

Re-Minded of the Story: Preaching and Teaching Lent Stephen Farris

Not long ago, by historical standards, Presbyterians did not keep Lent; it was a “Papist” observance. For the most part, we no longer think that way, but before we dismiss our ancestors’ opinions too easily, we ought to consider the reasons for their stand. It was not all a matter of prejudice. The Apostle Paul, after all, scolded the Galatians, “You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years” (Galatians 4:10). He considered these observances a form of spiritual slavery. But Paul himself urged that special collections be made on the “first day” of the week, almost certainly the day when the church gathered for worship. As far as we can tell, he honoured the calendar of Israel, including its great feasts, and could use Passover, in particular, as a poetic way of understanding the sacrifice of Christ. What seems to be at issue is a superstitious notion that some days are intrinsically holy or have special powers that we must respect...or else.

The Reformers objected to Lent because it was a time for penitential practices that were understood as good works that could earn God’s favour. The last remnants of this idea in our churches might be the emphasis on “giving up” things for Lent. By contrast, the

Reformers argued that we are saved by grace, through faith, and not by our own good works. We don’t have to earn God’s favour by denying ourselves this or that pleasure or convenience. The Lord Jesus has made peace for us by his suffering, death and resurrection...the very things we can remember in Lent! One more point: the Reformers also thought that what matters is not self-denial for a few weeks but self-discipline all the year round. That is obviously true, but not, I think, the whole story.



Perhaps all this suggests a few possible emphases in our teaching and preaching. In the first place, to quote Rick Warren, “It’s not about you.” Lent is not about what we give up or about anything we do. The focus should be on Jesus and on what he has done for us. We will return to this idea shortly.

Secondly, the focus of Lent ought not to be on special activities or forms of self-denial that we take up for a few weeks and then return to a self-indulgent lifestyle for the rest of the year. Consider an athlete training for a sports season. What matters is year-round commitment to the sport. Six week stints don’t work for physical training. What makes us think they will work for spiritual training? Still, there will be times of particular effort

and focus in physical training, and perhaps Lent can profitably be exactly that in the spiritual world.

Thirdly, there is nothing intrinsically holy about Lent. What is holy or unholy is the use to which we put these weeks. Observing Lent is not meritorious in itself. But it can be spiritually useful to the Christian in training. Much of what has just been discussed here can also be raised in sermons or lessons, for Lent is, among other things, a good time to teach doctrine. An aside, while we are still on the subject of seasons: a good deal of sentimental slush about new life in the spring gets spoken at Easter and some of it slips backward into Lent. Never say anything that would not be equally true in Patagonia, where the land is slipping into winter at this time of year.

Rightly observed, Lent allows a triple emphasis on believing, doing and being. (Are they three or one? Perhaps this is the human trinity.) Preaching doctrine during Lent, while important, is not enough. The ancient insight that Lent has something to do with the way we live is profoundly correct. Lent is a time to bring doctrine and life together. When speaking of our life as Christians, some in the church will want to emphasize the call for justice; others will value evangelism. It is not my task here to adjudicate between the two. Instead, I will speak of witness, a biblical term, which can embrace both. Witness happens when doctrine and life come together and it will issue in both justice and evangelism. It doesn't matter if individuals or even congregations concentrate on one or the other. We all have special gifts, after all. It does matter that the church as a whole does both. Many churches have special studies during Lent to strengthen the spiritual life of their own members. This is an inward focus. Perhaps Lent would also be time for an outward focus, a project that bears witness to the gospel.

This leaves the matter of being. Our hope as Christians is not simply to adopt new ideas or to take up new and healthier practices but to become "new creations," shaped into the likeness of Jesus Christ. What matters is that we be Christians, "little Christs." New creations are not the outcome of our programs but the work of

the Creator's Spirit. However, experience has shown us that knowing the story of Jesus is a prerequisite to becoming like him. Being reminded of the story of Jesus is more than mere mental recollection of a past event. Break down that word "reminded" into its constituent parts, "re" and "minded." When this story is told, Christians are re-minded. That is, our minds, our hearts, our whole beings are re-shaped and re-formed into something more like Christ. When that happens, we will far more likely be what Jesus would be and do what Jesus would do. To be more precise, we don't actually do what Jesus would do. His work is unique in many ways. We do what Jesus would have us do. But we still can't do that unless we know the story.

In earlier years, the story of the Bible - especially the story of Jesus, which we tell again in Lent - shaped our understanding of the world. Life was unclear and we explained life in light of the story. Now we appear to think that the story of Jesus is unclear and we try to tell stories from life to help people understand that story. Nothing can replace the story of

Jesus in a Christian church. The one main thing in preaching and teaching and Lent is to rehearse, repeatedly and in many forms, this story of Jesus that makes us what we are and what we can become in Christ.

Christianity does not have a cyclical view of history. We do not believe that the same events are repeated every year until infinity. Christ does not travel to Jerusalem every Lent, die again on Good Friday and then rise each Easter Sunday. We celebrate Lent in the doorway of an empty tomb. History changed with the death and resurrection of our Lord and will change again, ultimately, under God's good guidance. But we time-bound creatures are partially subject to the rhythms of creation, and it is good for us to be re-minded once again in the image of our Lord Jesus.

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