

Fasting: Islamic and Christian Perspectives

By Abu Atallah

Dear Friend:

What a timely question! As Muslims begin to observe the month of Ramadan, your question is, do Christians fast like us Muslims?

Let me first explain how fasting in Christianity is different from Islam and then the similarities. In Islam fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam, as seen in SAHIH AL-BUKHARI 1.7, Abdullah ibn Umar. The Prophet said: Islam is based on (the following) five (principles): 1. To testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah's Apostle; 2. To offer the (compulsory congregational) prayers dutifully and perfectly; 3. To pay *Zakat* (i.e. obligatory charity); 4. To perform *Hajj* (i.e. Pilgrimage to *Makkah*); 5. To observe fast during the month of *Ramadan*.

Fasting in Christianity is not compulsory but encouraged, so in Islamic terms it is *wajib* but not *fardh*. Fasting is not considered a good work or deed to pay for our sin. As in SAHIH AL-BUKHARI according to Abu Hurayrah, 1.37, Allah's Apostle said, "Whoever observes fasts during the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith, and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, then all his past sins will be forgiven." Fasting may be a sign of repentance, but not work to earn forgiveness.

The Spirit of Fasting:

To understand this we need to read from Isaiah 58:1-11:

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' 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. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. "

Fasting is primarily to God. Hypocritical religious activity is a hindrance to fasting. Fasting should be backed by righteous deeds. Jesus also has warned us that we do not boast that we are fasting. Jesus said in Matthew 6:16-18: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." [Putting oil on the head and washing the face were reserved for joyous occasions.]

I remember when I was a child my Muslim dad always broke his fasting because of smoking. But he always did it in a closed room away from the people. But in front of people he fasted. Jesus shows us here that fasting is to God and to God alone.

What is the purpose of Fasting then? Fasting has many purposes. These are some of them: to Chasten the soul [Ps. 69:10]; to Humble the soul [Ezra 8:21, Ps. 35:13]; to seek the Lord [Chron. 20:3,4]; to prepare for spiritual warfare [Matthew 17:21].

You may ask when do Christians fast then? Some Christians fast for 40 days just like Jesus did [Matthew 4:2]. According to the Bible we should fast when we are facing the judgment of God. Because of our sins this could be done individually or as a community [Joel 1:4; Jonah 3:4,5]. We can fast when we are concerned for the welfare of others [Psalm 35:13]. We can fast when we have some personal concerns [2 Samuel 12:15-17]. We can fast when we are facing danger [Esther 4:15,16]. We also fast when we appoint leaders in the church [Acts 14:23].

Fasting should be accompanied by confession of our sins and repentance. The Bible always mentions fasting and prayer done together. Fasting should also be accompanied by reading of the Bible.

Till we meet again.