

Lent

Last Wednesday was the beginning of a holiday on the Christian liturgical calendar called Lent. I did not realize what day it was until Mark Roberts and I had breakfast at Uncle Bills Pancake House and saw several people with dark ash stains (thus, Ash Wednesday) on their foreheads. Since the holiday is not specified in the Bible, I thought I would devote this week's bulletin space to explaining what it is all about for those who might not be aware.

Lent is recognized by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and Episcopalians throughout the world. Although the days are counted differently among the denominations, Lent represents the forty days leading up to Easter, which is the celebration of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection from the dead.

The forty days are symbolic of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness (Matt. 4) that mark the beginning of his public ministry. Like Jesus' time in the wilderness, the forty days of Lent are to be spent in prayer and fasting, both from foods and other forms of pleasure; and like Jesus' time in the wilderness, it symbolizes one's preparation for service in God's kingdom. According to Kenneth Osbeck, "The Lenten period should result in a spiritual self-examination and in rededicated living for each devout believer, preparing us for the celebration of our risen Lord." One common element of Lent is the giving up of something pleasurable that may serve as a personal vice. Last week I heard people talk about giving up caffeine, certain foods, and Facebook for the next forty days. Just as a side note, Mardi Gras is celebrated on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and is a time of excess and debauchery to "get your fill" before abstaining from pleasure for forty full days. That's kind of messed up!

The history of Lent is difficult to trace. At the end of the second century, Irenaeus and Tertullian described fasting for two days—about 40 hours—before Easter Sunday, which was believed to be the amount of time that Jesus was buried in the tomb. Later, others fasted for six days (a week before Easter), and other still, for three weeks. In 325 the duration became fixed at forty days when the Council of Nicaea attempted to systematize and unify the Roman Empire under one common system of Christianity.

The Lenten tradition is ancient, to be sure, but it is not Biblical. Before any of us gets on a high horse, however, in order to condemn or poke fun at those who abstain from certain indulgences during Lent, let me suggest that God's call is much stricter. Before I criticize those who follow a system that is not Biblical I had better make sure that I am following that which is.

Jesus prepared himself to serve God for about thirty years (Lk. 3:23). The apostles learned from Jesus for the duration of three Passovers, and at the end of that time they still didn't have it all figured out. Paul prepared himself for three years, ¹⁵ "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, *but I went away into Arabia*, and returned again to Damascus. ¹⁸ *Then after three years* I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days" (Gal. 1:15-18). What kind of preparations have you made to serve God?

Clearly, our preparation for a life of Christianity is something that happens on a daily basis. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross **DAILY** and follow Me" (Lk. 9:23). Paul explained to the Corinthians that this is exactly what he had done, "I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, **I die daily**" (1 Cor. 15:30). Our preparation for self-denial and service to God does not happen every forty days prior to Easter. Instead, it happens every single morning before I even get out of bed. Every single day must begin with preparation and commitment to self-denial in order to live the next waking hours as kingdom workers. If nothing else, and minimally, let this article serve as motivation to begin each of our days in prayer and thought about how I will die today.

Ryan Boyer, Preacher

Ellisville Church of Christ

www.SimpleChristians.com

62 Henry Ave. | Ellisville, MO 63021

Office: (636) 207-0789

Email: EllisvilleCofC@att.net