

UNDERSTANDING LENT

The Mardi Gras season is ended and the season of Lent has begun. Many of our friends began the Lent this past Wednesday when they were marked with a bit of ash on their foreheads. Now, for forty days, they will celebrate Lent, a period whereby adherents surrender some item of pleasure or luxury until Easter. It is impossible to fully detail all of the particulars surrounding this period of the year in the space allowed, but we will attempt to offer some explanation as to the origin of the celebration.

Lent begins, according to Roman Catholic teaching, forty days before Easter. The holiday claims its origins just prior to the founding of the Roman church sometime in the 300's, probably by 331, under the influence of Athanasius, a fourth century church leader. Originally, Lent seemed to be a period of fasting. The kind of fast varied from a strict fast of one or two meals a week, to a fast that excluded only meat, or one in which the celebrant partook only of dry bread. Today, most do not engage in a true fast of any sort. Officially, the only prohibition from the Catholic hierarchy is that meat and fish may not be consumed at the same meal. All of the particulars associated with Lent have come down from either the Roman Catholic Church or from protestant bodies who partake of the Lenten doctrine for there is no Biblical example or mandate.

The desire of those who celebrate Lent is to focus upon the crucifixion of Christ. We are pleased that Christ receives such attention and are happy that any event drives one to a deeper consideration of the Lamb of God. The question is whether such a celebration by the church is authorized, taught or even suggested by Scripture. We ought tread carefully anytime we apply earthly wisdom to divinely appointed practices such as worship (1 Corinthians 2:5; 2 Corinthians 1:12; c.f. 1 Corinthians 1:21-30; 1 Corinthians 2:13)

The churches of Christ know of no such practice as Lent, for there is no indication of any such practice among our first century brethren, and there is certainly no authority for the church to engage in such. Even the online Catholic Encyclopedia declares that there is likely no apostolic tradition for Lent. Their writers affirm that the closest possible event was a *weekly* feast which celebrated Christ's resurrection. So we see that the season of Lent is a creation of man, a creation of good intentions certainly, but still an innovation. We certainly concur with the absence of any Biblical or Apostolic teaching concerning Lent. We disagree, however, with the characterization that the weekly feast among Christians was to celebrate the *resurrection* of Christ.

Christians did come together to "break bread" on the first day of the week (Acts 2:42; 20:7). This was to participate in the communion as created by Jesus himself (Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:19, 20). A careful examination of these passages reveals that Jesus' suffering and death are the primary focus of the meal. Paul adds another purpose when he warns that a man must first examine himself so that he can partake in a worthy fashion (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Such is not to say the resurrection of Christ is unimportant. Paul writes that without the resurrection our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14). The very time of our weekly assembly is directly linked to the day Jesus rose from the tomb (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). The resurrection seals Jesus' victory over Satan and, by extension, our victory over Satan as well.

Can we see the Godly wisdom of celebrating Christ's death *every* week rather than setting aside a special annual event? God desires holy living throughout the year, not during special periods alone. While we are thankful of any event that directs hearts and minds toward the Savior, we encourage our friends to return to the teaching of our Lord as revealed only in Holy Scripture. May we always give proper place to the Bible while rejecting the wisdom of men.

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