

Are New Covenant Believers Required To Fast To Secure God's Blessing?

It is common in many evangelical circles today, particularly amongst Charismatic / Pentecostal groups, to instigate various fasts in order to secure blessing or knowledge of God's will. Oddly, this frequently happens to bless a course of action already decided by the leadership. Is this practice correct?

What is fasting?

First we must ascertain what fasting actually is. There are several words used in the Old and New Testament to cover this action:

1. Greek Noun: **nhstei,a nesteia** (Strong's 3521) meaning: a fast either as a religious ritual exercise or a voluntary private fasting. It also refers to a fasting caused by want or poverty and can simply mean hunger.
2. Greek Verb: **nhsteu,w nesteuo** (Strong's 3522) meaning: to abstain from food and drink as a religious exercise, either entirely, if the fast lasts a single day, or from customary and choice nourishment, if continued for several days.
3. Hebrew noun: ~Ac *tsowm* [tsome] or ~co *tsom* [tsome] (Strong's 6685) meaning: fast, fasting.

For the purposes of this study, fasting is the deprivation of food, and/or water, for a religious reason.

The Old Testament situation

The only fast required by the Law of Moses was that of the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:26-32, called 'the fast' in Acts 27:9). There are no injunctions in the law for individual fasts and the nouns/verbs 'fast' and 'fasting' do not appear in the Pentateuch. Moses fasted forty days (Ex 24:18, 34:28) as did Elijah (1 Kg 19:8), but these were involuntary. The first mention of a voluntary fast to plead with God regards David's refusal of food when praying for his son's life; a request that was not heard by God (2 Sam 12:22-23).

National fasts on account of sin or to seek God's blessing (especially in a time of crisis) were held from time to time later in Israel's history when spiritual life had degenerated. It should be noted that the prime cause for fasting, not required by God, was on account of personal or national sin, and was the expression of grieving for the guilt of that sin. Sometimes a person's grief over a specific problem resulted in an involuntary fasting (1 Sam 1:7, 20:34; 2 Sam 3:35; 1 Kg 21:27); but these are not a proper religious fast.

Jewish fasting was not just abstaining from food but included self-abasement:

But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing *was* sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. (Ps 35:13)

And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes. (Dan 9:3)

Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackcloths, and earth upon them. (Neh 9:1)

If there was a cause for a fast, such as seeking God for help and wisdom in a traumatic time, then the Israelite not only fasted but acted as if in grief – wearing sackcloth, covering himself in ashes and earth. Fasting was thus associated with humiliation, deprivation, mourning, and self-denial. There was no conception of living a normal life, doing one's normal duty (e.g. work in the fields), having fun, relaxing, and such like while one was in a

fast. It was a serious time of self-denial and humbling before God that occupied the totality of one's life for a time to the exclusion of all else. It showed a serious sense of purpose.

The only other mention of a regular religious fast is in Zechariah; during the captivity the Jews had four annual fasts (Zech 8:19b).

- The fast of the fourth month [seventeenth day of Tammuz] as the anniversary of the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Ex 32:19; cf. Jer 52:6,7).
- The fast of the fifth month [ninth day of Ab; cf. Num 14:27] to commemorate the burning of the city and temple (Jer 52:12,13).
- The fast of the seventh month [third of Tisri (cf. 2Ki 25:1)]; the anniversary of the murder of Gedaliah (Jer 41:1,2).
- The fast of the tenth month (cf. 2 Kg 25:1; Jer 52:4; Ezek 33:21) to commemorate the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.
- There was also a fast appointed by Esther (Est 4:16).

However, it is important to note that these were not appointed by the Lord. In fact Zech 7:1-7 shows that God did not approve of them because they were done out of fleshly, religious zeal. Immediately, the Lord demands kindness, mercy and charity (Zech 7:8ff).

