

The Practice of Lent and the Reformed Tradition

By Roland S. Barnes

Lent is a period of sober-minded fasting and spiritual discipline leading up to the celebration of the resurrection. Jesus and the Apostles did not oppose the practice of fasting, sober-mindedness, or the celebration of the resurrection; rather, they encourage it. However, the Apostles are abundantly clear in their assertion that, in the New Covenant era, there can be no requirement for God's people to observe a formal season of holy days. Hughes Oliphant Old's lectures on the history of worship in the Reformed tradition have helped me think more carefully about the observance of Lent—something of which I had not given much consideration in the early years of ministry. As a result of this study, I have come to the settled conviction not to observe Lent or to promote its observance in the church in which I serve. In order to explain the rationale for this position, I will attempt to offer some clarifying thoughts and then to give some consideration to the meaning and origins of the practice of Lent.

The observance of Lent in the Middle Ages was a required fast—not a voluntary or optional practice, as it is in many churches today. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) made the observance of Lent obligatory for all its members. This is well established in the Canon Law of the RCC Canon 1249–1251:

Canon 1249—All members of the Christian faithful in their own way are bound to do penance in virtue of divine law; in order that all may be joined in a common observance of penance, penitential days are prescribed in which the Christian faithful in a special way pray, exercise works of piety and charity, and deny themselves by fulfilling their responsibilities more faithfully and especially by observing fast and abstinence according to the norm of the following canons.

Canon 1250—All Fridays through the year and the time

of Lent are penitential days and times throughout the universal Church. This canon is taken from *Poenitemini*, part III.

Canon 1251—Abstinence from eating meat or another food according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops is to be observed on Fridays throughout the year unless they are solemnities; abstinence and fast are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and on the Friday of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.¹

The following quote also serves to make the point that the observance of Lent is not optional for members of the RCC.

In 1966 Pope Paul VI reorganized the Church's practice of public penance in his "Apostolic Constitution on Penance" (*Poenitemini*). The 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law incorporated the changes made by Pope Paul. Not long after that, the U.S. bishops applied the canonical requirements to the practice of public penance in our country. To sum up those requirements, Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In addition, all Catholics 14 years old and older must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent²

According to the RCC, failure to observe Lent and its required fasts is a violation of established church law and

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1. Canon Law Society of America, *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (Paulist Press, 1985) 1249–1253. See endnote 1.

2. <http://www.americancatholic.org/features/lent/lentrules.aspx> (accessed October 7, 2014). See endnote 2.

sinful. While it is certainly appropriate for Christians to observe times of fasting and sober reflections as an expression of their devotion to their Lord, it is quite a different matter for the church to bind the consciences of believers with observances which are not mandated in Scripture. In part, the Reformation of the 16th century was about the way in which God is properly worshiped and the power of the Church to mandate extra-biblical observances. Regarding “Liberty of Conscience,” *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, states:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience, and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.³

The issue here is what the Westminster divines called, “*Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience*”. It was the conviction of the members of the Assembly that the church had no right before God to bind the consciences of believers beyond that which is clearly set forth in the Word of God. The Confession carefully states that not only has God left the conscience free from any commandments of men that may contradict His Word, but He has also left the conscience free from any commandments that are “beside it” (WCF 20.2). The Standards declare that while there are matters of Christian piety that are to be practiced by believers, the church cannot add laws beside such biblically binding practices in order to bind the consciences of God’s people. For example, it is clearly expected that believers will pray and fast, but the church is not permitted by God to establish conscience-binding laws which are *beside* the requirements to pray and fast found in Scripture. The church cannot demand that believers pray and fast on certain days, with particular persons, in particular places, etc. Furthermore, the church is not permitted by God to bind the conscience of believers so that it can declare

that the believer is sinning when he fails to keep church laws that are established *beside* God’s law.

Regarding extra-biblical worship requirements, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states:

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.⁴

The last phrase (i.e., *or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture*), which Presbyterians commonly call the regulative principle of worship,⁵ is an affirmation of the same principle established with regard to *liberty of conscience*. The Church may not worship God in any way it pleases, introducing into the public worship services practices that are not commanded in Scripture. Thus the *Westminster Confession* does not acknowledge that the church has the authority to bind the believer’s conscience with special days of worship not prescribed in Scripture, or that the believer is bound to observe such days or by his neglect is to be charged with sinning against God.

In addition to rejecting the mandated observance of Lent as established in the church prior to the Reformation, it is worth considering whether it is wise for the leadership of a church to adopt this practice at all—even in a non-mandatory form in which the congregation is encouraged, but not required, to participate. Apart from other considerations,⁶ the danger inherent in a non-mandatory, congregational observance of Lent is that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, not to participate in the observance of Lent when the whole congregational life is being structured by it for six weeks out of the year.

