

005662

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Fasting - The Practice and Beliefs Among  
Adventists From 1851 to the Present

A Term Paper  
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Requirements for the Course  
CHIS570 History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to understand the practice and beliefs of fasting within the context of the Seventh-day Adventist church and its founding fathers. The primary sources used were the Review and Herald,<sup>1</sup> the Ellen G. White writings,<sup>2</sup> the Adventist Layman,<sup>3</sup> church bulletins,<sup>4</sup> and one letter.<sup>5</sup> Among the secondary sources used were the only term paper written on this subject in the Ellen G. White Vault,<sup>6</sup> a church history,<sup>7</sup> and the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia.<sup>8</sup> Since fasting has not previously been studied in depth, the amount of references to it are sparse. This is especially true of the Review, the main source for this paper.

This paper is divided into four main parts which will explain when, why, how, and by whom fasting was done. Although an attempt has been made to comprehensive, there are, by necessity, many interesting things left unsaid.

## WHEN FASTING HAS BEEN PRACTICED

It is impossible to really understand any practice unless one knows when that practice is done. Thanks to Bruce Bowen<sup>9</sup> there was a partial index to start hunting for this information in the Review. References not found in this index were found by simply turning the pages.

There were 49 seasons of fasting reported in the years from 1855 to 1977.<sup>10</sup> Forty of these were from 1855 to 1897. The numbers of seasons per decade were as follows: 1850's - 3, 1860's - 9, 1870's - 6, 1880's - 20, 1890's - 2. The 9 remaining seasons from 1907 to 1977 were divided as follows: 1900's - 1, 1910's - 3, 1940's - 2, 1950's - 1, 1970's - 2. This <sup>etc</sup> data indicates that the 1800's had approximately one season of fasting per year, i.e. 40 fasts in 42 years. In the 1900's there were approximately one season for every 8 years, i.e. 9 fasts in 70 years. Due to the poor indexing available, especially for the 1900's, these figures are probably not exact. However, it seems quite reasonable to say that fasting decreased substantially in the 20th century.

The seasons have been observed as single fast days and multiple fast days. The total number of single fast days is 40. Significantly, 35 of them occur on the Sabbath, with only 2 on Tuesday, 2 on Wednesday, and 1 on Friday. The total number of multiple fast days is 9. Four of them were on Sabbath

and Sunday; 2 of them on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sabbath; 2 of them were of Friday, Sabbath, and Sunday; and 1 was on Wednesday and Thursday. Again, it is significant that all of these but one include the Sabbath. The exception was justified by the fact that it would take more sacrifice to fast on the weekdays instead of the Sabbath.<sup>11</sup> We are, as our name implies, a people of the Sabbath.

## WHY THE CHURCH HAS FASTED

Having discussed the frequency of fasting it is natural to wonder why our church has fasted throughout the the years. The first evidence to consider is how the fasts were initiated.<sup>12</sup> Of the 49 seasons, 36 were appointed by the leadership on the General Conference level. Of these 36 seasons, 25 were directly from the General Conference and 9 were from individual states as a result of a "hint" from G.I. Butler, the GC President in 1884.<sup>13</sup> In the remaining 13 seasons, 6 were appointed directly by state conferences, 4 directly by an individual or a church, and 3 by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. The picture we get is one of the leadership initiating the seasons of fasting. This idea will be developed further in the last section of this paper.

The next evidence is the specific reasons for the fasts. As the custom was in the Review announcements, reasons were given for appointing a fast at the same time the fast was announced.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes follow up articles enlarged on the reasons.<sup>15</sup> Other times sermons were prepared for sale<sup>16</sup> or printed in the Review.<sup>17</sup>

Just what were the reasons? Actually, through the years the church has had about fifteen different reasons for fasting.<sup>18</sup> The most important one has been the church's need for spiritual renewal, revival, repentance, and reformation.

Of the 49 seasons of fasting, 37 are appointed with this purpose in mind. The second most important desire is for the progress of the work. This is included in 29 of the 49. Many of the reasons overlap for the same season. Spiritual renewal and progress of the work are thus the burdens of 29 seasons.

