

THE CHRISTIAN, FASTING AND RAMADAN

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[With Ramadan approaching, we are pleased to reprint the following reflections with permission from "Mindanao Update." Part I (MU Sept. '86) is based on a Bible Study the author led for his team members just prior to their first experience of living in a Muslim community during Ramadan. Part II is extracted from a reply that appeared in a subsequent issue (MU March '87). The authors, who minister in the Philippines, would welcome replies.]

I - What can we say about fasting?

First let's look at what fasting should NOT be, in Matthew 6:16-18. All of us can find examples of the hypocrites of verse 16. We see flagrant misuse by our neighbors of their spiritual exercise, sometimes just to flaunt it and point out how much better their religion is.

And then in Luke 18:10 & 12, we have the boasting man. Have we encountered such people among our friends who follow the practice of fasting?

Next, let us look at whether fasting applies to us today. In Mark 2:18-20 we have a statement by Jesus that we interpret to mean that when He, Jesus, is no longer in the world there will be times of fasting for his followers. And a second example is of the elders of the Church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) fasting and praying at the time Barnabas and Paul were called and commissioned. Paul also wrote of his many experiences during his life of service in II Corinthians 6:3-10, and one of them is fasting...voluntary hunger. It is interesting to note Paul's stated reason in verse 3, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path". Isn't this our very reason for cultural adaptation as well?

Now that we can say that fasting does apply for us today, and that it may be a way to remove discredit from our ministry, I'm still bothered. I hear too much "fasting is for our health" from both Christians and non-Christians. In the States it is recommended that one drink water while fasting to help purify the body of waste products. What does purifying waste products from ourselves have to do with fasting as a spiritual exercise? There is no mention of drinking water during fasting in the Bible, and where water is mentioned it is to say they did not drink (see Esther 4:16).

Coupled with this thought of healthful fasting, I'm extremely both-

ered by Zechariah 7:5. Here God is asking his people who have been fasting at regular times, "Was it really for me that you fasted?" In thinking about this in relation to my response to Ramadan, I was taken up short. If I fast will it really be for God?

So what does God want our fasting to be like? First he wants it to be for Him, and not flaunted in front of others. And then there are some broader applications listed in Isaiah 58:6-7 and Zechariah 7:9-10.

Loose chains of injustice, remove peoples' burdens, free oppressed people, share our food with hungry, provide shelter and clothing to needy, not to turn away from our family....

Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another, do not oppress widows, orphans, strangers, or poor, do not think evil of each other.

These are quite heavy texts which are really to be normal activities for us as followers of Jesus. If these are abnormal actions for us we have bigger problems. During fasting it is a good time to stop and think through our daily walk and see if we really believe that we are living good news. Also, while fasting we need to make sure that we don't burden down others and inconvenience them, which is so easy to do if we aren't feeling good.

Before we go on, let's continue reading in Isaiah 58 to verses 8 & 9. Isn't this just what we want to happen in and around us? We will have light (please interpret this as God shows you). There will be healing in our hurting places. People around us will know that we are righteous people and that will be our reputation. And God's glory will protect us. Also, our cries of help will be heard and answered and we will know that God is here with us. This does sound terribly "charismatic" but how we need the continuing touch of God!

Now we need to do something practical with all this information. I want to challenge us with Daniel's action seen in the book of Daniel chapter 9. In verse 2 it says that he understood the promise God made to Jeremiah, and then he turned to God in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes. Just what promises has God made to us through His Word about our present situations? What about the results of His Word going out, the people of every group in heaven, our own needs for the Spirit filling and enriching us, team unity, housing, safety, guidance...? We have many promises which we too can make the topic of our fasting.

In verses 5 and 6 we see Daniel make corporate and historic confession. Daniel was a righteous man, but he put himself in the problems of God's people. Can't we do the same for our history, for our larger group? Are we really one body with each other, with the Church in the city and country in which we minister, as well as with the church world-wide, which on the whole hasn't been a very good witness in history or even now.

