

## FASTING THAT IS PLEASING TO THE LORD: A NT THEOLOGY OF FASTING

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In this article I will argue that, as an expression of Christian piety, fasting is only appropriate in exceptional circumstances. It should not be a habitual expression of devotion to the Lord. Fasting belongs in the OT, but after the coming of Christ the appropriate sentiment for believers is joy, not grief. That is not to say that it is wrong for Christians to fast, but that it reflects a state that should not be a habitual one. Instead of fasting, Christians should express their piety through joy and through sharing their resources with those in need.

After a brief overview of fasting in the OT, I will discuss the implications of Jesus' words about fasting in Mark 2:19–20 par. Next, I will examine the references to fasting in the rest of the NT and see if they reflect an exceptional or a habitual practice. In the final section, I will sketch the outlines of a new kind of fasting. Without ignoring individual differences in expression, emphasis, and focus, my argument will assume the basic unity and coherence of the NT theological witness.

### I. FASTING IN THE OT

In the OT, fasting frequently accompanies prayer (2 Sam 12:16, 21, 22, 23; Isa 58:4; Jer 14:12; 36:6; Joel 1:14; Esth 4:16; Ezra 8:21, 23; Neh 1:4; 2 Chr 20:3). Fasting is associated with mourning (1 Sam 31:13; 2 Sam 1:12; Zech 7:5; Esth 4:3; 9:31; 1 Chr 10:12) and humility (1 Kgs 21:27, 29; Isa 58:3, 5; Ps 35:13; 69:11 [ET 69:10]; 109:24; Ezra 8:21), and is therefore especially appropriate in connection with repentance of sins (1 Sam 7:6; Jer 36:6, 9; Joel 2:12, 15; Jonah 3:5; Neh 9:1).<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, fasting is used when seeking direction from the Lord (Judg 20:26–27; Dan 9:3).

The only required fast in the OT is on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:31; 23:27–32; Num 29:7). When Israel confessed their sins, fasting was the appropriate expression of their mourning, repentance, and humility.

In later Jewish tradition, some Jews were fasting more frequently, apparently as a sign of their commitment to God. According to the Gospel of Luke, the Pharisees maintained the practice of fasting two days a week (Luke 18:12).<sup>2</sup> The disciples

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Lambert speculates that fasting must be understood against the background of the ancient Near Eastern view of the emperor as the defender of the afflicted and of Israel's understanding of God as the ultimate such defender (Exod 22:22–23). Fasting puts a person in a position of helplessness and therefore helps make their prayers effective ("Fast, Fasting," *NIDB* 2:432).

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the practice originated as a reaction against the forced Hellenization under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Felix Böhl, "Das Fasten an Montagen und Donnerstagen: Zur

of John the Baptist were also pious Jews, and they also considered fasting a sign of godly devotion. They were therefore surprised that Jesus' disciples did not fast (Mark 2:18 par.).

## II. JESUS' WORDS ON FASTING

Jesus' response to the Baptist's disciples is very significant. He says: "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day" (Mark 2:19–20 par.). Jesus compares his presence with the disciples to that of a bridegroom. What this means is that he is in the process of fulfilling the OT prophecies of God's marriage to his people, as the groom's marriage to his bride. The prophet Isaiah had proclaimed to Israel: "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (Isa 62:5). His prophecy is now being fulfilled. When Jesus is present, the groom is present to marry his bride.

At a wedding celebration, it would certainly be inappropriate for someone to say: "in honor of the groom, as a sign of my mourning, I am fasting." Such behavior would of course not be honoring to the groom; it would rather be a serious insult. When Jesus is with his people it is the celebration of his wedding party. In other words, Jesus has not come to invite us to fast, but to feast.

The words of Jesus show the radically new and different nature of devotion to the Lord after the coming of Christ. Whereas the OT devout were characterized by their longing for the presence of God, NT believers are characterized by their joy at his presence. OT believers were yearning to experience God's favor; NT believers rejoice that they always enjoy his favor through Jesus Christ.

This new and different orientation of piety comes very clearly and appropriately to expression in the new approach to fasting. As Mark has just shown, Jesus' presence brings the forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:1–12), and he invites sinners and tax collectors into his inner circle (Mark 2:13–17). Jesus' ministry has brought the Day of Atonement to its complete fulfillment. He did not merely provide an annual reminder of the people's sins, as the Day of Atonement did; he took away our sin forever (Heb 10:3, 10). The presence of Jesus entails the complete removal and forgiveness of sins. Fasting therefore has no place in Jesus' presence. His presence is the occasion for joy and exultation.

