

## **The Kitchen Table as a Platform for Change:**

### **Fasting in an Age of Division**

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2450 words

#### **Introduction**

Today's many conflicts in political ideology, cultural values, and lifestyle choices make it difficult for Christians to know how to engage with our world in faith and charity. In this increasingly noisy and contentious marketplace of ideas, platforms abound: protests, voting booths, activist gatherings, political events, and an increasing array of social media. Let us now consider a quieter, humbler platform that nevertheless has power to shape and amplify the witness of today's church: the kitchen table.

Divisive arguments and cultural estrangement are as old as the Christian experience. Yet in the epistles of the New Testament there are explicit warnings against being caught up in controversies.<sup>1</sup> Addressing the deep societal divisions of our time must not be about winning arguments, policies, or culture wars. It is about trusting in God's transformative and incarnational love. That same love empowers and equips God's people to do something unexpected. In a culture that values the

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 2:23-26; Titus 3:9-11.

right to pursue and celebrate any personal appetite, nothing is more unexpected than fasting.

*The Book of Common Prayer* (2019) contains this simple and oft overlooked statement: in addition to penitential seasons and special days of discipline, “every Friday of the year (outside the 12 Days of Christmas and the 50 days of Eastertide) are encouraged as days of fasting.” These days are to be marked by “reduced consumption...prayer, self-examination, and acts of mercy.”<sup>2</sup> The witness of the Anglican Church in North America can change dramatically if our kitchen tables are sparser one day a week. A fast will recommit our church to a posture of prayer, humility, repentance, and compassionate engagement with a world that is spiritually—and literally—hungry. The world will see a community of faith that is willing to make lasting lifestyle changes in response to what it cares about, and that will speak more powerfully than any post or placard.

## **Fasting and Prayer**

Fasting is not simply a diet or physical discipline taken up to improve physical wellness. It may well lead to the same benefits, but Christian fasting is first and foremost an invitation to deeper prayer. This, more than anything our efforts themselves might procure in service to any cause, is our hope. God’s is the power to redeem and reconcile, to bring health, and change hearts.

This posture of prayer is facilitated through abstaining from food. Fasting appears throughout the Old and New Testaments in many forms, from a partial restriction in diet to complete abstinence from food and water. Biblical fasts are

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<sup>2</sup> Anglican Church in North America, *The Book of Common Prayer* (Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), 689.

undertaken both as individual disciplines and corporate acts.<sup>3</sup> Our Lord addressed fasting as a practical fact with his disciples, as did the early teaching of *The Didache*.<sup>4</sup> Though it is common throughout Scripture and generations of Christian practice, fasting fell out of favor and observance over the centuries.<sup>5</sup> This negative connotation dates back, in part, to a reaction against the extreme asceticism and legalism in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there is support from the English Reformers for fasting. *The Second Book of Homilies* contains a two-part sermon on the discipline, which it describes as a “particular good work, whose commendation is both in the Law and the Gospel,” even emphasizing “that we ought to fast is a truth more manifest than that it should here need to be proved.”<sup>7</sup>

The logistics of fasting throughout the early church varied widely.<sup>8</sup> Its value lies not in the exactitude of the prescribed fast so much as in the posture of prayer and self-denial in which it is undertaken. So what might it look like today to reacquaint the province to this intentional discipline? With the Prayer Book as guide, it need not be complicated: weekly observance, on Fridays, of eating less food. The discretion of church leadership may provide more details, such as abstaining from meat all day, or from any food until sundown. What matters is a “reduction of consumption”<sup>9</sup> coupled with prayer, to “assist in breaking forceful habits that accrue within and harden the heart over years and even over generations...to render the faculties more subtle and sensitive to the outside world as well as to the ‘inner kingdom.’”<sup>10</sup> Something as straightforward as eating less,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:16-17; Aaron Milavec, ed., *The Didache* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) 81.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> John Griffiths, ed., *The Two Books of Homilies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859), 280, 282.

<sup>8</sup> Griffiths, *Homilies*, 284.

<sup>9</sup> *BCP*, 689.

<sup>10</sup> Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery*, 81.

on purpose, with prayer, one day a week, is simple. Simplicity does not, however, translate to ease.

