



# Giving Up Calvin For Lent'

I'm finding it rather intriguing to reflect on the meaning of Lent in a year in which we recognize the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The relationship Protestants and Catholics enjoy in the 21st century admittedly has its blips and controversies, but we're so much more congenial towards each other than what the Reformers could ever have imagined back in the day. It's interesting, too, how even Christian observances of the Church calendar are more aligned to one another today than was possible after the fallout of the Reformation. John Calvin, for instance, viewed the religious practices associated with Lent as oppressive and void of meaning. That today's Presbyterians might choose to "give up" something for Lent is a little ironic because we do so without the iconic Reformer's blessing. The much-venerated theologian would also be stunned to find Protestants wearing ashes on their foreheads at the beginning of Lent. Calvin and other Reformation leaders sought to eradicate practices of popular piety on the grounds that these rituals were not singularly Christ-centered. Ash Wednesday and other Lenten observances were among those practices that Reformers sought to eliminate. In his *Institutes* (IV.12.20), Calvin criticized the fasting associated with Lent as a "superstitious observance," believing that the discipline had become a substitute rather than an aid to right relationship with Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The pendulum swung so far from the Latin Church, however, that much of the Reformed tradition lost ties to ancient practices that supported Christian prayer and piety. It was

not until the twentieth century that Protestants fully enjoyed a broad return to practices such as pilgrimage, iconography, and *lectio divina*. So, what prompted Presbyterians to revive Lenten observance? The shift began in the early 1960s after Vatican II, after which there were major reforms within the Roman Catholic Church. These reforms embraced the best of Christian piety and opened a door that had been closed to increased dialogue and relationships between Catholics and Protestants. It paved the way to a mutual sharing of the best of both traditions. This in turn led to liturgical resources that allowed the two traditions to worship in greater unity. For instance, in 1970 The Westminster Press published a new *Worshipbook* that offered Presbyterians a full Lord's Day lectionary, and thereby, a resource to promote lectionary-based preaching. Use of the lectionary texts made the rhythms of the church year more visible to worshipers and guided those who planned worship to take greater notice of special days and seasons. Increased attention to the church calendar in time played a significant role for Presbyterian's reclamation of classical spiritual practices tied to the season of Lent.

Another factor in a return to classical spirituality is that the boundaries that once divided Christian traditions are not what they used to be. Your local college campus is very likely a perfect example of this trend. If you were to survey college students who identify as Presbyterian, you are as likely to discover someone who was raised Roman Catholic as you are to find someone who was raised American Baptist