But what about the second part of Jesus' saying: "the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day" (Mark 2:20 par.)? Jesus clearly anticipates a time of fasting for his disciples, the time when he "is taken away from them." Scholars debate whether this refers to the relatively

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Geschichte einer pharisäischen Praxis [Lk 18,12]," *BZ* 31 [1987] 248–50), but we do not know how widespread this kind of fasting was in the first century. It is also mentioned in the *Babylonian Talmud* (*b. Ta'an.* 12a).

short period between Jesus' death and his resurrection, or whether it refers to the long period between Jesus' death and his second coming.<sup>3</sup>

Both in light of the literary context and in light of the NT theology of Christ's continuing presence, the former interpretation is the best. The statement concerning fasting occurs in a context that unpacks the authority of Jesus and the new reality that is communicated through his ministry. He displaces the demons (Mark 1:21–28, 39), brings healing (Mark 1:29–34, 39, 40–45, 2:1–12) and cleanness (Mark 1:40–45), heals a paralytic (Mark 2:1–12), brings forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:1–12), includes tax collectors and sinners in his fellowship (Mark 2:13–17), and demonstrates his authority over the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28). Presumably, the audience of Mark's Gospel would see themselves as the beneficiaries of Christ's gifts and understand themselves to be in Christ's presence.<sup>4</sup>

In the Gospel of Matthew, this emphasis on Jesus' continued presence with his disciples is made explicit. Jesus is named Emmanuel, "which means 'God with us'" (Matt 1:23); he promises to be "there among them" when "two or three are gathered in [his] name" (Matt 18:20), and assures his disciples that "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).<sup>5</sup> As it is described in Luke-Acts, this continued presence is communicated by the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5, 8; 2:4 etc.), who is also known as the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7).

Turning to the Gospel of John, it becomes even clearer that the time after the resurrection is not a time of deprivation, but a time when the disciples enjoy an

<sup>3</sup> For the former interpretation, see Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 133; Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 237–38; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 226; John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (WBC 35A; Dallas: Word, 1989) 248. For the latter interpretation, see Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, vol. 1 (HTKNT II/1; Freiburg: Herder, 1976) 175; Joachim Gnlika, *Das Markusevangelium*, vol. 1 (EKK 2/1; Zurich: Benziger, 1978) 115; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 140; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 199; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 111; François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (trans. Christine M. Thomas; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 192; John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997) 37–38; Kent D. Berghuis, "Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002) 81–93; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 91. Joseph Wimmer holds the latter interpretation, but does not attribute the concession regarding future fasting to the historical Jesus (*Fasting in the NT: A Study in Biblical Theology* [Theological Inquiries; New York: Paulist, 1982] 93). Karl T. Schäfer also takes the latter view, but maintains that the fasting is metaphorical, referring to the grief of the disciples in the absence of Jesus ("... Und dann werden sie fasten," in *Synoptische Studien: Alfred Wikenhauser zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag am 22. Februar 1953* [ed. J. Schmid and A. Vögtle; Munich: Zink, 1953] 124–47). Bock takes a middling position, maintaining that fasting will be an appropriate option, not a rule, in the era of the church (*Luke*, vol. 1: *1:1–9:50* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994] 518). Gundry correctly observes that it is unwarranted to see a reference to fasting on specific days in the singular "on that day." The evidence for the church's fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays is too late to inform our interpretation of this verse (*Mark* 133).

<sup>4</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1–8* 237–38.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Ziesler therefore maintains that the bridegroom saying must antedate the regular practice of fasting in the church ("The Removal of the Bridegroom: A Note on Mark II. 18–20 and Parallels," *NTS* 19 [1972–73] 190–94).

even more intimate fellowship with their Lord. Referring to the time between his death and resurrection, Jesus promises them that the time of their separation will be short: “a little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me” (John 16:16). This temporary separation is for their good: “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). After the resurrection, the disciples will be at an advantage compared to their former situation, and they will enjoy a closer relationship with Christ.

