

Is “Lent” Christian Sacrifice?

*“I beseech you
therefore, brethren,
by the mercies of
God, that ye
present your bodies
a living sacrifice,
holy, acceptable
unto God, which is
your reasonable
service.”*

—Romans 12:1

ON MARCH 5, 2014, MANY sincere believers in the Christian world will observe Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Lent is a period of forty days of penitential preparation prior to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is observed by Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Church, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and various other Protestant denominations. Strange as it may seem, the Bible says nothing about Lent or any such observance. To learn about this ritual it is necessary to search writings that came later, starting around the fourth century.

The establishment of this period of penitential preparation seems to have formally begun as a result

of the actions which took place during the Nicaean Council of A.D. 325. The council called this period by the Latin name *Quadragesima*, meaning forty days of fasting. As conflict arose in the church and it split into Western and Eastern branches, the exact time period assigned to Lent varied because of their different rules on fasting.

The features of “forty days” and “fasting” appear to have been associated by church leaders with our Lord’s forty days in the wilderness. Jesus went into the wilderness to meditate immediately following his baptism in the river Jordan. There he fasted forty days and forty nights, and there the devil came and tempted him. (Matt. 4:1-11) However, our Lord’s meditative period in the wilderness was not intended to be a pattern for a ritual concerning his later death and resurrection, but rather an illustration of temptations that beset all consecrated followers of Christ.

When Lent was first established, fasting consisted of one meal a day with no meat, fish, eggs or butter. There was also public penance for notorious sinners. They were clothed in sackcloth and ashes and kept apart from everyone until the Thursday before Easter Sunday, at which time they were reinstated into church fellowship. This treatment of these sinners was discontinued several centuries later, when a form of public penance was imposed upon the entire congregation, including the clergy. This was done by burning the palm fronds saved from the previous year’s Palm Sunday and using the ashes to form a cross on the foreheads of all penitents on Ash Wednesday. This ritual remains to this day in many churches.

Somewhere between the fourth and eighth century, the word “Lent” became associated with this period of fasting and penance. Lent is an old English word meaning “spring,” and is further derived from a Germanic word meaning “long,” because in the spring the daylight hours visibly lengthen. Thus it is evident that the church leaders sought to combine this period of forty fasting days with the spring season. Similarly, the term Easter was adopted from the Saxons and refers to their goddess Estera, whose festival was celebrated in the spring of the year. The adoption of the two names, Lent and Easter, and their application to the period leading up to and including our Lord’s death and resurrection, were ostensibly designed to assist the supplanting of heathen beliefs by Christian events.

A RELATED CELEBRATION

There is yet another strange outgrowth of this imposition of the church upon its congregations, and that is the Mardi Gras. This is a French name, sometimes referred to as Shrove Tuesday—Shrove meaning confess—and is the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Since it was the last day before the fasting season, it became the occasion for great merrymaking in the Middle Ages. In the cities or regions of some countries, the custom of holding carnivals for Mardi Gras has not only been continued, but has become more elaborate. The carnivals, with spectacular parades, masked balls, mock ceremonials, and street dancing usually last for several days, or in some cases as long as two weeks, ending the day before Ash Wednesday.

Some of the most celebrated carnivals are held to this day in the countries of Belgium, Brazil, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In the United States, the cities of New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama are especially noted for their celebration of Mardi Gras.

The development of carnivals and merrymaking before Lent came as a natural consequence of forcing fasts and sacrifices upon a people not truly consecrated to God. It is evident that church leaders have not been too concerned about this development. They, in fact, are mostly supportive of it, satisfied that after the gaiety their congregations return to them, fast, and obediently support the church.

Although we have taken the liberty of describing these rituals and celebrations in some detail, our real interest is in the answer to the question: "Is Lent a way of Christian sacrifice authorized by—and in harmony with—the Scriptures?" The answer is "No." The Word of God is clear in its testimony that the Almighty has never forced anyone to sacrifice. The Scriptures plainly state that a true follower of Christ must willingly sacrifice, or not sacrifice at all.

