Theology and Application of Fasting

By Melody Beth Tomlinson

Outline:

1. **Introduction to Biblical Fasting**
2. **What is *Not* Biblical Fasting?**
    a. **Biblical Warning about Fasting**
3. **Grey Areas in Biblical Fasting**
4. **Biblical Fasting**
    a. **Fasting and Prayer**
    b. **Fasting and Repentance**
    c. **Fasting and Mourning**
    d. **Fasting and Community**
    e. **Fasting and Spiritual Discipline**
5. **What Does This Mean for Us Today?**

Disclaimer: This article on fasting was a part of my research on the theology of worship during my graduate program in Wheaton College. It was meant as a brief but informative dive into the idea of fasting as worship, and it is. If you would like to read more on the topic of fasting, I humbly suggest Scott McKnight's book, *Fasting*. Much of what I say in this article comes from his book. It is an informative, careful look into both biblical and early church fasting practices.

Theology and Application of Fasting

While is it extremely common for modern day Evangelical Christians to engage in prayer or singing as acts of worship before God, fasting seems to have fallen to the wayside. Though some may suggest that fasting is simply no longer relevant or important to Christians, they would be wrong in assuming that the Bible aligns with this belief. Fasting, as it turns out, can be found across the whole Bible, and while most references to fasting can be found in the Old Testament,[1] this does not imply that its relevance has decreased since Jesus' fulfillment of the covenant. Indeed, Jesus himself gives a message on fasting that heavily implies the exact opposite, as he begins one of his messages with "[w]hen you fast."[2] Many of the books within New Testament also make passing mention of people fasting.

But even without these references to godly people fasting in the New Testament, a case may still be made for fasting in today's time. For instance, it is important to consider that the New Testament does not call for a cessation of fasting. While seemingly minor, this actually has a lot of bearing on fasting's continued use, as Old Testament scholar Daniel Block has pointed out, "unless the New Testament expressly declares First Testament notions obsolete, they continue."[3] Since nowhere in the Bible is fasting explicitly made an invalid form of worship (as animal sacrifice was) and since Jesus gives a sermon on how to properly fast—with the implication being that this information will be used by his disciples, early Christians and even today—then fasting is indeed a form of worship that should be continued. Given that fasting was clearly an important part of biblical tradition and that it has not been set aside in the fulfillment of the Old Testament, it is imperative that we as Christians—Evangelical or otherwise—know the history, reasons and means for biblical fasting.

What is *Not* Biblical Fasting?

As there has been such a long separation between the modern Evangelical church and its participation in fasting, before going any further, it is important to define what fasting is and what it is not. In order to define what biblical fasting is with a clear mind, it would seem right to first tackle certain myths regarding biblical fasting so that there are no distractions. In her pursuit of finding out what contemporary Evangelical Christians believe about fasting, Lynne Baab

[1] Baab, Lynne M.
[2] *NIV* Mark 6:16
[3] Block, Daniel I.

encountered quite a few misconceptions regarding this spiritual discipline. According to her research, many people rejected fasting because it reflects "a denial of God's good creation […] denies the relationship between the body and spirit" and even that fasting is "about self-punishment because we are sinful." This sentiment is a reflection on centuries of church thought about the body that "led to the view […] that earthly desires were wicked and had to be curbed in favor of the pure soul [with] fasting, sleep deprivation, self-flagellation and sexual abstinence [being] admired as ways to subdue the 'sinful flesh.'"[4] Though clearly a pervasive line of thinking in the church, this austere outlook on the body being inherently wrong is not endorsed by the Bible and thus is not a part of biblical fasting.