Additionally, even though many observe Lent today solely as an expression of devotion to their Lord, in the Middle Ages Lent was understood as a part of that way in which salvation was obtained—since the works of believers were viewed, in some sense, as meritorious. In his work, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Dr. Old references a sermon from the Middle Ages, preached by Rabanus, in which it is clear that the RCC viewed the observance of Lent as being meritorious unto salvation. He notes:

3. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XX, ¶2.

4. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXI, ¶1.

5. [Ed. On the subject of the regulative principle of worship see the following from prior issues of *The Confessional Presbyterian*. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, “Reframing Presbyterian Worship: A Critical Survey of the Worship Views of John M. Frame and R. J. Gore,” *CPJ* 1 (2005); Frank J. Smith with Chris Coldwell, “The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part One (1946–1999),” *CPJ* 2 (2006); Part Two (2000–2007), *CPJ* 3 (2007).]

6. [Ed. See Calvin below on adopting idolatrous practices in worship.]

This sermon is fundamental to understanding the spirituality of Rabanus. Very carefully our preacher unfolds the mystery of Lent. He speaks of the foreshadowings of this spiritual discipline in the Old Testament: both Moses and Elijah fasted forty days in the wilderness as preparation for their spiritual battles. This is followed by a long explanation of the mystical mathematics behind the forty-day fast. It is one-tenth of the year, a sort of tithing of our time. If we fast more than the tithe or at other times of the year, we gain extra favor, but if we fail to fast for the forty days of Lent, it is counted as sin. But not only should we fast during the forty days of Lent, we should remain chaste as well. Rabanus, as his most serious contemporaries, firmly believed that one should avoid any kind of sexual relations during Lent. One should go to church frequently, attending both morning and evening prayer services as well as Mass; one should be often at prayers and generous in alms and good works; and one should live at peace with all. Thus it is that we prepare for Easter. It was through asceticism that one earned the blessings of God, and since the blessings of Easter were the greatest blessings of God, one must be especially vigilant in denying the flesh during Lent.⁷

Dr. Old concludes that fasting and the Lenten observance had taken on a soteriological significance in the life of the church. He states:

Through the Christian calendar fasting has become a sacrament. We notice this statement in the sermon for the beginning of Lent. By means of fasting we unite ourselves to Christ in his suffering and thereby become worthy of rising with Christ in glory. The graciousness of Christ's vicarious sacrifice completely escapes Rabanus. There is no sermon on the crucifixion of Christ, but rather all through Lent we are instructed on how we are to mortify our own flesh. Lent, the forty-day fast, has become the central sacrament of the Christian faith.⁸

Of course, many churches in our own day do not assign any saving power to the Lenten acts of self-denial as some were inclined to do in the Middle Ages. However, it has been observed by many that the observance of Lent prior to Vatican II was much more rigorous than it is now. While many of the Reformers acknowledged that fasting should be included in the practice of Christian piety, they denied—most vigorously—any saving power to the practice of fasting or any other practice of Christian piety. It was their conviction that salvation is received by putting one's faith in the saving power of

Jesus alone, and that the practice of prayer and fasting are means by which that saving relationship with Jesus is fostered and grows.

All of this brings into question what is meant when churches today employ the word "Lent." In the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1984) we find this definition for Lent:

The fast of forty days before Easter. In the first three centuries the period of fasting in preparation for Easter did not, as a rule, exceed two or three days, as is evident from a statement of Irenaeus recorded by Eusebius. The first mention of a period of forty days, probably of Lent, occurs in the Canons of Nicaea (A.D. 325; can. 5).⁹

The derivation of the word "Lent" is most likely from the Middle English "lente" or the German "lenzin" which has reference to the springtime when the days are growing longer. Of course, it is in the spring of the year when Lent is observed and when Easter is celebrated.¹⁰

The full-blown practice of Lent did not come about until well into the 4th century. Even then it was not practiced in the way in which it is today. Again, the *Oxford Dictionary* states, "The number forty was not made up in the Latin Church until the 7th century..."¹¹ As the observance of Lent took shape it became a time of strict fasting from numerous things, including—but not restricted to—food. "During the early centuries the observance of the fast was very strict. Only one meal a day, taken towards evening, was allowed, and flesh-meat and fish, and in most places eggs and lactinia, were absolutely forbidden."¹² Since the Reformation the observance of Lent has become much more relaxed and it is "...generally observed as a time of penance by abstaining from festivities, by almsgiving, and by devoting more than the usual time to religious exercises."¹³ Finally, in *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures: Volume II-The Patristic Age*, Dr. Old notes, "Lent was... only beginning in the fourth century to take on the prominence it would later have."¹⁴

7. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010) 3:208.

8. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 3:213.

9. F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 810.

10. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1967) 483.

11. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 810.

12. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 810.

13. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 811.

14. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 2:99.