A crucial passage showing God's thoughts regarding religious fasting is Isaiah 58;

1 "Cry aloud, spare not; Lift up your voice like a trumpet; Tell My people their transgression, And the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet they seek Me daily, And delight to know My ways, As a nation that did righteousness, And did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; They take delight in approaching God.

3 'Why have we fasted,' *they say*, 'and You have not seen? *Why* have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your labourers.

4 Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as *you do* this day, To make your voice heard on high.

5 Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?

6 "*Is* this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?

7 *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I *am*.' "If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, *If* you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall *be* as the noonday.

11 The LORD will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

12 Those from among you Shall build the old waste places; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.

13 " If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, *From* doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy *day* of the LORD honourable, And shall honour Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking *your own* words,

14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken. "

This shows the tendency of fasting to degenerate into formal legalism, or worse, into a mere superficial show with no meaning at all. Israel's fasting was of no spiritual value,

being merely an institutional external rite. Optimally, fasting was an external sign of the inner seriousness of a man's heart; a self-humbling in the face of God to demonstrate his repentance and earnestness. As such, accompanied by fervent prayer, all human needs were abandoned in order to seek God. Fasting was not the cause of any spiritual blessing but merely the outward expression of a heart utterly committed to seeking God and learning his will. It was faith in the heart that God honoured not the lack of food.

Isaiah shows us that God is far more concerned with righteousness than external forms of religion such as fasting. Even pagans can fast and this has no value to God. The Lord first desires that his people love Him with all their heart and then their neighbour as themselves (the summary of the law):

Obedience to God in Isaiah 58	Action towards neighbours in Isaiah 58
Focus on God on the Sabbath day.	Loose the bonds of wickedness.
Honour God.	Undo the heavy burdens.
Don't follow your own ways (of the flesh).	Let the oppressed go free.
Don't speak your own words.	Share bread with the hungry.
Delight in the Lord.	Be hospitable to the poor.
	Clothe the naked.
	Stop speaking wickedness.
	Satisfy the afflicted soul.

Isaiah 58 is thus a practical summary and commentary on obeying God's law to live righteously.

The prime result will be answered prayer and a fruitful life. No Israelite could expect any spiritual blessing from God, no matter how much he fasted, if he was not already doing all these things. Fasting is no substitute for walking righteously. The unrighteous will never receive God's blessing, nor have their prayers answered, if they are habitually dishonouring God's law.

Even in the Old Testament we see that fasting is no guarantee of God's favour and could actually bring his displeasure.

The New Testament situation

Over time the practice of fasting was further abused (Jer 14:12; Zech 7:5) and Jesus repeatedly rebuked the Jewish religious leaders for their hypocritical fasting (Matt 6:16). Fasting had become nothing but an external show, in the main, Anna being an exception.

The early Christians observed the ordinary Jewish fasts according to the law and later Jewish customs (Acts 13:3, 14:23; 2 Cor 6:5). This was due to the temporary changeover period from Judaism to Christianity. In this time Paul also undertook Jewish vows which involved shaving his head; he circumcised Timothy (but not Silas, a Gentile) to appease the Jewish believers in Jerusalem; the apostles initially cast lots to discern God's mind, kosher diet was insisted upon to ease fellowship with Jews, and so on. These practises were to pass away (Heb 8:13) and finally did so when Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. The temporary practices of Jewish believers in this time is not our guide; the specific teaching of the apostles representing the final words of Jesus to his church is what determines our own practice. In this there is also no command to fast.

New Testament teaching

The first point to make is that the Lord Jesus did not appoint any fasts at all. If fasting was

required of New Covenant believers then Jesus would have given some instruction on doing so, as he did regarding baptism, evangelism, prayer, preaching or the Supper.

Secondly, there is no apostolic instruction about fasting. The apostles did not command Gentile believers to fast and did not encourage it in their churches. Even in times of great crisis the Gentile churches are not told to fast, but they are told to pray and seek the Lord, or to suffer with joy and patience.