As for the rest of these concerns regarding fasting, fasting may deny one of God's creation, but it is important to remember that fasting is meant to be a temporary situation. Fasting is not in any way meant to imply that food is bad—merely that there are seasons of feasting and seasons of fasting. Regarding the supposed disconnect between the "sinful" body and "pure" spirit, most scholars who have researched fasting have agreed that fasting brings about the exact opposite and actually creates a clear bridge between our spiritual longings to our bodies, producing a much needed physical response to this spiritual longing[5] (Baab; McKnight). Lastly, while there is some connection between fasting and repentance, it is important to remember that the only endorsed sin-offering is blood sacrifice—whether an animal or the blood of Jesus Christ—and the Bible never calls people to punish themselves with fasting but to humble themselves in this act of solemn worship. As will later be discussed, fasting as repentance is a sign of meekness before God rather than any kind of penance.

On the other end of the spectrum, biblical fasting also has nothing to do with modern day dieting or wanting to lose weight. With the recent surge of the "fashionable 'detox' diet"[6] and "health experts and fasting proponents [declaring] the benefits to our health from fasting,"[7] it cannot be stated enough that this is not only a wrong representation of biblical fasting but that it also can be incredibly dangerous. The Bible makes no attempt to hide the fact that fasting is a physically painful experience—indeed, some passages use the term הִעָנָּ (*'ânâh*) in reference to fasting, which can be translated in the English language to mean "afflict, oppress, humble, be

[4] Baab, Lynne M.
[5] Baab, Lynne M.; McKnight, Scott
[6] Johnstone, A. M.
[7] McKnight, Scott

afflicted, be bowed down."[8] Theologian Scott McKnight, partnering with experienced medical practitioners, says that fasting "does not cleanse the body but instead increases metabolic toxins and decreases blood pressure," and, while McKnight goes on to say that "fasting does not harm the body if proper hydration occurs [and it] does not endure more than a dozen or so hours," this in no way mitigates the fact that fasting is not helpful to the body. Fasting is a wonderful spiritual tool in the arsenal of worship techniques, but it is not something to be entered into without proper consideration of the possibly dangerous effects fasting can wreak on the body.

In our "culture of dieting and obsession with food and weight,"[9] McKnight and Baab both warn that this view of fasting—when combined with the religious desire to fast—can even lead to anorexia and other disordered eating habits. This is emphasized by one of Baab's interviewees who said that fasting "opened the door to bulimia" from which it took many years after actively engaging in bulimia to "gain emotional healing." The reverse is also true, with one study showing that people with disordered eating habits would sometimes hide behind religious fasting to disguise their eating disorder as an expression of piety.[10] Teenagers and young adults are especially vulnerable to this trend of moving from a quasi-biblical fast to full-blown disordered eating, which is why McKnight—while not outright forbidding fasting at these sensitive ages—stresses the importance of community and close monitoring of the ones fasting. Fasting as dieting is found nowhere in the Bible, and this kind of dieting is proved to hold no health benefits. Therefore, such practice under the guise of religious fasting is not only an illegitimate form of biblical fasting, it can also lead to serious health problems and aggravate pre-existing conditions.

In light of this, many scholars have agreed that fasting in the biblical sense for any great length of time is not recommended for people with severe illnesses like diabetes or a history of disordered eating without express permission and ongoing monitoring of the one fasting by a doctor—preferably one who is familiar with the practice of fasting.[11] Since fasting has been shown to be both physically and sometimes psychologically draining, having as many supports in place as necessary is common sense and should not be regarded as weak.

Biblical Warnings about Fasting

[8] BlueLetterBible.com, "*'ânâh*"
[9] Baab, Lynne M.
[10] Ellison, Christopher G. and Henderson, Andrea K.
[11] Baab, Lynne M.; Ellison, Christopher G. and Henderson, Andrea K.; McKnight, Scott

Aside from our own cultural concerns about fasting, the Bible also lays out its own warnings about incorrectly fasting. As with many other acts of worship, there are many cautions in the Bible regarding false fasting, which need to be carefully considered before fasting. As McKnight points out, "Fasting, like other spiritual practices, [can] easily drift into self-righteousness and self-absorption." This warning can be read in Jesus' sermon on fasting, in which he rebukes those who "disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting"[12] in the hopes of finding favor among their peers rather than in reverence to God. Fasting can also be done without any real meaning behind it, such as in Isaiah 58 when God rebukes the Israelites for fasting out of habit or selfishly wanting something from God rather than in humble worship. Based on these passages, it is extremely important to check your motives before engaging in a fast, as fasting out of habit, fasting to receive praise from your peers, and fasting as a selfish means of getting something from God are specifically called out as being incorrect uses of fasting and are displeasing to God.

