

LENT FOR EVANGELICALS: A STUDY ON THE SEASON OF LENT AND
APPLICATION FOR ITS INTRODUCTION
IN AN EVANGELICAL CONTEXT

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Summary:

This paper provides an introduction to the history and theology of the season of Lent. Included is specific application for an evangelical context.

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*“A Study On The Season Of Lent and Application For Its Introduction
In An Evangelical Context”*

Introduction

The traditions of the practice of the church year are not observed in most evangelical contexts. This has resulted in the loss of a significant source of rich spirituality for the church. In the college context where I serve, this is especially true. Currently, there is virtually no sense of any of the seasons of the church year here. The primary focus of this project will be to promulgate a strategy for the introduction of one component of the historical practice of the church year, Lent, for an evangelical context and specifically, the college context where I serve.

This research paper will be the foundation for the implementation of a number of services of Lent in our college chapel environment. The paper will have four primary sections. The first section will be a brief overview of the history of the practice of Lent. It will include discussion about practices in the early church, the influence of the Edict of Milan and the subsequent council of Nicea, development of a structured seventy-day season and renewal in liturgical churches during the 20th century.

The second section of the paper will introduce a theology of the practice of Lent that might be considered in an evangelical church. This theological discussion will address issues of the church year in general and orientation around time, Ash Wednesday and the Sundays of Lent, Holy Week and Easter (Pasch) in relation to Lent, fasting in Lent, giving up versus adding, and an outward emphasis verses an inward emphasis. These will be addressed in light of the importance of both an inward focus and a community emphasis.

The third section of the paper will identify some cultural implications for the practice of Lent. Included will be the issues of Lent as a northern hemisphere practice,

new traditions versus old and the value of establishing culturally relevant traditions, British influence in North American culture and the value of cultural adaptation of church practice.

This will be followed by a final section focused on the specific introduction of the season of Lent to an evangelical context. Included will be discussion regarding newness versus ancient practices, dangers of the establishment of unbiblical expectations, the relationship between tradition and the Bible, Lent practices that permeate the whole year, the balance of a personal and corporate emphasis, the value of an outward focus during Lent, the value of contemplation, and some very specific applications for an evangelical context.

I will assume that my reader does not know anything about the season of Lent. This will be helpful for some students who will be exposed to Lent for the first time in our college context. A number of students and staff of the college will participate in this project by giving input along the way. They will also participate in the planning and leading of four corporate worship services during the upcoming season of Lent. The focus of discussion in this paper will be Lent as preparation for Easter and will not give much attention to Holy Week itself. An exception will be some discussion regarding Maundy Thursday and application to a worship service plan on that day in a college chapel service.

Where Lent fits in the Church Year

The word Lent comes from an Anglo-Saxon word “lencten” which means spring.¹ This is where we get the English word “lengthen” as during spring, the days become longer. The observance of the season of Lent coincides with spring of the year in

¹ Allan Hauck. *Calendar of Christianity*. (New York, NY: Association Press, 1961), p. 91.

Europe. The season of Lent does not coincide with the spring in the southern hemisphere. The cultural implications of possible related ethnocentricity will be discussed later in this paper.

Lent is a season of preparation for Easter and the observance of the death and resurrection of Christ. In this way it corresponds to the season of Advent, which is preparation for the celebration of the birth of Christ. However, Lent has a more somber tone than Advent. Historically, the season has been associated with confession and abstinence from certain pleasures.

The season of Lent begins some six weeks before Easter. According to church tradition established at the Council of Nicea in the 4th century, Easter is celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon of spring.² As a result, Easter can happen anywhere from March 21 to April 25.³ This causes Lent to begin anywhere from early February to early March.

Although Lent is a distinct season, it is helpful to understand it as part of a larger section of the church year. Pfatteicher suggests that "... Lent and Easter, Ash Wednesday through the Day of Pentecost, is to be understood as one whole season, consisting of forty days of preparation and fifty days of fulfillment."⁴ This brings up the important point that compartmentalization is always dangerous. The extreme approach of seeing the various seasons of the church year as entirely independent of each other will result in a lack of transference between the important emphases of Lent and the rest of Christian life. In fact, it may result in a sense of license before and after Lent, which is not consistent with Christian living.

² Neil Alexander. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Volume 5. Robert E. Webber (ed.) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996-1997), p. 226.

³ L. W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer. *The Christian Calendar*. (Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam Co. Pub., 1974). p. 85.

⁴ Phillip H. Pfatteicher. *Liturgical Spirituality*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). p. 120.

An example of this is the extreme practices sometimes associated with Mardi Gras in some parts of the world. Mardi Gras is French for “Fat Tuesday” – the day before the beginning of Lent. Often, celebrations on this day degenerate into license in anticipation of the upcoming season of abstinence. Practices like Mardi Gras have the potential of creating an artificial distinction between penitence and license that is inappropriate. Yet the tension exists in the natural separations of seasons. In nature, winter and spring can be quite separate. A proper approach to the distinctions of the church year includes the separation *and* integration of the various seasons in a holistic way.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and the tradition of the imposition of ashes. This is the Wednesday prior to the first Sunday of Lent, which is six Sundays before Easter day. In 2002, Easter occurs on March 31 so Ash Wednesday is on February 13. There will be more discussion regarding the specific practices of Ash Wednesday later in this paper. Ash Wednesday is important in that it delineates the boundary between the celebrative tone of Christmas and Epiphany and the more somber time of preparation for Easter. Pfatteicher suggests that:

“...the clear break in the turning of the year happens with Ash Wednesday. The beginning of the penitential season of Lent comes as a sober interruption of our enjoyment of life. The joy of Christmas and the Epiphany gives way to “the cold cheer of Lent”.⁵

Westerhoff compares Lent to the adolescence after the childhood of Christmas and Epiphany. Lent is where “...we face up to the hard realities of ourselves, others and the world... Having attempted to live as childlike dreamers for eight weeks, we turn to reflect on how we have done.”⁶

⁵ Ibid. p. 115.

⁶ John H. Westerhoff III. *A Pilgrim People: Learning Through the Church Year*. (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury Press, 1984). p. 71.

Penance, a human attempt to atone for wrongdoing, is often associated with the season of Lent. Penance can be defined as "...acts of making whole again and repairing damage done, and of growing in grace and living into who we really are."⁷ Doherty suggests that penance is an act of love that clarifies the soul.⁸ It is the mortification (putting to death) of self. In this way, according to Westerhoff, we may "find ourselves" during this season. Every Lent we face up to the battle with principalities and powers in us and in our history that prevents us from "actualizing our true identity".⁹ Lent is the story of principalities and powers, the story of reconciliation and redemption. "A time for sorrowful attention to our denials of who we really are as saints in the image of God, and of the world as the kingdom of God under the rule of justice and peace."¹⁰ "Lent is a time to sort out the transitory from the permanent."¹¹

It would appear that Westerhoff's understanding of Lent as the pursuit of personal identity might be more rooted in a humanistic worldview rather than a biblical one. However, the sense of a direct confrontation with the powers of evil, both inside and outside of us, is appropriate to the pursuit of the Christian life. Lent is the season of the church year that is most oriented around this confrontation.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Catherine Doherty. *Season of Mercy: Lent and Easter*. (Combermere, ON: Madonna House Pub., 1996). p.49.

