



WHY BOTHER WITH LENT?

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The Lenten season starts on Ash Wednesday. For many recognizing Lent, that day marks the first day of a forty-day fast from something.

The day before Ash Wednesday is known as Shrove Tuesday, Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras (French for “Fat Tuesday”). Many people have at least a day of feasting before the season of fasting. Perhaps no city in America celebrates Mardi Gras better than New Orleans.

The weeks leading up to Mardi Gras (again, the Tuesday before the first day of Lent) as well as the actual day are a season of parties and parades throughout New Orleans. Many revelers—especially those who have traveled to New Orleans to celebrate—gather on Bourbon Street on Tuesday evening. The party goes long into the night, ending at Midnight on Tuesday night. Since Lent starts at 12:01 a.m. on Ash Wednesday, the New Orleans Police Department gather at Midnight on Mardi Gras, form a wall of officers and horses, and use that wall to clear Bourbon Street.

In the minds of many, that's a great picture of Lent: Party up to the last minute before the Lenten season starts. Get what you can before you have to give it up. Feast before you have to fast. It's the reason the celebrations associated with Mardi Gras are often referred to as Carnival—a word that comes from the Latin for “goodbye meat.”

In the minds of others, that's also what makes the Lenten season at best a disappointment and at worst a farce. It seems almost hypocritical to celebrate the Seven Deadly Sins before suppressing them.

CONFUSION REGARDING LENT

There is much confusion in the American Evangelical Church regarding Lent. To be sure, the Bible doesn't require us to recognize seasons like Lent or even Advent. In Romans 14:5, Paul writes that the celebration of holy days is a matter of Christian liberty. Paul continues, “The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord” (Rom. 14:6). Therefore, any recognition of Lent must be done in a way that honors God.

As Jesus made clear when he quoted Isaiah to the Pharisees, external actions void of heart-engagement are not honoring to God.

Well did Isaiah prophecy of you hypocrites... ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.’

Therefore, any special attention to the Lenten season that honors God must include heart-level repentance and real faith, not external obedience to church tradition.

So the Lenten season and its encouragement to take an extended time to focus on the death and resurrection of Christ provides us with an opportunity to honor God as well as a temptation toward sin. There can be a real value in marking this season, but only if done with a heart that seeks to honor God.

HISTORY

Lent is one of the liturgical seasons of the church calendar that precedes Easter. The name of this season originates from the Anglo-Saxon *lencten* meaning "spring." The origins of Lent are controversial. Traditionally it is understood as an intense season of preparation for “Catechumens” (converts under training) who were preparing to be baptized on Easter.

By the [Council of Nicea](#), A.D. 325, it officially referred to Lent as “forty days” and made it immediately precede Easter. Sundays are not counted as part of Lent, since Sundays are reserved for celebration. The Season of Lent now officially begins with Ash Wednesday because of the imposition of ashes on the foreheads of Christians. This practice is dated back at least from the late-eleventh century.

LENTEN THEMES

Lent carries in its tide a number of biblical themes, stories, and structures.

Again, Lent was a season that the early church used to prepare catechumens—new converts that wished to join the church through baptism, which was typically accomplished at Easter. The catechumens were encouraged during the 40 days to engage in regular times of repentance and confession and to seek reconciliation with those whom they had sinned, and been sinned against—the very spiritual disciplines that every Christian should engage in daily. (Matt. 5:24, 2 Cor. 5:18)

Now, you don't need a special season to do this. But there also is a benefit in setting aside a specific time to focus on these things. Throughout the history of the church, many believers have benefitted from using the Lenten season to do just that.

PRACTICE

The Season of Lent is part of a larger church calendar that includes Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Ordinary time. These are celebrations that have been developed over a long period of time originally in the Catholic Church and have flowed into practice in other denominations (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian). The practices connected to each season mostly find their roots in observing the life of Jesus as it is portrayed in the gospels. Some of the practices and celebrations may also be connected to ancient pagan celebrations that Christians re-appropriated over time.