The rest of the 13 seasons and the number of times appointed are as follows: 13 times for camp meeting success, 10 times for financial needs, 9 times for missionaries or missionary work, 9 times for more workers, 7 times for the health of workers, 6 times for wars, 5 times concerning military problems (draft and non-combatancy), 4 times for persecution, 2 times for educational work, 2 times for slaves, 2 times for individual spiritual help, 2 times for Sunday legislation, and 1 time for the health improvement of an individual church. The data shows that the concerns were chiefly for a spiritual work to be done and then secondly for the work of the church to move on to completion.

It is evident that the church has believed in fasting as a means of spiritual renewal and finishing the work. Early leaders recognized this fact. They even saw fasting as a duty.

Christ in his sermon on the Mount, (Matt. vi,) introduces the duties of alms-giving, prayer and fasting. He reproves the manner of the hypocrites in these things, and points out the right way. We think it will be admitted by all truth-seekers that all three of these duties are still binding on the church. We see no reason why one should cease and the others continue.<sup>19</sup>

They also saw the object of fasting in a spiritual context.

The great object of fasting we understand to be, first, self denial, that the whole being may be especially consecrated to God on such occasions; and, second, that the mind may be clear to receive the teachings of the Spirit and Word, and exercise faith in God.<sup>20</sup>

Some individuals realized that fasting was in harmony with the antitypical day of atonement.<sup>21</sup> Ellen G. White makes it plain that "there is need of fasting, humiliation, and prayer over our decaying zeal and languishing spirituality."<sup>22</sup>

In the light of the preceding comments, later statements by churchmen seem to make the spiritual benefits and former counsel take a less important role.

The OT records no divine command requiring abstinence from food as a matter of religious duty; however, there are numerous instances of voluntary fasting prompted by religious motives.<sup>23</sup>

. . . the NT stands without any specific divine requirement for fasting or expressed approval of the practice.<sup>24</sup>

The reader may be surprised to discover that the church's lack of specificity with regard to fasting is doubtless based on the lack of specificity of the Bible itself.<sup>25</sup>

The problem with these statements is that they are not balanced in regard to the benefits and positive side of fasting. Perhaps this testimony is one of the reasons for our declining practice of fasting today. It seems a shame since our early brethren were so blessed by their seasons of fasting<sup>26</sup> that we should miss this opportunity to overcome our Laodicean condition.



## HOW THE CHURCH HAS FASTED

Perhaps the question of how to fast is the one most frequently discussed and the least understood. The writer has heard the following suggestions on "how" from several different Adventist friends: no water-no food, water only, water and vitamins, no food until sundown then splurge, juices only, juices and vitamins, skip only one meal, and don't fast-just live temperantly every day of your life.

There is another problem associated with "how" that affects some individuals. The problem is guilt. When some old or new Christians read in the Review<sup>27</sup> or in the church bulletin<sup>28</sup> about an appointed fast like March 26, 1977, what do they do? If they ask how and get answers similar to the above, they might be confused. If they write the Review they might get an answer like this:

This lack of specificity leaves the matter largely with the individual member. We would recommend that the one interested consult a Bible concordance and the Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White and formulate his own opinions on the procedures.<sup>29</sup>

Then they might wonder why there aren't clearer guidelines for a church member in a nation-wide program. Worse yet, they may in despair give up the search and accept the guilt that comes with not participating. Every bite of Sabbath dinner reminds them of the neglected task.

Does the history of our church shed any light on this perplexing question? Yes it does. In response to a rather radically written pro-fasting letter by D.W. Hull in 1860,<sup>30</sup> Uriah Smith gives some helpful hints.<sup>31</sup> He points out first that God wants "mercy and not sacrifice." In other words, if abstinence would hurt an individual it should certainly not be practiced. Second, he says if fasting is entered into as a mere form we miss the spiritual significance altogether. Last, he says we must remember to be as little known of men as possible (Matt.6:18).