⁹ Ibid. p. 72.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 93.

¹¹ Pfatteicher. p. 118.

A Brief History Of The Practice Of Lent

Lent In The Early Church

During the first few centuries of the church, most corporate practices were done with some emphasis on secrecy. This was primarily the result of persecution. However, the establishment of new ritual was desirable for the Jewish Christians. The early church built on ancient Hebrew practices. The Old Testament texts are at the heart of "...both Jewish tradition and the Christian liturgy."¹² The best example of this is the institution of the Lord's Supper, which is covenant making reflective of Sinai (Exod. 24:1-11). The Hebrew traditions had a strong emphasis on preparation for various events and festivals. It was natural that the early Christians would also have this emphasis. This is basically what Lent is.¹³

In the early church the primary worship ritual was the simple weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. This was the regular commemoration of Easter.¹⁴ But the central event of the early church, Easter, was also celebrated annually during the time of the Passover and by the second century, Christians were celebrating a 2 day fast before Easter. By the third century, it was extended to all of Holy Week.¹⁵ By the end of the third century, "...Rome was experimenting with a more ambitious three-week fast..."¹⁶ At some point in the fourth century both Alexandria and Rome introduced a six-week preparation for Easter, beginning on our first Sunday in Lent.¹⁷ By this point, the season of Lent was basically intact as we know it.

¹² Lucien Deiss. *The Springtime of the Liturgy*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1967). p. 3.

¹³ Allan Hauck. *Calendar of Christianity*. (New York, NY: Association Press, 1961). p. 91.

¹⁴ George Gibson. *The Story of the Christian Year*. (New York, NY; Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945). p. 68.

¹⁵ Adolf Adam. *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*. (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1992). p. 91.

¹⁶ Eugene R. Fairweather. *The Meaning and Message of Lent*. (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1962). p. 115.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The practice of Lent in the early church included preparation for the baptism of catechumens - the new believers. This was initially significant because of the large number of adult converts to the faith. However, as time passed and more were baptized as infants, this emphasis waned.

At the beginning of the 4th century an event occurred that would radically change the practices of the church. This is the Edict of Milan. The Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and declared a reversal in the practices of persecution. In fact, he made Christianity not only legal but the state religion. Overnight, the secret practices of Christian worship became public. This allowed for the development of the church year in a vibrant way. Lent became public.

Sylvia of Egeria, also known as Silvia of Aquitaine, a Christian nun from Spain, visited Jerusalem in the 4th century (383CE).¹⁸ She recorded the events of Lent and Holy Week in her diary. Her record is an important source of knowledge of early church practices. Egeria observed that there were eight weeks of Lent with five fast days in each week. Neither Saturday nor Sunday were fast days.¹⁹ She reports that the monks of Jerusalem treated Holy Week with great seriousness. Some of them, she says, “having taken food after the Divine Liturgy on Sunday do not eat again until Saturday”.²⁰ This record helps us understand that the idea of preparation for Easter was an established tradition very early in church history. It is reflective of Hebrew practices as well as a commitment to an annual celebration of Holy Week as central to the new Christian faith.

¹⁸ Julian J. Katrij. *A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year*. (New York, NY: Basilian Fathers Publication, 1983). p. 100.

¹⁹ Thomas J. Talley. *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986). p. 218.; also Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, Editors. *The Study of Liturgy*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978). p. 413.

²⁰ Katrij, p. 100.

By the time of the Council of Nicea, the forty day tradition of preparation for Easter was assumed. Documents from this council refer to the *quadragesima paschae*, a forty day period of preparation for Easter, as something obvious and familiar to all.²¹ Lent was being observed in Rome by 340CE.²² According to Egeria's description, this forty days worked out to eight weeks because of the elimination of Saturday and Sunday as fast days. Other records suggest that Lent began six weeks before Easter and included holy week.²³ "Finally, after trying out one or two other reckonings, the Roman church settled on "Ash Wednesday" as the opening of the fast, and the Lenten calendar as we know it throughout Western Christendom was complete."²⁴

After The Fourth Century

The practices of Lent developed consistency soon after the fourth century. Somewhere around the end of the seventh century or the beginning of the eighth century Ash Wednesday became universally observed as the beginning day of Lent.²⁵ During this time, there was much discussion regarding appropriate practices for the Sundays in Lent. Most believed that because Sunday was a celebration of Easter and the Lord's Supper, it was inappropriate to fast. As a result, the fast was adjusted to the Wednesday before the first Sunday of Lent. However, it was always referred to as "the forty days" or the Latin term "*quadragesima*".²⁶

During the first millennium, a pre-Lent tradition developed. This was the celebration of the three Sundays prior to Lent as preparation for the Lenten season.

²¹ Adam, p. 91

²² Talley, p. 170.

²³ Richard Nardone. *The Story of the Christian Year*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). p. 46.

²⁴ Fairweather, p. 115.

²⁵ Hauck, p. 92

²⁶ Nardone, p. 47.

These three Sundays were named *Quinquagesima*, *Sexagesima* and *Septuagesima*, three Latin terms that mean “fifty”, “sixty” and “seventy” as they occurred during the respective ten-day periods prior to Easter. In this Roman pre-Lent, however, no real fast was required. The practice was simply to omit some celebrative components of the liturgy (i.e. the Alleluia) from Sunday worship.²⁷

Over a number of centuries, the practice of penance was developed. Penance is a type of repayment for wrongs done. Gregory the Great urged this disciplinary use of the season of Lent.²⁸ Often, penance was required to compensate for certain sins. By fulfilling these requirements, sinners could be restored to good standing in the church. Examples of penance included the wearing of sack-cloth and ashes or the completion of certain tasks.

The imposition of ashes that became common for Ash Wednesday services finds its roots in the Old Testament practice of putting ashes on one's head during a time of mourning. This practice developed by the end of the first millennium. In the 12th century it became common to use ashes from the burned palm branches that were part of the previous year's Palm Sunday Service.²⁹ Usually, ashes were imposed (rubbed) on the forehead of the believer in the shape of a cross with the accompanying statement: “Remember, O mortal, that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”³⁰

One final comment regards the use of the term Easter, which was a relatively late development. This word is the Old English adaptation of *Eastre*, the name of the Teutonic goddess of spring and dawn.³¹ The term Pasch or the Paschal (pronounced

²⁷ Adam, p. 92.

²⁸ Gibson, p. 92.

²⁹ Adam, p. 98.

³⁰ Genesis 3:19.

