

Fasting, Prayer and the Will of God

Because some had fasted and prayed about it, was the 2007 proposed relocation of the home office to the Denton, Texas, area the will of God? How much does fasting with prayer actually determine God's will? What greater lessons can we learn about fasting?

Fasting for the home office move

It's important to remember that there was no official request for a *church-wide* fast made by the church president in his video sermon proposal for the home office move in February 2007. The only request to fast and pray was part of the regular Call and Notice packet which was sent to the General Conference of Elders that spring. However, a request for fasting and prayer, specifically for Council of Elders selection, is routinely included in the "Call and Notice" before every annual meeting of the GCE.

For the United Church of God, with a 20- to 25-million dollar annual budget, the home office relocation with an initial price tag of 9 million for just the first phase, with additional millions for phases two and three, would have been a huge strategic move fiscally, physically and by extension spiritually. Certainly there have been times when the Church faced a serious crisis or strategic crossroads that the brethren were all specifically asked to fast and pray for God's guidance. But such was not the case in this instance. In addition to the annual request for the elders, any special fasting and prayer about that proposed move was done on an individual basis.

It's logical and expected to call a special fast and pray when the Church faces a sudden and unforeseen crisis. But to launch such a large strategic project without, at the beginning of the process, formally seeking divine guidance and a multitude of counsel on a church-wide scale via fasting and prayer is ill-advised.

To have requested a fast at the start of the planning process would have displayed appropriate honor and respect for the ministry and membership who would be significantly affected by the strategic cost and effect of the move. However, waiting well into the process "frontloaded" any fasting that was done, in essence, asking God to "rubber stamp" a decision already made rather than guiding it from the beginning. Not requesting such a church-wide fast at all—again, which was the case—not only disallowed broad "ownership" of the decision among the members and ministry, but overlooked the vital need for humbly seeking God's guidance.

To end polarization over this issue and build unity we need to see the spiritual discipline of fasting and prayer for what it is—and what it is not.

Lesson from the longest fasts

The longest fasts in Scripture convey the true values of fasting and prayer:

- David fasted seven days with humble repentance and seeking divine intervention and guidance (2 Samuel 12).
- Daniel fasted 21 days with intercessory prayer for Israel and seeking divine intervention and guidance (Daniel 10).

- Moses, Elijah and Jesus Christ each fasted 40 days seeking spiritual strength and guidance and, in Moses' case, with intercessory prayer for Israel (Exodus 34; 1 Kings 19; Matthew 4).

Lesson: We fast to humble ourselves before God in repentance, and when we do that, “Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer... The Lord will guide you continually...” (Isaiah 58:9-11). We fast and pray for God to guide our lives and His Work—not for us to somehow “guide” His will.

Three kinds of fasts

Dedicated personal fasting and prayer humbles us in order to grow spiritually and to seek God's guidance toward His will in our lives (1 Corinthians 7:5). Jesus revealed to His disciples that specific fasting with prayer is required for the humility and spiritual strength to cast out powerful demons (Mark 9:14-29). Fasting and prayer are also required for selecting and ordaining ministers—and in principle for seeking God's guidance via His will in major decisions for the Church (Acts 13:1-3).

God's will and us

The question about the power of fasting and prayer has puzzled God's people for years. Can fasting and prayer automatically invoke the will of God on a matter? Is fasting and prayer almost like “magic”?

We present ourselves to God as living sacrifices—completely reasonable considering that God gave us life and by His continued grace we draw breath itself. Our debt to God is total and our goal is to revoke the evil influence of this world, and be transformed by the indwelling of His Spirit to “prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:1-2). Then ideally we act on that divine will, rather than on our own.

Key question: Since we exist only by divine grace, should we assume that we can *merely* fast and pray, then whatever we decide is by definition God's will? No. We are fickle and fallible human beings, and we ought not think that even by fasting and prayer we can pronounce the will of the great and living God.

God alone declares His will. Our thoughts aren't His. God's ways and thoughts—His perfect will—exceed and infinitely excel our paltry attempts to think and do (Isaiah 55:8-9)! Even if we fasted as long as Moses, Elijah or Christ, all our discomfort, hunger pains and prayers would not and could not invoke God's will. That's not the purpose of fasting and God doesn't operate that way.

The primary function of fasting

Perhaps there is no more illustrative case in point of the primary function of fasting and prayer than that of the arrogant, evil, conniving, despicable King Ahab of Israel. Ahab's example is classic and fascinating by its sheer contrast to his usual egotistical self.

All of his evil conduct came to a head in the “vineyard of Naboth” incident (1 Kings 21). God sent Elijah to lower the boom of His divine will of destruction on Ahab and his entire dynasty. Amazingly, for once in his life Ahab reacted correctly—he fasted and mourned (a type of prayer)!

Positively impressed, God described Ahab’s fasting and prayer as, “See how Ahab has *humbled himself* before Me?” (Verses 27-29, emphasis added throughout). His humbling was so complete and so honest that God commuted the sentence to occur after Ahab’s natural death.

The first function of fasting and prayer therefore is to *thoroughly humble ourselves before God*. Then He can begin to work His will by guiding our lives and the work of His Church through inspiration and circumstances. *Self* is the world’s greatest problem. When we get self out of the way, then Christ can live through us—enabling us to prove and follow His will.

The magic danger

God condemned the Israelites for fasting “for strife and debate and to strike with the fist of wickedness” while continuing with “the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness”—using the fast as a political weapon against each other and pressuring Him to act on *their* pre-determined desire (Isaiah 58:4, 9).

