

Calvin on Fasting.

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A holy and lawful fast has three ends in view. We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before Him. The first end is not very often regarded in public fasting, because all have not the same bodily constitution, nor the same state of health, and hence it is more applicable to private fasting. The second end is common to both, for this preparation for prayer is requisite for the whole Church, as well as each individual member. The same thing may be said of the third. For it sometimes happens that God smites a nation with war or pestilence, or some kind of calamity. In this common chastisement it behoves the whole people to plead guilty, and confess their guilt. Should the hand of the Lord strike anyone in private, then the same thing is to be done by himself, alone, or by his family. The thing, indeed, is properly a feeling of the mind. But when the mind is affected as it ought, it cannot be but give vent to itself in external manifestation, especially when it tends to the common edification, that all, by openly confessing their sin, may render praise to divine justice, and by their example mutually encourage each other. Hence fasting, as it is a sign of humiliation, has a more frequent use in public among private individuals, although, as we said, it is, common to both. In regard, then to, the discipline of which we now treat, whenever supplication is to be made to God on any important occasion, it is befitting to appoint a period for fasting and prayer. Thus, when the Christians of Antioch laid hands on Barnabas and Paul, that they might the better recommend their ministry, which was of so great importance, they joined fasting and prayer. (Acts xiii. 3.)

In general, the only object which they had in fasting was to render themselves more alert and disencumbered for prayer. We certainly experience that after a full meal the mind does not so rise towards God as to be borne along by an earnest and fervent longing for prayer, and perseverance in prayer. In this sense is to be understood the saying of Luke concerning Anna, that she “served God with fasting and prayers, night and day” (Luke ii. 37). For he does not place the worship of God in fasting, but intimates that in this way the holy woman trained herself to

assiduity in prayer. Such was the fast of Nehemiah, when with more intense zeal he prayed to God for the deliverance of His people (Neh. i. 4). For this reason, Paul says, that married believers do well to abstain for a season (1 Cor. vii. 5), that they may have greater freedom for prayer and fasting, when joining prayer to fasting, by way of help, he reminds us it is no importance in itself, save in so far as it refers to this end.

Again, when in the same place he enjoins spouses to render due benevolence to each other, it is clear that he is not referring to daily prayer, but prayers which require more than ordinary attention. On the other hand, when pestilence begins to stalk abroad, or famine; or war, or when any other disaster seems to impend over a province and people (Esther iv. 16) then also it is the duty of pastors to exhort the Church to fasting, that she may suppliantly deprecate the Lord's anger. For when He makes danger appear, He declares that He is prepared and, in a manner, armed for vengeance. In like manner, therefore, as persons accused were anciently wont, in order to excite the commiseration of the judge, to humble themselves suppliantly with long beard, dishevelled hair, and coarse garments, so when we are charged before the divine tribunal to deprecate His severity in humble raiment is equally for His glory, and the public edification, and useful and salutary to ourselves. And. that this was common among the Israelites we may infer from the words of Joel. For when he says, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly" (Joel ii. 15) he speaks as of things received by common custom. A little before he had said that the people were to be tried for their wickedness, and that the day of Judgment was at hand, and he had summoned them as criminals to plead their cause; then he exclaims that they should hasten to sackcloth and ashes, to weeping and fasting; that is, humble themselves before God with external manifestations. The sackcloth and ashes, indeed, were perhaps more suitable for those times, but the assembly, weeping, fasting, and the like, undoubtedly belong, in an equal degree, to our age, whenever the condition of our affairs so requires. For seeing it is a holy exercise both for men to humble themselves, and confess their humility, why should he in similar necessity use this less than did those of old? We read not only that the Israelitish Church, formed and constituted by the Word of God, fasted in tokens of sadness, but the Ninevites also, whose only teaching had been the preaching of Jonah. Why, therefore, should not we do the same? But it is an external

ceremony, which like other ceremonies, terminated in Christ. Nay, in the present day it is an admirable help to believers, as it always was, and an useful admonition to arouse them, lest by too great security and sloth they provoke the Lord more and more when they are chastened by His rod. Accordingly, when our Saviour excuses His Apostles for not fasting, He does not say, that fasting was abrogated, but reserves it for calamitous times, and conjoins it with mourning. "The days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them" (Matt. ix. 35).