The final point is to emphasise the great difference that occurred when the Holy Spirit was outpoured upon the church. Through this baptism of the Spirit the covenant was internalised in the hearts of believers and replaced many external forms found in the Old Covenant (Jer 31:33). The believer did not have to go to the temple to present an offering but was himself God's temple because God dwells in his heart (Eph 3:17; 2 Cor 6:16). A hierarchy of priests was not required to mediate between God and man in formal services because each believer is a priest of God (1 Pt 2:9). Casting of lots was no longer required since every believer has the mind of Christ by virtue of union with him (1 Cor 2:16). We could continue.

Fasting is an external religious action having a deeper internal meaning and significance – in other words a sacrament or means of grace. Under the New Covenant there are only two commanded sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, and only these are required for believers. Nothing we do in the flesh changes our status or value before God. We are now sons of God in Christ; our legal adoption, as the corollary of being justified, gives us all the rights and privileges of heirs. Consequently we are not grovelling acolytes who need to placate a distant God by external forms; we are sons who sit with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:6).

When in need we ask our father for grace to help (Heb 4:16); when being persecuted we seek his comfort; when afflicted we rest in his fatherly care. All this is done by faith; indeed everything in the Christian life is to be done by faith and not by external rites (Rm 1:17). In any case whatever is not done in faith is sin (Rm 14:23); thus the most extreme form of fasting can actually result in judgment if there is no faith.

**The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
(Rm 14:17)
When they fast, I will not hear their cry. (Jer 14:12)**

The one possible exception

1 Corinthians 7:5 Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Firstly, we must note that this verse regards a passage teaching on domestic issues between a husband and wife; it is not general teaching about worship, prayer, discipleship or service. Secondly, the fasting mentioned appears to have nothing to do with food but regards sexual intercourse. Paul states that a married couple should not deprive each other of sex unless it is to focus their joint prayers for a reason. The fasting is ceasing physical relations for the time of prayer; abstinence from sex not food. The word 'fasting' does not appear in modern versions apart from the NKJV. [It is also omitted in the Vulgate Latin and Ethiopic versions, the Alexandrian manuscript and two of Stephens's texts. It is, at least, questionable.]

Even if Paul refers to fasting from food for some reason, this does not mean that he is endorsing the practice for all believers. In 1 Cor 15:29 he mentions the practice of being

baptised for the dead to bolster his arguments about the resurrection; but this certainly does not mean that he endorses proxy baptisms and he does not command people to do it.

The heretical origins of modern fasting

The reason why many modern Charismatics practice fasting to secure heavenly benefits is their absorption of serious erroneous teachings from the Pentecostal Latter Rain Movement of the 1940s. Many aspects of this awful movement (outlawed by the Assemblies of God churches in 1949) have been assimilated in Restoration churches that feature apostles and prophets. The extreme practices that came with the Toronto Blessing, the Kansas City Prophets, the Signs & Wonders Movement, and so on, stem particularly from the teachings and practices of Latter Rain gurus such as Franklin Hall and William Branham, both of whom were outright heretics.

It was in these teachings that fasting was emphasised as a means of gaining spiritual power. It was so stressed as a magic bullet that Hall taught that pagans who fast will get prayers answered while Christians who fail to fast will not see answered prayer. His other errors included teaching that: closing the eyes in prayer destroys faith; men can become immortal by ascending mystical degrees of growth, can hover, fly in space and be free from accidents; coloured 'immortal' substances rest on those with faith and raising the left hand enabled believers to smell Jesus and drive insects from houses. He also believed in the demonisation of believers, astrology and advocated benefits of UFOs. It is largely from his teaching that modern Charismatics adopted fundamental practices such as: laying on of hands to impart power, the leadership of apostles and prophets, modern emotional external worship forms and it is from Latter Rain that the whole idea arose of a super race of Christians who will eventually rule the earth.

A practical consideration

Fasting makes people weak (Ps 109:24). There is a great danger that demands for people to fast in this day and age may actually cause great harm, and displease God.