In this context, John also includes a saying that has much in common with Mark 2:20, predicting a time of grief for the disciples: “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy” (John 16:20). The period of mourning is here the period until the disciples’ reunion with Christ after his resurrection, as verses 23–24 clearly show.<sup>6</sup>

The history of redemption may be read as the history of God moving closer and closer to human beings. In the old covenant, God was present with his people in the Tabernacle and the temple (Exod 20:24; 1 Kgs 8:37–40). Only select individuals experienced that God was “with them” personally (e.g. Josh 3:7; 1 Sam 3:19; 1 Kgs 1:37). With the incarnation, God dwelled among his people as a human being: “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (John 1:14 ISV; cf. Matt 1:23). With the giving of the Holy Spirit, God and his Son dwell in believers (John 14:23). The church is therefore God’s dwelling, God’s temple (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21–22). There are therefore strong arguments for the view that Jesus does not envision the period of the church as a period of his absence and that this is not a period of fasting.

Many scholars hold a different view, however, and they also have good arguments. They maintain that there is ample evidence that the church actually did fast, that the time of the church is a time of the messianic woes, that the phrase “the days will come” must be understood eschatologically,<sup>7</sup> that the church experiences the Lord’s absence (even though he is also present through the Spirit), and that Matthew specifically describes the time of the church as the time of the bridegroom’s absence (Matt 25:1–13).<sup>8</sup>

The last of these arguments puts too much weight on a subordinate detail in the parable of the ten virgins. Interpretation of parables requires restraint in reading theological meaning into the parable’s individual elements. Most of the details of a parable do not serve to make a theological point, but to give vividness to the story. The point of the parable of the ten virgins is to exhort believers to watchfulness. Other details do not have any theological significance. It is not significant, for ex-

<sup>6</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI): Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1970) 730; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 543; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 1044; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 477; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 843.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Isa 39:6; Jer 7:32; 9:24; 16:14; 19:6; 23:5, 7; 28:52 LXX; 30:18 LXX; 31:12 LXX; 37:3 LXX; 38:27, 31, 38 LXX; Amos 4:2; 8:11; 9:13; Luke 17:22; 21:6; 23:29; Heb 8:8.

<sup>8</sup> For references, see note 3.

ample, that the virgins play the role of bridesmaids even though the stock metaphor for the church is that of the bride (cf. Eph 5:25–27).<sup>9</sup>

That “the days will come” evokes an eschatological event does not mean that it has to refer to the tribulations of the church. Christ’s death is the ultimate eschatological event, and his earthly ministry is frequently announced with the same phrase (Jer 23:5; 38:31 LXX; Heb 8:8).

True, believers in the period of the church yearn for the visible appearance of the Lord (1 Cor 16:22; Rev 22:20), but do they therefore have a better reason to fast than the disciples had at the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry? The disciples also had reason to look forward to the consummation of the kingdom (Matt 6:10), but the joy of the Lord’s presence was the predominant feeling. In that respect, believers in the church age are not in a worse position than they were. To the contrary, they enjoy a closer relationship to Christ than they did (see above).

The observation that the church age is an age of tribulation also does not warrant the conclusion that fasting is appropriate. When believers experience tribulation, it is a consequence of their union with Christ. Suffering is therefore not a sign of distance from the Lord, but a sign of intimacy between the Lord and his followers (Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10–11; Phil 3:10). When Paul shares the afflictions of Christ, he considers it an occasion to rejoice (Col 1:24), and Peter exhorts suffering believers: “rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet 4:13).

### III. FASTING IN THE REST OF THE NT

If the time of the church is not the time of separation that Jesus anticipated in Mark 2:20 par., how are we to understand the fact that the early church practiced fasting? It bears repeating that this practice is never mandated in the NT. From the second century, there is firm evidence that Christians fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays (*Did.* 8.1), but there is no evidence of a similar practice in the earliest church.

Apart from Mark 2:20 par, which probably refers to the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection or Pentecost, Jesus never encourages fasting. Some manuscripts include a reference to fasting when Jesus’ disciples had been unable to cast out a demon. After casting it out, Jesus said to them: “this kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29 par. KJV; cf. ISV; NKJV). But

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<sup>9</sup> For our present purposes, the discussion of whether the oil should be given a theological interpretation need not detain us (cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997] 3:396–97; Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008] 515). It has long been the consensus in NT studies that parables only make one single point, but that view was an overreaction against the earlier, allegorical methods of interpretation. Parables may have more than a single point, but it is a mistake to find too many points of theological correspondence. For a discussion of the hermeneutics of the parables, see Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990); Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 12–19.

the words “and fasting” are not found in the most reliable Greek manuscripts of the NT, and most modern translations rightly omit them.<sup>10</sup> The words were probably added by Christian scribes later, at a time in church history when there was considerable emphasis on fasting.<sup>11</sup>