Finally, Daniel turns everything over to God, and in verses 17-19, calls out for God to hear him, to see His people's needy, and in fact impossible, situation, and to act for His glory and honor.

O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake. O my God do not delay because...your people bear your Name.

When I was preparing this study I was convicted of many things I was letting slide. Spiritual conferences were approaching for me to attend and I was not praying about them or even about preparing myself. How much I am lacking in Daniel's dependence on God!

So, what is our response to Ramadan? I'm tired of fasting having been robbed from the Church, as well as discarded by us. We need to make fasting a part of our worship and service. but let us not be hypocrites. It is so easy for us to put on an act only for others. So IF, and I mean IF, we choose to fast during Ramadhan, let's do it because we are needy and we want to see God act for His glory. Let's do it only for God.

II - Assuming that we will fast, it does not necessarily follow that that fasting will take the form of the Muslim Fast of Ramadan. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that we are to fast from sunup to sundown for one month. Although a Christian may choose to do this because of his associations with Muslims while living in a Muslim community, it is clearly not obligatory on us. We are free to choose the times of our fasting or not fasting. ...

One possible form of fasting was suggested to me in the book, Too Hard For God? by Charles Marsh. He mentions that an Algerian Muslim woman, newly converted to Christ, wanted to fast but did not want to observe the Fast of Ramadan. Continuing the Ramadan Fast, to Algerians, had the connotation that one was really still a Muslim and tied to the system of works righteousness. She decided to fast one day a week. She first prepared food for her family. Then she spent the day praying for her friends and neighbors. God brought neighbors to her home during the day and she prayed for each one after they left.

Following her idea, I began last Ramadan to fast one day a month. spending extended time, on these days, in prayer and reflections. i am still learning. One thing I learned was that if I continued a normal day's activity of running around town while fasting, I would become irritable, suffer severe headaches, and have difficulty praying. My wife began to dread when I would say, "I'm going to fast tomorrow." I had made the mistake spoken against in Isaiah 58:3b-4.

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

I have learned that by avoiding errands and duties outside the house on my days of fasting, I am much better able to spend extra time in prayer, and avoid becoming irritable. It is not too hard to stay at home one day a month for fasting. ...

I found that my decision led to many opportunities to witness to my Muslim friends. I was asked multiple times each day of Ramadan, "Are you fasting?" When I had the opportunity, I responded something like, "Fasting for followers of Jesus is different than for Muslims. For us fasting is not obligatory. We fast on any day or month, but we don't let others know when we are fasting. We don't have to fast so that God will forgive our sins. Our sins are already forgiven through faith in Isa Masih and we know for sure that we will go to heaven when we die. We fast to pray and worship God." This sometimes led to profitable questions and discussions. It also served to remove any stumbling block in their minds that our faith is inferior because we don't fast.

Is fasting worth it? Certainly it is worthwhile to spend extra time with our Lord. I am still learning about fasting. I share my experience, not because I expect it to be normative for others, but to encourage further reflection and action on the subject.

THE RABITA -- FIFTEEN YEARS OLD IN 1987

"Rabita" is an Arabic word meaning "tie" or "link," that which joins together. The "Rabita" we are speaking of represents the "bond of fellowship" which ties together believers in Christ. It is the name taken by Christians converted out of Islam, scattered over Western Europe, who have joined together to form a support network for Christians of Muslim background. Most are North Africans but all believers of Muslim background are welcomed, whatever their nationality. Arabic and French are the principal languages of communication but other languages are also used as needed.

The Rabita was founded in response to a need. For years, North African Christians have been living in Europe and their numbers are growing. These include immigrant workers, university and Bible school students, and a few in exile for their faith. Some are serving the Lord full-time. Many of these have been spiritually isolated, especially the recent arrivals, and many have had difficulty integrating into local churches. Because of isolation from Christians of like cultural background and separation from family, many of these suffer severe loneliness.

To meet this need, a young Moroccan Christian conceived the idea of periodically bringing these Christians together for fellowship. A retreat was organized for the summer of 1972 at Aix-en-Provence in