James White helps our understanding in the appointment for the fast of August 3, 1861. He says that the Bible isn't clear about total abstinence or how long fasting is to be practiced. Then he adds, "We would recommend to all to abstain from their noon meal if consistent, and and (sic) let the other two meals, if eaten, be plain." His final sentence is very helpful: "Fasting, without turning to the Lord, will be of no use; but in returning to him, abstinence from food will be acceptable to the Lord according to his word."<sup>32</sup>

George I. Butler gives some helpful information in 1872:

There are two fasts spoken of in the Scriptures in reference to food. One, where food is wholly abstained from, and the other where they ate "no pleasant bread" or "bread of desire" Margin. Where the health of the individual will not admit the former plan, we recommend the latter.<sup>33</sup>

S. N. Haskell in 1887 is in harmony with the validity of health in determining total or partial abstinence. He also says in a beautiful way, "neither would we urge any to fast who would not regard the special privilege to make the special effort to seek God."<sup>34</sup>

Most of the various references and articles are of this well balanced nature. Only once did the writer find any type of a threatening statement. O. A. Olsen, president of the General Conference said in 1890 that "to negligent (in fasting) and indifferent now will certainly bring upon ourselves the curse of Meroz."<sup>35</sup> He was probably stating it this way to emphasize his deep conviction regarding the needs of the church.

Apparently others have had similar questions to the ones this section was introduced with. One person wrote to the Review and asked if children must fast "who have not reached years of accountability."<sup>36</sup> The answer was no, since they can't be baptized either. In 1917 an individual wrote in and asked if water should be taken during a fast.<sup>37</sup> The answer was no, since a fast is not for affliction, but "to bring the mind into the best state for clearness of thought"<sup>38</sup> so the individual could know and understand God better.

These examples given are in harmony with the witness of the years. The picture one sees is that of balance.

Total or partial abstinence is an individual choice to make, between the individual and his maker, and in some cases the doctor. With this type of explanation of "how" to fast, all people could enter in the next season with no guilt at all.

This section of the paper is mostly a biographical section. In doing the research, the writer was amused at the dedication and the love of certain individuals for the fast. It would be impossible to mention all the faithful followers of God, but a few representatives give credit to all the church.

The most outstanding individual, without question, was Joseph Bates. On July 11, 1851, Bates penned these words, "Prevailing prayer is inseparably connected with fasting."<sup>39</sup> Bates must have been a man of prayer; he certainly was a man of fasting. Listen to his response to James White, who said the Review was "backslidden."<sup>40</sup>

I believe with all my heart that a twenty-four hour day of fasting, humiliation and prayer throughout the ranks of the remnant would give us an impetus to the cause in which we are engaged for time to come.<sup>41</sup>

With these words he affirmed the fact that he believed in the benefits of fasting.

In February of 1865 Bates reported that he and the Monterey church (Michigan) "gladly" observed the appointed fast of February 11.<sup>42</sup> He writes again in March to report on February 11 again, and includes March 1-4 and February 25.<sup>43</sup> The Review said that if anyone wished to fast for the fast they could.<sup>44</sup> Naturally, Bates and those he influenced followed along. The church also observed the

June 10, 1865 fast which proved to be "much better for us than a day of feasting."<sup>45</sup>

The next year was no exception. Bates and his church observed the four day fast of May 9-12. They were strengthened and benefited.<sup>46</sup> The following Sabbath at Battle Creek, Joseph Bates preached and led the meeting which consisted of special fasting and prayer for a sick brother, James White.<sup>47</sup>

Bates goes out of the picture for awhile. The last reference to him and his fasting is in a letter from Sister White in 1872. He had been eating one meal a day and she said

I think that you have erred in fasting two days. God did not require it of you. I beg of you to be cautious and eat freely good, wholesome food twice a day. You will surely decrease in strength and your mind become unbalanced unless you change your cause of abstemious diet."<sup>48</sup>

Our dear brother died the same year, but the witness of his love for the Lord lives on, even though the last reference shows that abstemiousness can be carried too far.

The other representative chosen among many is J. N. Loughborough. Unlike Joseph Bates, Loughborough was on the General Conference Committee. His first mention concerning fasting is in endorsement of James White's article on "Non-Combatants" and therefore appointing February 11, 1865, as a day of fasting and prayer.<sup>49</sup> Just

a few months later, he was in Dansville, N.Y., praying and fasting for James White on October 14, 1865. It was a "precious season to him."<sup>50</sup>

Loughborough wrote for the Review in May, 1866.<sup>51</sup> His article was the main one in support of the May 9-12 fast. He stated that fasting did move God's hand to stop the Civil War (even the government in Washington testified to that). He wondered if it wasn't time to earnestly seek the Lord again so the work could be completed in our lives and in the world. That same month he reported that the fast had been a real "season of refreshing" in Battle Creek.<sup>52</sup> He and others had prepared for the fast by searching their hearts for wrongs.