God commands us to look after our bodies. We are responsible to him for the gift of our lives and we are to take care of ourselves. It dishonours God if we do not do this. We are also commanded to work for our employers properly; in fact better than non-believers. Our testimony to the world is very important. Proper fasting involves the whole life or it isn't fasting. The abstinence from food is just part of the Old Covenant commitment to God in prayer, self-denial, concentration, meditation and waiting for God. It isn't possible for modern people to properly fast and still do a day's work and run a family. Just withholding from food isn't Old Covenant fasting.

Now if an employee cannot get time off from work in order to fast properly, then his fast is pointless – even under the Old Covenant. If he persists, and still works but has no food for a time, then his work will suffer – and this ruins his testimony before God. If his job involves responsibility for others (say a nurse, doctor, fireman etc.) then his reduced performance could put other people's lives at risk, and this is probably illegal as well as dishonouring God.

A friend of mine told me that he once (as a Charismatic) fasted for seven days and carried on working and walking to his job. Fortunately he was young at the time, but even so this is irresponsible behaviour. Someone tired, busy, stressed, bringing up young children, or working very hard could only do such a thing at great cost to their health and the safety of those around them. For leaders to demand this is wickedness.

Conclusion

Fasting is just another example of Charismatic churches adopting Old Covenant practices that have been abrogated by the New Covenant. It is part of their externalising of religion, when the whole point of godliness in Christ is spirituality: faith, grace, love, patience, obedience, devotion, hearing God and personal worship.

Over and over again Charismatic churches fail to understand even basic doctrines, especially those related to God's sovereignty and decree, and continually fall back on external and sacramental forms. In their desperation to gain some kind of success, they adopt false practices to hope for fruit. Needless to say, there often is none at all. It is also interesting that some modern Charismatic churches that enjoin fasting on their members are the same ones that spurned this practice decades ago.

The same individual Charismatics who try fasting to get God's attention are often those who fail to study the Bible, fail to walk righteously, fail to help the local poor and needy and even fail to pray and worship in a Biblical manner. No amount of fasting will replace these.

Now I do know some godly old-time Pentecostals who are fervent in prayer and also fast; I applaud their seriousness in intercession. Indeed, I have no wish to condemn such folk at all and I make no individual judgments. My task is to demonstrate the Biblical teaching on this subject and for people to make up their own mind under God in faith. This teaching shows that there is not even an Old Covenant command for an individual to fast, let alone a New Covenant one. Even if there were Old Testament precedents, the apostolic teaching on the blessings of the New Covenant and life in union with Christ, make it clear that fasting is not required for a son of God to gain God's ear. Neither does he need to seek special blessing by external actions, since every spiritual blessing has already been given him in Christ (Eph 1:3). What he needs to do is look more closely and fervently at his Saviour, always trusting in God's sovereign purpose in his life every minute of every day.

As so often with external forms of religion, fasting is just another method of turning people's attention away from Christ, focusing upon their own efforts and denying the truth established by the apostle's doctrine. It can only cause damage.

Appendix

Every NT reference to fasting, including parallel passages.

Jesus' personal fasting

Matt 4:2

Jesus commands regarding Jewish hypocrisy

Matt 6:16-18

The lack of fasting amongst Jesus' disciples

Matt 9:14-15; Mk 2:18-20; Lk 5:33-35

Jesus' compassion for the crowds; would not let them fast

Matt 15:32; Mk 8:3

A certain type of demon

Matt 17:21; Mk 9:29 ['Fasting' does not appear in modern critical-text Bible versions.]

Anna's fasting
Lk 2:37

Pharisaic fasts
Lk 18:12

A Jewish Fast
Acts 27:9

The fasting of the early church
Acts 13:2-3, 14:23, 27:33

Paul's involuntary fasting
2 Cor 6:5, 11:27

A Jewish proselyte's fasting
Acts 10:30 ['Fasting' does not appear in modern critical-text Bible versions.]

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