

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

I was reminded by the morning paper that we are entering those weeks before Easter known in some other traditions of the faith as “Lent.” This is a period of forty days from what is called “Ash Wednesday” (intended to remind us of our mortality—have you ever been particularly unaware or forgetful of your mortality?) to Easter, but *not* counting Sundays, of (limited) fasting, ostensibly in imitation of Christ’s forty days of fasting in the wilderness.

Some might wonder why Presbyterians do not observe “Lent.” The short answer, of course, is that there is not a word about “Lent” in the Bible, so that there is absolutely no scriptural basis for such a practice. For a fuller answer, let me quote from **John Calvin**:

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. And the marvel is that such sheer hallucination (which is refuted so often and with such clear arguments) could creep upon men of keen judgment. For Christ does not fast often—as he would have to do if he had willed to lay down a law of yearly fasting—but only once, when he girded himself for the proclamation of the gospel. Nor does he fast in human fashion, as would have been fitting if he willed to arouse men to imitate him; but he shows an example rather to transport all men to admiration of him than to arouse them with zeal to imitate him. Finally, his reason for fasting was not different from that which Moses performed when he received the law at the Lord’s hand. For since that miracle was manifested in Moses to establish the authority of the law, it ought not to have been omitted in Christ, lest the gospel seem to yield to the law. But since that time it never entered any man’s mind, on the excuse of following Moses, to establish such a form of fasting among the people of Israel. And none of the holy prophets and patriarchs followed it, even when they had enthusiasm and zeal enough for all pious exercises. For the statement that Elijah went forty days without food and drink only served to apprise the people that he had been raised up to restore the law, from which almost all Israel had departed. It was, therefore, mere wrongheaded zeal, full of superstition, that they justified and painted fasting as the following of Christ.

However, there was amazing diversity in the manner of fasting, as Cassidorus relates from the ninth book of Socrates’ history. For the Romans (he says) had only three weeks, but for them the fast was continuous, except on Sunday and Saturday. The Illyrians and Greeks had six; others, seven; but fasting was at intervals. They differed as much in choice of foods; some ate only bread and water; others added vegetables; still others did not abstain from fish and fowl; others made no distinction in foods. Augustine also mentions this difference in his second letter to Januarius.

Worse times then followed, and to the misdirected zeal of the people was added

the incompetence and lack of training of the bishops, as well as their lust for mastery and their tyrannical rigor. Wicked laws were passed which bind consciences with deadly chains. The eating of meat was forbidden, as if it would defile a man. Sacrilegious opinions were piled upon one another, until the depth of all errors was reached. And not to overlook any depravity, they began, with a completely absurd pretense of abstinence, to mock God. For the praise of fasting is sought in the most exquisite delicacies; then no dainties are enough; at no other time is there greater abundance or variety or sweetness of foods. They think that they are duly serving God in such and so elegant trappings. I forbear to mention that they who wish to be esteemed the most holy of men never glut themselves more foully. To sum up: for them the highest worship of God is to abstain from meats, and in their place to abound in all sorts of delicacies. On the other hand, the ultimate impiety, scarcely to be expiated by death, is for anyone to taste the slightest bit of bacon fat or rancid meat with dark bread. Jerome tells us that in his day there were certain men who mocked God with such follies. To avoid eating oil, they arranged for the most delicate foods to be brought to them everywhere; indeed, to do violence to nature, they abstained from drinking water, but had sweet and costly draughts prepared for them, which they drank not from a cup, but from a shell. What was then a vice among the few is today common among all the wealthy, so that they fast for no other purpose than to feast more sumptuously and daintily. But I do not want to waste many words in a matter so obvious. ***I say only this, that both in fasts and in all other parts of discipline the papists have nothing right, nothing sincerely, nothing well-ordered and arranged, to give them occasion to boast as if anything remained among them deserving of praise.***

John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), cited by book, chapter, section, and, in parentheses, volume and page, 4.12.20-21 (2.1246-47), emphasis added.

So, we can see why Presbyterians do *not* observe “Lent”! What we do instead, on the Sundays before Easter as on all Sundays, is to gather for the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

Grace and Peace,

Jim

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, *Executive Director*
Foundation for Reformed Theology
4103 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23230
(804) 678-8352
www.foundationrt.org

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