In the earliest days of Lenten observation, the practice did not dominate the preaching texts chosen for sermons. Old observes:

In Etheria's (a fourth century pilgrim to Jerusalem) day the liturgical observance of Lent was still quite modest. Its main concern, we gather, was the keeping of the fast; only after that was the preparation for candidates for baptism of interest. Special catechetical sermons were still preached, as they had been in Cyril's day, and these, according to Etheria, consisted of two parts: a series of sermons going through the whole Bible, giving first the literal and then the spiritual meaning, and an explanation of the creed phrase by phrase. Etheria makes special note of the fact that although Lent lasts eight weeks in Jerusalem, it does not include Saturdays and Sundays, and no special Lenten sermons were preached on Sunday.¹⁵

Originally then, the practice of Lent was very modest. It was not until Gregory the Great (A.D. 540–604) that the practice of Lent began to take the shape of an extended period of a more rigorous ascetic nature. Old states:

In Gregory's Lenten sermons one misses a solid preaching of the cross. While Gregory guards against the extremes of Pelagianism, there is certainly a Pelagian drift to his message. This, too, was part of the age in which he lived. The Christianity of late antiquity was still influenced by a strong current of Neoplatonism, which tended to encourage the denial of the material world, and in the development of Lent both Neoplatonism and Pelagianism came to full expression. The message of Lent, even today, is Pelagian through and through. In fact, Pelagius is somewhat symptomatic of the way much of Christian spirituality developed when the barbarian invasions began to threaten the Roman world. Pelagius was a British Christian who left the British Isles for Rome when the Romans withdrew and the Anglo-Saxons began their invasion, and when the barbarians threatened Rome he moved on to North Africa. His asceticism was a way of fleeing a world doomed to destruction.¹⁶

The practice of Lent seems to have been rather modest at first. Well-meaning Christians were encouraged

to practice self-denial and to prepare themselves for the celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. However, during the early Middle Ages other influences helped shape Lent into the more rigorous and complicated form in which it is found today. Dr. Old contends that the two influences of Neo-Platonism and Asceticism combined to shape the Medieval observance of Lent. He states:

It is this gospel of asceticism which is the whole basis of the celebration of Lent. As Leo understands it, the grace of God in Christ is the giving of an example of how we, too, may obtain salvation. As Christ was saved through suffering, so we can be saved through suffering. If we follow the example of Christ and resist the temptation of the devil, if we deny the appetites of the flesh as Christ did, then we, too, will be worthy of making the passover from this life to life eternal.¹⁷

He makes this further observation:

The age that produced the lectionaries was characterized not only by the dimming of learning but also by the changing character of piety, particularly among the general population. The learned piety associated with the ancient synagogue, and with the flourishing of the patristic age had little appeal. This kind of piety had retreated almost entirely to the monastery, and even there it had dwindled markedly. A new kind of piety had taken its place. This piety was characterized by an emphasis on penance, by an interest in the cult of the martyrs, and by an almost desperate concern to hold on to the vestiges of a glory that had all but passed away. More and more the Church reacted to the problems of the age by advocating an ascetic approach to life. Christians tightened their belts and lamented their sins before God. They hoped that by disciplining their lives God would have mercy on them. This is what Advent was all about. Advent, like Lent, was a perfect expression of medieval piety.¹⁸

The Reformers of the 16th century—with their emphasis on the principle of *sola scriptura*—reacted to the practice of Lent and other similar practices precisely because they were mandated by the church but not by Scripture. Commenting on a Lenten sermon by Peter Pazmany (1570–1637), a Hungarian Jesuit priest, Dr. Old remarks:

Finally, we notice that this sermon is concerned to emphasize a position at odds with Protestantism. Protestants, and especially Calvinists, have always opposed the

15. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 2.138.

16. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 2.435.

17. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 2.415.

18. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 3.184.

asceticism of both Lent and Advent. Asceticism drives a sharp division between the physical and the spiritual. Much pagan philosophy, especially Manichaeism and Neoplatonism, sees our physical existence as the source of sin and corruption. It is pagan philosophy, not biblical Christianity, which teaches that the physical body is a prison that enslaves the human spirit. This has always been a major point of controversy between Catholicism and Protestantism...as the seventeenth century advanced, Catholic preaching deteriorated considerably. In both Bohemia and Hungary it tended to pound in the Catholic doctrines which Protestants had challenged. The preaching of the Marian devotions, pilgrimages, Lenten observances, and saints' days became increasingly important.¹⁹

While illegitimate charges of Neo-Platonism abound in theological debates, and while such a charge may initially seem far-fetched with regard to the development of Lent, when one considers the link between Neo-Platonism, Pseudo-Dionysius and the RCC, it becomes clear that there is dependence. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* states:

...the philosophical system of Plotinus (c. 205–70) and his successors...The more ardent and thorough-going Neoplatonists were necessarily hostile to Christianity, especially its doctrine of an incarnation in history and its rejection of the ancient philosophies. On the other hand, Neoplatonist influences gradually made themselves felt on Christian theology. They came in partly from their diffusive impact on the whole of the later Roman world...Instances of more specifically Neoplatonist influences in Christianity may be seen in the writings of ... the Pseudo-Dionysius....²⁰