In March of 1872, Loughborough was in San Francisco observing February 10:11 by fasting and praying for more workers.<sup>53</sup> He was also aware of the same season being observed in Santa Rosa, Pataluma, Healdsburg, Green Valley and Bloomfield.

In December of 1875, the next fast after February 10 and 11, 1872, was appointed. He was still on the General Conference Committee. New Year's Day, 1876, was chosen to be a "most appropriate season to commence the new year with humiliation before God, searching of heart and life, fasting, praying and new consecration to the services of God."<sup>54</sup>

This same day, January 1, 1876, concludes J. N. Loughborough's recorded involvements with fasting. He wrote in the Signs of the Times (as mentioned in the Review<sup>55</sup>) that he preached that day "on the nature of a Bible fast, the humiliation and confession that should go with fasting, and the results following such a fast, all of which were illustrated by instances of Scripture fasts." Ellen G. White spoke in the afternoon on Hebrews 12:1-5. In his diary he comments on this day by saying he spoke on Isaiah 58.<sup>56</sup> He also mentions dinner. The writing is hard to understand, but he probably had a "light" meal!

These individuals and scores of others have prayed and fasted their way to Christian growth and maturity. They have helped the church become a strong and vital instrument in God's purpose. What an inspiration they provide for those of us who walk in their footsteps.



## CONCLUSION

We have seen the when, why, how, and who of fasting in the Seventh-day Adventist church. The picture is one of consistency for the most part. It is sad that our church does not have the same burden for fasting today as it did in the 1800's. Perhaps this is because the leadership has not educated the people. Perhaps someone needs to educate the leadership. The testimony of our history is too powerful to miss the point - fasting is an important means to use in ridding us individually and collectively of the Laodicean plague. Ellen G White sums it up beautifully:

Now and onward till the close of time the people of God should be more earnest, more wide-awake, not trusting in their own wisdom, but in the wisdom of their Leader. They should set aside days for fasting and prayer. Entire abstinence from food may not be required, but they should eat sparingly of the most simple food. No one should lift up his soul unto vanity, walking in pride and self-indulgence. We are living in a time that demands genuine humiliation and most earnest prayer. We are nearing the most important crisis that has ever come upon the world. If we are not wide-awake and watching, it will find us unprepared.<sup>57</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>Review and Herald. Vols. 2 - 154.
- <sup>2</sup>Ellen G. White, her assorted works.
- <sup>3</sup>Lawrence M. Nelson, "MV Day of Fasting and Prayer," The Adventist Layman, March, 1972, pp. 12-13.
- <sup>4</sup>Pioneer Memorial Church and Berrien Springs Church. Bulletins for March 19 & 26, 1977.
- <sup>5</sup>Patricia Zima to the author. April 4, 1977. Contains information of a present fasting program in the Northern Union.
- <sup>6</sup>Connell Bruce Bowen, "Fasting and Prayer - The Practice and Belief, 1855 - 1864."
- <sup>7</sup>Arthur Whitefield Spalding, Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists, Vol 1. (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1961), pp. 330-332.
- <sup>8</sup>Don F. Neufeld, ed. (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966), pp. 401-402.
- <sup>9</sup>Bowen, his attached index.
- <sup>10</sup>See appendix.
- <sup>11</sup>RH. Dec 11, 1888:776.
- <sup>12</sup>See appendix, "Appointed By" column.
- <sup>13</sup>RH. Jul 29, 1884:488.
- <sup>14</sup>RH. Mar 29, 1877:101 & 104, Mar 10, 1977:1.
- <sup>15</sup>RH. Nov 21, 1882:721-723, Sept 9, 1890:554, May 11, 1897:297, Dec 12, 1907:6.
- <sup>16</sup>RH. Feb 17, 1876:56.
- <sup>17</sup>RH. Apr 30, 1942:24.
- <sup>18</sup>See appendix.
- <sup>19</sup>RH. May 15, 1855:228.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>RH. Oct 7, 1858:158, Jan 26, 1860, Jul 30, 1861:  
71, Great Controversy 1888, p. 425.

<sup>22</sup>4T 535-6, 1881.

<sup>23</sup>Siegfried H. Horn, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary (Washington:Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), p. 344.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>25</sup>RH. Jun 20, 1968:12.

