

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 12 – Part 2

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH: ITS CHIEF USE IN CENSURES AND EXCOMMUNICATIONS

In this chapter, Calvin will look at three topics. The first is the purpose, means, and limits of church discipline. The second is the issue of fasting as an act of penance. The third is that of the history and role of marriage and celibacy for clergy. This article covers penance and fasting.

Summary: Penance refers to voluntary actions taken to express repentance, or ways of expressing one's sorrow for having sinned. Penance, in the Reformed tradition, does not earn someone forgiveness, but encourages the one doing penance to take seriously their sin and the forgiveness Christ offers. Calvin believes that penance is both Biblical and useful. He says that pastors should "...exhort the people either to fasting or to solemn supplication, or to other acts of humility, repentance and faith..." (pg. 1241) as ways of doing penance. But since "scarcely anyone will be found who would raise a question" (pg. 1241) about prayers for forgiveness as an act of penance, Calvin will focus on fasting because "...it is not well understood, (and) it can easily lapse into superstition" (pg. 1241).

Calvin defines fasting this way. It is when people "...withdraw something from the normal regime of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily. This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity" (pg. 1244). Thus, for Calvin, fasting can be anything from not eating, to eating less or to simply not eating what one normally would.

Fasting, for Calvin has three purposes; to keep our physical needs under control, to better prepare ourselves for prayer and to show God that we are sorry for the sins we have committed. (pg. 1242). The first use, keeping our physical needs under control, is to be done in private, since it doesn't affect others. The second use, preparing ourselves for prayer can be done, either in private or in public. It is useful because "...with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God that it can be drawn to prayer with a serious and ardent affection and persevere in it" (pg. 1242). The third use, that of an act of penance, can be, again, done privately or publicly, such as in those times when a nation or church, has strayed from God and wants to demonstrate that they are serious about changing their ways.

Just as there were three purposes for fasting there are three dangers of fasting as well. The first is that people will use fasting to try to look pious and repentant, when they are not. The second is that people will believe that fasting can earn them favor with God. The third is that people might become excessively proud because they fasted more severely than anyone else. These are dangers because "...God (hates) nothing more than when men try to disguise themselves by displaying signs and outward appearances in place of innocence of heart" (pg. 1245). A specific misuse of fasting, for Calvin, was the Roman church's forbidding people to eat meat on Fridays, which made it a rule and not a tool.

Reflections: Within the Roman church, penance was/is a sacramental rite. It consists of private confession, absolution and an act of penance dictated by the one hearing the confession. We in the Reformed churches moved away from this understanding of penance. If someone confesses, they either do it privately to Christ or corporately in worship. Absolution or forgiveness is offered by Christ and then proclaimed publicly by the church. Penance, as Calvin, explained can and ought to be used in the three ways he mentions. As Presbyterians, fasting has never been one of our important spiritual disciplines (prayer, scripture reading, service, etc.). For some Presbyterians, it can be and is sometimes used during Lent, as a means of focusing an individual's spiritual life.

Questions:

1. Have you ever fasted? If so, what was that experience like?
2. What do you think of Calvin's three purposes for fasting?
3. What do you think of Calvin's three dangers of fasting?