evangelize others, enhance our prayers, and so on. McKnight jokingly refers to this “inflation of benefits” in an “increasing list of items one is promised by fasting” as “benefititis.”

In the Bible, by contrast, fasting almost always has a responsive structure:

$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$

in which A is a *grievous condition*, B is the *act of fasting*, and C is the *result* or benefit. “The Bible’s focus is not B leads to C, but B responds to A,” McKnight explains. Thus, he proposes that the most accurate schematic for biblical fasting is

$A \leftarrow B$, sometimes leading, but not all that often, to C

The “grievous condition” may be personal or communal, but it is something serious or tragic, and often involves death or a threat of death. “Hence, war or tragedy or the threat of war or calamity or capture, but especially sin and its consequences—these are the precipitants of fasting in the Bible.” Given the gravity of the situation, it just seems inappropriate to eat anything, or to eat in the normal way. In the paradigm cases, the faster is sharing the wrath, grief, sorrow, and love that God has in that situation. McKnight suggests, “fasting is entering into participation in the divine pathos over death and sin in Israel and Judah, and therefore also in the Church and our culture.”

As a season of prescribed fasting, Lent directs our attention to a grievous condition we tend to ignore—that Christ died due to our personal and corporate sins. It reminds us “that Christ died *with* us—in that he completely identified with us in our humanity all the



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way to our death (Philippians 2:5-11), that Christ died *instead of us* – in that he took upon himself the guilt and punishment and death of our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21), and *for us* – in that his death brings us the forgiveness of sins (Romans 4:25). We fast and afflict ourselves, or deny ourselves, in response to our life of sin and sinning. We embody then our conviction that our sins entangle us in death,” McKnight concludes.

Study Questions

1. How does Scot McKnight distinguish the *instrumental* from *responsive* approaches to fasting? What roles do benefits – personal or corporate, bodily or spiritual – play in each type of fasting?
2. McKnight observes that “The famous passage in Isaiah 58 about fasting is neither an example of a spiritual discipline leading to formation nor an intensification of intercession. It is the fast in response to the poverty of others that spurs the fasters to use their resources for the good of others.” How can our Lenten fasting become a proper response to what McKnight calls “our culture’s complicity in death-dealing systemic injustices”?
3. Rachel Marie Stone admits that fasting from food always draws her “into ‘a diet place’ rather than ‘a God place.’” What does she mean by this? How would this derail her attempts at responsive fasting? Discuss her suggestion that we might expand the meaning of fasting to include abstention from other things like movies, television, shopping, reading, or music. Could these non-food fasts be responsive in the way that McKnight describes?
4. We do not fast alone during Lent, or as spiritual solitaries, but together with others in community. Why is this fact important? Consider how this theme is expressed in Pope Gregory the Great’s hymn “The Glory of These Forty Days.”

Departing Hymn: “The Glory of These Forty Days” (vv. 1, 2, and 4)

The glory of these forty days
we celebrate with songs of praise;
for Christ, by whom all things were made,
himself has fasted and has prayed.

Alone and fasting Moses saw
the loving God who gave the law;
and to Elijah, fasting, came
the steeds and chariots of flame.

Then grant us, Lord, like them to be
full oft in fast and prayer with thee;
our spirits strengthen with thy grace,
and give us joy to see thy face.

Pope Gregory the Great (6th century)

Translated by Maurice F. Bell (1906)

Suggested Tunes: WINCHESTER NEW or OLD HUNDRETH

Responsive Fasting

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 understand scriptural fasting as an act that is responsive to a grievous condition.
2. To consider the communal dimensions of fasting – both that we fast in community with others and that our fasting can express solidarity with others.
3. To examine the value of fasting from things other than food.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “The Glory of These Forty Days” locate one of the familiar tunes WINCHESTER NEW or OLD HUNDRETH in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“Fasting seems so countercultural – for what could be less North American than voluntarily going without food?” Rachel Marie Stone writes. “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?” (*Lent*, p. 82)

In this study Scot McKnight examines the nature of fasting in Scripture, and on that basis he proposes a proper attitude toward liturgical fasting during Lent.

