

Making Lent difficult: The case for rigorous disciplines

by [Ted A. Smith](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue



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Every year I find myself wondering what to do for Lent. What should I give up? Or should I take something on? These questions have been with me for a long time. When I was six or seven, I learned in Sunday school that I should give up sweets for Lent. I also learned how to put tabs into slots to assemble a box to hold the extra offering I would give to One Great Hour of Sharing. And I learned to be extra sure to say my prayers at night. It was a Midwestern mainline Christian's version of the venerable Lenten triad of fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

After a summer or two at a camp run by Texans, who taught me a prayer they said would keep me out of a hell I had not known to fear—the camp was more fun, and more serious about sports, than anything my denomination offered—I came to Lent with a new intensity. Jesus suffered and died for me on the cross, and in recognition of that great sacrifice, I was—giving up candy? I resolved to take on more rigorous regimes of prayer and fasting. If I was not quite sure why I did these things, I took

comfort in their difficulty. And if I failed every year to live up to my intentions, I enjoyed the satisfactions that came with failing at something grand.

Even as a teenager I had some sense that there was more narcissism than discipleship in these Lenten dramas. It felt like they involved a privileged and privatized piety that was all about my personal righteousness. Reading Walter Rauschenbusch, Mary Daly and Gustavo Gutiérrez in college helped me make sense of these instincts. And I heard Isaiah 58 with new ears:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
(vv. 6–7, NRSV)

With Isaiah's words in mind, Lent became a season not just for giving things up but for taking things on: working in a homeless shelter, writing letters for Amnesty International, doing community organizing and more. Over time I came to think that fasting and prayer still had a place alongside attempts to loose the bonds of injustice. Sometimes I gave up foods that I really shouldn't have been eating anyway, at least not in any quantity. Sometimes I tried to give up habits I had been wanting to break for some time. And sometimes I made an effort to take on some kind of spiritual discipline that I would intend to continue after Lent. In making these choices, my focus was on finding the right balance between piety and justice.

I still think it is important to seek out disciplines like these in everyday life. But I have come to think that my understanding of them missed the particular gifts and demands of Lent. In focusing on a presumed tension between piety and justice, I missed the deep feature that all of the disciplines I considered had in common. Both the disciplines I associated with justice and those I associated with piety involved things I thought I should be doing all year long, at least ideally. Fasting turned into responsible eating. The prayer of Lent became an extra fidelity to daily prayer. Almsgiving became social ethics. My Lenten disciplines became like New Year's

resolutions: promises to live a little more the way I knew I should live all the time. Undertaken as booster shots for everyday ethics, Lenten disciplines would be “fulfilled” if they turned into durable habits that would inform the rest of life. Lenten disciplines like these aimed for sustainability.

Sustainable Lenten disciplines anticipate an Easter in which those disciplines will continue. They hope for a resurrection life—of whatever shape and content—that is continuous with an improved version of this one.

But surely Easter hope is for something more than a better performance of our present obligations, more than a new year in which we keep our resolutions. It is hope for a new heaven and a new earth, for new life on the other side of death. What kind of practices could bear witness to that hope? What kind of Lenten disciplines might help us prepare to receive an Easter that is something more than extensions of everyday disciplines?

Both the problem I am trying to name and the outlines of some possible responses can be clarified by recalling the ways that Lenten disciplines became for many Christians an ethics for Ordinary Time. That transformation has been under way for centuries. If it is far from universal, even in the North Atlantic Protestant traditions in which it is most powerfully present, it is still a dynamic with significant power and range.

The origins of Lent lie deep in the earliest life of the church. Dom Gregory Dix, the great Anglican liturgical historian of the first half of the 20th century, argued that Lent assumed its form of 40 days through a gradual backward expansion of the fast in preparation for Easter. More recently Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson have argued that what we call Lent first emerged through the harmonization of traditions that included not only fasts in preparation for Easter, but also fasts in preparation for baptism and 40-day fasts that were linked more to Jesus’ time in the wilderness than to either Easter or baptism.

Whatever traditions it inherited, the Council of Nicea in the fourth century cast Lent into a distinctive form. Nicea linked Easter and baptism through a practice that made Easter the ideal day for baptism and a theology that built on Romans 6 to understand the sacrament as a participation in the dying and rising of Christ. The council then defined Lent as a season of preparation for Easter and baptism.

