

Growing God's People

a journal for teachers and other learners

Feasting on God in Our Hearts

This publication is designed to help you grow in the graces of the Christian life. Each issue can serve as an agenda-setter for a two-month period, during which you can incorporate the contents of GGP into your lessons, home, and other areas of ministry.

In our journey as teachers toward completeness in Christ, we are learning to embrace a disciplined study of scripture, an expectation that we can find God represented in the arts, a willingness to be stretched by theological study, and a practice of spiritual disciplines.

In these last months of the year, our focus falls on the discipline of fasting. If you're a regular practitioner of fasting

we encourage you to use this journal as a springboard for practical teaching (including testimony from your own experience) in teaching on this discipline. If you like the editor of this journal, we encourage you to greet this topic not with guilt and avoidance, but rather with a willingness to again visit the practice of fasting and discover anew the sufficiency of the divine Lover of our souls.

May God bless you in your studies, as you join others in a journey of discovering the sufficiency of God in our daily lives, the saving and sanctifying work of God on behalf of the Church, and the freedom that God offers as we let go of our feeble efforts to control, and releasing, receive from Him our daily bread.

The Practice of Fasting

In this issue.. page

Discipline of grace: 1-2

Fasting

Theology of Teaching 2

No More, No Less!

Poetry 3

Featuring Robert Frost

Book Review: 3

Life Together

Biblical Studies 4

Isaiah 58:6-7

When we practice the spiritual disciplines, we stand against the basic principles of this world. Through participation in these "disciplines of grace" we come to know more deeply the intimate love of God and the sufficiency of His grace. In each issue of GGP, we will focus on a spiritual discipline as it is practiced within the Christian faith.

By Bryan Regier

In the business of sanctification the Holy Spirit moves believers toward the conscious awareness of God's preeminence in their daily experience. By practicing the spiritual disciplines of believers respond to God's Spirit to this end. For this purpose and within reach of every believer lies the long-neglected discipline of fasting.

Fasting serves as a call-to-arms for busy Christians tending to view their fellowship with God as one priority among many; and fasting serves to remind believers of God's preeminence even in simple matter of habit.

By foregoing a legitimate desire—usually food—fasting creates a sense of urgency that calls believers to immediate fellowship with God. Hours of time usually spent in the preparation and eating of food become available for study and prayer. Customary excuses for not spending time with God lose their power as the decision to seek God

creates a sacred and necessary chaos in the believer's established routine.

Beyond a sense of urgency, fasting also provides a sense of gratitude. The stomach conditioned to three meals daily must suddenly take its proper place in submission to the mind. This results in a sudden awareness of all that God provides daily: a cup of coffee elicits quiet thanks, the first meals after a fast becomes a celebration of God's provision.

For many, fasting may provide a sense of reckoning. Fleshly patterns typically buried under the comfort of food—or other means of coping—become exposed marked as items for confession. Just as the dredging of a lake brings filth to the surface by force, fasting brings harbored sins to light: the cross word comes more quickly, the selfish attitude will not be concealed in the mild discomfort of the empty stomach. Both must instead be brought to light and confessed.

In all, this precious discipline serves to release believers from placing God on a list of priorities as though He were an obligation to be accomplished before beginning our day. Fasting restores sanctity to each of our priorities and reminds us of God's transcendence in all our daily business.



PRACTICING THE DISCIPLINE

Given fasting's private nature—as well as popular notions of its misuse—many lack understanding about how fasting works. The following paragraphs provide practical suggestions for those wishing to rediscover this ancient treasure of the faith.

Like exercise, fasting does not produce benefits instantly but should be practiced consistently to produce a change of life-style. Certain days of the week, or certain mealtimes on certain days, can be selected to create a rhythm of fasting. Training the body to anticipate regular fasts de-emphasizes the physical element of fasting in favor of the more important spiritual discipline.

Again like exercise, this spiritual discipline should be learned slowly. Single meals can be forgone on a regular basis. The next step might be the twenty-four hour fast stretching, perhaps, from lunch-to-lunch or breakfast -to-breakfast. Longer fasts should be undertaken after consulting a doctor and only as the Lord leads. (See Richard Foster's chapter on fasting in *Celebration of Discipline* for a description of what to expect during much longer fasts.)

Though it goes without saying that fasting should not

be broadcasted to others (Matt. 6:16), close family members should be informed, even if the fasting will last only for a single meal. This prevents hurt feelings—dinner thoughtfully prepared but uneaten—and may provide needed explanations for perceived lethargy or thoughtful disposition.

Though without precedent in scriptural passages on fasting, practices other than eating may be foregone. This includes anything to which a person has become dependent - television-watching, caffeine consumption, napping, even exercise. Just as food must be periodically restored to its place as a gift from God, so must each of our other necessary or perceived needs.

Finally, it must be remembered that fasting is not about giving up but taking in. Just as Jesus acknowledged the Word of God as his true, spiritual food (Matt. 4:4) so believers celebrate fullness in fellowship with the Father. As Richard Foster writes in his excellent chapter on fasting, "Food does not sustain us; God sustains us... Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!" With such anticipation Christians have much to gain in rediscovering the discipline of fasting. In doing so they restore the sacred order of their lives while resting in God's preeminence.

Teaching and Learning God's Way

No More, No Less

By T.M. Moore



There is a temptation common to all who teach, and a mistake we can sometimes make because of a certain timidity about the straightforward teaching of God's Word. They are two sides of the same coin, and can be a source of problems in our teaching if we're not careful. Both of these errors can be avoided by following the example of the generations of chronologists who gave us the account

of Enoch: "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (GN. 5.24).