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. 500) is the name given to a body of writings that combined Neo-platonism with Christianity. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* states,

The Pseudo-Dionysian writings aim at achieving a synthesis between Christian dogma and Neoplatonist thought." and "The supposed apostolic authority of these writings, added to their intrinsic value, caused the 'Pseudo-Dionysius' to exercise a profound influence on medieval theology both in the East and the West.... In the West the approval of St. Gregory the Great and Martin I, and especially that of the Lateran Council of 649 which quoted them...established the Pseudo-Dionysian writings as an uncontested doctrinal authority.... A

great change in the earlier estimate of them took place in the 16th century when not only the Reformers but a few Catholic scholars...contested their authenticity....²¹

In the *Story of Christianity*, Justo Gonzalez writes about "Dionysius the Areopagite:"

In the fifth century, someone had written these works, which were purported to be by the same Dionysius who had heard Paul at the Areopagus. When they were introduced into Western Europe during the reign of Charles the Bald, no one doubted their authenticity. Erigena's translation was read as the word of one whose authority was almost apostolic. Since these works expounded a form of Neoplatonic mysticism, soon this was confused with Paul's theology, and the Apostle was read as if he too had been a Neoplatonist.²²

Partly through the influence of the Neo-Platonism promoted in these writings the practice of Lent in the Middle Ages developed into a lengthy season of rigorous fasting. The Lenten season came into being under the guise of a Neo-platonic aversion to the physical as over against the spiritual. Neo-platonism downplayed physical existence in much the same way as did Greek dualist who preferred the soul as over against the body. In some extreme forms of this thought, matter was deemed to be evil and thus the body evil as well. Salvation then was construed in a more metaphysical sense than ethical. Salvation was viewed as an escape from the body, from the physical realm into the realm of the spirit. The Apostle Paul addresses this "asceticism" in 1 Timothy 4:1–5:

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ²by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, ³men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; ⁵for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer (NASB).

19. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 5:323.

20. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 960.

21. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 406.

22. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1985) 270.

His opposition is based on the doctrine of the goodness of the created material world. Modern protestant observances of Lent are far from the rigor of the Middle Ages. First, they are more often than not, voluntary in nature; i.e., not mandated by the Church. Second, the modern observances are often a faint reflection of the more exacting practice of the past. The spiritual discipline of a rigorous fasting is now replaced by such things as giving up chocolate. Some modern observers of Lent decry the slack manner in which it is presently observed. One advocate of a stricter Lent states on his blog,

As we prepare for Lent in this Septuagesima season, it is good to review the nature and requirements of the traditional Lenten Fast. The Current Code of Canon Law requires that Ash Wednesday and Good Friday be days of abstinence and fast, and all Fridays of Lent (like all other Fridays of the year) are days of abstinence. However, this modern Lenten observance is laughable in its laxity, and only goes to show how far removed the modern, *novus ordo* establishment has removed itself from all things authentically Catholic. One might as well not even observe the season Lent at all! However, the observance of fasting on all weekdays of Lent is the traditional method of observing the Lenten fast, and is strongly recommended for all traditional Catholics. It is also our hope that the more ancient and spiritually efficacious traditional Lenten Fast will be soon restored to universal practice, for the good of the Church, and the greater glory of God.²³

What started out with an all-out deprecation of such things as are lawful (e.g., food, sex, marriage, etc.), has degenerated into rather trivial acts of denial, such as giving up chocolate or coffee. Of course, fasting is good as an expression of self-denial, but for the Church to decree such seasons for fasting as Lent, and thereby bind the consciences of believers, is contrary to the instructions given by the Apostle Paul. In addition it must be asked why would one voluntarily place himself under such rigorous regulations concerning food when Christ has set His people free from such regulations. Lent became a season of penance—forty days of sorrowful penance while waiting for Easter and the celebration of the

resurrection. Nowhere in scripture is there any prescription for such an observance. The forty years that Moses worked for Jethro were preparatory for his mission to rescue the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. His forty days of fasting on Mount Sinai were preparatory for the reception of the covenantal law of God. The forty days of fasting by Jesus were preparatory for spiritual battle in the wilderness. There is no pattern set forth in scripture for forty days of mourning over sin, especially when Christ has offered immediate forgiveness to everyone who repents.