In the history of the church, Jesus’ example of fasting has been used as a motivation for Christians to fast as well. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness in order to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:2 par.), but that was not something Jesus did in order for us to follow in his footsteps; it was something he did in our place. Jesus was baptized by John, not because Jesus was a sinner, but because he was our substitute. As our representative, he was also tested by Satan. His temptations recall Israel’s temptations in the wilderness and show us that Jesus was tested as the ideal Israelite. Where Israel failed, Jesus prevailed.<sup>12</sup> While Jesus’ perseverance in temptation is a great example for us, his baptism and temptation were part of his vicarious ministry. His forty-day fast does therefore not serve as an example for us to imitate.

After this test which Jesus went through in our place, his ministry was not characterized by fasting. On the contrary, he was known for his feasts, feasts where he invited all kinds of people, people that were not allowed in good society, prostitutes and tax collectors, the dregs of society, individuals that no one would be seen around if they cared about their own reputation. And these feasts were so characteristic of Jesus’ ministry that people called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19).

Nevertheless, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus appears to assume that his disciples will be fasting. He even gives directions for how to do it: “whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt 6:16–18).

<sup>10</sup> The words “and fasting” (και νηστεια) are attested in the apparent text of the Chester Beatty papyrus (p<sup>45</sup>), the second hand of Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Ephraemi, Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, and the Majority Text. The words are not included in Codex Vaticanus or in the original hand of Codex Sinaiticus.

<sup>11</sup> Similar additions (with even poorer attestation) are also found in Acts 10:30; 1 Cor 7:5. Since the reference to fasting is included in the majority of witnesses to Mark 9:29, R. T. France argues that it may be original. He maintains that a scribe could have omitted the words to counter an overemphasis on fasting and to bring the verse in harmony with 2:19 (*Mark* 361). His explanation is possible, but it is based on the assumption that the scribes responsible for Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus represented an ideology that ran counter to the predominant trend in the early church. There is no evidence that these scribes were against fasting, but there is ample evidence for the added emphasis on fasting in the early church. It is therefore more likely that the reference to fasting was added in the later manuscripts. The United Bible Society prefers the reading without the reference to fasting and gives this reading the highest probability rating (cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek NT* [4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994] 85; similarly Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* [WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001] 47).

<sup>12</sup> See especially Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God’s Son (Matt. 4:1–11 & par.): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash* (ConBNT 2; Lund: Gleerup, 1966).

However, it is not obvious how much we should read into this statement. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus also appears to presuppose that his audience keeps the Sabbath (Matt 24:20), pays the temple tax (Matt 17:24–27),<sup>13</sup> and even observes the commandments of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 23:1–3). Perhaps the audience of Matthew's Gospel was characterized by a Jewish ethos or perhaps Matthew has preserved more of the Jewish color of Jesus' teaching.<sup>14</sup> In any case, these references do not constitute a prescription. As for the references to fasting in Matt 6:16–18, Jesus' point is not to instruct his disciples to fast, but to warn them against hypocrisy. Fasting evidently offers an example of a practice that is easily misused in a hypocritical way.

Paul also has a stern warning against misuse of fasting in Col 2:20–23: “if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.” The word that is translated “humility” (ταπεινοφροσύνη; v. 18) may refer to ascetic practices, such as fasting (Herm. Vis. 3.10.6; Herm. Sim. 5.3.7).<sup>15</sup> Paul's mention of “severe treatment of the body” leads to the conclusion that he has such practices in mind here.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to popular belief, these activities are not of any help in restraining fleshly indulgence.<sup>17</sup> No one should think that fasting makes them more spiritual. It does not. If fasting is done because it is believed that fasting in and of itself accomplishes something spiritual, fasting is downright wrong.

Nevertheless, there are two instances in the book of Acts where the disciples are seen to be fasting.<sup>18</sup> While the disciples were fasting, the Holy Spirit told them

<sup>13</sup> For a different interpretation, see Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992) 203–6.

<sup>14</sup> On Matthew's relation to Judaism, see Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Stanton, *Studies in Matthew*; Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Studies in the NT and Its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> The cognate verb ταπεινώω is used with specific reference to fasting in Ps 34:11 LXX; Isa 58:3, 5 LXX; Jdt 4:9; cf. also 2 Esd 8:21.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 178; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 226; Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 55; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 188.