³¹ Gibson, p. 79.

pask – pask-el) is the older term.³² Pasch is borrowed from the Passover and used by Paul in I Cor. 5:7 to describe the work of Christ. In many cases, this term is used rather than Easter. Stookey condemns the use of the term Easter by stating that “Easter as a name fails to say anything about Jesus Christ and is possibly a remnant of a polytheistic nature cult... The more venerable term for the resurrection observance is ‘Pasch,’ from the Greek word we translate as ‘Passover.’”³³

After The Reformation – The Protestant Reaction To The Church Year

The events of the reformation lead to the abandonment of many of the practices of the established church of the time. This was true, to some extent, with the traditions related to the church year. Of the reformers, Luther retained the major elements of the Christian Calendar but Calvin “...reacted strongly against any continuation of the ancient observances.”³⁴ This was largely because of abuses associated with the observances of saints days and prayer to the saints. It was also a response to some of the related superstitions associated with the church calendar. “Calvinism, therefore, considered that the calendar was inconsistent with the purity of religion it wished to establish, and insisted upon its entire rejection.”³⁵

The Puritans had a similar perspective.³⁶ “Puritanism originally meant a purification of *worship* rather than its later meaning of rigidity or personal morals...” However, Puritans were intent on revising the church year and were opposed to various practices associated with it.³⁷ The English reform movement also took a

³² Gibson, p. 79.

³³ Laurence Hull Stookey. *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996). p. 53.

³⁴ Cowie and Gummer, p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Gibson, p. 156.

revision-oriented approach. Freedom within tradition rather than freedom from tradition was "...a main mark of the English reform movement."³⁸

The subsequent Free Church movement almost completely discarded the church calendar. Except for Easter and Christmas, the various feasts of the church year were ignored. This included the season of Lent. Advent became more like Christmas itself and Lent disappeared. In many evangelical churches, a somber Good Friday service is all that remains of the historical practice of Lent.

During the late 1960s, there was significant renewal in regard to the practices of the church year and to the season of Lent in particular. In the Roman Catholic documents of Vatican II, which focused on renewal, the three Sunday pre-Lent season was dropped.³⁹ In the "preface for Lent" from Vatican II, we read:

"Each year you give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed. You give us a spirit of loving reverence for you, our Father, and of willing service to our neighbor. As we recall the great events that gave us new life in Christ, you bring the image of your Son to perfection within us."⁴⁰

This statement focuses on joyful preparation rather than mourning or penance.

During the late 20th century there was a significant sense of renewed interest in the church year among Protestant evangelical churches as well. Many churches began to observe the weeks of Advent by lighting candles and at least mention other significant seasons of the church year. In many evangelical contexts this resulted in new opportunities to experience the richness of the tradition of the season of Lent for the first time.

³⁸ Gibson, p. 149.

³⁹ Adam, p. 92.

⁴⁰ Adam, p. 94.

The Theology Of The Practice Of Lent

Orientation Around Time – The Church Year

People live according to time. “Common to all cultures is the association of events to their proper times and places, with fitting observances. All people have their calendars...”⁴¹ In much of western culture, this time sense is oriented around opportunities for leisure and vacation. In this way, often the school year and the natural seasons of winter, spring, summer and fall are most influential. We look forward to summer vacations and school holidays. While religious holidays like Christmas and Easter are evident, their focus is often on more secular practices. However, everyone lives according to a sense of time. For many, this is simply living for the end of the workweek and days off. For others, it might be birthdays, civic holidays or annual family events.

It is reasonable that the Lordship of Christ should have influence in this important orientation of time. Merton suggests that time is to be sanctified by the presence and action of Christ. It is the space between his two advents.⁴² Time is created by God and infiltrated by God in the incarnation. We can see time as being sanctified by God.⁴³ God expected the ancient Hebrew people to orient their sense of time around his acts. It follows that God desires contemporary Christians to orient their lives around his work as well. This may or may not require the abandonment of the celebration of certain secular events. However, it is fair to suggest that the central celebrations should be oriented around the traditional celebrations of the church and the church year.

⁴¹ Gibson, p. 17.

⁴² Thomas Merton. *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965). p. 48.

⁴³ J. G. Davies, Editor. *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1986). p. 427-428.

Celebrating the seasons of the church year "...makes the very passage of time sanctify our lives, for each new season renews an aspect of the great Mystery of Christ living and present in His Church."⁴⁴ This is the biblical type of *remembering* called anamnesis. The biblical foundation of liturgy and the church year is the remembrance (anamnesis) of the events of the work of God. This is very obvious from the Old Testament. Virtually all OT practices were active remembrances of God's work. New Testament teaching supports this as well. Adherence to anamnesis ideology was present in the very beginning of the church. In fact, the Lord's Supper was the first and central component of this new liturgy. Christ said: "This do in *remembrance* of me."⁴⁵ If we claim to be biblically based, we must "remember" the events of the Bible and God's work in his church. In both the Old and New Testaments, we have a wealth of record of God's acts for anamnesis. The suggestion in the Free Church that liturgy is a Roman Catholic ritual and not a New Testament practice is clearly incorrect.

Anamnesis is bringing the past into the present. This is not a mental process but a ritual process. The word amnesia means a loss of memory but anamnesis is literally "...the drawing near of memory...the entrance into our own experience of that which otherwise would be locked in the past."⁴⁶ The remembrance of our mortality on Ash Wednesday might remind us about eternity as well as death. Possibly an appropriate focus of Ash Wednesday is that our ultimate life is lived in eternity – after death. This is not to deny our life here on earth but to remind us that it is transitory. In this way, anamnesis is true to the biblical idea of remembering. It is not merely cerebral.

⁴⁴ Merton, p. 52.

⁴⁵ Luke 22:19.

⁴⁶ Stookey, p. 29.

Lent prepares us for the deliverance event of the resurrection. Deliverance is the theme of Scripture. In the Old Testament, the focus is on the Passover and deliverance from Egypt. The Passover (pasch) is thematically continued in the Eucharist. Pfatteicher says that “In the days of Lent we embark on an exodus journey toward the veiled future that lies on the other side of change.”⁴⁷ In this sense, Lent is the barren wasteland of the wilderness.

“Thus during Lent we make our annual spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where during Holy Week we will watch the great events of the passion, death, and resurrection. We go on our journey, like our spiritual ancestors the Israelites, in the wilderness, for forty days, to be cleansed, purified, and renewed by discipline.”⁴⁸

Ash Wednesday

In most contexts where the church year is observed, the season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and the ritual of the imposition of ashes. The primary focus of the observances of Ash Wednesday is the remembrance of our sinful human condition and God’s unmerited acceptance of us. In this sense, “Ash Wednesday is intended to be a bold confrontation with death”.⁴⁹ Genesis 3:19 is read as the ashes are imposed in the shape of a cross on the believer’s forehead: “Remember, O mortal, that you are dust and to dust you shall return”.

The week of Ash Wednesday has often begun with celebration. Because of the requirement to abstain from certain foods and activities during Lent, the Monday and Tuesday before are often seen as the last fling of excess prior to fasting. In the Orthodox tradition, believers are also expected to abstain from sexual relations.⁵⁰ In France, this tradition has been celebrated in the form of carnival. The word carnival

⁴⁷ Pfatteicher, p. 119.

⁴⁸ Pfatteicher, p. 239.

⁴⁹ Stookey, p. 85.

⁵⁰ Doherty, p. 46,

comes from the Latin – carne vale – which means “farewell to meat”⁵¹ or to “put away flesh”.⁵² In many cases, believers were expected to abstain from meat during Lent. Carnival is the last fling of pleasures that are forbidden during Lent. In France, these festivities reach their climax in Mardi Gras (French for Fat Tuesday). Although this tradition has its origin in France, it is common in other parts of the world as well. New Orleans is known for its Mardi Gras celebrations. In many cases, however, the festival has degenerated into license that is not consistent with the Christian commitment. By and large, Mardi Gras has become a secular event that is not followed by a heightened awareness of the need for reliance on God.