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 to open your eyes and heart to the grievous condition of sin in our fallen world and to be with you in this time of Lenten fasting.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study guide – like the next two, “Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)” and “Keeping Vigil” – explores a central discipline of Lent in both its traditional form and its creative adaptations today. Of course, the discipline of fasting is appropriate on occasions throughout the Church year. Scot McKnight emphasizes that biblical fasting is not an instrument to gain something (though it has benefits), but a response to a grievous condition. In the case of Lenten fasting, he suggests that our fasting is in response to a deep awareness of our personal and corporate sin.

If your group would like to extend their study of the practice of fasting or plan a Lenten fast together, some excellent resources are Scot McKnight's *Fasting* and the other books reviewed by Rachel Stone in "The Why and How of Fasting."

Study Questions

1. The *instrumental* approach to fasting emphasizes the "B → C" segment of Scot McKnight's schema: one fasts in order to secure a benefit such as physical health, intimacy with God on our own terms, success in evangelism, or power in intercessory prayer. The *responsive* approach focuses on a grievous condition; one fasts in order to respond appropriately to this condition, expressing through the body one's recognition of and participation in the divine pathos. Responsive fasting may have characteristic benefits—e.g., seeing the world as God sees it, deeper identification with God's purposes, receiving further guidance from God, being empowered by the Holy Spirit to do God's will, and so on—but these are welcomed as unmerited and sometimes unexpected gifts one receives in growing friendship with God.
2. If time allows, read Isaiah 58 from a modern translation. Otherwise, read Isaiah 58:6-7. McKnight urges us to "not withdraw from the world in contemplating only our own sins. As Isaiah told his audience that genuine fasting was care for the poor, so in our day: genuine Lenten truth-telling is the story of complicity, of systemic injustices in the United States, in the Western World, and in the stories of those around the globe, and of unrealized participation in evils that affect us all, like consumerism and individualism. Lenten fasting is the proper response to our culture's complicity in death-dealing systemic injustices."

Invite members to brainstorm how these cultural realities might shape their responsive fasting. We might abstain from foods whose production or delivery involves injustice; might break our fast with simple meals that help us identify with the poor or oppressed; or might fast in concert with others in the Church. Discuss how such plans resist the consumerism and individualism that typically informs our eating. How can we go beyond "personal spiritual formation" and "intensification of intercession" for those who are unjustly treated, and actually "use [our] resources for the good of others"? The early Christians were encouraged to give to the poor the money which they had saved by fasting. Also, focused fasting can lead us to new patterns of economic behavior that help others.

3. "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," Rachel Marie Stone explains. This interfered with her focusing on the grievous condition of sin and participating in God's pathos for it (to use McKnight's terms). Stone gives two reasons for expanding the meaning of fasting: (1) this "opens the practice to those (such as pregnant or nursing women, diabetics, the elderly, and individuals with a history of eating disorders)" who cannot abstain from food, and (2) it recognizes that "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)."

Would a fast from television, shopping, the Internet, etc. be an appropriate response to the grievous condition of sin? Here's a reason to answer "yes." When we are grieving, we naturally withdraw from these things as we do from eating. So, voluntarily giving them up can redirect our attention to the grievous condition just as effectively as fasting from food.

On the other hand, these other things cannot be as central and necessary in our lives as food is, even in a Western consumer culture. If we fast from anything that is more discretionary than food, we "dodge" the seriousness of the grievous condition. (However, Stone might reply that fasting from them might be better than doing nothing, and much less distracting than fasting from food for those who struggle with a diet mentality.)

4. Gregory situates Lenten fasting in a spiritual community that includes Christ, Moses, and Elijah. His plural pronouns remind us that we fast in a present community of worshipers during a liturgical period. Discuss how fasting with others in these communities, invisible and visible, can encourage us to keep our fast, to keep it rightly focused on the grievous condition of personal and corporate sin, and to participate in the divine pathos.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.