<sup>17</sup> For a defense of this translation, see J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (8th ed.; London: Macmillan, 1886) 204–8.

<sup>18</sup> Paul also mentions fasting in 2 Cor 6:5; 11:27. In both cases, the context is a hardship catalogue, and it is not clear whether the reference is to voluntary or involuntary fasting. Even if it is voluntary fasting, the point is not that Paul has excelled in pious exercises (such an insistence would run counter to Paul's overall argument). Rather, fasting is another example of Paul's acquaintance with suffering for the sake of Christ, perhaps as a consequence of not accepting monetary support from the Corinthians. Similarly, Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: Translated with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 32A;

to send Saul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2–3). With prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas prepared to leave the church in Antioch in Syria (Acts 14:23).

Even though there are no regulations concerning fasting in the NT, these examples show that there are situations in which fasting is legitimate. Both the instances in Acts occur in a context where the disciples are praying and seeking guidance from the Lord. Viewed in light of Jesus' words in Mark 2:19–20, therefore, it would appear that fasting has its place when believers experience uncertainty and have a special need for direction from the Lord.<sup>19</sup> Such fasting seems to have had its place when believers found themselves in exceptional circumstances.

Many scholars also think that Paul's three days without food and drink (Acts 9:9) is an example of Christian fasting. Some even find here the origin of the later practice of fasting three days before baptism (*Did.* 7.4).<sup>20</sup> Luke does not explicitly say whether Paul's fasting was an act of penitence or whether it was an involuntary punishment inflicted by God. The context in which the story is told, however, shows that we should think of it more in the latter sense.<sup>21</sup> Being three days without sight, Paul was in darkness, which in Luke's account represents alienation from God. In Luke's third version of Paul's Damascus experience, Paul gives his account to Herod Agrippa and associates his experience with turning from darkness to light. The Lord told him: "I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17–18). This perspective is present in the version in Acts 9:1–19 as well. When Ananias visits Paul, reception of the Holy Spirit and regaining of sight coincide (Acts 9:17–18).

Through the Holy Spirit, Christians enjoy an intimate relationship with Christ. The baseline for Christian piety must therefore be that fasting is not an appropriate expression of Christian devotion to the Lord. NT differs from OT piety in that God has now come near in his Son and through his Holy Spirit. Even though believers long for the Second Coming of Christ and the visible manifestation of his rule (Matt 6:10; 1 Cor 16:22; Rev 22:20), NT piety is characterized by intimacy, not

New York: Doubleday, 1984) 518; Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 2:747. The widow Anna is an example of OT piety (Luke 2:37).

<sup>19</sup> Scot McKnight describes fasting for this purpose (*Fasting: Fasting as Body Talk in the Christian Tradition* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008] 47–49).

<sup>20</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987) 72; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 426; Richard I. Pervo, *Acts* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 242.

<sup>21</sup> F. F. Bruce is on the right track when he observes: "There is no need to regard his abstinence as an early instance of fasting before baptism; it was probably the result of shock" (*The Book of the Acts* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988] 185).

distance.<sup>22</sup> The predominant sentiment of believers living in the age of fulfillment is joy, not grief (Phil 3:1; 4:4–7; 1 Thess 5:16). They therefore have no occasion for fasting.

Christians who long for a deeper relationship with the Lord should therefore not be directed to fasting. In accordance with his promise, Christ is still present with his people today. Believers may enjoy his presence through his word, through prayer, and through the community of the church.

In the NT era, fasting is not even the natural way to express one's repentance.<sup>23</sup> Joy is so overwhelmingly the characteristic sentiment of the new era that even repentance may be expressed through feasting and joy. In the parable of the prodigal son, the implicit call to the Pharisees to repent is phrased as an invitation to join a party: "we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:32).<sup>24</sup> Repentance means that a person's mind is realigned, so that it conforms to the mind of God and rejoices in the salvation brought by Christ.

