

Should a Christian Observe the Lenten Liturgical Calendar?

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

Many Christians over the years in my independent congregation have asked me about Lent and its significance to the Christian life. In this study, I would like to address the issues related to Lent and see if this seasonal practice of various denominational churches has any connection with the Christian life. Should we corporately practice a prescribed Liturgical calendar? Was Lent practiced during the days of the early assemblies? What is the significance of this practice?

Background of Lenten Season

Lent is the period of forty fast days from Ash Wednesday (the day marking the beginning of Lent) to the Saturday immediately preceding Easter. It is to be a time of inspection leading up to Easter. Lent is traditionally described as lasting for forty days, in commemoration of the forty days which, according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus spent fasting in the desert before the beginning of His public ministry, where he endured temptation by the Devil. However, different denominations calculate the forty days of Lent differently. In most Western traditions the Sundays are not counted as part of Lent; thus the period from Ash Wednesday until Easter consists of 40 days when the Sundays are excluded.

Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras is the period that precedes Lent. It's a time people are to "live it up" in excess and indulgence before they place themselves under the Lenten Liturgical Calendar. This is called "yo-yo" living or "doe-doe" living. It is not consistent Christian living. God expects holiness from our lives every day (2 Cor. 7:1). This time of Lent is intended to be a period of repentance, abstinence, prayer and works of charity. Of course, all of these things are important in the Christian life if they are kept in a Biblical frame of reference. But this is usually not the case with those who observe Lent.

Reasons for Not Observing Lent

There are 12 basic reasons why a Christian should not observe Lent.

#1

Because Lent is NOT modeled after Biblical fasting.

Lent is viewed as a time when people, through acts of abstinence, reformation, and charity seek a type of superficial and “part time” spirituality in hope of improving or approving themselves before God through meritorious actions. This is not Biblical fasting.

Whenever fasting is commanded, then it becomes a wrong practice, since God’s Word NEVER commands the church to fast. However, when God’s people willingly decide to fast, then they are to remember to not fast like the Pharisees of the day of Jesus (Matt. 6:16-18). These hypocrites or play actors wanted to impress people with their time of fasting. Whenever fasting is done in order to impress others or make yourself appear more spiritual than others, then it is wrong.

The practice of Lent is NOT Biblical fasting which was designed to be secret and not open, personal and not liturgical, meaningful and not ascetical (Col. 2:20-21), individual and not ecclesiastical. Lent is a designed type of fast where food and certain practices are often given up by an individual as an act of Reformation to please God. ** Biblical fasting as presented in the Bible involves focusing on God in prayer as one seeks His guidance and answers to prayer. Biblical fasting had nothing to do with reformation (trying to improve yourself or approve yourself before God by an act of fasting). Biblical fasting involved humbly seeking God’s will and guidance through prayer; it did NOT involve gaining God’s favor through some ritual practice or necessarily result in spirituality through giving up certain practices.

The Bible DOES talk about believers in the early church fasting in connection with prayer. It was an accepted practice during the early church. Therefore, we cannot assume that fasting is a wrong practice for the church today. However, fasting was a practice that was never commanded for

church life. Also, the Lenten practice of fasting is NOT the same thing as Biblical fasting which involved seeking God's guidance and direction in one's life in relationship to prayer.

Fasting is when a person abstains from eating for a specified amount of time in order to demonstrate his earnestness and desire for God to hear and answer his prayers. It was a way to periodically demonstrate a believer's desire and deep longing as he prayed to God. It was a way to show to God earnestness in prayer as one would seek answer to a certain prayer or receive guidance while praying.

Fasting in the Marriage: Paul spoke about fasting and how a married couple may want to refrain from physical relations with each other as they express their request and prayerful desire to seek God's will and guidance about some matter (1 Cor. 7:5). Of course, this is always to be done with agreement and understanding. Fasting does not necessarily guarantee that one's prayers will be answered in the way that he asked for it to be answered. God may still say "no" or answer in a different way altogether. As noble as our fast may be, we may not receive what we asked for.

Fasting and Guidance: When the early church leaders (prophets & teachers) sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey, they found it profitable to fast and pray about the matter (asking for God's guidance and protection) before sending them away (Acts 13:2-3). They spent time in prayer and fasting over this important spiritual matter. They wanted God to give them wisdom and show them the right course of action to take. Their desire to seek God's wisdom and direction was indicated by their fast.

