

DID JESUS OBSERVE LENT?

by Herman L. Hoeh

Where and when did the custom of observing Lent originate? Here are amazing FACTS about this 40-day period of penitence that will surprise you!

BELIEVE it or not, Lent was observed 2,000 years before Jesus was born!

It was still being observed during the lifetime of Jesus—and in the days of the apostles. Yet Christ did not institute it and he never observed it! The 12 apostles never observed it! The Church Jesus built never observed it.

How, then, did Lent—a 40-day period of fasting and penitence—enter the Christianity of our Western world?

Isn't it time we pause to ask ourselves *why* we observe the customs we do? We may have *supposed* Lent was taught in the Bible. But have we ever looked into the Bible to see what the Bible really says?

Why Churches Observe Lent

The Lenten season is a period of 40 days' abstinence, beginning on Ash Wednesday. Do you know what the meaning of "Lent" is?

The word *Lent* comes from the Old English word *Lencten* meaning the "spring" of the year. The Lenten celebration was originally associated with the *spring* of the year. But today it begins in the winter! Why?

Where did the springtime celebration of Lent actually originate? Here is the surprising answer!

Let us first turn back the pages of time till we reach the close of the

second century. This was 100 years after the death of the last of the 12 apostles. In a letter to the bishop of Rome about Lent, written at this time, we read:

"For the controversy is not only concerning the day"—there was a controversy over the time to celebrate the day called Easter—"but also concerning the very manner of the fast"—the fast of the Lenten season. "For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more, and some forty." This letter was written by Irenaeus, a bishop from Gaul (the old name of France in the days of the Roman Empire).

How did all this confusion over a Lenten fast originate?

God is not the author of confusion! Then who originated this confusion over Lent?

"And this variety in its observance," continued Irenaeus, "has not originated in our time, but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus *formed a custom* for their posterity according to *private fancy*"—not apostolic authority or Christ's command! (From Eusebius' *Church History*, book 5, chapter 24.)

Lent came into the church through CUSTOM—through PRIVATE FANCY. The churches observed Lent, not because the Bible commands it, but because professing Christians adopted the custom from their gentile neighbors.

"As long as the perfection of the primitive church [the inspired New

Testament Church] remained inviolable," wrote Cassian, a Catholic prelate of the fifth century, "*there was no observance of Lent*, but when men began to decline from the apostolical fervour of devotion . . . then *the priests in general agreed* to recall them from secular cares by a canonical indiction of fasting . . ." (*Antiquities of the Christian Church*, book 21, chapter 1).

Fasting, or abstinence from certain foods, was imposed *after* the days of the apostles—by the authority of the priests!

Lent is not of apostolic origin. It did not originate with Christ. It entered the Christianity of the Roman World in the second century. It entered at the same time that Easter did! Lent is always associated with Easter! But when did the custom of celebrating Easter originate?

What About Easter?

Here is what Socrates Scholasticus wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History*, not long after Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century after Christ:

"Neither the apostles, therefore, nor the Gospels, have anywhere imposed . . . Easter . . . Wherefore inasmuch as men love festivals, because they afford them cessation from labor: each individual in every place, according to his own pleasure, has by a prevalent custom celebrated [Easter] . . . The Saviour and his apostles have enjoined us by
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no law to keep this feast . . . just as many other customs have been established in individual localities according to usage, so also the feast of Easter CAME TO BE OBSERVED IN EACH PLACE ACCORDING TO THE INDIVIDUAL PECULIARITIES OF THE PEOPLES inasmuch as none of the apostles legislated on the matter. And that the observance originated not by legislation, BUT AS A CUSTOM the facts themselves indicate" (chapter 22).

Did you notice that? Easter originated as a custom of the people! And so did Lent. Lent is merely the introduction to Easter. Easter is the climax to Lent.

If you have not already read the TRUTH about Easter, you need to read our free booklet entitled *The Plain Truth About Easter*. It will give you many astounding facts about the origin of Easter—and it will reveal what the New Testament Church observed *instead of Easter*.

But from what city did the celebration of Lent really begin to spread throughout the professing Christianity of the Roman World?

Here is what the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* records:

"In any case it is certain from the 'Festival Letters' of St. Athanasius that in 331 [he] enjoined upon his flock a period of FORTY DAYS of fasting preliminary to . . . Holy Week, and second that in 339 *after having travelled to Rome* and over the greater part of Europe, [he] wrote in the strongest terms to urge this observance"—of Lent—upon the people under his jurisdiction.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, was influenced by Roman custom. It was *at Rome* that not only Easter, but also Lent, entered the Christian church. Irenaeus confirmed this when he wrote in his famous letter that Lent and Easter were introduced during the time of bishop Xystus of Rome. This bishop "did not permit those after him" to observe the New Testa-

ment practice of commemorating the death of Jesus on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar. Instead he introduced the custom of Easter and Lent.