#### IV. A NEW KIND OF FASTING

When some Christian leaders today call the church to renew the practice of fasting, they often seem to be motivated by the laudable desire to set Christians free from slavery to the pleasures of this world. In his very valuable book, *A Hunger for God*, John Piper writes passionately about the need for Christians to renew their focus on their fellowship with Christ. He calls for a new fasting that is redefined by the new covenant and the age of fulfillment. He describes fasting as any kind of abstinence in order to prioritize the gifts of Christ.<sup>25</sup> This kind of Christian discipline is certainly biblical (e.g. 1 Cor 7:5; 9:24–27), but I wonder if it would be better just to call it Christian discipline than to call it fasting.<sup>26</sup> The biblical concept of fasting is a concept that mainly belongs in the OT. NT discipline is something very different; it is not motivated by grief, but by the joy of experiencing Christ's presence.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bucking the predominant trend in Pauline scholarship, Peter Orr's study of Christ's presence and absence takes Christ's absence as the controlling metaphor for Paul's view of Christ's location and interprets Christ's presence as a presence mediated by the Holy Spirit (*Christ Absent and Present: A Study in Pauline Christology* [WUNT 2/354; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014] 182–218). His study is important in that it emphasizes the role of Christ's absence in Paul's thinking, but this idea must be held together with the ample evidence for his presence, not played out against it, lest Paul be found to be contradicting the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 18:20; 28:20).

<sup>23</sup> *Pace* McKnight, who relies on Lev 23:27–32; Joel 2:12–15; and Acts 9:9 (*Fasting* 24–36), but see above.

<sup>24</sup> John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012) 135.

<sup>25</sup> Piper *Hunger*.

<sup>26</sup> For fasting as an exercise in Christian discipline, see also Wimmer, *Fasting* 111–20; McKnight, *Fasting* 61–80.

<sup>27</sup> Piper is aware of this fundamental difference, of course, and makes it a cornerstone of his redefinition of fasting: "the newness of our fasting is this: its intensity comes not because we have never tasted the wine of Christ's presence, but because we have tasted it so wonderfully by his Spirit, and cannot now be satisfied until the consummation of joy arrives" (*Hunger* 42).

If we ask the question of how the practice of fasting is transformed in the new covenant, we can hardly do better than to take our cue from the prophet Isaiah:

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.  
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isa 58:3–7)

Isaiah corrects a common misunderstanding concerning fasting: that fasting in and of itself was pleasing to God and that he would be compelled to answer the prayers of those who fasted. But God was repulsed by such fasting. If the people did not seek to do his will, their fasting was not acceptable to him. Since fasting was a way to identify with the poor, combining fasting and neglect of the poor was hypocritical.<sup>28</sup> This is what their fasting should be about, therefore: they should share their food with the hungry and provide shelter to the homeless. They should loose the bonds of injustice and give clothes to the naked.

This is the concept of fasting that is fulfilled in the NT. Isaiah's prophecy reads as a description of Jesus' earthly life. He brought the new creation, provided food for the needy, and was known to include the marginalized in his meal fellowships. This is the kind of fast that the Lord has chosen.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For fasting as an attempt to manipulate God and constituting a form of idolatry, see Leslie J. Hoppe, "Isaiah 58:1–12: Fasting and Idolatry," *BTB* 13 (1983) 44–47. Hoppe's insights are valuable, although overstated. The prophets did not condemn fasting wholesale, only its misuse. See Michael L. Barré, "Fasting in Isaiah 58:1–2," *BTB* 15 (1985) 94–97.

<sup>29</sup> Whereas Isaiah's words were not directed against fasting in and of itself, we may consider his teaching on fasting in analogy with the case of circumcision. The OT points to an ethical and spiritual fulfillment in both cases (for circumcision, see Lev 26:41; Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:25–26; Ezek 44:7, 9)

In this respect, we are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We put into practice what Jesus taught us, and keep the fast that God has chosen, by feeding the hungry and giving clothes to those who do not have any. Through the Holy Spirit, our fast is to expand the feast.

## V. CONCLUSION

The coming of Christ brings a new level of intimacy between the Lord and his people. With this new kind of intimacy come new forms of piety and devotion to the Lord. Fasting, which is an expression of grief, is no longer appropriate as a habitual expression of piety. Instead, Christian devotion to the Lord is demonstrated in joy and in imitation of Christ, who included the outcasts in his meal fellowships. The Christian fulfillment of fasting should therefore be to spread the joy of Christ's presence and to demonstrate it in action by sharing with the needy.

Nevertheless, while joy has replaced fasting as a habitual expression of Christian piety, fasting is not prohibited in the NT. Christian experience is still characterized by the tension between the already and the not yet, between realized and future eschatology. Normal Christian experience will therefore still have room and need for other expressions than manifestations of joy. The NT shows that Jesus' disciples continued to fast in special circumstances, but fasting is not lifted up as an ideal of piety.

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without calling for the abrogation of the corresponding rituals. In light of the NT, however, we understand that the outward rituals are no longer required.