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20 minutes (@ 2400 words or 10 double spaced pages)

Fasting from Oppression: A Christian Response to Socio-Economic Powers

This topic began for me April of 2011 in Assisi, Italy. It was Ash Wednesday and Cheri (my wife) and I were attending the Ash Wednesday service at the Basilica of St. Francis, which was celebrated immediately above the location where Francis was buried. I walked forward in line to receive the ashes on my head and as the priest was making the marks I heard a voice inside speaking to me: “I want you to fast from oppression.” I knew it was the Spirit of God. But I did not know what it meant. “Fast from oppression.” Connections between social justice and spirituality had been on my mind that week (How can you avoid them while visiting the home town of Francis of Assisi?). But I have never been very good at fasting, and in Montrose, Colorado I live far from any obvious manifestations of oppression. But I knew - this was an invitation into exploration: both academic and personal. My reflections here are fruits of that exploration to date. I will first say something about the practice of fasting, drawing from biblical and historical sources. Then I will examine the notion of oppression from a few angles. Once we are clear about what each of these words mean, we can begin to get an idea of what the joining of these words might mean for us today.

Fasting

Fasting is a form of Christian asceticism, which itself may be defined as “*the act or habit of intentionally constraining one's own human experience in the context of God's active presence and aimed at serving spiritual ends.*”¹ The constraint of experience normally associated with fasting is

¹ “Dying to Live: Reflections on Asceticism, Spiritual Disciplines and Everyday Life; Part One: Asceticism Summarized” 2014, 6. I review a number of definitions of asceticism in preparing to offer my own in this document. The essay is available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/wp-content/pdfs/Dying-to-Live-I.pdf>. For a review of the biblical material on fasting, see Kent Berghuis, “Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach” (a lightly edited version of his doctoral dissertation) available at <https://bible.org/series/christian-fasting-theological-approach>.

abstinence from food. In the Christian scriptures, the Hebrew term *sôm* and the Greek *nēsteuo* both express abstinence from food. This is clearly what Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount when he re-introduces the spirit of fasting in Matthew 6: 16-18. “When you fast,” Jesus instructs, “Do not make your devotional sacrifice obvious to others.” The aim of abstaining from food is not to improve your image among peers, but rather to express the sincerity of your pursuit of God. Nonetheless, while Jesus corrects the motive of fasting, he affirms the practice; just as he did with the practices of prayer and almsgiving.

Christian scripture and history document two different forms of the practice of fasting. One, indicated in Jesus’s instructions above, is a personal and periodic withdrawal from food. This is the spiritual discipline commonly practiced by contemplative types and was prominent among the early desert elders. Thus,

"Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, 'How should one fast?' Abba Poemen said to him, 'For my part, I think it better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied.' Abba Joseph said to him, 'When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, abba?' The old man said: 'Yes, even for three days and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.'"²

French monk and theologian John Cassian identified three types of gluttony: eating in anticipation of the appointed time for food, eating excessive amounts of food, and over-attention to rare or delicate dishes; three types of fasting corresponded to these.³ Personal, periodic fasting, in the literature of Christian spirituality, serves a number of different functions in cooperation with the grace of God’s Spirit: for example targeted abstinence to address a particular vice (gluttony), training one’s will in general, or opening oneself in vulnerability to God. Laura Swan, in her *Forgotten Desert Mothers*

2 Benedicta Ward, translator, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1975), “Poemen,” #31, p. 171.

3 See John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes*, Book V, #23 (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), p. 84.

writes, "The desert ascetics understood that fasting creates the space in our bodies, minds, and spirits for God to *be* within us, for new things to grow."⁴

The second form of fasting is more common in the First Testament and in the Puritan and Pentecostal/charismatic traditions. Rather than a personal affair, this type of fasting is often a public withdrawal from food for the sake of pursuing God regarding a concern. Just as Queen Esther called for days of public fasting prior to the risky request she presented to her husband to spare the Israelite people, so Charles Hambrick-Stowe writes of New England Puritan life, that "Public fast days were held in response to dire agricultural and meteorological conditions, ecclesiastical, military, political, and social crises both in New England and in Europe, and in preparation for important events such as the ordination of a minister or the militia's embarkation on a campaign."⁵ When Pentecostals get really serious about something, they fast either personally or publically, often for days at a time. Pentecostals, drawing from Jesus's own suggestion that certain matters require prayer and fasting, often have this sense that fasting just puts a little more power into prayer. From Franklin Hall's *Atomic Power Through Prayer and Fasting* (1946), to Derek Prince's *Shaping History Through Prayer and Fasting* (1973), to Lou Engle and Catherine Paine's *Fast Forward: A Call to the Millennial Prayer Revolution* (1999), Pentecostals, as their Puritan ancestors, have made seasons of "prayer and fasting" an important part of their experience of relationship with God.