DRAWN BY GOD

The first step toward becoming a willing sacrificer, according to the Scriptures, is for God to draw that person to himself. Jesus explained this when he said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." (John 6:44) Once the Father has drawn one to Jesus, then must come the willingness to follow Jesus and be a sacrificer. In Matthew 19:16-22, we have these words recorded

concerning a rich young man who came to Jesus, asking, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions."

It is noteworthy that Jesus had a very simple requirement of those whom the Father drew to him. They were to follow him. In order to get treasures in heaven, they had to be willing to give up treasure on earth. This was not a sacrifice for just a certain period of time each year—during Lent—but for the rest of their lives.

This young man was rich and unwilling to give up his possessions. Jesus continued on this occasion to make the point of how necessary it is to give up all we have. "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard it,

they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?”—Matt. 19:23-25

THE NEEDLE’S EYE

The lesson given by Jesus was that earthly wealth and possessions were a burden to a rich man, and that they would more likely hinder than help him enter the kingdom of heaven. The illustration of the camel going through the eye of the needle makes this point. In the walled cities of biblical times, the gate to the cities would be closed at night. One small door, called the “eye of the needle,” provided guarded access to the city. A traveler coming to the city late in the day—toward sundown—might find the gates closed. To get through the needle’s eye, it was necessary for one to take all of the camel’s burden off his back, have him kneel, and then by pushing and tugging get the camel through the needle’s eye. This illustration was not intended to convey that it was impossible for a rich man to enter the heavenly kingdom. Rather, it showed that it was possible to enter through humility, sacrifice of earthly goods, and with difficulty—these being illustrated by the camel kneeling, being unburdened, and by the struggle of pushing and tugging. The disciples, upon hearing this illustration, were amazed, and asked, “Who then can be saved?” The attitude of sacrifice sought by God of those whom he was calling seemed to them very difficult to attain.

Jesus, sensing their discouragement, said, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” Then Peter was encouraged enough to say, “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed

thee; what shall we have therefore?” Jesus answered, “Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.” (Matt. 19:26-29) Notice how much is to be sacrificed—houses, family, lands—every earthly possession and all earthly ties.

ALL TO BE SACRIFICED

There is even more, however, to the requirement of sacrifice. The Apostle Paul’s words, contained in our opening text of Romans 12:1, say, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

Those whom God calls are to give up their all in sacrifice. Their very lives are to be devoted to him. The Apostle Paul calls it a “reasonable service.” It is not a ritual that is imposed upon an individual for a period of time. It is a lifetime of reasonable service to God. Also associated with this willing sacrifice is a desire to be transformed so that one does all things as God desires. Hence, the Apostle Paul adds, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (vs. 2) To the true follower of Christ it would be a delight to do God’s will in such a manner, rather than partake of worldly pursuits

and rituals. To those fully consecrated, the merry-making before Lent would not be sought as a relief, or escape, before sacrificing some little thing and being bound by the penance requirements of a few short weeks.

Jesus mentioned, in answer to Peter's claim cited earlier, that the proper carrying out of one's life of sacrifice would have a manifold compensation to those who are faithful. In his kingdom, these brethren would be with him ruling over Israel and the world as a reward for their sacrifice.

AWARENESS OF SIN

Another objective that church leaders had in setting up the observance of Lent was to make people aware of their sins and to be penitent. The awareness of sin should always be with us. The Apostle John writes, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."—I John 2:1,2

We are to so chart our course of life that we "sin not." Of ourselves, however, we cannot succeed in this endeavor. John makes this plain earlier in his epistle: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his

word is not in us.” (I John 1:7-10) We have the assurance that Jesus died for our sins and has become the satisfaction not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world. This appreciation of our Lord, particularly that he died for our sins, should be a matter of reflection every day, and not merely for a period of forty days within a year.