The Tuesday before Ash Wednesday is also known as Shrove Tuesday. Historically, on this day, the church practiced a ritual of confession and absolution. This is what it meant to be shriven.⁵³ On Shrove Tuesday, it was customary to eat pancakes cooked in butter and fat.⁵⁴ The eating of fat was forbidden during Lent. Traditions of Shrove Tuesday date back to when penance was public and central to the season of Lent. This represented the beginning of our time of entering into Christ’s suffering.⁵⁵ Of course, after being shriven, people would usually begin merrymaking, which would often degenerate into license.⁵⁶ The Monday prior to Ash Wednesday is sometimes called Collop Monday. This refers to the English tradition of eating slices of meat and eggs on this day.⁵⁷ In middle English, the word collop refers to an egg fried

⁵¹ Hauck, p. 94.

⁵² Cowie and Gummer, p. 58.

⁵³ Fairweather, p. 136.

⁵⁴ Charles Alexander. *The Church’s Year*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). p. 66.

⁵⁵ Fairweather, p. 136.

⁵⁶ Hauck, p. 95.

⁵⁷ Alexander, p. 66.

in grease.⁵⁸ Again, this practice emphasizes the desire to experience one last pleasure prior to the season of abstinence.

After the excesses of Monday and Tuesday are over, the reflective tone of Ash Wednesday is a striking contrast. On Ash Wednesday we emphasize an encounter with our own mortality and sin before God and the community of faith.⁵⁹ However, it seems difficult to accept the sincerity of this practice if the Mardi Gras celebration has degenerated into inappropriate license only a few hours before.

Some suggest that the emphasis of mortality and death on Ash Wednesday is a re-creation of the experience of baptism.⁶⁰ In baptism, we die to self and are raised up in Christ. The focus on death helps us realize our frailness and our need for dependence on God.

Historically, certain colors have been associated with the various seasons of the church year. These colors are evident in the decoration of the church building or other worship space. They also appear as part of the vestments of the worship leaders. The color for Ash Wednesday is gray, for ashes, rather than purple which is common for the rest of the season of Lent.⁶¹

The Sundays Of Lent

There are five Sundays that fall during the season of Lent. These are followed by Palm Sunday and then Easter. Each Sunday has a specific emphasis along the theme of preparation for the death and resurrection of Christ. In most cases, Sundays are treated as different from the rest of Lent. They are not fasting days. This is

⁵⁸ Hauck, p. 95.

⁵⁹ Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, James F. White (contributor), and Laurence Hull Stookey. *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992). p. 115.

⁶⁰ Pfatteicher, p. 238.

⁶¹ Hickman, Saliers, White, and Stookey, p. 115.

because each Sunday is seen as a commemoration of Easter and the resurrection of Christ. In most churches that celebrate the seasons of the church year, the central act of worship on Sunday is the Eucharist or Lord's Table, which is marked by celebration and rejoicing. The theme is deliverance and is linked with Sinai where 'they...ate and drank' (Exod. 24:11). Breaking of bread relates to community and to eternity. It is a heavenly feast.⁶² Because of this, the Sundays of Lent are generally considered *in* Lent but not *of* Lent. They are more celebrative than the weekdays during Lent. This is why the entire season of Lent is more than forty days. The Sundays are not counted.

Though Sundays are not considered part of the fast of Lent, there are Lenten themes associated with each of the five weeks that are evident in Sunday liturgy.⁶³ The first Sunday emphasizes the wilderness temptations and the need to be saved from trials. The second week focuses on estrangement from true self and the need for new birth. The third Sunday emphasizes the various distortions and dissonance in our lives and the resulting need to be defended from evil. Week four highlights our natural hungering for wrong things and the need for soul nourishment. The fifth Sunday emphasizes the entrapment of the world and our need to die to the world's understanding and ways.

Stookey suggests that the first five days of the season of Lent (i.e. Ash Wednesday to the first Sunday of Lent) proclaim both judgment and hope.⁶⁴ Though we are rebellious and mortal, we are assured of what may become by the grace of God. We are redeemed and raised from death. The theme of the first Sunday is

⁶² Deiss, p. 23.

⁶³ These emphases are found in Westerhoff *A Pilgrim People: Learning Through the Church Year*. (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury Press, 1984).

⁶⁴ Stookey, p. 86.

exemplified in story of the temptation of Jesus.⁶⁵ “It is the analogue to the story of the fall of humanity.”⁶⁶ Adam succumbed but Christ resisted the tempter. In this sense, paradise that was lost is becoming paradise regained. The victory of Christ, which is primary and central, “...is at once past and present, communal and personal.”⁶⁷

Stookey has given us a summary of the content from the church Lectionary, an organized three-year system of observing the various seasons of the church year.

Here is that summary as related to the second to fifth Sundays of Lent.⁶⁸

	Year A	Year B	Year C
<i>Second Sunday</i>			
	Covenant with Abram	Promise to Abram and Sarai	Abram’s vision
	Abraham’s faith; grace	Abraham’s faith/ours	We await a Savior; Stand firm
	Nicodemus and Jesus	Take up your cross	“How often I would have gathered you”
<i>Third Sunday</i>			
	Water from the rock	The Decalogue given	Come to the waters Buy without price
	Justification by grace	The cross as foolishness	Israel’s “baptism” Do not be idolaters
	Woman at the well	Cleansing the temple	The fig tree spared
<i>The fourth Sunday</i>			
	Anointing of David	Serpent in the Wilderness	Entering Canaan
	Walk in the light The man born blind	Saved by grace God so loved the world	The New Creation The prodigal and Elder sons
<i>The fifth Sunday</i>			
	Valley of the dry bones	Covenant in the heart	“I do a new thing”
	Life in the Spirit	Christ as high priest Forever	The past is over; Christ is all
	Raising of Lazarus	“I will draw all to myself”	Mary anoints Jesus

⁶⁵ Matthew 4:1-11.

⁶⁶ Pfatteicher, p. 119.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Stookey, p. 87.

The second Sunday of Lent focuses on the need to be born again in Christ. The story of Nicodemus is central in year A. Westerhoff suggests that this emphasis focuses on the human need to become childlike, dependent, non-rational and non-productive.⁶⁹ In fact, he contends that a certain amount of struggle, as in the birth process, is necessary for spiritual growth. “Complacency and the absence of inner torment are the deadly enemy of prayer. Searching in darkness, struggling for the narrow way, aching for fulfillment, embracing suffering are signs of new life, of living prayer, of unity with God.”⁷⁰ According to this perspective, a sense of peace may be deceptive and cause a spiritual paralysis. Being born again is deliverance from this disease.

The first two Sundays of Lent “...already point clearly to the Easter mystery by showing us the way and the goal for our earthly lives and praying that we may travel this way as followers of Christ. On the next three Sundays... the baptismal motif, based on the gospel, dominates...”⁷¹ The third week of Lent emphasizes the story of the cleansing of the temple found in John 2:13-22.⁷² The focus of this third Sunday should cause us to consider where we have made idols of created things. Though these things in themselves are good, because of our idolatry, we must sweep our lives clean of them.