However, as Dr. Old observes, the rigorous fasting of the Lenten observance developed into one of the central aspects of Christian devotion. He wrote:

As Neoplatonism came to have greater and greater influence on Christianity, asceticism began to gain an ever stronger grip on Christianity. This was particularly evident in the matters of fasting and celibacy. Fasting had come to be the touchstone of a serious devotional life. It was at the heart of the liturgical calendar. There were two long fasting seasons of the year, Advent and Lent; then there were Friday fasts. Celibacy had come to have such great importance that it was considered a prerequisite for any kind of ministerial vocation.²⁴

The Reformation brought about changes in many of the practices in the church. The Protestant church that arose from it took a different approach to observances like that of Lent. Old again states the following with respect to the approach of Ulrich Zwingli:

As Zwingli saw it, asceticism was foreign to the Christian gospel, and he forthrightly preached against it. Dispensing with the traditional liturgical calendar was, of course, only consistent when one dispensed with asceticism. One can hardly be said to observe either Advent or Lent if one does not fast during these seasons. Two sermons have come down to us in which Zwingli broke into his *lectio continua* to preach against Lenten fasting. There was consideration of the matter throughout the town, and Zwingli took to the pulpit to assure his congregation that Christians living under grace were not bound by laws regarding which foods were permitted and which were not permitted. That had been characteristic of the Law of Moses, not the gospel of Christ.²⁵

The Reformers were persuaded that the Apostle Paul had instructed the early church not to allow their consciences to be bound by mandates to observe special days which had been fulfilled by the redemptive work

23. <http://www.arsorandi.blogspot.com/2009/02/traditional-lenten-fast.html?m=1> [Ed. This blog is no longer online and the page in question was not archived at web.archive.org. The address now points to a fashion site. Cf. <http://veneremurcernui.wordpress.com/2013/02/13/today-begins-the-great-fast/> (accessed October 7, 2014).].

24. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 4.51.

25. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 4.51.

of Christ, or not ever ordained by God in His Word. In Galatians 4:9–11 Paul wrote:

⁹But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain (NASB).

In his commentary on this passage, Calvin remarked:

When certain days are represented as holy in themselves, when one day is distinguished from another on religious grounds, when holy days are reckoned as part of divine worship, then days are improperly observed.²⁶

And again, he noted:

Since that very description of impiety supported by Popery, what sort of Christ or what sort of gospel does it retain? So far as respects the binding of consciences, they enforce the observance of days with not less severity than was done by Moses. They consider holidays, not less than the false apostles did, to be a part of the worship of God, and even connect with them the diabolical notion of merit.²⁷

The Reformers were seeking to follow the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* when considering which practices of the medieval church they would continue and which ones they would discard. Since the fulfillment of the symbolic and ceremonial purposes of special days mandated by God in the Old Testament economy, the Reformers placed their emphasis on the God-ordained observance of the weekly Christian Lord's Day.

Colossians 2:16–23 is another passage that significantly shaped the Reformed view of holy days. There, the Apostle Paul wrote:

¹⁶Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — ¹⁷things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. ²⁰If you have died with Christ to the

elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ²²(which all refer to things destined to perish with use) — in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (NASB).

Calvin made the following important observation about this passage when he wrote:

I answer, that we do not by any means observe days, as though there were any sacredness in holidays, or as though it were not lawful to labor upon them, but that respect is paid to government and order -not to days.²⁸

While it may be allowable to observe a day of celebration, Calvin insisted that it would be unlawful to bind one's conscience on the matter. It would be unlawful for the church to mandate the observance of such days.

In *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, Dr. Old addresses *The Confessio Tetrapolitana*, established at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. This work was adopted by four reformation churches for the purpose of setting forth a way forward with respect to which practices of the medieval church to continue, and which ones to discontinue. Dr. Old comments:

Prayer and fasting are worthy exercises of Christian piety which Reformed pastors are in the custom of encouraging. Fasting is a discipline of desire in which we turn away from this world, while prayer is turning of our hearts toward God. Fasting is a practice of piety having particularly to do with hope. Paul teaches us that since love is more important than either faith or hope we should not let fasting interfere with those practices of piety which have to do with love and the aid of our neighbor such as preaching and the care of the poor. The Reformers particularly objected to set periods of fasting such as Advent and Lent. Fasting should be an inner discipline rather than the outward and legalistic form which the Reformers found the practice of their

26. *Calvin's Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–1856; repr. in 22 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) volume 21, The Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians, p. 124. Hereafter *Commentaries*.

27. Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 125.

28. Calvin, Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, vol. 21, p. 192.

day to be. A passage of Irenaeus is quoted to show that the Ante-Nicene Church had not yet established a uniform system of forty days of Lenten fasting.²⁹

Another early act adopted by the reformers in Germany was “*The Ulm Reformation Act of 1531*.” Concerning their perspective on the liturgical calendar, Old remarks:

The Lord’s Day is to be the only holiday observed. It is to be celebrated by the hearing of the Word of God, and other Christian observances...The Seasons of fasting such as Advent and Lent are no longer to be observed.³⁰

The Reformers decidedly discontinued the practice of “holy days” that were established by the church throughout the Middle Ages. As they went about the “reformation” of the church, they gave due consideration to

29. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Black Mountain, NC: Worship Press, 2004) 58.

30. Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, 66.

31. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Volume V, pp. 60–61.