Grey Areas in Biblical Fasting

While it is true that fasting can simply be described as "going without food or drink voluntarily, generally for religious purposes,"[13] as it has already been mentioned that not all fasts are built on biblical theology—such as the fashionable new "detox" or "cleansing" fasts that have entered into our Western society—what is a biblical understanding of fasting? What is it about biblical fasting that sets it apart from other religious fasting, or is all fasting the same? For instance, while pastors and some scholars alike may call any temporary withholding of luxuries (i.e. watching television, pleasure shopping, etc.) for more time in communion with God a "fast," is there anything in the Bible that would confirm this practice to be in alignment with biblical fasting? As it turns out, there is nothing in the Bible that hints at fasting being anything else but a self-denial of food and/or drink for a certain amount of time. Though there is a passage in the Bible when God calls his people to "abstain from sexual relations"[14] for a time, which Paul similarly asks in 1 Corinthians 7:5, these is not referenced as being fasts, making it difficult at best to determine if there is anything in the Bible that counts as a non-food related fast. This is not to say that this kind of "fast" is morally wrong—to the contrary, according to Baab's

[12] *NIV* Matthew 6:16
[13] *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, "Fast, Fasting"
[14] *NIV* Exodus 19:14

research it can have a positive effect on one's prayer life—but this is very likely not biblical fasting in the strictest sense.

On that note, there is also no real distinction of types of fasting in the Bible beyond fasting from just food and fasting from food and drink, making temporary dietary restrictions such as denying delicacies or meat a gray area in Biblical fasting. While there are definitely cases in the Bible where people refuse certain types of foods temporarily—such as with the Nazarite vow during which the individual would abstain from grapes and all of its derivatives, among other restrictions[15]—this is never referred to as a fast, though granted the lack of the word "fast" does not necessarily mean that it wasn't a fast. While such temporary food restrictions certainly occurred and are continuing to occur even today in some church denominations,[16] the evidence neither confirms nor denies this kind of fast to be the same as when the people in the Bible fasted before God. Again, this does not mean that this kind of fast is wrong, just that this is not a practice specifically referenced in the Bible as fasting.

Also, given that the definition of a fast includes that it is "for a prescribed period"[17] and therefore temporary and not a permanent lifestyle change, giving up certain food or drink indefinitely would more likely be correctly labeled as "abstinence" rather than a fast. While at this point it sounds like splitting hairs, this distinction does have some Biblical grounding. For instance, in the book of Daniel we know that Daniel (among others) "resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine,"[18] and Daniel is granted his request after a ten day trial period.[19] Based on the context, it sounds like Daniel has made a lifestyle choice to never eat choice foods and drink rather than a temporary one, so while not outright stated, it could be implied that Daniel is continuing his dietary restrictions throughout the rest of the book. If Daniel is continuing this diet throughout his life, then we know that there is a distinction between his abstinence from choice food and Biblical fasting because, later on in the book, it is said that Daniel "turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."[20] If Daniel's permanently restricted diet counted as a fast, then certainly

[15] Numbers 6
[16] Baab, Lynne M.
[17] McKnight, Scott
[18] *NIV* Daniel 1:8
[19] Daniel 1:12-14
[20] *NIV* Daniel 9:3

some distinction would have to be made to say how this fast was separate from his abstinence from choice food. This can also be said of the Jewish dietary laws in Leviticus or of Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist's lifelong Nazarite vows; these do not count as a fasts because these are permanent fixtures in their lives rather than temporary. Thus, abstaining from food or food and drink can only be called a fast if it is temporary.