Theirs was a “magic” fast. In scholarly circles it’s called *sympathetic magic*, and they recognize it’s been around for thousands of years. The evil and false premise is that the worshiper can take certain actions in the human realm—like repeating magic words, impaling voodoo dolls, offering a special (often child) sacrifice, or afflicting his soul in fasting—which then forces the “gods” in the divine realm to act specifically on the person’s behalf.

“Why have we fasted, . . . and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?” (Isaiah 58:3). The Israelites were surprised because in their self-absorbed lives, they never noticed that God doesn’t play the magic game.

The “magic” danger for us is to frontload our fasts and prayers with what we want God’s will to be and then assume that it must come to pass specifically *because* we fasted. A variation of this is to assume that because God didn’t intervene then and there to *directly prevent* what we wanted from happening, therefore it must be His will and have His blessing.

God’s will in God’s Church

Every minister ordained in our era of the Church of God was presumably fasted and prayed about beforehand. Yet how many of those ministers by subsequent behavior abused or forsook their calling and God’s truth? Over the years many men have been ordained because other ministers *wanted* them to be, rather than *properly asking* by fasting if *God wanted* them to be.

Ostensibly, Herbert Armstrong fasted and prayed in decades past about any major decision in God’s Work. How many times did he subsequently see the error of a decision and reverse—or rescind—it? If to fast and pray was all that he had to do to make a decision that was certainly “God’s will,” then how could he ever “reject” that divine will by changing his mind?

Consider the example of the commissary program that Mr. Armstrong approved in the early 1970s. It was to be a discount store for members where they could buy good foods, reasonably priced clothing, electronics, etc. The ministerial organizers assured Mr. Armstrong that the commissary would serve the brethren's needs and pay its own way. He was excited enough to enthusiastically plan for opening regional commissaries for brethren across the United States and possibly even in England. It looked and sounded like it was God's will!

However, it soon became evident that it was an expensive boondoggle that threatened to sidetrack the Church's efforts to more powerfully preach the gospel. Apparently, the commissary wasn't God's will after all. By rescinding his initial decision, Mr. Armstrong "proved" God's greater will was for the Church to focus on the fulfillment of the "great commission" by preaching the gospel of the Kingdom and feeding the flock.

Consider the closings of the Ambassador College campuses in first Bricket Wood, England (1974), and later Big Sandy, Texas. Certainly judged by their fruits, the original openings were God's will. But by later closing them, was Mr. Armstrong breaking God's will? Certainly not. In fact, when obedience to His law is not at stake, God can change *how* He carries out His will in the course of time and circumstances.

Nearly all of us, if we thought about it, could name other instances of rescinding previous decisions that had been considered God's will that occurred during Mr. Armstrong's ministry. Similarly, many examples have happened during our own UCG history.

God's will in the United Church of God

The elders of the GCE fast and pray every year before the annual conference for God's will to be done in their selection of Council of Elders members. Yet almost annually one or more Council members are "rescinded"—not reelected. Sometimes Council members choose not to submit their names for another term. Sometimes Council members even resign before completing their terms. If it was God's will to put them on the Council then shouldn't they be there for life? Does a Council member resigning, or the GCE choosing not to vote for every incumbent on the Council, thwart God's will? No.

The elders voted in 1997 that the home office should be moved from California to less-expensive and more central Ohio. We believed that was God's will, and subsequent fruits of the choice proved it wisely to be just that. But what about the 2007 resolution to relocate the home office to Texas, which very narrowly passed? That resolution in effect rescinded the original move to Ohio until it, in turn, was rescinded itself in 2008. If God's will was absolutely ironclad by fasting and prayer in 1997, then how could the proposed move to Texas have been justified in 2007?

What about the program we had adopted to study, teach and promote "Christ-centered, servant leadership"? Not only is it clearly God's will for His ministers (Matthew 20:26-28), but we also considered the program to be such via both Council and GGE fasting prior to its launch. Has that particular will of God been neglected since there is no visibility of it for the past several years? Or, do we in fact need to actively revisit that part of God's will in the Church?

Council of Elders members are reminded to fast before each of their quarterly meetings. Yet over the years they have created and then rescinded numerous resolutions, some appointments of Council staff, and in some cases even entire Council committees. Were these rescissions breaking God's will—or were they attempts to effectively address concerns and needs of the Church which in some cases were later no longer needed?

It has been widely argued that the fasting and prayer that passed the resolution to move the home office to Texas was absolutely God's will—but the resolution to rescind the move broke God's will. Using our intelligence guided by our significant experience shows that this idea does not hold water. The argument is not based on the correct biblical understanding about how fasting and prayer relates to God's will.

Clearly, the Church has long understood the foolishness of “the law of the Medes and the Persians,” which when once decreed, “does not alter” (Daniel 6:8). Even if we had had a church-wide fast on the home office relocation proposal in 2007, God allows us (as do our Christ-directed governing documents) to change our minds when we need to do so.

Prayer and fasting—divine guidance system

If tracking God's will sounds complicated, it's not. It's simply wise and reasonable—as in, spiritually rational or intelligent (Romans 12:1-2).

If God had wanted us to follow Him like automatons, then prayer and fasting *would* be like magic. However, He wants us to use our converted minds to think things through in the light of His Word. Yet even with our finest thinking we can't always know what is in fact the highest and best decision—the will of God.

Thus enters fasting and prayer, which when done with the correct attitude becomes our divine guidance system. When we humble ourselves like Ahab and pray like Jesus that not ours, but God's will be done, “Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’...*The Lord will guide you continually...*” (Isaiah 58:9, 11).