At first glance we might ask, "What in the world can Christian educators learn from this?" Allow me.

First, we can learn to avoid the temptations of saying more than what God has been pleased to reveal to us. We don't know who first inscribed these words. They probably fell into Moses' hands whether from some ancient clay tablets passed down through the generations, or by the medium of oral tradition. Think how many opportunities there must have been, between that first recorder and Moses, to try to gussy this passage up a bit - make it clearer, more reasonable, or easier to understand. The temptation must have been great to clarify such ideas as "walked with God"

and "was not." But the teacher who received this story and passed it on let it stand just exactly as it was given, with all its ambiguity and wonder. So too we need to resist the temptation, when it comes to difficult or unclear passages, of wanting to say more than the Scriptures do. The old cliché, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it" is a good one to keep in mind when we are baffled by the strangeness or difficulty of a text.

Second, we can learn to set the Word forward just as we have received it without fearing that its very (at times) ambiguousness will be an embarrassment to the faith. Not only did those early teachers and scribes not try to embellish this text, in order to make it more sensible, they did not flinch to pass it on with all its strangeness! They surely must have known that their readers and students would scratch their heads and wonder about this text just like we do, even, perhaps, to the point of rejecting it because they may seem strange, unlikely, or perhaps upsetting to our contemporaries. Our job is to set forth the Word of God just as we have received it, without embellishing in order to make the Word more palatable-making more of it than is given—or shying away because of the Word's potential to alienate-making less of it than given.

Just teach the Word exactly as it is given—no more, no less—and let the Spirit of God do the clarifying and making palatable. He is the Guide into all truth; we are but His executive assistants.

The Road Not Taken

As believers we are each the workmanship of God (Eph. 2:10) created in Christ Jesus for a life of good works which we are to walk about doing, as the original Greek so descriptively says. The good works we do are to express our way of life, as we live lives of loving God and those around us.

Whether you read this popular poem as a proponent of the “road less traveled” perspective, or as an endorsement of the theory that the many roads through life are “really about the same,” we Christians are on a certain journey prepared for us by the Master.

His values and His kingdom can truly set us apart from this world on our brief-but-exciting journey through life.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as fast as I could
To whether it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

—Robert Frost

Featured Book

Reviewed by Robert Hodge

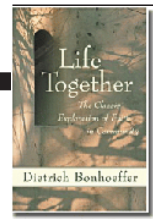
When we respond to God’s call to faith in Christ, we immediately become part of the Body and in that moment begin a journey of growth in living together with other Christians. how well we live together demands our attention, and we have a tremendous, practical resource in this martyr’s classic text.

Full of practical advice for living life together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book *Life Together* was written from the context of an “underground” seminary in Nazi Germany, where competing agendas, personality conflicts, and shortfalls in individual commitment could have had catastrophic effects.

“We who live here in fellowship with [Christ] will one day be with him in eternal fellowship. He who looks upon his brother should know that he will be eternally united with him in Jesus Christ. Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ,” Bonhoeffer writes, demonstrating the centrality of Christ’s lordship—as revealed in the Scriptures—that unites the chapter: Community; The Day with Others; The Day Alone; Ministry; and Confession and Communion.

“Jesus Christ stands between the lover and the others he loves. I do not know in advance what love of others means on the basis of the general idea of love that grows out of my human desires—all this may rather be hatred and an insidious kind of selfishness in the eyes of Christ. What love is, only Christ tells in his Word. Contrary to all my own opinions and convictions, Jesus Christ will tell me what love toward the brethren really is,” Bonhoeffer writes.

TITLE:*Life Together*
AUTHOR : *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*



In the course of the book, the author will tell us what we need our Christian brothers and sister to speak the Word to us, to bring us to lay aside decisions and agendas for the foundation of life together in Christ, to bear with one another and in so doing discover the empowering love of God, to hear confession and announce restoration, to speak of the strange and wondrous new life to which we have been called, and much more.

To read this 120-page classic is to be encouraged and revived for the struggle of life together as the unified Body of our Lord and Savior, and to be equipped with useful counsel rooted in the daily practices of a thriving Christian community where the love of God was poured out liberally and where the rains of Heaven brought grace for the storm.

New in the Library!

In memory of Bob Stelling, the Covenant CU purchased several books for the church’s serious students of Scripture:

Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels
Dictionary of Paul and His Letters
Dictionary of Later New Testament
International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
Dictionary of Biblical Imagery
...and more!

Isaiah 58: 6,7

*“Is not this the fast that I choose:
no loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the straps 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?”*



Preparing to Teach

Biblical Interpretation

The fasting called for in this passage is a fasting from indulgence unto a practice of sharing in which God-honoring values are brought to Israel.

There is certainly a message for the Church today. After studying the text to know how it was heard in Isaiah’s day, how might you bring the same words into the context of a wealthy church in a city like ours?



Isaiah 55-58

Read these chapters and then reflect. In this book of impending judgement we still find the offer of salvation. How would you characterize God’s tone-and how would you summarize God’s message-in these chapters?



1

Isaiah 58: 6,7

List all the words used to describe the intended recipient of God’s blessing!



2

Old Testament

Using a concordance and a theological dictionary, what does the OT have to teach us about fasting?



3



1

WIDER WORD STUDY

Look up each of the following passages, and note briefly what can be discovered about a biblical understanding of fasting in the Old Testament.

2 Samuel 12:16

I Kings 21:9

Ezra 8:21

Nehemiah 9:1

Psalm 69:10

Daniel 9:3

Zechariah 8:19



text



word study



commentaries



meditation



outline



presentation