Fasting and Elders: Paul and Barnabas also prayed and fasted when ordaining elders in the cities when they were building God's work (see Acts 14:23). Their prayer and fasting was connected with their prayerful desire to see God's church grow within these localities and see these new ordained pastors preach the word faithfully and without reservation.

Fasting and Difficulties: Paul the apostle practiced fasting in connection with his journeys in life (2 Cor. 11:27; 6:4-5). He saw the need to pray and

fast as he encountered great difficulties and problems in life as a preacher. Fasting was a way to demonstrate his utter dependency upon God for help and divine strength as he faced tremendous challenges.

Fasting and Temptation: It may be fitting at times to fast and pray when we are going through strong satanic temptation in our lives or feel like we need extra assistance to overcome Satan or break down demonic strongholds (Matt. 17:21). Fasting does NOT produce victory but it demonstrates to God a sincere, humble and dependent heart regarding victory.

From these verses, we discover that fasting is a spiritual exercise connected to prayer that truly demonstrates a Christian's humility, desire, and believing heart before God. Fasting is connected with the earnest prayers of a humble believer who asks God for wisdom, direction, blessing or help in some area of his life.

Note: The Bible tells us that fasting was part of the Jewish practice connected with the Day of Atonement (Acts 27:9; Lev. 23:27, 29). Fasting was a necessary mandate of the Old Testament Law that God gave to the Jews. However, God never did authoritatively require the New Testament church to fast. There is no command given to the church in the new dispensation to fast. Therefore, it is not a requirement given to the New Testament church. Fasting in this dispensation is always to be done voluntarily and without any obligation attached to it. God does not command us to fast, but He does commend the practice of fasting.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise between God and individuals. It does not have anything to do with approving or improving yourself before God on a legalistic basis by some outward practice of refusing food, nor is fasting to be done in a mechanical or legalistic manner like the Roman Catholic fast during the 40 days of Lent.

There may be times when you may want to draw near to God in prayer and refrain from eating for a length of time in order to express your earnestness and desire to seek God's wisdom about a certain situation or God's answer for some important decision in life (Ezra 8:21-23). Fasting shows one's humbleness and spiritual dependence upon God!

Always remember that fasting is not commanded in the New Testament church dispensation. The church was never called on by God to corporately fast. You do not have to fast in order to be spiritual. Fasting is NOT a sign of spirituality. Fasting is NOT one of the fruits of the Spirit. God does not love us any more or think any more of us if we choose to fast. Likewise, He does not think any less of us if we do not fast (1 Cor. 8:8). Fasting is less important than simply doing God's will and walking with the Lord (Micah 6:8).

Whenever we engage in some form of discipline that crunches our lives and robs us of our freedom to serve and live for Christ without bondage to legalistic rules, then something is wrong. Any discipline that we have in our Christian life is to produce greater freedom for us to live holy and separated lives for Christ, without any set pattern of rules and regulations that become weighty and lay heavy upon our lives. Discipline is one thing; bondage to rules is quite another thing (Gal. 5:1).

One of the greatest spiritual benefits of fasting is learning to become more attentive to God and more aware of our own inadequacy and God's sufficiency to meet our needs (Phil. 4:19). Fasting actually is to get our mind off of self and place it on God and what His will and way is for our life. In this way we can fast today and do it personally without commanding it upon the rest of the church. The church was never authoritatively ordered to fast. Fasting is a personal matter. God does not COMMAND fasting; He COMMENDS it.

#2

Because Lent does NOT commend a person to God.

Certain dieting restrictions are required during Lent (no meat, only fish, no chocolate, etc.). A believer does not get closer to God through dieting (refusing certain foods) but by delighting in Him? Psalm 37:4; Galatians 2:20. Eating or refusing to eat certain things is never a sign of spirituality (1 Tim. 4:1-4 – “Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.”

Refusing to eat is normally a sign of false teaching and erroneous spirituality. Observing Lent by refusing to eat certain foods does not make us more commendable to God (1 Corinthians 8:8 – “But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse”).