Biblical Fasting

While many different religions and even secular health guides may also prescribe fasting, there must be something that makes biblical fasting distinct through how it fits into our understanding of theology. If we are to understand that "true worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will,"[21] then surely fasting should be considered an act of worship, but exactly how is biblical fasting implemented? While the Bible makes frequent reference to specific people fasting for specific amounts of time, "nowhere are we told how often to fast, what to fast from or how long to fast"[22] as a general rule. Looking at the original languages of the Bible from which we get the word "fast," we can safely infer that fasting—as it is biblically understood—involves, at least, cessation of eating. This comes from the two most common words for fasting: the Hebrew word צוּם (*tsûwm*), which means "to cover over (the mouth), i.e. to fast";[23] and the Greek word νηστεύω (*nēsteúō*), which means "to abstain from food (religiously)."[24] That said, while the word study is important for defining terms used in their original language, it proves limited in its scope. Surely there is more to this act of worship than willfully refusing food? While, looking at the specific passages in which fasting occurs—several of which not even using the word "fast" but simply specify that an individual or group did not eat (or drink, in some cases)—sheds more light on the purposes and common practices that accompanied fasting.

Fasting and Prayer

When contemporary Christians think about fasting, fasting and prayer is often the combination that first comes to their minds, and they are not wrong in identifying that there is a link between the two. Such a connection can be seen in Psalms, where one of David's Psalms

[21] Block, Daniel I.
[22] Baab, Lynne M.
[23] BlueLetterBible.com, "Tsûwm"
[24] BlueLetterBible.com, "Nēsteúō"

reads "yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth / and humbled myself with fasting. / When my prayers returned to me unanswered, / I went about mourning / as though for my friend or brother."[25] Clearly in this passage, there is a link between prayer and fasting. Another example of prayer and fasting can be seen in the book of Esther, when Esther asks the Jews to "not eat or drink for three days, night or day"[26] before she approaches the king. While there is no specific request to have the Jews pray and fast, given the dire circumstances that they all face, it is easy enough to imply that either it was assumed when Esther asked them to fast that they would pray as well or the Jews were already consistently praying for their situation so asking them to pray would have been superfluous.

Perhaps the best link between fasting and prayer is when David pleads before God to spare the life of his illegitimate son, during which David "fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders […] stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them."[27] David does this for seven days. While this seems like David is mourning for his son—and to some degree this was probably true—what is most interesting about this incident is that immediately upon hearing that his son has passed, David gets up, gets dressed, goes to worship God, and requests something to eat. Given his attendants' reactions to David's sudden turnaround, his behavior is clearly an atypical response to the death of a child, but David's explanation sheds light on his actions, as he says:

> "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."[28]

Based on David's reasoning with his attendants and the fact that David immediately ceased his fasting upon hearing his son was dead, it would appear that his fasting was more tied to his prayers to God to save his son than to mourning for his son.

Looking at the connections between fasting and prayer, one characteristic of this relationship becomes abundantly obvious: absolutely none of the passages related to prayer are

[25] Psalms 35:13-14
[26] *NIV* Esther 4:16
[27] *NIV* 2 Samuel 12:16-17
[28] *NIV* 2 Samuel 12:22-23

divorced from extreme, sorrowful need. Esther and her people fasted because they were desperate to save themselves from annihilation. David's fasting and prayers before God were for the recovery of his dear enemy from illness and for the life of his illegitimate child to be spared. No one in the Bible fasts cheerfully in thanksgiving to God, and no one is fasting and praying for something trivial. Indeed, fasting is clearly a very somber aspect of worship to God, and while it is often spontaneously enacted, it is not entered lightly.