More recently, writers in spiritual formation have begun to speak of "fasting" from more than food. In this sense, the term "fasting" becomes a general term for abstention. Adele Calhoun in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* under "fasting" mentions both "abstaining from media" and "abstaining from habits or comforts."⁶ Nevertheless, though the form varies and the aims are not

4 Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 45. For Protestant examples see the Church of England's 1558 collection of Homilies, particularly "An Homily of Good Works, and First of Fasting", and Wesley's treatment in his sermon (XXVII, Discourse VII) on the Sermon on the Mount.

5 Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Williamsburg, Virginia: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 100

6 Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 218.

always the same, the essence of fasting as a form of Christian asceticism remains: a constraint of human experience in some form in the context of God's active presence and serving spiritual ends.

Oppression

We don't talk much about oppression these days here in the US. We kind of figure that oppression was eliminated with the civil rights movement, or that oppression is what happens in dictatorships overseas. Consequently, I will begin here by giving you a sense of the biblical teaching about oppression and then I will suggest where we might find oppression in our midst today.

First, a brief definition of oppression. Merriam-Webster defines oppression as an "unjust or cruel exercise of authority." Other definitions include the idea of "prolonged" mistreatment. The Latin *oppressus* speaks of being pressed against or squeezed. Sometimes we use the term in a mental sense of being heavily burdened, as in "My to-do list is becoming downright oppressive."

There are a number of different Hebrew terms that communicate the idea of oppression in the Bible. In addition to the numerous times that Scripture speaks of Israel's own experience of being oppressed by foreign nations, we hear biblical condemnations regarding taking advantage of hired workers by failing to pay them promptly (Deuteronomy 24:14-15; see also James 5:4 on this); cheating another by overcharging for land (Leviticus 25:14-17); and using fraud to acquire desired assets (Micah 2:1-2). Amos 4:1 speaks of rich women oppressing the poor by asking their husbands for drink, demonstrating the Bible's own sensitivity to the interrelated character of economies, even in biblical times (see also James 5:5-6). Not only did Jesus free those who were oppressed by demons, but in his first sermon, Jesus proclaimed the inauguration of the fulfillment of the Jubilee promise of economic restoration given in Isaiah 61:1-2 – good news to the poor, setting the oppressed free (see Luke 4:16-21). When used with regard to socio-political relationships, the terms for oppression consistently

denounce the use of economic, political, and legal power for personal gain at the expense of those who are power-less.⁷

But do we see oppression today? True, low income families bit the bait of sub-prime loans when they should have been more responsible. But I still place a good deal of the blame for the housing crisis of 2008 at the feet of those who utilized overly complicated legal-economic power to, quoting the book of Job, “seize assets they did not own.”⁸ Loan sharks who exploit the crises of the poor through overcharging interest, abortion clinics who persuade young mothers to end innocent lives unnecessarily, corporations who bleed vital resources from Native American lands through slimy “agreements” concerning ownership of water and mining rights, networks of labor trafficking who exploit the vulnerable: all of these are examples of contemporary oppression.

The very fact that some are now choosing to buy products labeled “fair trade” suggests that some products are not traded fairly. Coffee plantations, clothing factories and more can be accurately described as environments of oppression, highlighting an aspect of oppression which Quaker activists perceived in the 18th century. Oppression is frequently globalized and hidden behind complex corporate and governmental structures.⁹ Perpetrators of oppression may be located in a democratic haven while the victims are far away.

Yes, though the legal systems, the ownership regulations, and the monetary measures are different now than in biblical times, people here and now still employ a cruel and unjust exercise of power. And I think oppression should be resisted as strongly now as the Bible condemned it then.

7 See for example, Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 144-54. Puritan writer Arthur Dent (d. 1607) has a nice treatment of oppression in his *A Plaine Man's Pathway*.

8 For a list of New York Magazine's recommendations on books regarding the crisis, see <http://nymag.com/strategist/article/best-books-about-the-financial-crash.html>.

9 For an interesting exploration of this see Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

Fasting from Oppression

And this leads us to the consideration of “fasting from oppression.” My hope here is to re-package an old spiritual discipline for a new purpose. Or perhaps what I am doing is providing spiritual backing for a common socio-political act. See what you think.

The idea of fasting from chocolate – or from social media – is simple. It is simply a chosen act of non-participation in the product or activity in question. This act of choosing non-participation is the *constraint* of experience which I hope will serve a godly end. But what does choosing non-participation in oppression look like?

In order to grasp this, we must first recognize some of the various “causes” or co-contributing factors to the arising of oppression. While some factors appear “structural” and consequently outside the influence of our own actions (such as the scale of institutional structures), there are actually many types of human participation which contribute to the arise or perpetuation of oppression. Consider the following:

- Involvement in or initiation of particular acts of oppression (e.g. pressured loan misuse, bribery)
- Support of oppressive organizations (e.g. through voting habits)
- Purchase or use of goods/services provided under conditions of injustice (e.g. clothing made at sweat shops)
- Affirming, consciously or by default, the values central to an oppressive system (e.g. the values of profit at all costs, care for product more than people)
- Engaging in the patterns of power-use which are characteristic of an oppressive system (failure to give voice to those with less power, targeting scapegoats, manipulation, and the like)
- In certain circumstances, is not speaking out itself a form of oppression (e.g. neighbor is abusing spouse)? When is silence culpable, and for which issues?
- Sharing of the primary motivations of an oppressive culture. We live in a world where violence and injustice are perpetuated for the sake of maintaining comfort, convenience, security - a

lifestyle wherein we can have coffee, connection, and chocolate whenever we want. Does our perceived *need* for comfort, convenience, security, immediate gratification itself contribute to oppression?