Whether we eat or do not eat does not express greater dedication to God since we can do all of these things to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Our dedication and commitment is not to be witnessed through asceticism or the subtraction of normal activities related to everyday living but through actual surrender and commitment to God and His cause (Rom. 12:2). What we need to give up are those things that get in the way of us following Christ and doing His will on a “daily” basis (Luke 9:23). Surrender is NOT giving up those activities and foods that are amoral and which God has given us to enjoy.

Surrender and dedicating ourselves to God means that we yield to God everyday of our lives and find victory (Rom. 6:11-13). We must remember that our life is not more pleasing or acceptable to God when we follow a manmade Liturgical Calendar but when we walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) on a daily basis and bring forth fruit for God’s glory (Gal. 5:22-23).

Living for Jesus is NOT following liturgy, manmade religious ordinances and formulas, which have no Biblical basis, but placing our lives under Christ’s authority (1 Cor. 7:22-23; Luke 6:46), drawing close to Him (Phil. 3:10; James 4:8), and revolving our everyday living around His person, power, and presence (Gal. 2:20).

#3

Because Lent does NOT prescribe immediate prayer and confession.

Prayer and confession is practiced during Lent. However, prayer is to be practiced continually throughout the year “Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer” (Romans 12:12). Furthermore, we should not have to wait for a prescribed season to search our hearts and confess our sins. Confession is to be done at the moment one sins (1 John

1:9). It's not to be made during a certain Lenten season. Lent stresses season praying while the Bible stresses instant praying. Our desire in respect to prayer, confession, and seeking God's path for our lives should be that of David who searched his heart as God convicted him (Ps. 51:10). David did not wait for the Lenten season to get right with God!

#4

Because Lent does NOT legalistically save a person.

Penance is also observed during Lent. If penance is defined as a payment to God for sins committed, there is no such thing, since Jesus already paid for our sins with His blood on the Cross of Calvary (John 19:30). Some will view the Lenten season as a time to gain God's favor and salvational blessing (Titus 3:5). For many people, fasting is intended to bring a person salvation or acceptance before God. This action of fasting for salvation is condemned in the Scripture (Luke 18:9-14). The sacrifice of Lent is simply a man-centered non-biblical abstinence that places man at the forefront of the salvation experience. The Biblical fast is a true fast that centers upon a person's desire to see God work in his life in a certain manner or see God answer prayer; it has nothing to do with meriting God's favor through reformation and silly acts of asceticism.

History: Lent was adopted by Romanism back in 525. They borrowed the ritual from the ancient Babylonian ceremony of fasting, which was held in honor of the miraculously conceived child Tammuz (Ezekiel 8:14). As already stated, Lent is not a true fast because people still eat food during these days. Furthermore, many fast for the wrong reasons – gaining God's favor and demonstrating a show of false humility (Col. 2:23). Fasting in the New Testament was never done as a sign of spirituality but a sincere desire to hear from God and be lead by God.

For many, the season of Lent acts as a kind of saving reformation process for many people. Some people attempt to abstain from smoking cigarettes for a period of time or drinking alcohol in order to have God be pleased with them. They abstain from eating eggs, cheese, chocolate bars or meats on certain days in order to gain favor with God. These types of actions are not

Biblically fasting and they are not pleasing to God by these actions. They are simply pagan legalistic acts which are intended to have God focus on them practicing some meritorious action instead of focusing on God's grace as the only way of salvation (Eph. 2:8-9).

#5

Because Lent does NOT portray the need for immediate repentance and the forsaking of sin.

Repentance is practiced during Lent. Biblically defined, repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of behavior towards a sin committed. Why wait for the Lenten season to repent. Repent now! Repentance should take place immediately after sinning and not wait until a special time of the year (Rev. 3:17; 2 Cor. 7:9). When we repent we don't demonstrate it by giving up food and other insignificant things that don't matter to God. We give up the sin! So, while you are at it, wipe those ashes off your forehead: they look ridiculous!

We don't need meaningless signs of repentance today but repentance! Ash Wednesday is the day Catholics and others line up before the priest to ritually have ashes smeared on to their foreheads in the shape of a cross. They normally do not wash them off but will wear them around all day until they came off or they take their next shower or bath. This is a morbid focus on death and darkness goes against Jesus' direct instructions (Matt. 6:16-17).