32. [Ed. Calvin further elaborated on the subject of the retaining of superstitious and idolatrous practices in the worship of God in his *Responsio ad Versipellem Quendam Mediatoreem*. Responding to the objection that ‘abuse does not remove right use,’ the Reformer writes, “Similarly, what is alleged of an Italian writer, that abuse does not take away good use, will not be true if one holds to it without exception: because it is clearly commanded to us to prudently watch that we would not offend the infirm brothers by our example, and that we should never undertake what would be illicit.” “One might speak better and more wholesomely if he were to say that what God himself ordains may not be abolished for wrong use or abuse that is committed against it. But even here, it is necessary to abstain from these things if, by later human ordinance, they have become corrupt with error, and if their use is harmful or scandalizes the brothers.” And he concludes from the example of the destruction of the bronze serpent (2 Kings 18:4), “Among the virtues of Hezekiah told to us is that he had it broken and reduced to ash. The superstitions for the most part, against which true servants of God battle today, are spreading from here to who knows where as covered pits in the ground. They are filled with detestable errors that can never be erased unless their use is taken away. Why, therefore, do we not confess simply what is true, that this remedy is necessary for taking away filth from the church? See the translation of this tract, Raymond V. Bottomly, “*In Translatione: Calvin’s Response to a Certain Tricky Middler*,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 8 (2012) 264. George Gillespie refers to this passage in his elaboration of a general reforming principle that, “All things and rites which have been notoriously abused to idolatry, if they are not such as either God or nature has made to be of a necessary use, should be utterly abolished and purged away from divine worship, in such sort that they may not be accounted nor used by us as sacred things or rites pertaining to the same.” George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies* (Naphtali Press, 2013) 149, 156.]

33. James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968) 87.

whether they ought to continue the practice of “saint’s days,” etc., in the worship of the church. Old again observes:

There was no observance of Advent, any more than there was of Lent. Discontinuing the penitential seasons of preparation for Christmas and Easter was one of the first reforms of Reformed Protestantism. This may seem radical to some, but it is at the heart of the Reformed approach to worship. The whole history of these seasons of fasting had been marked by a legalistic asceticism which is far removed from Christian piety as taught in the New Testament. While specifically Reformed churches have been characterized by their avoidance of Lent and Advent, few Protestants find the kind of asceticism implied by these observances consistent with the teaching of Jesus. Most Protestants have found the old observances of Lent and Advent terribly reminiscent of the piety of the Pharisees which Jesus so explicitly condemned. The objection to Lent and Advent is that they overemphasize the penitential dimension of Christian devotion.³¹

In short, Calvin *et al* moved away from the observance of seasons of holy days promoted in the Liturgical Calendar of the medieval church *partly* because they believed that they were contrary to Scripture, and *partly* because they had become “vehicles of false teaching,”³² as observed by James Nichols in his book *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*. Dr. Nichols states:

In Calvin’s view it was right, thus, to set aside certain rites not in themselves indecorous which had become vehicles of false teaching. To cleanse the church of frightful superstitions it was necessary to remove ‘many ceremonies probably established of old with good reason and not notably impious of themselves.’³³

In other words, the concern of Calvin was to let the Scripture regulate the activities of worship and thus shape the piety of God’s people. Man-made ceremonies and holy days, while often well intended, are always accompanied by the ever present danger that they may lead God’s people away from that which is required of them in the Scriptures. Calvin remarks with regard to the Lenten fast:

At that time the superstitious observance of Lent had prevailed everywhere, because the common people thought that in it they were doing some exceptional service to God, and the pastors commended it as a holy

imitation of Christ. On the contrary, it is plain that Christ did not fast to set an example for others, but to prove, in so beginning to proclaim the Gospel, that it was no human doctrine but actually one sent from heaven.³⁴

As the Reformers followed the “regulative principle of worship,” they decided to observe the one “holy” day prescribed by God in the Fourth Commandment.³⁵ Thus they promoted the Christian Sabbath (i.e., the Lord’s Day) as the one “holy day” ordained by God. On this day Christians would “fast” from their own pleasures. They would practice a weekly “self-denial” on the Lord’s Day. By way of contrast the church of the Middle Ages had replaced the weekly observance of the Sabbath with festivals, seasons of special observance, and holy days. The season of “Lent” was one such season, a period of fasting and preparation for the observance of Easter. It began with Ash Wednesday when the penitents would pledge themselves to a season of self-denial until the observance of Easter/the Resurrection. This has produced the unfortunate day of consummate indulgence of every vice called “Fat Tuesday,” the day before Ash Wednesday. If one is being required to fast from certain foods, etc. for the forty days of Lent, why not indulge himself or herself the day before? The Reformers discontinued these man-made observances in favor of the God-ordained weekly observance of the Sabbath.

Dr. Old suggests that one of the consequences of an emphasis on “required” special days of fasting as observed in Lent is that the Christian Lord’s Day was, in a sense, squeezed out of the life of the church.