TRUE FASTING

When Lent was conceived, it was to be particularly associated with fasting. Fasting can be a way whereby people show devotion to God. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus presents three ways of showing devotion to God and comments on them. One of these is fasting. The other two are prayer and the giving of alms. Each of these can be misused, and so Jesus says, “Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret;

and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. . . . Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”—Matt. 6:1-6,16-18

In each of these acts of devotion, Jesus recommends that others not be aware that we are performing them or it will all be for naught. Above all, these things must all be done willingly, at any time, and never by decree. Setting up a period of time in which all must fast violates these principles. Hence, church leaders were not wise when they imposed “Lent” rituals upon their congregations. They opposed the principles laid down by Jesus and, as a result, set in motion a way of developing hypocrisy.

THE CALLED ONES

As a final consideration of this matter of observing Lent, we note that church leaders had in mind the forty days that Jesus was in the wilderness after being immersed by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. We realize, however, that it would be difficult—if not impossible—for anyone merely keeping a ritual to comprehend the import of these particular experiences of Jesus. This understanding is only obtained by those called of God to be joint-heirs with his Son and to partake of his sufferings—“joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him.”—Rom. 8:17

The Apostle Paul describes these as “the called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28) Hence, we should not expect everyone in the world to understand the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, nor should we expect those who are followers of Christ to duplicate what he did when he spent forty days and nights without food. In fact, it would be inadvisable to try this and, for most, impossible. The real lesson of this forty day period concerns the temptations presented by the Adversary—to which all of Jesus’ consecrated followers are similarly exposed—and how to deal with them.

JESUS’ TEMPTATION

The Scriptural account of these temptations is found in Matthew 4:1-11: “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the

world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.”

In the first two of these temptations, the Devil used the approach, “If thou be the Son of God,” attempting to goad our Lord into proving his identity by sensational means. The first temptation to Jesus was to gratify his desires as a man. Being hungry, he could use his power to provide food, as he was later to do when he fed 5,000 people. The second temptation was the suggestion that Jesus bring himself before the eyes of the people by jumping from a pinnacle in the Temple. This is believed to be the top of the royal portico, in itself 150 feet high, and the valley below it about 600 feet deep. When these approaches failed, the Devil appealed to Jesus to consider avoiding the course of sacrifice, suffering, and humiliation as a path to glory, and take a shortcut—suggesting that his gain would be as great—by joining forces with him. In each case, the answer Jesus gave came from God’s Word: “It is written,” and the Devil failed in his temptation of Jesus.

FOLLOWERS ALSO TEMPTED

All three temptations of Jesus are typical of those which his followers must endure. Although the Devil was involved in all three, the first two are especially emblematic of how our flesh and the world are particularly used, under Satan’s direction, to

tempt us, whereas the third is typical of the Adversary himself.

The first test points to those temptations besetting the followers of Jesus that involve the gratifying of their senses—their fleshly desires. The second test is illustrative of those temptations that involve entanglement with the world and its ambitions, desires, and appetites. The third test is clearly that of the Adversary appealing to us to worship him. If we are to succeed, as Jesus did, in resisting these temptations of the Devil, we need to be thoroughly acquainted with the Word of God and his plan. We could never hope to succeed by merely setting aside forty days in which to fast. Our temptations will come every day, and must be met every day.

The way of true Christian sacrifice is not open for all. This is made clear by Jesus when he explained to his disciples why he spoke to the people in parables and dark sayings: “He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand

with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.”—Matt. 13:11-17

The opportunity for the rest of the world of mankind to understand God’s words will come in Christ’s Messianic kingdom, when “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” “They shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD.”—Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:34

In summary, the observance of Lent implies that whoever will join a Christian church can sacrifice and fast as Jesus did. This is not so. God has reserved this privilege for a few. Those who have been invited to do so should appreciate this privilege and seek to carry out their consecration vows faithfully every day, not merely at a particular time of the year. “If we suffer [with him daily], we shall also reign with him.”—II Tim. 2:12 ■