That being said, fasting is also not a guarantee that God will answer your prayers. While fasting and supplication to God are often seen together in tandem in biblical passages, fasting does not hold any power over God. This is very important to remember. Though Esther's prayers were answered from the three day fast she and her people took part in, remember also that David's prayers on behalf of his son were not answered, though he fasted as well. Following the definition by Scott McKnight—that "fasting identifies with God's perspective and grief in a sacred moment"—fasting as prayer is more of a response to the grievous moment and to prepare oneself for God's purposes than getting what we desire—even if what we desire seemingly aligns with God's desires. For this reason, McKnight has proposed that when someone intimates that they are fasting, the better question to ask them is "'In response to what?' instead of, 'What do you hope you will get out of it?'" Now, this is a painful subject for many, and this article is in no way attempting to demean or demoralize anyone who is earnestly praying and fasting during great hardship. However—while there are some well-written and many poorly-written books on this topic—as this article is a discussion of biblical fasting and not an academic discourse to problems of theodicies or the mysteries of God, the most this article can do is offer that no one whose prayers and fasting have come and gone without healing or timely response is alone.

Fasting and Repentance

This leads to perhaps the most somber reason for fasting—that being fasting as it relates to repentance and mourning. Probably the most eye-opening experience from studying fasting in the Bible is that most passages that speak about fasting tie fasting to mourning and repentance. This link between fasting and repentance can be seen no clearer than when God implemented the Day of Atonement, which specifically combines fasting with Israel's repentance for their sins with God's command that they "deny themselves."[29] While the phrasing does not lend itself to clearly mean that the Israelites were to fast even in the original Hebrew, according to McKnight

[29] *NIV* Leviticus 23:29

"[n]early all experts agree that the self-denial involved here was at least to deny oneself of food and probably also water." Further evidence of this interpretation can be deferred to Jewish tradition, which calls for an "*absolute* fast—no food or water for twenty-four hours" (emphasis in original) during Yom Kippur.[30] Other famous biblical examples of fasting combined with repentance would be when King Ahab "tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted [and he] lay in sackcloth and went around meekly,"[31] when all of Israel assembled at Mizpah and "they fasted and […] confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD,'"[32] and when all of Nineveh fasted in the hope that "God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that [they] will not perish."[33] In each of these examples, it is clearly shown that there is a connection between fasting and repentance.

Fasting and Mourning

Yet fasting was also a key feature to simply mourning great tragedy—be it a significant death or calamity that had befallen one or many people. It is important to make a distinction here between fasting and prayer and fasting and mourning. While it is certainly true that people of the Bible did fast and mourn as they prayed to God—as we have seen in the cases of David and Esther's fasts—this particular combination is referring to the times in the Bible when people just reacted to tragedy by fasting, without any mention of prayer to rid them of their misfortune (though this is not to suggest that prayer could not have happened). This is purely fasting as a reaction to grief, which can be seen in many passages in the Bible. One example of this is with the Jews in Babylon, who "in every province to which the edict and order of the king came [it is said that there was] great mourning among [them], with fasting, weeping and wailing"[34] over their grief of hearing that there will be a mass genocide among them. While it is true, as stated previously, that they fast again when Esther needs them to for a specific reason—this initial fast appears to be more of a reaction to their impending destruction than to come before God in prayer. Another example is Hannah, who "wept and would not eat"[35] because of her inability to cope with her barrenness. Though she does eventually take her case to the house of the LORD

[30] *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, "Fast, Fasting"
[31] *NIV* 1 Kings 21:27
[32] *NIV* 1 Samuel 7:6
[33] *NIV* Jonah 3:9
[34] *NIV* Esther 4:3
[35] *NIV* 1 Samuel 1:7

with weeping and prayer, it would seem that her fasting is more of an extension of her grieving than her petition to God for a child.

Perhaps the best example of this takes place after King Saul and his sons were slain and David and his men, in response, "mourned and wept and fasted 'til evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, […] because they had fallen by the sword."[36] Here, there is no mention of calling on the Lord for help or guidance about Saul and his sons' death. David and his troop are not supplicating God to restore Saul's life or even to recover the bodies—in fact, the very next thing David does is write a lament about Saul and Jonathan.[37] Based on the context, it would seem that David and his men are simply overcome with grief and that fasting was a natural response to that grief. This is not to say that David was not praying during this time—given his character, he very likely was—but that the fasting itself seems much more tied to his grieving for his King and friend than in prayer to God.