<sup>26</sup>RH. Aug 30, 1864:112, Mar 14, 1865:120, Apr 25,  
1865:164.

<sup>27</sup>RH. Mar 10, 1977:1.

<sup>28</sup>PMC and BSC bulletins.

<sup>29</sup>RH. Jun 20, 1968:12.

<sup>30</sup>RH. Jan 26, 1860.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>RH. Jul 23, 1861:60.

<sup>33</sup>RH. Jan 9, 1972:32.

<sup>34</sup>RH. Apr 5, 1887:217.

<sup>35</sup>RH. Aug 5, 1890:488.

<sup>36</sup>RH. Jul 21, 1896:457.

<sup>37</sup>RH. Aug 30, 1917:24.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>RH. Aug 5, 1851:6.

<sup>40</sup>RH. Jul 2, 1861:4,45.

<sup>41</sup>RH. Jul 16, 1861:56.

<sup>42</sup>RH. Mar 7, 1865:106. In this letter Bates says Jan 11, but this is probably a mistake due to these reasons: 1. This is a chronological letter, Feb 11 fits and Jan 11 does not, 2. The reference to the Review 25/10 is Feb 11, 3. His last report was for Jan 19, which would have included the Jan 11 date.

- 43RH. Mar 21, 1865:125.  
44RH. Feb 21, 1865:100.  
45RH. Jun 20, 1865:24.  
46RH. May 29, 1866:204.  
47 Ibid., p. 205-6.  
48 E. G. White, Letter 2, 1872.  
49RH. Jan 31, 1865:80.  
50RH. Oct 31, 1865.  
51RH. May 1, 1866:172-3.  
52RH. May 15, 1866:192.  
53RH. Mar 12, 1872:102.  
54RH. Dec 16, 1875:188.  
55RH. Jan 20, 1876:23.  
56 J. N. Loughborough, Diary - 1876.  
57RH. Feb 11, 1904:8.

## APPENDIX

MONTH	YEAR	DAY							APPOINTED	REASONS															
		M	T	W	T	F	S	S	BY	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	
Jan	1855						2		A	*	*														
Jan	1857			14					C	*	*														
Feb	1857						6		A	*	*														
Aug	1861						3		A	*	*														
Aug	1864						27		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Feb	1865						11		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Feb	1865						25		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Mar	1865			1	2	3	4		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jan	1865						10		C	*	*														
Oct	1865						14		A	*	*														
Mar	1866			9	10	11	12		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Mar	1866						19		C	*	*														
Feb	1872						10	11	A	*	*														
Jan	1876						1		A	*	*														
Apr	1877						7		B	*	*														
Aug	1877						11		F	*	*														
Jan	1878			1					A	*	*														
Aug	1879						9		B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jul	1880						24		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
May	1881						21		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Aug	1882						19		B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Dec	1882					1	2	3	A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jan	1884			1					C	*	*														
Aug	1884						9		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Aug	1884						16		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Aug	1884						16		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Aug	1884						30		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Aug	1884						30		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sen	1884						6		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sen	1884						13		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sep	1884						20		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Oct	1884						1		A/B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Dec	1886						18		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Dec	1886						25		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jan	1887						1		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Apr	1887						16	17	B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jun	1887						4		B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Dec	1888			19	20				A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Oct	1890					3	4	5	A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
May	1897						29	30	A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Dec	1907						14		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sep	1910						17		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jul	1917						14		D	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sep	1917						1	2	D	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
May	1942						9		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Oct	1943						30		A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
May	1954			25					A	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Mar	1972								B	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Mar	1977								D	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Explanation of this chart on the following page.

### Appendix Explanation

The 49 fasts are indicated by Month, Year, and Day of the week.  
The number of the day is also given.

APPOINTED BY section: The code is as follows -

- A - General Conference
- B - State Conference
- C - Individual or Church
- D - North American Division Conference
- A/B- GC initiated state fast

REASONS section: The code is as follows -

- A - More workers
- B - Worker's health
- C - Church's spiritual help
- D - Individual's spiritual help
- E - War
- F - Slaves
- G - Military problems ( including draft and non-combatants.)
- H - Health in general
- I - Progress of the work
- J - Money
- K - Camp meetings
- L - Missions and missionaries
- M - Education
- N - Persecution
- O - Sunday bills

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