### **Self-Examination and Acts of Mercy**

Even a single day of consciously eating less will inevitably bring aspects of spiritual health to light. Richard Foster, in his *Celebration of Discipline*, writes, “More than any Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us...Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting.”<sup>11</sup> It is humbling to realize how powerful the physical desire for food is when not immediately satiated. The benefits of regularly confronting this challenge in prayer and humility is an increase in repentance, a weekly opportunity to observe one’s spiritual state, and a reminder to treat every meal with a heightened sense of gratitude. In prayerful practice, fasting directs its observers, over and over, to the truth that “Man is a hungry being. But he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is God.”<sup>12</sup>

This posture of self-reflection and repentance prepares a person for acts of mercy. There are so many different ways to serve one’s neighbor, but let us consider again the current climate of contention. How might members of the church engage differently in some of our time’s most divisive conversations, once tempered and refined in the fire of fasting? Fasting lays bare how difficult it is to allow our faith to shape physical aspects of our lives. Many of today’s contentious

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<sup>11</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 14.

social issues pertain to the physical body, including questions of sexual expression and gender identity, abortion rights, and healthcare access. A body of believers who can speak with compassion and experience about regularly denying the impulses of the flesh will sound different when addressing sexuality or addiction. They will be able to speak with humility and self-awareness about how being part of the church is incarnational, that the body is a gift and an integral part of worship. They may understand better the needs of a mother overwhelmed at the prospect of feeding a new child, or the desperation of an immigrant risking undocumented work. This is where the discipline of fasting meets the church's engagement with divisive topics. Its capacity to soften and strengthen the message and ministry of the church is not limited to a single issue.

Fasting will also necessarily result in a renovated relationship with the food we consume. Food is undeniably a vital part of the Christian narrative. From the very beginning, the garden was filled with edible provisions. The fall came through a bite of fruit. The sacrament of our redemption is a feast—not merely spiritual, but of actual food and drink. Indeed, we know Christ in the breaking of the bread. Our future hope is a banquet.<sup>13</sup> Food is a sign of God's provision and proof of the value of our physical bodies. Yet in this present age, our relationship with food has become obscured. Unlike most humans throughout history, many of us in modern-day North America are disconnected from the production of the food we eat daily. Moreover, eating habits have led to a number of devastating challenges: obesity, food addiction, eating disorders, overly processed food devoid of nutrition, and food waste. These issues are rampant in our communities, but they generally garner less attention than more contentious topics. In our commitment to fast there

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:29; Genesis 3:6; John 6:53-56; Luke 24:35; Matthew 22:2.

is a new opportunity to examine the role that food plays in our personal lives and communities and to prayerfully invite God’s transformation into those spaces.

There are already movements responding to this need, but many of them originate outside the church. Meatless Mondays is an initiative with the same outward act of a weekly fast, meant to “promote sustainable behavior change by dedicating every Monday to health.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, intermittent fasting uses set times of food abstinence to pursue weight management. Celebrated journalist Michael Pollan has been examining the environmental, cultural, and ethical ramifications of our food supply for decades.<sup>15</sup> The church should be leading the way in these conversations. We still can.

This food-focused reflection leads to food-related acts of mercy. If the fasting church explores the question of how faith relates to food, answering that question has the potential to inspire direct changes in a wide range of current issues. For example, the church who rediscovers gratitude for God’s provision in creation becomes a better environmental steward. They become ready to challenge the profit-driven corporate decisions behind overly processed and industrialized food. Envision the church promoting the care of creation through regenerative farming and community gardening to reduce the burden in our communities of rising food prices, food insecurity, and food waste. Again, these topics are less flashy in the headlines, but have the power to effect true change in the lives of our neighbors in need.

Of all food-related acts of mercy, the following is the most important: the church can and should lead the world in responding to the desperate situation of

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mondaycampaigns.org/meatless-monday>

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, his works *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (London: Penguin, 2006) and *In Defense of Food* (London: Penguin, 2008).

the pending global food crisis. Fasting opens the eyes of the faithful to the plight of the hungry. It is “a critical alternative to our consumer lifestyle in Western society, which does not permit us to notice the impact and effect of our customs and actions.”<sup>16</sup> The World Food Programme warned this summer that “Conflict, weather extremes, economic shocks, the lingering impacts of COVID-19, and the ripple effects from the war in Ukraine push millions of people in countries across the world into poverty and hunger.”<sup>17</sup> While food insecurity exists in communities everywhere, including North America, the most vulnerable regions of the world are not beyond our capacity to help. Every meal skipped should turn into a meal given. Every dollar saved by fasting should go straight to hunger relief. This is where our resources belong, until the church has a worldwide reputation for feeding the hungry. More than any social cause the church engages with today, this has the power to save precious lives and show God’s love to a hurting world.

