

# Much Ado about Something? Nagging Questions about Observing Lent.

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Once more, this late winter, we have begun to hear and read about the observance of Lent. In recent days, I have read three blog articles which were supportive (in varying degrees) of the practice. The religion pages of our weekend newspaper gave us much the same news: it's time for Lent and thoughtful Christians will, *of course*, be observing it.

This annual cycle troubles me, but not for what might be thought the obvious reasons. This writer is not anti-liturgical, does not disparage a modest use of the 'church year' (the annual highlighting of the main events in the career of Christ), and actually thinks that our evangelical churches need to be more deferential towards our Christian heritage than they are. He believes that there have dropped out of sight some valuable worship practices – once parts of the evangelical Protestant and pre-Reformation traditions – that we would do well to revive.

The primary objection to our current rush to re-instate Lent is this: too many evangelical Christians are considering this (and some related questions) with what might be called a 'liturgical inferiority complex'. While we do not shout this from the roof tops, we quietly admit to ourselves that our evangelical Protestant tradition as it now exists is somewhat homespun, even threadbare and that it stands in need of being augmented by resources taken from the past. While the Christian past has plenty of riches which may be drawn upon, the point is this: these are not best 'tried on for size' from the standpoint of felt inferiority. What is needed (and, I contend is currently in short supply) is healthy critical judgment towards a whole host of things (of which Lent is but one) that might be thought to be 'just the thing' to rectify our evangelical Protestant deficiencies.

The writer is not a liturgical scholar; but he is pondering the way Christians (and evangelicals in particular) are trying to appropriate the past nowadays. He thinks that the following considerations are important:

1. Lent ('The fast of forty days before Easter' says the ODCC) is indeed an early Christian practice, but a fast of such duration is both untraceable in the Apostolic period, and unrecorded in the first three Christian centuries. During that early post-Apostolic period, any pre-Easter fasting 'did not as a rule exceed three days'. The idea of a forty-day fast finds first mention in the Canons of the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.). Thus an initial question is: if a pre-Easter fast is to be re-instated at the present time, *which version* of the fast is to be preferred? One day? Three days? Forty days (and will this

include or exclude Sundays)? Just *what* is the ancient practice to be copied and why? If earliest is most reliable and best, the briefer observance would have the greatest claim. Yet this is *not* in fact what is being advocated within evangelicalism just now.

2. The idea of a forty-day fast was itself diversely practiced. In the centuries immediately after 325 A.D. there was a strict approach. One meal a day, taken towards evening, was allowed. This could not include meat, fish, eggs or dairy. But by the ninth century the strictness was relaxed; the daily meal was allowed at 3 p.m. By the fifteenth century, one was allowed to dine by noon. Since then, the strictness has been further pared back; for many today, observing Lent involves no fasting at all. A second question therefore might be: which level of severity is to be aimed at, and why? What constitutes authentic practice? It is authenticity that we are seeking, isn't it?

3. Conscious of this varied past record of Lenten practice, and conscious that for many, Lenten observance had come to be grasped at as a means of acquiring merit before God, the Protestant Reformers treaded carefully. They understood that the earliest post-Apostolic pre-Easter observances had been for just a few days and that the extension of the period to forty days came considerably later. They cautioned that the forbidding of certain foods was prohibited by Jesus and the Apostles. While allowing for the Christian discipline of voluntary fasting, they warned against any understanding of fasting which nourished mistaken notions of merit. These could only undermine the gospel understanding that we are accepted before God by His grace in Christ, or not at all. Not surprisingly, in some Reformation lands Lent seemed to vanish altogether.

4. Even in Anglicanism, where Lent survived the Reformation, the practice was not uniformly maintained, and by the eighteenth century it was being largely ignored. It was the fresh promotion of Lenten observance by the Tractarian or Oxford movement in the 1830's that ensured that this once more captured the attention of Anglicanism, and (eventually) of wider Protestantism. Historian David Bebbington has pointed out that the Oxford movement, centering on John Henry Newman (1801-1890), has had far wider influence in its second century of existence (i.e. since 1930) than in its first hundred years. Do evangelicals of all stripes understand the recent pedigree of the Lenten observance being urged today?

5. Leaving aside the known abuses to which Lenten observance has contributed (and happily, all evangelical Christians avoid these), and accepting that 'abuse does not rule out right use', the question remains: by what authority and according to what measure does evangelical Protestantism now promote or re-instate versions of Lenten practice? It is not enough to 'sense' or to 'hope' that by the restoration of such practices we are somehow 'standing with the church of all ages', or 'adopting earliest Christian practice'. It seems we cannot know *either* with any absolute certainty. All that can be known for certain is that pre-Easter devotional practices of a few days duration were practiced

sometime in the second century. These grew, over a century or more, to forty days. An early extreme austerity of observance was steadily modified over time. Even since the Reformation, which seemed to purge Lent of its excesses, this practice has had a very uneven record of observance. For its revival in the modern world, we have to thank Newman and the Tractarians more than anyone else. Today's Lenten practice among evangelicals is definitely not the same thing as that of the early Christian centuries. Evangelicals are tending to 'pour into' Lent meanings we think important.

6. Our evangelical Protestantism needs to appropriate many things from the Christian past. But as it does so, two things ought to be born in mind. First we ought to look more often to the Reformation era for help in evaluating features of Christian antiquity. Bucer, Bullinger, Calvin and others have already combed the early Christian centuries on these questions and left their evaluations. Yet there is an attitude taking root today that looks on the Reformation as a 'barrier' between us and the riches of early Christianity. On this understanding, the Reformation ought to be by-passed. Yet, this attitude will require us to 're-invent the wheel', needlessly. Second, let us be sure that when we go looking for the approbation of Christian antiquity, that we are not chasing some romanticized ideal of what constitutes the genuine and the pure. The current 'chase' after Lent convinces this writer that the evangelical pursuit of romantic ideals is like a stallion, still needing to be tamed.

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### **For Further Reading:**

"Lent" in F.L. Cross, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1957)

"Lent" in Everett Ferguson, ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (Garland, 1990)

"Devotional Practices" in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Reformation*, (Oxford, 1996)

David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Paternoster, 2000), 28

Martin Bucer, "The Kingdom of Christ" in Wilhelm Pauck, ed. *Melanchthon and Bucer*, (Westminster, 1969), chap. xii

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster, 1960), IV.xii.19-21

Eusebius, *History of the Church*, G.A. Williamson, trans. (Dorset, 1965) 5.24.12

"Second Helvetic Confession" chap. xxiv in A.C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Westminster, 1966), 291 (reflecting the views of Heinrich Bullinger).

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Kenneth J. Stewart is the author of *Ten Myths about Calvinism* (IVP, 2011). His next book (also IVP) will be *Evangelicalism Navigates the Past*.