"But that there may be no error in the name, let us define what fasting is; for we do not understand by it simply a restrained, and sparing use of food, but something else. The life of the pious should be tempered with frugality, and sobriety, so as to exhibit, as much as may be a kind of fasting during the whole course of life. But there is another temporary fast, when we retrench somewhat from our accustomed mode of living, either for one day or for a certain period and prescribe to ourselves a stricter, and severer restraint in the use of that ordinary food, and the sparing use of it. By the time I mean, that while fasting we are to perform those actions for the sake of which the fast is instituted. For example, when a man fasts because of solemn prayer, he should engage in it without having taken food. The quality consists in putting all luxury aside, and, being contented with common and meaner food, so as not to excite our palate by dainties. In regard to quantity, we must eat more lightly and sparingly, only for necessity and not for pleasure. But the first thing always to be avoided is, the encroachment of superstition, as formerly happened to the great injury of the Church. It would have been much better to have had no fasting at all, than have it carefully observed, but at the same time corrupted by false and pernicious opinions, into which the world is ever and anon falling, unless pastors obviate them by the greatest fidelity and prudence. The first thing is constantly to urge the injunction of Joel, "Rend your-hearts and not your garments" (Joel ii. 13); that is, to remind the people that fasting in itself is not of great value in the sight of God, unless accompanied with internal affection of the heart, true dissatisfaction with sin and with oneself, true humiliation, and true grief, from the fear of God; nay, that fasting is useful for no other reason than because it is added to these as an inferior help. There is. nothing which God more abominates than when men endeavour to cloak themselves by substituting signs and external appearance for integrity of heart. Accordingly, Isaiah inveighs most bitterly against the hypocrisy

of the Jews, in thinking that they had satisfied God when they had merely fasted, whatever might be the impiety and impure thoughts which they cherished in their hearts. "Is it such a fast that I have chosen?" (Isa. lviii. 5). See also what follows.

(The above exposition of the eminent John Calvin should cause men to ponder solemnly, and seriously when perhaps without much prayer, or consideration they care for confession of sin, days of humiliation, and prayer without the sincerest heart-rending in secret for our personal sins!) (We believe that true confession of sin, grief, and pain of heart before God, must begin in secret, and if it begins there by the teaching of the Holy Ghost it will be known to the people of God in public; and, it will be a life-long confession of sin, a daily prostration, and genuine humiliation for sin in every approach to the infinite God of heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. We have heard men praying, and preaching and if one did not know better, the impression they would give to their hearers was that they had no sin in them! Fasting, humiliation, and confession of sin must begin in the heart, otherwise God is not honoured nor glorified by lip confession of sin. We believe that true confession of sin comes from the Holy Ghost, and when He begins in the souls of sinners His good work, individuals, Churches, and nations will not find it a burden to humble themselves before the mighty hand of God.)

The fast of hypocrites is, therefore, not only useless and superfluous fatigue, but the greatest abomination. Another evil akin to this, and greatly to be avoided, is to regard fasting as a meritorious work and species of divine worship. For seeing it is a thing which is in itself indifferent, and has no importance except on account of those ends to which it ought to have respect, it is a most pernicious superstition to confound it with the works enjoined by God, and which are necessary in themselves without reference to anything else.

Such was anciently the dream of the Manichees, in refuting whom Augustine clearly shows, that fasting is to be estimated entirely by those ends which I have mentioned, and cannot be approved by God, unless in so far as it refers to them.

Another error, not indeed so impious, but perilous, is to exact it with greater strictness and severity as one of the principal duties, and extol it with such extravagant encomiums as to make men imagine that they have done something admirable when they have fasted. In this respect I dare not entirely excuse

ancient writers from having sown some seeds of superstition, and given occasion to the tyranny which afterwards arose.