If this list indicates a fair range of the kinds of human participation in unjust uses of authority, then the constraint of our experience – as we explore “fasting from oppression” – must be a restriction of these kinds of activities. We choose not to purchase goods produced in conditions of oppression. We choose not to manipulate those with less power in our own spheres of influence. We choose not to remain silent and we name oppression for what it is. We flee the temptations toward convenience or instant gratification that lie behind culture’s demands for products and services produced in oppressive situations. As you can imagine, I could give you examples of this for the rest of the day.

Which is an important matter to notice. Remember my definition of ascetical practice? I defined asceticism as “the act or habit of intentionally constraining one’s own human experience *in the context of God’s active presence* and aimed at serving spiritual ends.” Do you hear that? *In the context of God’s active presence*. There is simply no way that we can possibly address every aspect of injustice and every dimension of our own subtle culpability in oppressive structures. On the one hand, it is all too easy to be overwhelmed by the vastness and complexity of it all. But the enemy likes to use this as a trap, itself a means of perpetuating oppressive systems. What we must do as Christians is to attend to the active presence of the Holy Spirit, sincerely opening ourselves to the risks of conscious response to oppression while at the same time realizing our human limits. But that leads us to a lecture on discernment and spiritual formation and I can’t deal with all that here.

What seems best then in this presentation, as I try to re-package an old practice for new purposes, is to illustrate how fasting from oppression might look “on the ground” so to speak. To do this, I will speak from my own experience in the past few years.

First, insofar as I am aware and able, I must minimize my use of *goods and services* likely to have been provided through unjust uses of power. I learned that the well-known bank I used for many

years in Montrose had a reputation for investing in the questionable private prison industry. So I transferred my money to a local credit union. It meant that I had to find other ways of transferring money to our daughters and working out finances for traveling. It was a small constraint, however. Now, years later, I am proud to announce that as of March 12 both JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo have announced their decision to cease funding private prisons and immigration detention facilities.¹⁰ Organizations like “Ethical Consumer” provide evaluation-guides regarding producers and their products, and I have followed their recommendations, for example, when it comes to buying books online.¹¹ We have also recently changed our health insurance arrangements and my computer operating system. Each of these decisions (and more) were accompanied with their own set of “constraints” as we learned to withdraw from the products and perpetrators of oppression.

But, secondly, I also need to distance myself from the *values* that are characteristic of oppressive actions. As I mentioned above, we live in a world where violence and injustice are perpetuated for the sake of maintaining comfort, convenience, security. Fasting from oppression, then must become both an act of protest and a celebration of the uncomfortable, the inconvenient, the insecure. I must learn to de-habituate myself from the need for convenience, for comfort, for immediate gratification. I have explored this by choosing, for example, to put on a sweater rather than increasing the demand for natural gas when I am in locations that use gas heat; or by resisting my desire for the comfort-food snacks I find so addictive. I also try to resist the value of absolute control by trying to give those people around me with the least power first voice. I am beginning to learn this even as a technique of my research.

Finally, I must address the self-oriented spirit which lies behind all oppression. When I look at oppression, I see this need and exercise of freedom/power to take what I want. It is a habit (or a sense of self?) of wanting and taking as opposed to a fundamental posture of receiving and giving. God has been speaking to me about this for some time. Thus, for me, fasting must be an act, not only of

¹⁰ See <https://populardemocracy.org/blog/wells-fargo-divests-private-prisons-immigrant-detention-industry>

¹¹ See <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/>

restriction of consumption but also a restricting re-habitation of thought and feeling. What this means is that I must withdraw from the need to satisfy myself when I want to, thereby addressing a fundamental principle behind oppressive actions. This means welcoming a “plain” life, finding God and pleasure in home grown creativity, for example. It also means changing the way I navigate my social relationships, for I have learned well over the years how to utilize the relational powers I have for my own advantage – even when this advantage is simply some petty stroking of my self-esteem. I must also invest myself, in prayer and action, in others (not just self): into the fullness of a Christ-like, non-oppressive community.

So what does it mean to fast from oppression? As I see it, it is the conscious restriction of our participation in the products, the perpetrators, the practices, the values, and even the underlying spirit that together tend to foster the abuse of power to the harm of those without. This practice is conducted with the guidance of the active presence of the Spirit of God. It cannot be imposed as the latest criteria of “who is the really good Christian,” simply because oppression is too broad and our own circumstances are too diverse. Furthermore, as an ascetic act we fast from oppression for the sake of spiritual ends: the personal end that we might think, feel, and act more and more like Jesus, and the greater end of the advancement of the Kingdom of God. I am just beginning to explore what this all might mean. I invite your own reflections about our own responses as Christians to the forces that surround us.