

A person wearing a black turtleneck and dark pants is holding a large, torn piece of cardboard. The cardboard has the question "Why in the World Would an Evangelical Church Celebrate Lent?" written on it in a dark, hand-drawn font. The person's face is partially visible at the top of the frame.

Why in the
World Would an
Evangelical Church
Celebrate Lent?



During lent, check out vineyardcolumbus.org
each day for a new cardboard testimony that will help
encourage you to draw closer to Jesus.

Since at least the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD the church has set aside the 40-day period before Easter as a time of spiritual preparation for the events of Holy Week (especially Good Friday and Easter Sunday). This 40-day period involves some kind of abstaining - whether from food or entertainment such as TV watching or using Facebook or shopping. But we evangelicals don't do holidays (except Christmas and Easter)! We barely do Sabbath except to attend church. The rest of Sunday is typically set aside for catching up on chores, shopping, and kids' sports activities.

We are fond of quoting the Apostle Paul's caution to the Galatians against observing days, and months, and times, and years so that we not return in bondage to "the weak and beggarly elements" (Galatians 4.9-10). Why not forget about Lent altogether and "stand fast in the liberty with which Christ has made us free" (Galatians 5.1)? Why not individually try as best as we can to follow Christ and to simply live our Christian lives on our own terms?

In short, why do Lent?

First, let me say that the practice of Lent, just as the practice of Christmas or Easter, is by no means obligatory for any Christian. There are certain scripture passages which indicate that a Christian's observance of certain sacred periods may be appropriate (Ecclesiastes 3.1; Acts 20.16; Revelation 1.10, etc.). But the Apostle Paul is abundantly clear that the practice or non-practice of holidays is a matter of individual conscience (Romans 14.5-6). Regarding the practice of Lent, no one should judge another Christian's spirituality based upon one's celebration or non-celebration.

Why, then, do Lent?

Lent is a time for spiritual spring-cleaning – The word "Lent" is derived from an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning "to lengthen" and refers to the spring season when the days become longer. Former megachurch pastor, Ted Haggard, was on Oprah a couple of years ago and he discussed the sexual urges that finally destroyed his ministry. "I kept thinking my problem was demonic," he told Oprah. "[But] part of this process forced me to say, 'This is not demonic. This is me.' And when I said, 'this is me,' oh! everything started to change...that's when I started to heal."

All of us need a time for taking spiritual inventory and engaging in more intense spiritual self-examination. What are our particular weak places? Where are we being tempted? Where are we giving ground and disqualifying ourselves from useful service to Christ?

Most people have found that if they are going to stay up on home-maintenance, spring cleaning once a year is helpful. Lent is a time of spiritual spring cleaning in which an individual can clean out those things which hinder our relationship with Christ and our service to him.

Lent meets our need for spiritual training – The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:25 and 27: *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever...No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.* God has not made human beings to be pure spirits. Rather, we human beings are embodied in a material world. The way we treat our bodies affects our souls and spirits. Spiritual disciplines such as fasting or abstaining from consuming entertainment or abstaining from shopping is analogous to engaging in weight lifting. A person who lifts weights will be stronger not just when he or she is lifting

weights, but also in every other situation in life.

One very astute observer of Christians commented, "Deep down we may not even want to change. I like to say, everyone wants to be transformed, but nobody wants to change." Engaging in spiritual disciplines trains us body and soul to serve Christ better. Lent is a time in which we can through the practice of some activity of self-denial better understand our dependence upon God for all of life.

Lent is an opportunity to do good – Whenever a Christian voluntarily chooses to abstain from something, it is for the purpose of being available for something better. So, we might abstain from eating a meal in order that we could take that time to pray. We might abstain from shopping in order to take the time for fellowship. Lent is a particularly apt time to engage in charitable activity. Our own hunger from a day of fasting can serve to make us more sensitive to people who are hungry.

Therefore, Lent could be a great time for families to choose to volunteer to work at our food pantry. Or it might be a great time to choose to volunteer to teach English as a second language in our Community Center, or to volunteer to help build a house with Habitat for Humanity. As the prophet Isaiah said more than 2700 years ago in Isaiah 58:6-7, *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

Lent is an opportunity to prepare for Holy Week – Imagine our church exploding with joy on Easter, because thousands of us came spiritually prepared to celebrate Easter following the 40-day practice of Lent. Imagine if you personally got involved in spiritual spring cleaning, if you engaged in a little bit of heavy lifting and spiritual weight-training for six weeks preceding Easter. Imagine if you looked forward to Easter with greater anticipation than you ever have in the past. What will Easter morning be like for you? Imagine if you were not alone in this, but thousands of others in our congregation engaged in similar practices. If this occurred, Easter 2011 could be the greatest day of spiritual celebration in our church's history.

What Vineyard Columbus is planning for Lent:

1. We are going to host an Ash Wednesday Service on Wednesday, March 9, 2011. Ash Wednesday is the traditional beginning of Lent. During the Ash Wednesday service we hear these words from a pastor or church leader: *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* As finite beings and sinful persons we are destined to die and so we humble ourselves before God, who created us. As a result of this humbling, we are made ready to receive fresh grace from God.
2. There will be daily devotionals posted online at our website for each of the 40 days of Lent written by our small group leaders. These devotionals will include an application section that will encourage you regarding various spiritual practices in order to draw near to Jesus.
3. I will be preaching a new series during the 40 days of Lent titled *40 Days of Drawing Near to Jesus*. It will conclude on Easter Sunday.
4. Many small groups will be encouraging the members of their groups to especially press into the Lord during this season.

Congregational letter by Rich Nathan