## 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 it's 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

or Lutheran. Recent studies disclose that over 40 percent of adults have switched to a religious affiliation that is different from the tradition in which they were raised.<sup>3</sup> It makes sense that as young people migrate from one church to another (or from one expression of faith to another) they bring pieces of their previous worship traditions with them. Ancient spiritual practices such as labyrinths, centering prayer, the Daily Office, along with the rituals we associate with Lent are part of an increasing trend toward the Christian's embrace of mystery, ritual, and awe.

What might Presbyterians take from the Reformation's 500-year legacy that could inform today's Lenten practice? If Calvin's chief opposition to Lent was around fasting, then we should not worry that we've become overly zealous in our Lenten devotion. Not many Presbyterians – if any take on the extreme fast prescribed by the Latin Church in the 15th and 16th centuries. We are far less radical in our fasting. For us, fasting means to "give up" something during Lent by removing one thing from our diet, such as chocolate, sugar, caffeine—or even something as substantial as red meat or dairy. Some of us choose to fast for one meal each week and may even donate the cost of that meal to local or world missions (or to One Great Hour of Sharing). An expanded notion of Lenten "fasting" might encompass something other than food. In this case, a person might choose to abstain from watching television or using Facebook. And finally, there is the possibility of honoring Lent through adding a practice instead of abstaining from a practice. We might

"add" a meditative walk or more mindful eating practices. Any of these spiritual practices are perfectly in line with Reformed theology if we are engaging them as a means of increasing attention to Christ. If Calvin were here to see our creative acts of devotion, perhaps he might indeed be willing to modify his earlier critique of the Lenten observance. Calvin was opposing a system that demanded acts of piety as proof of unconditional loyalty to the church when these acts had become a substitute for an authentic relationship with Christ. He objected to Lenten fasting on the basis of its elevation to a practice that somehow *earned* God's favor, and he would have nothing to do with it.

We can discern the appropriateness of our Lenten observance by evaluating our practices in light of the gospel. We honor Calvin's legacy when we refrain from empty rituals that fall short of honoring Christ. As we prepare to observe another season of Lent, let's consider what unforced rhythms of grace might guide our spiritual practices toward greater receptivity to the love of Christ in us, and for us, and through us.

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## Notes

- A previous version of this article was published by Congregational Ministries Publishing in *IDEAS! Magazine*, Volume 8, Issue 3, Spring 2009
- 2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.12.20 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).
- 3. *Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life*, Feb. 25, 2008. See http://religions.pewforum.org.