With the progression of fasting and prayer to fasting and repentance and mourning, it remains clear that fasting is a somber act of worship before God. While fasting as mourning was likely more of a cultural response to grief on par with rending one's clothes, fasting and repentance are strongly tied together throughout the Old Testament as a correct response for remorse over one's sins.

Fasting and Community

As many of the examples above prove, fasting was also steeped in community. This is yet another aspect of fasting that has fallen out of popular use within the Evangelical church, which seem to view fasting as "such a personal thing, not common or corporate."[38] While there are biblical passages in which individuals fast alone, most references to fasting concern whole groups of people fasting together.[39] Communal fasting was mostly practiced because everyone involved was fasting in response to the same concern, usually also because someone in a leadership position called for a fast—such as when King Jehoshaphat called for all of Judah to fast for salvation[40] or when the King of the Nineveh commanded that everyone under his domain

[36] *NIV* 2 Samuel 1:12
[37] 2 Samuel 1.17
[38] Baab, Lynne M.
[39] Baab, Lynne M.
[40] 2 Chronicles 20:3

fast in repentance.[41] The theory behind biblical fasting as community is as simple as fasting involving two or more people, with no real distinction between what is done when an individual fasts and what is done when a community fasts. That being said, since fasting is a form of worship before God, Christians are called to both private and corporate worship. Throughout the Bible, fasting as a community was a vital part of Jewish and Christian worship. Thus, corporate fasting is both a valid and important form of worship that has its place in today's church practice.

Fasting and Spiritual Discipline

This brings us to the last look at Biblical fasting, which is also the kind of fast that receives the least amount of attention in the Bible: fasting as it relates to spiritual discipline. Interestingly, while it is given the least attention in the Bible, this kind of fast seems to receive the most amount of attention today by popular Christian culture, besides fasting and prayer. This overinflated use of fasting as spiritual discipline likely comes from Richard J. Foster's very successful book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, which featured fasting as one of the major disciplines he hoped to rekindle in the lives of his fellow believers. This is not to say that this is an invalid form of fasting, but it is the form of fasting for which there is the least amount of biblical guidance on how to proceed. We know from the book of Mark that it was common practice for both the Pharisees and John the Baptist's follower to engage in regular fasting, which could imply that these groups fast as a general discipline.[42] This comes up again in the book of Luke, during which Jesus tells a parable of a Pharisee who remarks that he regularly fasts "twice a week."[43] Some scholars have also remarked that in Acts the early church engaged in prayer and fasting without any specific or dire need stated—which had been the case every other time prayer and fasting were mentioned in the Bible together—leading scholars to suppose it could mean that these members of the church were fasting and praying more for spiritual discipline.[44] It is also possible that Jesus' sermon on fasting relates to these kinds of fasts in particular, as he specifically refers to fasting in secret, which had heretofore not been addressed in the Bible.[45] If these examples sound incredibly vague, that's because they are vague; basing our study solely on the canonical texts of the Bible, there is very little in the way of fasting as

[41] Jonah 3:9
[42] Mark 2:18
[43] Luke 18:11
[44] Baab, Lynne M.; McKnight, Scott
[45] Matthew 6:18

discipline aside from it possibly showing up sometime between the Old and New Testament. This isn't to say that this kind of fast didn't occur in the Old Testament—it's very possible that it did—but there's no solid evidence of it found in the Bible.