#6

Because Lent does NOT promote a consistent pattern of good works.

Almsgiving is part of the Lenten season. However, good works in relationship to helping others should transpire throughout the entire year. Whenever there is someone who truly has a need the believers should, as much as possible, seek to reach out to that person and help meet their need (Gal. 6:10). "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels *of compassion* from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (1 John 3:17). We are called upon to

develop a consistent pattern of good works (Titus 3:8, 14; Heb. 10:24; Eph. 2:10) and not to focus on seasonal almsgiving and good deeds. Furthermore, many who practice Lenten almsgiving do so to earn meritorious points before God, thinking that God will somehow accept them on the basis of their almsgiving and good deeds. Of course, this is a fallacy (Rom. 3:10).

#7

Because Lent does NOT practice a DAILY self denial of selfish and sinful practices.

Self-denial is part of Lent. However, the self-denial of Lent is often involved with petty things such as denying oneself of meat, coffee, or some other ridiculous practice. Self denial (denying ourselves of sin and selfish practices) commanded to be done on a daily basis and not only during a certain time of the year, “And he said to *them* all, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross **daily**, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Although many observe the season of Lent for various reasons Christians need to refocus on their relationship and commitment to the Lord everyday of their lives (Rom. 12:2). This commitment consists of forsaking worldly sins – not meat, foods, and other amoral things which make no difference in living the Christian life. God’s people must remember that living the Christian life involves commitment 365 days a year. It’s a “day by day” Christian life and it has nothing to do with prescribed Liturgical calendar. Seasonal consecration and denial of sins is not in accordance with God’s Word.

#8

Because the practice of Lent is NOT found in the Bible as a corporate function of the Church.

Scripture is silent concerning the observance of a liturgical calendar. Where do we find the apostles commanding it or the New Testament epistles suggesting that individual and independent churches follow this procedure? Just the opposite is seen in New Testament revelation (Rom. 14:1-5).

Nowhere are the churches or the believer commanded to follow a certain calendar of prescribed Church events, but neither is the individual believer necessarily prohibited from doing so, if he has right motives. However, no Christian should be judged for failing to participate in liturgy. Colossians 2:16 is very clear on this matter. How each day of the year is observed should be a personal decision and matter. “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*.”

#9

Because the practice of Lent is NOT a sign of true spirituality.

Spirituality in the Christian life does not pertain to giving up certain non-essential items. The idea of “touch not; taste not; handle not” (Col. 2:21) has no spiritual significance in relationship to the real meaning of Christian living. Giving up food and stopping certain normal activities of everyday living does not improve our commitment and relationship to God in any way. We don’t have to be subject to manmade “ordinances” (prescribed rituals and ceremonies) which follow strict liturgy. The problem is not really a liturgical calendar but what is practiced during the days of the calendar and for what reason it is practiced. Many people actually feel that following some ritual practices makes them more spiritually acceptable to God (Rom. 12:2). True spirituality consists of being filled with the Spirit and the Biblical prescribed fruit that comes from the Spirit’s work in our hearts and lives (Eph. 5:18-23).

#10

Because Lent is NOT patterned after true Christian living.

The problem with most people who observe Lent is that it becomes primarily an empty ritual to follow. According to Scripture, this is unacceptable to God. Christian living is not ritual living. “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). Ritualism is the death knell to true Christian living which involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ on a daily basis (“For to me to live is

Christ” - Phil. 1:21). In Philippians 3:10 Paul’s desire was, “That I may know him” (Jesus Christ). The Christian life is all about a loving relationship with a Person – Jesus Christ. It is not about going through certain rituals or giving up certain items, which have no connection with true spirituality.

Lenten practices are often superficial acts which are not focused on having a daily walk with God (Gen. 5:24; 6:9; James 4:8). We don’t draw closer to God by practicing ritual observances but by cleaning up our lives from spiritual defilement and fellowshiping with the Lord (2 Cor. 6:17-18).

#11

Because Lent is NOT focused on the Spirit’s daily work and ministry in the believer’s life.