### **Some Objections**

Some may object that our Lord warned his listeners against fasting in the public eye.<sup>18</sup> English Reformer Thomas Becon addressed this concern by pointing out that Jesus’s warning was against seeking the praise of others. Our fasting does not need to be hidden. As a good work done in humility and prayer, it can shine as a witness to the glory of God.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery*, 83.

<sup>17</sup> World Food Programme, “FAO and WFP warn of looming widespread food crisis as hunger threatens stability in dozens of countries” 06 June 2022. <https://www.wfp.org/news/fao-and-wfp-warn-looming-widespread-food-crisis-hunger-threatens-stability-dozens-countries>.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 6:16-18.

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson, Rowan Williams, eds., *Love’s Redeeming Work*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 42; Matthew 5:16

Similarly, it was important to the formers of our Anglican heritage to establish that fasts are not works that can be trusted “to purchase to ourselves and others remission of sin, and so consequently everlasting life.”<sup>20</sup> It is a mark of the Christian life to remember always that God’s grace quickens us to do his work, and that our salvation is a gift, not a wage. He then sends us out into the world to do the works he prepared for us to walk in.<sup>21</sup>

Some argue that fasting is “a private matter between the individual and God.”<sup>22</sup> It is true that fasting is an effective spiritual discipline for the individual, as Scripture attests, but fasting in biblical times and the history of the church also exists as a corporate practice. In fact, even private fasts—done with prayer, self-reflection, and acts of mercy—are always done in light of the suffering world and to identify with the needy. “To fast then, is to fast with and for others...Fasting is a solemn reminder that everything we do relates to either the well-being or the wounding of others.”<sup>23</sup> It is true that there is no explicit command in the Bible requiring a weekly fast. The church is not bound to observe fasting in a particular form—but it can choose to do so. About fasts, the homilist says, “the Church hath full power and authority from God to change and alter [prescribed forms in religion] when need shall require.”<sup>24</sup>

Why propose a sustained, weekly fast and not a special, limited one? Quite simply, because it is already encouraged in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Furthermore, a weekly fast can strengthen and prepare observers for those times when a special fast is called. Archbishop Foley Beach has made several invitations to members of the province to fast and pray: in response to the COVID-19

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<sup>20</sup> Griffiths, *Homilies*, 279.

<sup>21</sup> Ephesians 2:10; *BCP*, 598.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Griffiths, *Homilies*, 293.



pandemic, the suffering of the people of Afghanistan, the civil discord and racial violence in America, and others.<sup>25</sup> In his leadership, he has not been afraid to call for fasting and prayer. Considering the countless desperate needs of this world, we are not in danger of fasting too much.

## **Conclusion**

The Anglican Church in North America is uniquely positioned to adopt a discipline of regular fasting. Anglicanism mines from the deep riches of church tradition to address the special needs of its modern context. At this moment in history, many people have come to Anglicanism to reconnect with historic church practices and live out their faith incarnationally. A provincial-wide fast reconnects the faithful of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to an ancient spiritual practice, one that embodies sacrifice and humility in a lasting lifestyle change.

Though it presents a challenge, this fast is feasible. The foundation is already laid in Scripture, early church practice, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and Archbishop Beach's prior call to special fasts. It is a practical and immediate, if unexpected, answer to those who wonder how to engage in this world and its climate of division. This fast is in line with the gospel of Christ, redirecting the faithful to pray and repent, trust God, and lay down one's own appetite and resources for the sake of others. It is an act of love to a world that is divided and cynical, needing a church that speaks a better word than the many other clamoring

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<sup>25</sup> <https://anglicanchurch.net/?s=call+to+fast>

voices, a church that calls for real, lasting change to the kitchen tables of its followers in order to better minister to the needs of our hungry world.

Let us therefore, dearly beloved, seeing there are many more causes of fasting and mourning in these our days than hath been of many years heretofore in any one age, endeavor ourselves, both inwardly in our hearts and also outwardly with our bodies, diligently to exercise this godly exercise of fasting in such sort and manner as the holy Prophets, the Apostles, and divers [sic] other devout persons for their time used the same. God is now the same God that was then.<sup>26</sup>

So Anglicans in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century were exhorted, and so are they exhorted now.

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<sup>26</sup> Griffiths, *Homilies*, 296.