Most of what we know about fasting as a spiritual discipline comes from the *Didache*, which was an early Christian extra-biblical text, but even that is limited. In the *Didache*, it is mentioned that the Pharisees would routinely fast on Mondays and Thursdays—which strengthens the notion that Jesus' fictional Pharisee's fast was a reflection of an actual discipline Pharisees engaged in—and that the early church would practice stationary fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays.[46] Beyond this, however, no mention is given for why these stationary fasts were put in place or what the Pharisees and early Christians did during these fasts. The safest speculation about this kind of fasting is that it had something to do with "body discipline,"[46] but any conjecture beyond that would be stepping into the realm of pure wild guessing. Had this form of fasting any less presence in the Bible and extra-biblical texts, fasting as spiritual discipline would be more at home in the grey area of fasting section in this article. However, since there appears to be just enough evidence to conclude that this was more than likely a valid form of fasting found in the Bible, it is included with the rest of the facets of fasting.

What Does This Mean for Us Today?

Having looked at certain key biblical passages to determine some of the contexts in which fasting occurs, we know that fasting was profoundly connected to repentance and mourning, followed closely behind with prayer and lastly spiritual discipline. Fasting was most often done in community with others rather than individually, and most biblical passages reference spontaneous fasting rather than stationary fasts, although we know from extra-biblical texts like the *Didache* that both the Pharisees and the early Christian church regularly fasted twice a week.[47] We also know, based on the contexts in which fasting occurred, that it is a somber act of worship and therefore not something to be entered into lightly.

In light of this, we can finally define what biblical fasting is. After looking through the Bible and scholarship found on the subject of fasting, perhaps the best definition of biblical fasting is this: "fasting is a choice not to eat for a designated period because some moment is so sacred that partaking in food would deface or profane the seriousness of the moment."[47] Fasting

[46] McKnight, Scott
[47] McKnight, Scott

also fits under the definition of biblical worship, which "involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will."[48] Combining these two definitions, fasting is a physical manifestation of the Church's reverence and submission to the holy God through the denial of bodily sustenance over a period of time in reaction to a serious need. With this definition of biblical fasting in mind, there is only one more aspect of fasting to be addressed: how should the church apply these biblical acts of fasting into today's culture?

Though biblical fasting has largely fallen out of usage within the Evangelical church community, it is obvious from biblical study that fasting is not only a valid form of worship but also a great balancer to Evangelical worship practice, which tends to weigh more heavily on the praise and thanksgiving with little variance in worship to lean on in times of great trial. While strictly fasting as mourning is not really a religious practice so much as it was a cultural one, certainly when tragedy strikes the church community, it would be more than appropriate to respond with fasting and prayer with an implied form of mourning resonating from this response to the grief. Fasting as repentance is another equally valid use of fasting even for today so long as this fast is not used as a means of self-punishment but as time set aside to rededicate one's life to the will of God.

Remember that in these kinds of fasts, the actual act of fasting is meant as a somber form of worship to God. Prayer and repentance do not need to involve fasting to "work;" fasting is merely an act of deference to the Holy God, a reminder that "man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."[49] Thus, it is important to bear in mind that the use of fasting does not guarantee that God will be any more likely answer your prayers if it is not in God's will to do so, nor will you be any more forgiven if you fast in repentance. If anything, fasting is meant to align ourselves with God's will as a reminder of what we really need and who is able to provide it. Prayer and fasting prepares our hearts to receive God's answer; repentance and fasting prepares our hearts to receive God's calling to go and sin no more.

American Evangelical churches today should also take into consideration the power of corporate fasting, which is being used to great effect in other parts of the world and within

[48] Block, Daniel I.
[49] *NIV* Matthew 4:4

different denominations.[50] Just as churches may call for corporate prayer in times of need, corporate fasting is likely to strengthen the solidarity the church has between its members and with God. Setting aside certain calendar dates for corporate worship as the early church had or calling together the church for spontaneous prayer and fasting if disaster strikes are just a couple of the many ways corporate worship can be used in today's church. However fasting is reincorporated into the Evangelical church, remember to so whole-heartedly for God and in accordance to his will, not letting current trends or selfish desires get in the way of the incredible gift of worship for those times of somber reflection we so desperately need.

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[50] Baab, Lynne M.