We sometimes meet with sound and prudent sentiment on fasting, but we also ever and anon meet with extravagant praises, lauding it as one of the cardinal virtues. (What a master in Israel the godly, and learned John Calvin was! No wonder although formalists, pharisees, and ignorant papists hate his very memory. Men who never read his excellent works, write, and traduce his character from sheer malice, which can be traced to Satan, the murderer of souls!) Then the superstitious observance of Lent - (Lent a fast of forty days, observed in commemoration of our Saviour, beginning with Ash Wednesday, and continuing till Easter Roman Catholics and Anglo-Romanists in England, and their apeing Scoto-Catholics observe Lent and Easter as if they were sincere anti pious Christians!) had everywhere prevailed: for both the vulgar imagined that they thereby performed some excellent service to God, and pastors commended it as a holy imitation of Christ; though it is plain that Christ did not fast to set an example to others, but, by thus commencing the preaching of the gospel, meant to prove that His doctrine was not of men, but, had come from heaven.

And it is strange how men of acute judgment could face into this gross delusion, which so many clear reasons refute: for Christ did not fast repeatedly (which He must have done had He meant to lay down a law for an anniversary fast) but once only, when preparing for the promulgation of the gospel. Nor does He fast after the manner of men as He would have done had He meant to invite men to imitation; He rather gives an example, by which He may raise all to admire rather than study to imitate Him. In short, the nature of the fast is not different from that which Moses observed when he received the law at the hand of the Lord (Exodus xxiv. 18; xxxiv. 28). For, seeing that that miracle was performed in Moses to establish the law, it behoved not to be omitted in Christ, lest the gospel should seem inferior to the law. But from that day, it never occurred to anyone, under pretence of imitating Moses to set up a similar form of fast among the Israelites. Nor did any of the holy prophets and fathers follow it, though they had inclinations and zeal enough for all pious exercises: for though it is said of Elijah that he passed forty days without meat and drink (I Kings xix. 8), this was merely in order that the people might recognise that he was raised up to maintain the law, from which the whole of Israel had revolted.

It was therefore merely false zeal, replete with superstition, which set up a fast under the title and pretext of imitating Christ; although there was a strange diversity in the mode of the fast, as is related by Cassiodorus in the ninth book of the History of the Romans: "The Romans," says he, "had only three weeks, but their fast was continuous, except on the Lord's Day and the Sabbath. The Greeks and Illyrians had, some six, others seven, but the fast was at intervals. Nor did they differ less in the kind of food: some used only bread and water, others added vegetables; others had no objection to fish and fowls; others made no difference in their food."

Augustine also makes mention of this difference in his latter epistle to Januarius. Worse times followed. To the absurd zeal of the vulgar were added rudeness and ignorance in the Bishops, lust of power, and tyrannical rigour. Impious laws were passed, binding the conscience in deadly chains. (The eating of flesh was forbidden as if a man was forbidden, as if a man was contaminated by it.) Sacrilegious opinions were added, one after another, until all became an abyss of error. And that no kind of depravity might be omitted, they began, under a most absurd pretence of abstinence, to make a mock of God (Foot Note: Bernard, in Serm. I. in die Paschea, censures, among others, princes also, for longing, during the season of Lent, for the approaching festival of our Lord's resurrection, that they might indulge more freely!) for in the most exquisite delicacies they seek the praise of fasting: no dainties now suffice; never was there greater abundance of variety or savouriness of food.

In this splendid display they think that they serve God. I do not mention that at no time do those who would be thought the holiest of them wallow more foully. In short, the highest worship of God is to abstain from flesh, and with this reservation, to indulge in delicacies of every kind. On the other hand, it is the greatest impiety, impiety scarcely to be expiated by death, for anyone to taste the smallest portion of bacon or rancid flesh with his bread. Jerome, writing to Nepotian relates, that in his day there were some who mocked God with such follies: those who would not even put oil in their food caused the greatest delicacies to be procured from every quarter; nay, that they might do violence to nature, abstained from drinking water, and caused sweet and costly potions to be made for them, which they drank not out of a cup, but a shell (what was then the fault of a few is now common among all the rich) richly and luxuriously. But I am

unwilling to waste many words on a subject as to which there can be no doubt. All I say is, that, as well in fasts as in all other parts of discipline, the Papists are so far from having anything right, anything sincere, anything duly framed and ordered, that they have no occasion to plume themselves as if anything was left them that is worthy of praise.