Historically, the Reformed tradition has largely discarded the celebration of a complete church calendar because it binds the conscience to follow rules and rituals from man. Nowhere is the church calendar commanded in Scripture. Calvin and others thought it permissible to recognize the chief evangelical feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost but felt that the focus should always be on the proclamation of the whole gospel for the people of God each Sunday.

Today, you will find that many churches are beginning to use bits and pieces of this church calendar as a guide to meditating on certain themes through out the year. The church calendar can be helpful in giving us a guide in proclaiming the whole counsel of God. Every Sunday should be a mini-narrative of the whole gospel story. Yet some churches in the Reformed tradition tend to focus on the cross more than the empty tomb, Jesus and God to the neglect of the Holy Spirit, and the doctrine of justification and not sanctification, adoption, or glorification. The church calendar, when used with great wisdom, can be a helpful tool to observe the ancient practice of *lectio continua*—preaching through both the easy and difficult parts of a book of Scripture.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Churches and individuals can recognize the Lenten season in a variety of ways.

Ash Wednesday

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday (February 17, 2010).

The use of ashes in the observance of Ash Wednesday, to start a season of repentance and faith, is rooted in the ancient biblical practice of severe repentance and contrition. You can read about it in Daniel 9:3 or concerning the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6).

Ash Wednesday provides an opportunity to remember our mortality and to ask God to “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). It is also a time to remember Jesus’ promise in light of our mortality: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

We can, as Jesus encouraged Martha to, then reflect on that promise and answer ourselves, “Do you believe this?” (John 11:26). If we do believe it, as we consider our weakness and mortality and remember our salvation and the promises it holds, our heart should be overwhelmed with a love for Jesus that helps us grow in our distaste for sin.

Fasting and Prayer

Fasting and prayer are two traditional focuses of Lent.

Fasting, joined with fervent prayer and reading of Scriptures, is a spiritual discipline of humbling ourselves in abstinence before God to turn away some tragedy, or for obtaining of some special blessing. Fasting is traditionally the act of willingly abstaining from some or all food, drink, or both, for a limited time. Some people give up a certain behavior or habits during the season.

We fast (not just during Lent) because Jesus told us to do so (Matt. 6:16, Mark 2:20). We fast because we continue to see the pattern of fasting practiced in the church (Acts 13, for example). We fast because it is one of the means God uses to break the power of sin in our lives, prepare us well for prayer, and humble us before him (for unlike God, we need food to live).

The act of self-denial can be a helpful tool in your Christian growth. There is nothing magic about it; however it can be a helpful reminder of your deep need for Jesus and the way that Jesus meets and satisfies your every need.

So as you pray, join the Psalmist in praying, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Ps. 139:23-24).

Almsgiving

Often the money that is saved from giving up something for Lent is given to help the poor and oppressed (giving of alms). As we fast, we are reminded that we have a Savior who is rich in

mercy. In response to this mercy, we follow the pattern set by the One who became poor for our sake, so that we, by his poverty, could become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

As we give of our resources (time and treasure) to those in need, we remind ourselves of Jesus' self-giving mercy and we demonstrate to those in need the kind of Savior we serve.

Baptism

Since Lent was a season where people new in the faith would prepare for baptism, the church has often used this time to teach on baptism, deepening our understanding and applications of the union we have in Christ in his death and resurrection.

If you haven't been baptized, get baptized and join a church! If you have been baptized, use the Lenten season as a time to improve on that baptism by remembering the promises signified and sealed to you in that sacrament.

Study

Historically, Lent was a time when recent converts would learn the fundamentals of the faith in preparation for Baptism at Easter. Use the Lenten season as a time to read the story of Jesus, especially his journey to the cross. Read through the Gospel of Mark, trying to get through Mark 8 during the first 20 days of Lent and then reading Mark's description of Jesus' journey to the cross during the second 20 days of Lent.

PREPARATION FOR EASTER

Again, the Lenten season and its encouragement to take an extended time to focus on the death and resurrection of Christ provides us with an opportunity to honor God as we prepare for Easter Sunday.

Another way to consider the value of recognizing Lent is to consider the ways you currently prepare for Easter Sunday.

- New clothes for the kids?
- A flower for mom?
- A roast for the oven?
- Candy for baskets?

Now, consider if there might be a better and more beneficial way to think about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.