But from where did the bishops of Rome obtain the custom of Lent?

The Origin of Lent

In the early church, Lent was always called *tessarakoste*, in Greek, or *quadragesima*, in Latin. These two words mean "count 40." Lent—though sometimes celebrated for only one or two days, or for several weeks—WAS ALWAYS CALLED THE CELEBRATION OF 40 DAYS!

Why?

Why should a period of abstinence have gone by this name even though it was not until the beginning of the eighth century after Christ that the final number of 40 days was fastened on the whole church from Ireland to Asia Minor?

The answer is obvious—abstinence among the pagans was called by the name "count 40" because that is the length of time they celebrated their spring festival! Remember, Lent means "spring."

The historian Wilkinson, in his book *Egyptian Antiquities*, chapter III, p. 181, wrote that the pagans kept "fasts, many of which lasted from seven to forty-two days, and sometimes even a longer period."

But the original length of the fast, traced back to ancient Babylon 4,000 years ago, was a "forty days" fast in the spring of the year (Layard's *Nineveh and Babylon*, chapter 4, page 93). That is why it bore its *name* of "40 days"!

Each nation gradually changed the length of celebration, but they all retained the *name*. The professing Christians of the second century merely adopted the customs found in their respective countries—that is why they were divided as to its length from the beginning. Remember, it took the churches of the Western world nearly eight centuries to reimpose a total period of 40 days abstinence as had been the original custom at Babylon.

Christianity today has turned to

pagan customs instead of the commands of God in the Bible!

Where Mentioned in the Bible

Lent is nowhere commanded or mentioned in the New Testament. But it is mentioned in the Old Testament!

Lent, remember, was an indispensable preliminary to the great annual festival in commemoration of the death and resurrection of Tammuz—the pagan Babylonian counterfeit of the Messiah. The Babylonian lunar month of June/July was named in honor of this false Babylonian messiah. Forty days preceding the feast of Tammuz (usually celebrated in June) the pagans held their Lenten sea-

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son! Ezekiel describes it vividly in Ezekiel 8:13-14:

"He [the Lord] said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater *abominations*." Notice that God calls what Ezekiel is about to see an ABOMINATION. What does the prophet see?

"And, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz."

They wept for Tammuz, the false messiah of the pagans! That weeping preceded the pagan festival in honor of a supposed resurrection of Tammuz. Fasting was joined with weeping FOR A PERIOD OF 40 DAYS before the festival in honor of Tammuz. The period of weeping and semifasting fell during springtime. That is why the word Lent means "spring"! Lent is a continuation of the pagan springtime custom of abstaining from certain foods just prior to celebrating a supposed resurrection of a pagan Babylonian deity.

That is why Christ and the true New Testament Church never observed it! Paul forbade Christians to observe these pagan "times" or "seasons" (Gal. 4:9-10).

Does It Make a Difference to God?

But what if Easter and Lent *are* ancient pagan festivals? Isn't it *still* all right, if we use them to honor CHRIST? That's the way people reason. Let GOD answer that question:

Hear what he said to his people through Moses: "Take heed . . . that thou enquire not after their gods, saying: How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods" (Deut. 12:30-31).

Here is what *God says*. It doesn't matter what we think—but it DOES MATTER what God thinks. He calls these pagan Easter and Lenten customs *abominations* because they commemorate false ideas. The penitence of Lent is a form of worldly sorrow over the things that smite one's conscience. But conscience is no sufficient guide to right or wrong. The penitence of Lent is a counterfeit of genuine repentance of sin. What is the Bible definition of sin?—"sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4)—God's law! God's law defines right from wrong. And the customs of Easter? They commemorate a supposed Sunday morning resurrection of Jesus—though in fact Jesus was resurrected, according to the Bible, on Saturday evening after he had been in the tomb three days and three nights (Matt. 12:40). No wonder the apostles did not teach the early spirit-filled New Testament Church of God to observe these traditions of men!

Is it any wonder that Jeremiah was *inspired* to write: "Learn not the way of the heathen . . . for the customs of the people are in vain"? (Jer. 10:2-3).

Jesus left us an example of what we ought to do—and that example is not Easter or Lent! □