The fourth Sunday in Lent is sometimes called “Refreshment Sunday”. It is associated with God’s provision. The gospel for this Sunday tells the story of the feeding of the 5,000 found in John 6:4-15. Westerhoff suggests that this is a story of

⁶⁹ Westerhoff, p. 76.

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Adam, p. 101.

⁷² Westerhoff, p. 77.

failure and success.⁷³ Philip failed by focusing on money, Andrew failed by focusing on things (loaves and fishes). But Christ's focus was on heavenly provision and grace. This is a story of a sacrament, more than a miracle. It is "...an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."⁷⁴ The focus is not on the material but on grace and provision, which is unending heavenly food. In France this Sunday is called Mi-Careme or Mid-Lent, and is celebrated with processions and feasting.⁷⁵

Prior to the reorganizing of the season of Lent in Vatican II, the fifth Sunday of Lent was the beginning of the passion and suffering of Christ. This was called Passiontide.⁷⁶ Passiontide was the full two weeks from Passion Sunday (before Palm Sunday) to Easter Eve.⁷⁷ However, Passiontide was eliminated "...to preserve the internal unity of Lent. The Sunday now known as the First Sunday of the Passion will henceforth be the Fifth Sunday of Lent...".⁷⁸ This fifth and last week of Lent reflects on the story of the raising of Lazarus found in John 11:18-44. We can identify with this story as it reflects our own entrapment. According to Westerhoff, we are all trapped and must be freed from our tombs.⁷⁹

Maundy Thursday

Maundy Thursday is during holy week, which begins with Palm Sunday. In most cases, Holy Week is seen as separate from Lent but some suggest that Palm Sunday is really the sixth Sunday of Lent.⁸⁰ The name Maundy comes from the Latin

⁷³ Westerhoff, p. 81.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Alexander, p. 75.

⁷⁶ Adam, p. 105.

⁷⁷ Gibson, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Adam, p. 105.

⁷⁹ Westerhoff, p. 82.

⁸⁰ Adam, p. 107.

“mandatum” and means command.⁸¹ It is reflective of the new command given by Christ on this day.⁸² Maundy Thursday services emphasize the institution of the Lord’s Supper. However, the focus of celebration on this day is not only to reenact the Eucharist but also to celebrate the ordaining of it – when *and* how it was given.⁸³

The practice of foot washing is often part of Maundy Thursday services.⁸⁴ It is the reenactment of the Christ’s demonstration of servanthood. Sometimes Maundy Thursday is called Shere Thursday, which means “pure”, symbolizing the physical purity of the washing of feet.⁸⁵

Holy Week As Part Of Lent

At times during church history, Holy Week has been treated as part the season of Lent. Adam’s view that Palm Sunday is the 6th Sunday of Lent has been identified earlier.⁸⁶ Katrij, an Orthodox theologian, declared that the Lenten fast did not end until the dawn of the Resurrection Day at the cock crow.⁸⁷ However, he acknowledges the view of Anastasius the Sinaite (7th century), a monk of the Sinai monastery and a theologian of the Eastern Church, who was first to declare that the Forty Days Fast terminated with the feast of Palm Sunday.⁸⁸ In most current contexts, Lent concludes with the celebrations on Palm Sunday. However, it is appropriate that the sentiment of the season continue through the Triduum (Good Friday through Sunday Morning), as this is certainly part of the time of preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

⁸¹ Hauck, p. 99.

⁸² Alexander, p. 87.

⁸³ Stookey, p. 95.

⁸⁴ Stookey, p. 93.

⁸⁵ Hauck, p. 100.

⁸⁶ Adam, p. 107.

⁸⁷ Katrij, p. 88.

⁸⁸ Katrij, p. 134.

Fasting In Lent

Fasting has always been associated with the season of Lent. Richard Lobs III has identified three different kinds of fasts.⁸⁹

1. The normal fast
Abstaining from all kinds of food but not water
Jesus did this – Luke 4:2
May also include fasting from sleep – called “a watching”
2. The absolute fast
Abstaining from eating and drinking
Must not be for longer than 2 days
3. The partial fast
Restriction of diet rather than abstinence
Example – one meal per day or from certain foods or drink

Often believers choose to participate in one or more type of fasting during Lent.

Fairweather suggests that fasting is based in the doctrine of God and creation.⁹⁰ Creation must not be allowed to hinder man from obedience to God and his will. This puts the creator and created things in their proper perspective. Fasting is an appropriate way of dealing with the craving for material things in western society. Merton offers this helpful thought: “Fasting is a good thing because food itself is a good thing. But the good things of this world have this about them, that they are good in their season and not out of it.”⁹¹ In this approach, fasting helps support the teaching of moderation. Stookey suggests that fasting should remind us about our dependence on God. These kinds of endeavors depend on grace.⁹²

Fairweather makes a strong case that Christian fasting must lead to spiritual awareness and activity. “The Christian’s supreme aim in fasting is to foster prayerful

⁸⁹ Richard Lobs III, [Robert E. Webber (ed.)]. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Volume 5. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996-1997), p. 245.

⁹⁰ Fairweather, p. 122.

⁹¹ Merton, p. 121.

⁹² Stookey, p. 84.

concentration on the ultimate meaning of his life, and a fast that fails to lead to prayer is not a Christian fast at all.”⁹³ If fasting does not lead to prayer it does not emphasize the proper perspective on creator and created things. It allows created things to retain the primary focus. It appears there is some tension between purposes here. Is fasting and Lent a time of entering into Christ’s suffering or is the focus of fasting to put creation into its proper order? Possibly both could be accomplished but the emphasis during Lent should be more on identifying with Christ.

There have been many motives for fasting through history. In the early church, baptismal candidates were instructed to fast for 40 days from food, “legitimate use of marriage”, and the “pleasure of the bath” (except for Maundy Thursday when they bathed to prepare for baptism).⁹⁴ Adam writes, “Fasting for medical reasons, without any religious motivation, was not uncommon among the Greeks and Romans.”⁹⁵ Fasting could indicate a tendency toward the Gnostic heresy where the body is considered as a lesser reality than the spirit. It is important to avoid the idea that denying the body is for the purpose of achieving a higher spiritual state. We should observe Christ’s model. Westerhoff suggests that too many people give up superfluous food during the season of Lent and too few people strive after the food that God offers.⁹⁶

Giving Up Versus Adding

In many modern contexts, the emphasis during Lent is that the believer gives up something in order to experience the benefits of denying the flesh. Fairweather

⁹³ Fairweather, p. 123.

⁹⁴ Jones, p. 99.