Explain it as you will, for the next thousand years asceticism would become the essence of being religious and the church calendar would become a fasting schedule. Advent and Lent would become the religious seasons of the year and weekly celebrations of the Lord’s Day would no longer set the tone of Christian worship.³⁶

The Reformers viewed the Christian Sabbath as both a weekly celebration of the victory of the resurrection and a weekly practice of self-denial; that is, fasting from the pursuit of labor and entertainment. This weekly observance was meant to put a curb on self-seeking pleasure and so necessarily works against the self-indulgence of “Fat Tuesday.” Self-denial becomes a way of life, (i.e., the normal practice of piety) and not a seasonal event. In *The Worship of the English Puritans* we read:

For the Puritan there was only one festival of the

Church, and that a weekly one. The Lord’s day was the single red-letter day in his calendar. The Lord had decreed that one day out of every seven should be spent in religious exercises. The Jewish Sabbath was the testimony to his command under the old dispensation. On this day every week the mighty acts of God in the creation, redemption and sanctification of man, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, were celebrated. The whole drama of salvation was rehearsed each Sunday in its entirety. What need was there, then, for separate festivals which celebrated only one scene of the divine drama at once?³⁷

The observance of fasting, praying, self-denial, and sober-minded reflection in the life of a believer is to be strongly commended. Someone may wish to do so as a matter of habit and regular observance by keeping some form of “Lent.” However, the mandated observance of Lent, along with its extra-biblical requirements of abstinence from things that God does not withhold from us in His word, is an altogether different matter. What merit or benefit is there in our abstaining from something which God has personally given us to enjoy? If something is sinful, we ought to abstain from it (i.e., fast from it) every hour of the day, every day of the

34. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book XII, 20 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960) 1246.

35. [Ed. As the Westminster Assembly famously enjoined, “There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord’s day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly [commonly] called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.” See “An Appendix Touching Days and Places for Publick Worship,” in *The Directory for The Publick Worship of God*. From the Reformation forward, Presbyterians have been opposed to a liturgical calendar. See for example, George Gillespie, *A Dispute against the English Popish Ceremonies* (Naphtali Press, 2012); Samuel Miller, D.D., “Presbyterians do not observe holy days,” *Presbyterianism the truly primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1835) 73–78; Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication, c. 1846) 251–252; Robert Lewis Dabney “The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design and Proper Observance,” *Discussions: Theological and Evangelical* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1890) 1. 524–525; James R. Boyd, *The Westminster shorter catechism: with analysis, Scriptural proofs, explanatory and practical inferences, and illustrative anecdotes* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1860) 145; William S. Plumer, *The Law of God, As Contained in the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia, 1864) 325; James Harper, *An Exposition in the Form of Question and Answer of the Westminster Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (1905); J. A. Grier, *Synoptical Lectures on Theological Subjects* (1896); J. G. Vos, “The Observance of Days,” *Blue Banner Faith and Life* (1947).]

36. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Vol. II, 437.

37. Horton Davies, *The Worship of the Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997) 75.

week, and every week of the year. If something is not sinful and not forbidden by God in His Word then we are free to partake or not partake of it as our conscience guides us. Given the faulty foundations upon which the practice of Lent is established, one wonders why such a practice is perpetuated in Reformed churches. It is both ill-conceived and wrongly focused. As such, it is not truly beneficial for the life of the church. The practice of self-denial is to be the daily experience of the believer. The Protestant and Reformed church, for the most part, has treated fasting as an individual and personal matter. Therefore, on special occasions, times of fasting and prayer have been called for and have been deemed appropriate. For these reasons I have decided not to observe the practice of Lent and not to recommend it to others. Dr. Old wisely puts this question before us concerning the observance of the liturgical calendar with its seasonal Lenten penance:

The question we need to ask is whether in our day the canonizing of the liturgy and the reintroduction of the liturgical calendar would be a true reform of the worship of American Protestantism.³⁸

The Liturgical Calendar has the danger of becoming spiritually stunting insofar as it asks believers to suspend their living in the light of the finished work of Christ as they march along from incarnation to resurrection and ascension throughout the calendar. Another question we ought to ask is, “Why do we spend six weeks each year anticipating the death and resurrection of our Savior when each Lord’s Day (i.e., Resurrection Day) is a celebration of Jesus’ triumph over sin and death and hell?” The Reformed observance of the weekly Sabbath, together with the regular practice of expository, Christocentric preaching, are meant to emphasize that we are now living in the full realization of the finished work of Christ. Each Lord’s Day we celebrate the fact that “He is Risen!” We live in the light of the victory and triumph of the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. We do not enter into worship during the months between Christmas and Easter waiting for a resurrected Savior.