Walking in the Spirit’s power on a daily basis (Gal. 5:16) and relying upon His power for victory, fruit (Galatians 5:22-23) and blessing is what’s important to God. Lenten observances suggest a seasonal departure from the normal routine of living, but Scripture conveys that we are to have a consistent pattern and walk by the Spirit’s enablement and power, which is continually operative in our lives. We need daily victory over the flesh by the Spirit’s enablement (Gal. 5:17) and not just during the Lenten season. The Christian should possess a moment-by-moment walk by the Spirit’s power (Gal. 5:25) and not be focused on a certain season for victory and cleansing. We are to live by the Spirit’s constant power (Acts 1:8) and not be focused on manmade ordinances which do not supply us with any ability to overcome sin (Rom. 7:4-25).

#12

Because Lent is NOT living a consistent Christian life.

Christians must always remember that possessing a right relationship with God and walking with God is what’s important all year long – not just during the season of Lent. James 4:8 declares, “Draw nigh (near) to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *ye* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *ye* double minded.” There are those who try and “live it up” before

the season of Lent. They want to “sow their oats” as many say today. But this is not the Christian way of living, which involves commitment to holiness on a daily basis (1 Pet. 1:15). The Christian mindset and attitude everyday of his life must be to “live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Titus 2:11). This kind of living should not just be practiced during the Lent season.

A person is not missing something in the will of God if he fails to participate in the Lenten season since sanctification is the will of God for our lives (1 Thess. 4:3). Lent really has nothing to do with the regular Christian living and sanctification.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, living the Christian life is not a seasonal matter (Luke 9:23 – “take up thy cross daily”). It does not involve the Lenten philosophy “to eat or not to eat” (Col. 2:21) since none of these practices commend us to God or dedicate us to Him in any greater way (1 Cor. 8:8). The Christian should not focus on Lenten practices but a consistent walk with God throughout the entire year (Phil. 3:10). It involves walking in the Spirit’s power daily (Gal. 5:25). It involves a loving relationship with Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:20). It has nothing to do with rituals or giving up non-essential things in life, whether food or (1 Tim. 4:4) in order to appear more spiritual before God or gain acceptance before God. Refusing to eat does not improve ourselves or approve ourselves before God. Furthermore, true repentance over sin and the forsaking of sin is to occur immediately when it invades our life and seeks to control us (1 John 1:9). The Christian life involves enjoying the salvation we can have through Jesus Christ without trying to gain merit before God through outward acts of human goodness and kindness (Rom. 3:10).

An Email Sent to the Brethren

Below is an email I sent to several people who asked me about the observance of Lent. It may be helpful to give to others in relationship to the practice of Lent. I will share it with you as I finish out this study.

Should a Christian Observe Lent?

Here is a simple answer to this question. Giving up food and stopping certain normal activities of everyday living does not improve our commitment and relationship to God in any way. We don't have to be subject to manmade "ordinances" (prescribed rituals and ceremonies) which follow strict liturgy.

Colossians 2:20-21

"Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances (Touch not; taste not; handle not)."

Whether we eat or do not eat does not express greater dedication to God since we can do all of these things to the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

Observing Lent by refusing to eat certain foods does not make us more commendable to God.

1 Corinthians 8:8

"But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse."

Our dedication and commitment is not to be witnessed through asceticism or the subtraction of normal activities related to everyday living but through actual surrender and commitment to God and His cause (Rom. 12:2). What we need to give up are those things that get in the way of us following Christ and doing His will on a "daily" basis (Luke 9:23). Surrender is not giving up those activities and foods that are amoral and which God has given us to enjoy.

1 Timothy 4:4

"For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving."

Surrender and dedicating ourselves to God means that we yield to God everyday of our lives and find victory (Rom. 6:11-13). We must remember that our life is not more pleasing or acceptable to God when we follow a manmade Liturgical Calendar but when we walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) on a daily basis and bring forth fruit for God's glory (Gal. 5:22-23).

Living for Jesus is NOT following liturgy, manmade religious ordinances and formulas, which have no Biblical basis, but placing our lives under Christ's authority (1 Cor. 7:22-23; Luke 6:46), drawing close to Him (Phil. 3:10; James 4:8), and revolving our everyday living around His person, power, and presence (Gal. 2:20).

“Living for Jesus, a life that is true,
Striving to please Him in all that I do;
Yielding allegiance, glad hearted and free,
This is the pathway of blessing for me.”