⁹⁵ Adam, p. 93.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

suggests that this is a “dualistic hostility”, implying that material things are somehow evil or a lower reality: “It is clear that genuine Christian fasting has nothing to do either with dietary taboos or with dualistic heresies.”⁹⁷ He questions the arbitrary nature of certain kinds of denial seen today.⁹⁸ He states that food in the stomach is a good thing, not some kind of defilement. The emphasis of fasting in Lent should focus far more on joy and the person of Christ than on penitence and denial. Merton seems to agree: “Lent is then not a season of punishment so much as one of healing.”⁹⁹

Don Saliers writes that Lent is not a time to give up things but rather “... a season of taking on something.”¹⁰⁰ This “taking on” is to identify with the suffering, death, resurrection and Spirit giving of Christ. While Saliers sees the trend toward abstinence from things like chocolate or the like as “not without merit” he urges that Lent demands something deeper and spiritually more substantial.¹⁰¹ Stookey writes that “...Lenten disciplines are not temporary deletions or additions but spiritual exercises that permanently alter us.”¹⁰² The problem is that when material things become an end in themselves, then what is good becomes sinful.¹⁰³ Westerhoff suggests that this is the influence of industrialization – the desire for things (money, fame, power) rather than people. Our language has become noun oriented rather than verb oriented – I have things – friends, job, etc. It reflects an inappropriate pride in possession.¹⁰⁴ This is the essential difference between a focus on *doing* and on *being*. *Doing* (activity) focuses on things and possessing whereas *being* focuses on process

⁹⁷ Fairweather, p. 121.

⁹⁸ An example of this might be to give up coffee for the season of Lent.

⁹⁹ Merton, p. 113.

¹⁰⁰ Don Saliers [Robert E. Webber (ed.)]. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Volume 5. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996-1997), p. 228.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Stookey, p. 82.

¹⁰³ Westerhoff, p. 80.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

and becoming. In this way, an understanding of Lent as a season where we *add* a deeper sense of the process of becoming like Christ is more healthy than a focus on temporary *denial* of things we enjoy. It is especially unhealthy when our fast is characterized by a longing for the future enjoyment of these things.

An Outward Focus or An Inward Focus

There is some danger, in our individualism-oriented culture, that Lent might become something that is only an inward activity. An appropriate understanding of Lent includes both an inward focus and an outward one that sees the practices of Lent as rooted in community. Stookey suggests that we can understand a double focus of Lent.¹⁰⁵ The first considers our human condition, sin and its deadly consequences for individuals and for society. The second is a focus on new possibilities offered to us in Jesus Christ and the practical applications. Both of these foci have a strong corporate sense as well as an emphasis on individual, personal growth. The first focus is more evident in the beginning of Lent and exemplified in the Ash Wednesday service. The second is more evident at the end of the season in Palm Sunday and the Triduum.

Stookey suggests that Lent engages three different groups of the community at different stages of commitment.¹⁰⁶ The first group is converts who are in the final preparation for baptism. The second group includes those who feel the need to keep fresh in the faith, keep from old ways. And the third includes the backslidden and their need for restitution and restoration. These emphases shed light on the importance of internal, individual growth as well as the need for maturity that is reflected and focused in community.

¹⁰⁵ Stookey, p. 80.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Preparation For Baptism/Renewal Of Baptism Vows (Promises made at Baptism)

In the early church, a primary function of the season of the anticipation of Easter was preparation for baptism. In many cases, baptisms were only performed at Easter. Those who wished to be baptized at Easter had to give their names at least 40 days in advance.¹⁰⁷ Throughout Lent baptismal candidates were expected to attend daily instructions, which included learning creeds, responding to moral questions and the Lord's prayer.¹⁰⁸ Lent also focused on making sure that evil spirits had departed from the catechumens.¹⁰⁹ In later times, as a larger percentage of believers had been baptized, the emphasis on teaching almost completely disappeared. This made the earlier practices of Lent largely unintelligible to later centuries.¹¹⁰ As a result, "The history of Lent shows what seems to be a shift of emphasis from preparation for baptism to a general public penitential observation predicated upon what were once exercises for penitents seeking formal reconciliation with the Church in Holy Week."¹¹¹

Lent and The Dangers of Sentimentalism

There is some danger that the season of Lent may become focused inappropriately on emotion. When certain emotions are the primary goal of an activity, sentimentalism is almost always a result. Barclay suggests that an example of this kind of sentimentalism is reflected in the phrase "the lovely picture of the cross".¹¹² This is a distortion for the sake of emotion. He criticizes an example by Peter the Lombard who

¹⁰⁷ Jones, p. 97.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, p. 98.

¹⁰⁹ Jones, p. 111.

¹¹⁰ Adam, p. 95.

¹¹¹ Talley, p. 224.

¹¹² William Barclay. *We Have Seen the Lord!: The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). p. 28.

says, "The Cross was a mouse-trap to catch the devil, baited with the blood of Christ."¹¹³

There is significant danger in sentimentalizing the cross. It is a common problem during Lent. I believe this is because people naturally want to find some kind of emotional experience in the suffering and death of Christ. While an emotional response is appropriate, if it is the goal, abuse is almost certain to occur. A determined focus on the person and work of Christ in his passion will eventually touch the emotions. We must resist the temptation to simply pursue emotion for its own sake. When we do this, we will tend to focus on ourselves rather than on Christ.

Cultural Implications of the Practice of Lent

As with all human practices, culture plays an important role in both forming the practice and its implementation. It is important that this is clearly understood with the season of Lent. Lent is a tradition of the church that is based on principles from Scripture but is not specifically prescribed in Scripture. This means that potential for ethnocentricity is significant when the practices of the church year in Europe or the West are arbitrarily introduced, or even required, in other cultures.

Lent As A Northern Hemisphere Practice

Alexander says that Lent always falls in the springtime.¹¹⁴ This is true if one lives in the northern hemisphere. It is important to realize that for half of the world, this is not true. Therefore, an emphasis on new life and the end of winter as significant in Lent will not make sense for Australian believers if it is during the month of March.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Alexander, p. 67.

When implementing the church year in a new context, it is essential that one understand the practices of local culture or geographical area. While this may be less significant for us in North America because we come from diverse backgrounds, it remains important. It is essential for other work in more indigenous cultures. This is significant in light of this paper because my intent is to introduce the season of Lent to an evangelical culture that is largely ignorant of the tradition of the church year. The intent is that this will be reflected in the Lent worship service plans that are a part of this project.

Davies says that worship is profoundly sociological. Worship is a religious ritual affected by culture.¹¹⁵ This is evident in American culture where faith in God and loyalty to the state are often treated as inseparable. In the Canadian context where I live, this is not nearly as significant. Rather, there is a profound tolerance in Canadian culture that must be respected in the development of any tradition.

New Traditions or Old (The Validity of establishing new traditions)

The balance between the goals of establishing historical, well-founded traditions and introducing new traditions that are appropriate to a cultural context must be maintained. In the context where I am planning to introduce Lent, there are virtually no traditions associated with the church year. It is a wonderful opportunity to embrace some established traditions from twenty centuries of church practice. It is also a good time to introduce some new rituals that might be more meaningful for this time and the future.

For example, going a journey requires preparation. This could be the approach to fasting during Lent. It is preparing for a spiritual journey, which is exemplified in the

¹¹⁵ Davies, p. 493-497.

events of Holy Week. Using similar metaphors to represent the adding of spiritual sensitivity might be a way for a significant new tradition to be established in an evangelical context. It is also possible that some of the negative practices of Lent might be avoided as a result (i.e. Mardi Gras, inappropriate fasting practices, some kinds of penance, etc.)