We come each Lord’s Day to celebrate His resurrection and triumph over sin, death, and hell. At best, a Liturgical calendar limits this celebration that belongs to the Christian every week of his or her life. At worst, it holds believers back from the celebration of the resurrection until Easter. The weekly celebration of the

resurrection reminds us that the babe that was born in Bethlehem is our triumphant Lord, that He suffered so that we would be spared judgment for our sins, that the veil of the Temple was rent in two and that we enter in to the very Holy of Holies each Lord’s Day as we gather for worship. The Calendar, strictly observed, holds us back from the Holy of Holies and the joy of entering into the celebration, while we work through the somber days of Lent and its emphasis on sin, sorrow, etc. waiting for the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to come. The majority view in the Reformed tradition emphasizes the weekly Lord’s Day celebration of the resurrection on the first day of the week. In this way, it reminds us that all that Christ endured in His humiliation, from incarnation to death and burial, leads us to His exaltation. Each and every Lord’s Day, we serve a risen and triumphant Savior.

ENDNOTES

Note 1. “This entire section of the 1917 Code had been reformed by Paul VI on February 17, 1966 with the apostolic constitution *Poenitemini* (see bibliography following c. 1253). The five canons in this chapter of the Code are a summary of part of this document and must not be understood apart from it, especially the very rich discursive section of the document treating the history of penance and its role in the life of every Christian.

Penitential Days

Canon 1250—All Fridays through the year and the time of Lent are penitential days and times throughout the universal Church.

This canon is taken from *Poenitemini*, part III,

Days of Abstinence and Fasting

Canon 1251—Abstinence from eating meat or another food according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops is to be observed on Fridays throughout the year unless they are solemnities; abstinence and fast are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and on the Friday of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

This canon is taken from *Poenitemini*, part III, 112. *Poenitemini* exempted holy days of obligation from Friday abstinence; this canon extends that exemption to all solemnities whether they are of obligation or not. The Code also gives the conference of bishops the power to

38. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 2.416.

substitute another penance to be observed on Fridays in place of abstinence from meat.

Neither Poenitemini nor the Code mentions fasting on Holy Saturday whereas The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC 109) states:

The paschal fast must be kept sacred. It should be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday, and where possible should be prolonged throughout Holy Saturday so that the faithful may attain the joys of the Sunday of the resurrection with uplifted and responsive minds.

Poenitemini adds the following explanation of abstinence and fast:

The law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat. The law of fasting allows only one full meal a day, but does not prohibit taking some food in the morning and evening, observing—as far as quantity and quality are concerned—approved local custom (III-1 & 2).

Obligation to Abstain/Fast

Canon 1252—All persons who have completed their fourteenth year are bound by the law of abstinence; all adults are bound by the law of fast up to the beginning of their sixtieth year. Nevertheless, pastors and parents are to see to it that minors who are not bound by the law of fast and abstinence are educated in an authentic sense of penance.

The completion of the fourteenth year means the day after one's fourteenth birthday. The beginning of the sixtieth year means the obligation ceases at midnight between the fifty-ninth birthday and the next day.

Poenitemini stated that the law of fast bound those who have completed their twenty-first year; the Code uses the term "adults," i.e., those who have completed their eighteenth year (c. 97, §1)." Canon Law Society of America, et al., *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 1249–1253.

Note 2. "Fasting as explained by the U.S. bishops means partaking of only one full meal. Some food (not equaling another full meal) is permitted at breakfast and around midday or in the evening—depending on when a person chooses to eat the main or full meal.

Abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, milk products or condiments made of animal fat.

Abstinence does not include meat juices and liquid foods made from meat. Thus, such foods as chicken broth, consomme, soups cooked or flavored with meat, meat gravies or sauces, as well as seasonings or condiments made from animal fat are not forbidden. So it is permissible to use margarine and lard. Even bacon drippings which contain little bits of meat may be poured over lettuce as seasoning.

Each year in publishing the Lenten penance requirements, the U.S. bishops quote the teaching of the Holy Father concerning the seriousness of observing these days of penance. The obligation to do penance is a serious one; the obligation to observe, as a whole or "substantially," the days of penance is also serious.

But no one should be scrupulous in this regard; failure to observe individual days of penance is not considered serious. Moral theologians remind us that some people are excused from fasting and/or abstinence because of sickness or other reasons.

In his "Apostolic Constitution on Penance," Pope Paul VI did more than simply reorganize Church law concerning fast and abstinence. He reminded us of the divine law that each of us in our own way do penance. We must all turn from sin and make reparation to God for our sins. We must forgive and show love for one another just as we ask for God's love and forgiveness.

The Code of Canon Law and our bishops remind us of other works and means of doing penance: prayer, acts of self-denial, almsgiving and works of personal charity. Attending Mass daily or several times a week, praying the rosary, making the way of the cross, attending the parish evening prayer service, teaching the illiterate to read, reading to the blind, helping at a soup kitchen, visiting the sick and shut-ins and giving an overworked mother a break by baby-sitting—all of these can be even more meaningful and demanding than simply abstaining from meat on Friday." <http://www.americancatholic.org/features/lent/lenrules.aspx> (accessed October 7, 2014). ■