British Influence

In North America, we see a great deal of British influence in practices of the church year. Examples of this in the season of Lent include terms like Collop Monday, Shrove Tuesday and the word Lent itself.¹¹⁶ While this may be appropriate in a culture that finds its roots in Western Europe, sensitivity to non-European perspectives is important for effective church ministry. This reemphasizes the need to balance the use of established traditions with introduction of new, culturally relevant and sensitive practices. Worship practices that are not directly mandated by the Bible should be adapted to the cultural context where the church is.

Lent In An Evangelical Context

The Need For Meaningful Ritual¹¹⁷

The evangelical church has not embraced most of the practices of the church year. In part, this rejection of the church year happened with the reformers when the *word* as tradition and act was no longer needed. The printing press allowed for the rejection of oral and other kind of active traditions. This is a legacy of Western cerebral emphasis. Western, post enlightenment culture is book oriented. This is true of the

¹¹⁶ Gibson, p. 153.

¹¹⁷ For more on ritual, see: Leonel L. Mitchell. *The Meaning of Ritual*. (Toronto, ON: Paulist Press, 1977).

Western evangelical church as well. Westerhoff suggests there are some weaknesses in a book oriented church culture:

“We speak of the “eyes of faith” and hold that “seeing is believing”. We are wordy and our preaching is discursive. We turn sacred story into historical event and doctrinal statement. We produce persons who use the biblical story as pornography (a subject turned into an object) or as idolatry (a means turned into an end). In an oral culture, on the other hand, learning involves all the senses and the imagination as well. In an oral culture truth is poetic, and story telling is understood as the doorway into the realm of the sacred. Persons in an oral culture experience life as whole, integrated and interconnected. The biblical story becomes a sacred story that is to be imagined and participated in, not studied objectively or believed literally.”¹¹⁸

While we may not agree with all of Westerhoff’s perspectives, it is clear that our cerebrally oriented culture has missed much of the wealth of a world view rooted in oral tradition. In fact, it is fair to say that our culture is hungry for some kind of meaningful ritual. As a result, there is a great deal of experimentation with various rituals in the West. This includes everything from North American First Nations practices to an almost religious approach to professional sporting events. Westerhoff contends that “Ritual story-telling is every community’s primal way of knowing.”¹¹⁹

The lack of ritual in Western evangelicalism has also accompanied an absence of lament, which often has been associated with the season of Lent. “All too often the church has offered us only feasts without fasts, talk instead of silence, togetherness instead of solitude, satisfying tasks instead of suffering, a vacation trip instead of a wilderness pilgrimage.” Lent is an invitation to the desert to “...listen for the voice of God in our restless spirits.”¹²⁰ The observances of the seasons in the church year provide an opportunity for the evangelical church to experience meaningful ritual in

¹¹⁸ Westerhoff, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Westerhoff, p. 73.

worship. This includes celebration *and* lament, contemplation and exuberance, silence and the noises of speech and music.

Possible Components of the Tradition of Lent for the Evangelical Church

The introduction of the season of Lent to an evangelical context requires a balance of historical tradition and new, culturally relevant practices. Both are important. This fits well in a post-modern culture. It seems people are hungry for traditions that are rooted in history but are also eager for new practices that can be passed on to future generations.

Much of the criticism levied by evangelicals against the use of the church year is that it has the potential to lead to empty ritual. It is important that this is taken into account when introducing Lent. It is very possible that this introduction could result in a new evangelical legalism. For example, fasting should be a choice based on desire for deeper spirituality and identity with Christ. However, if fasting becomes something that is legislated as a new ritual, this important motivation will most likely be lost. Merton writes: "Self denial is useless unless it opens the ears of our heart to obey the will of God commanding us to take our place in time, in history and in the work of building His Kingdom of Love and Truth." If this does not happen, self-denial may actually strengthen our opposition to God by focusing on our own autonomy.¹²¹

Some rituals come from clearly delineated biblical commands. Others come from church tradition and practice. The Lord's Supper, for example, is a clearly biblical ritual – a sacrament. The practice of Lent is a tradition of the church. Traditions of the church are important and valuable but maintaining a proper perspective on rituals that come from tradition as opposed to those that are clearly biblical is essential for the

¹²¹ Merton, p. 138.

avoidance of inappropriate expectations. Tradition established by the church, though they are valuable, should not be equated with biblical commands.

One possible negative result of unbiblical expectations is that the focus of certain rituals becomes disproportionately oriented on the activity itself rather than the purpose. An example of this is some of the decadent practices related to the pre-Lent celebration of Mardi Gras. When Lent is perceived as an isolated component of life, it becomes acceptable to do things that are incompatible with the Christian life. If the rituals we practice remain entities in themselves and do not have significant affect on our lives as a whole, they contribute negatively to our spirituality. Holistic spirituality means that the emphases of Lent must be evident through the rest of the year and not just relegated to a forty-day season. Though some of the activities may not continue past Easter, the influence of Lent must lead to deeper commitment to God that is year round.

Personal And Corporate – The Importance of Community

We live in a culture that has a disproportionate emphasis on the individual as opposed to the community. In many cases, it seems corporate worship is merely a group of individuals performing individual acts of worship in a group. I believe it is very important that the practices of Lent have a strong community emphasis. While a focus on personal spirituality and growth is appropriate, it must not eclipse the Lenten journey of the community of faith. However, the role of the individual in the practices of corporate worship is also important. Merton writes:

“...from the moment corporate worship ceases to be genuinely *communal* and becomes, instead merely *collective* – as soon as it ceases to be the *collaboration of free persons*, each offering his own irreplaceable contribution, and becomes the mechanical functioning of anonymous units, whose identity and individual contribution are of no special worth – then it loses its right to be

called liturgy or Christian worship. It is no longer the public witness of free and responsible personalities – it has become a demonstration by mass-men, or slaves.”¹²²

The appropriate practices of Lent include personal spiritual introspection and resulting change. Lent must also include a commitment to the body of Christ and the journey toward Christ-likeness that is rooted in community.¹²³ The church is not merely a group of individuals who worship in the same space. Stookey is critical of the perceived voluntary nature of the church as an organization that meets for efficiency: “Because such a gathering is purely voluntary, people feel free to participate when they wish (particularly when they “need” to “get something out of it”), and to do otherwise the rest of the time.”¹²⁴ This is certainly the hallmark of much of contemporary worship. It is very easy for the focus of Lent to become oriented solely around personal and individual growth. In the college context where I work, this is remarkably evident. Among some students, there is a trend toward giving up something for Lent. This is very personal and often not even discussed with others. Instead of Lent being a communal activity, it is secretive and personal. This is not essentially wrong. However, if it is the *only* focus of Lent, it contributes to a sense of the autonomy of the individual rather than free persons functioning in community.

Don Saliers has given us two practical suggestions for a corporate emphasis during Lent.¹²⁵ The first is that we search the scriptures together – as a community. This is very different than personal, individual devotions. The second is that we engage in communal prayer and fasting. In this way, as a community, we intentionally simplify the way we live. We do this, for a season, so that we may identify with Christ

¹²² Merton, p. 6.

¹²³ Don Saliers [Robert E. Webber (ed.)], p. 228.

¹²⁴ Stookey, p. 76.

¹²⁵ Don Saliers [Robert E. Webber (ed.)], p. 228-230.

and focus outside of our own immediate needs. In this way, we are able to focus on the needs of others, especially the poor in our community.

Although the dangerous trend toward individualism must be avoided during the season of Lent, a focus on inward, personal growth should be emphasized. In the practices of the church, this has often shown itself in denying certain pleasures during Lent. Sometimes this is as simple as abstaining from coffee or chocolate. Sometimes it is commitment to one day of fasting per week. In some cases, this denial simply has a health focus – like giving up smoking. Stookey suggests that our choices during Lent should not simply be oriented on personal health. The focus should be to identify with the mind of Christ and his ministry to the world.¹²⁶ Here are some helpful evaluation questions about Lent that Stookey has given us¹²⁷:

1. What progress am I making in sharing gladly with the poor?
2. How is God's grace evident in my attitudes toward those who irritate me?
3. How is my corporate worship contributing to community?
4. Am I equally charitable to family members?
5. Can I re-budget so as to have more to give away?
6. Do I speak in defense of those who are unjustly maligned?
7. How can I better support legislation that helps the disadvantaged?
8. Am I listening more rather than talking more in personal devotion – thanking more than complaining or requesting?
9. How am I confronting prejudice in my life?
10. How can I practically respond to the hurting people around me, in addition to prayer?
11. Am I consistent in attendance in corporate worship setting an example of service and God's worth in my life?

We can see that these questions provide a focus that is not oriented around the denial of certain things during Lent but rather adding a perspective and emphasis that is in line with the person and teaching of Christ. They are communally oriented and relationally focused. They do not foster individualism in any way. This is consistent with a healthy sense of preparation for Easter. Lent is not something that is perceived

¹²⁶ Stookey, p. 82-83.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

as a time of giving up but a time of adding that might permeate the rest of the church year as well.

A Season of Reflection, Not Busyness

Often, in an evangelical context, the seasons that receive the most emphasis are also the busiest. Christmas, for example, is one of the busiest seasons of the year where I live. Sometimes, it appears that the busier one is, the more value they bring. However, the season of Lent should not be a busy season. It is important that the introduction of Lent to an evangelical context be accompanied with teaching and emphasis on reflection, silence and listening. This can be done in a corporate context. Because it is so rarely done at all in an evangelical context, it must be a foundational component of the season of Lent. The temptation to make Lent a time of activity must be resisted. If this season is a time of busyness and many activities, it detracts for the personal and corporate spiritual journey.¹²⁸ I believe this is especially important for the clergy. Evangelical pastors tend to be overly busy. The sense of many believers in the evangelical church is that the pastoral value is based on how much he or she does. This is a cultural sickness at the best of times but is especially negative during Lent. Clergy should reduce their busyness during this time. This will mean simple corporate worship. It may mean scaled down music. It will mean more attention to reflection and silence. It may mean more public reading and contemplation of scripture. This is very good and appropriate. The Easter season will bring much busy activity. There is no need for busyness during Lent.

¹²⁸ Hickman, Saliers, White, and Stookey, p. 106.; also Don Saliers [Robert E. Webber (ed.)], p. 230.

Specific Applications – Introducing Lent In An Evangelical Context

These are a few specific suggestions regarding the introduction of Lent to an evangelical context. They are oriented more around community than the individual. While personal spiritual growth is important, I believe the emphasis during Lent must be corporate. In the same way that the people of Israel wandered toward the Promised Land as a nation and the early church waited on the Holy Spirit together, we must move through the journey of Lent as a community today.

Fasting has always a part of the season of Lent. It is good to continue this tradition. However, an emphasis on personal health and weight loss should not be the primary focus. Rather, the activity of fasting should provide time and reminder for prayer. This can happen individually but should happen corporately. Organized communal prayer need not be excessively draining on clergy. In fact, this is a good opportunity for lay leadership. A specific example of this could be that one meal per week be designated a time of fasting and corporate prayer. Communal involvement should be strongly encouraged, however, it should be done in a way that encourages participation rather than instills negative pressure.

A second practical application is the focus on the needs of the poor, both inside and outside of the church community. In many cases, giving to local food banks or homeless shelters can do this. It may be accomplished by a heightened awareness of specific needs in the church community. Possibly a percentage of the general church giving during this season could be designated to serve the needy. It is important that this not result in busyness, however. Ideally, this will become a natural part of life practice rather than something seasonal.

Over most of the history of the practice of Lent, the décor of the church has been significantly affected. This could be a good application for an evangelical context. The

church building should look simple and somewhat stark during Lent. This will not result in extra work for people. Rather, those who have the responsibility to decorate the church will have time free to focus on other things. Simplicity and starkness are appropriate to the time of preparation for Easter.

An often-neglected component of corporate worship in the evangelical church is related to what the leaders wear. Possibly Lent could be a season for the introduction of vestment oriented around colors related to the season. According to Adam, the color for Lent is Purple.¹²⁹ However, according to Alexander, colors should be veiled during Lent.¹³⁰ In any case, the clothing of those who lead worship could contribute significantly to the tone and emphasis of worship during Lent. This introduction, however, must be accompanied by teaching. It is important that people understand why vestments are being used.

Lent is an excellent time for a simplification of the use of the arts in worship. The contemporary trend, especially in evangelical contexts, is that music is more and more complicated. This results in the need for a great deal of preparation time for paid as well as volunteer staff. Moving toward a simpler kind of music in worship would allow for more reflection time. It would also delineate the season of Lent as one where life and worship is simplified. I believe this would be very healthy in the college context where I work. Rather than submitting to the common temptation to outdo each other, musicians would be given permission to focus on simplicity and the work of Christ in our community in a new way. This would be a very helpful, if temporary, emphasis.

I believe it is important that each church establish its own traditions as well as utilize historical practices when Lent is introduced. This is appropriate in light of the

¹²⁹ Adam, p. 96.

¹³⁰ Neil Alexander, [Robert E. Webber (ed.)]. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Volume 5. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996-1997), p. 227.

variety of practices of Lent through the history of the church. They are very different. It is also important that traditions are relevant to the geographical, sociological and cultural context of a community of believers. In a college context, this means working around the academic year. In my case, it means working around a large youth event that falls during Lent. This is a celebrative event. It is appropriate to work around these kinds of things. Over time, it is possible that school events might be re-scheduled. However, the introduction of something new must respect what is already in place.

Conclusion

The practice of Lent is a valuable and important historical tradition of the church. Because of this, its introduction should be considered for an evangelical context. In addition to this, the contemporary evangelical church is hungry for the introduction of meaningful ritual and very open to historical church practice. If anything, meaningful ritual is something that is lacking or absent in most evangelical churches. I believe the church is ready and in some cases, eager to participate in Lent. Young people, especially, seem to be longing for rootedness in their worship experience. Lent provides this opportunity. As careful attention is given to the introduction of culturally relevant, spiritually significant Lenten practices, I believe the evangelical church will be enriched and deepened. I also believe that individual Christians will be very positively affected by this focus on Christ likeness and obedience.

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