The disciplines of Lent might have been practiced by many Christians, but they were especially binding on catechumens preparing to be baptized. And while disciplines of fasting, almsgiving and prayer might have been practiced at other times, the church understood that Lent was a season for taking on disciplines that would not be practiced throughout the whole year. At their core, Lenten disciplines were practices for a particular group of people at a particular time.

This constellation of theology and practice began to break up as infant baptism became increasingly common. A long season of fasting and penitence was not possible for infants, and a desire to baptize children without undue delay led to the practice of performing baptism on days other than Easter. These shifts led not to the disappearance of Lenten disciplines but to a transformation in the logic at work within them. They became not just the practices of those preparing for baptism but a way for all Christians to prepare for the coming of Easter.

The expansion of Lenten obligations from catechumens to all Christians anticipated by several centuries their expansion from seasonal practices to everyday ethics. Reformation movements often retained Lent in some form, but they also developed a logic that called special seasonal obligations into question. That logic ran parallel to arguments for the priesthood of all believers. If following Jesus required some particular practice, why should it be done only by some people? And if a practice was the right thing to do, why should it be done only at certain times? Thus the season of Lent went the way of the cloister. It did not so much disappear as get incorporated into all of life.

By the 17th century, Puritan Christians, for example, had done away with the seasonal observation even as they had intensified penitential practice throughout the year. In an instance of what the social theorist Charles Taylor calls the “homogenization of time,” the line between Lent and the rest of the year became blurred. What was good for one season was good for all.

The generalization of Lenten discipline fit closely with the generalization of applying it to all Christians. Through this double transformation, Lenten disciplines became for many Christians something like Kantian ethics: obligations that were binding on all people at all times.

This transformation did not bring the end of Lent, of course. Lent as a season of special obligations continued to be practiced in Catholic and Orthodox communities

around the world. The Oxford movement revived widespread observation of special seasonal disciplines in Anglican traditions in the first half of the 19th century. And the liturgical renewal movement has led many Protestants in the United States to revive Lenten practices over the past 60 years. But like the reforms of earlier generations, traditional theology and practice are not so much eradicated as transformed in ways that make a new kind of sense. When the early modern logic of universal obligation gets grafted onto an older emphasis on liturgical seasons, Lent can become, as it did for me, a season of recommitment to what we think we should be doing all the time anyway—a kind of spring training for Ordinary Time.

I do not mean to make my own experience into universal history. The particularities of a white, North American mainline Protestant context matter. And the self-imposed trials of my adolescence surely took gendered forms. But particular experience is bound up in the larger cultural transformation known as secularization.

As Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age*, secularization does not necessarily involve a decline of religious belief or practice. On the contrary, as in the case of the Puritans, it can be driven by a renewed intensity of belief and practice. What happens in secularization, however, is that religious beliefs and practices are trimmed to fit an “immanent frame” that makes sense of the world as defined in secular terms. The generalization of catechumens’ disciplines into duties for all Christians (when coupled with a belief that all people should become Christians) fits that transformation. The practices of a select group defined by theological identity are turned into an ethic for a universal community defined by its simple humanity. Just so, the transformation of seasonal disciplines into everyday obligations fits with a wider process of homogenization in which time can be defined and lived without reference to anything beyond an immanent frame. This understanding of time reduces the new creation promised in Easter to an extension of ordinary history. It limits our hopes to that which can be achieved in this age. This constriction of hope is part of what Taylor means by secularization.

Like Taylor, I do not want to tell this story as a simple narrative of decline. I value many of the achievements of the secularization process—especially the way that an extension of ascetic disciplines to all Christians helped make possible an ideal of universal citizenship that in turn grounds a commitment to the equal rights of all people.

Nevertheless, the transformation of Lent into Ordinary Time leads to the transformation of Easter into Ordinary Time. When Lenten disciplines become everyday ethics, then Easter becomes a time of continuing those efforts. We prepare not to receive a great gift but to strive through an eternity of ethical living. This is the mode of secularization that worries me—not the loss in the worldly power of religious communities, and not the decline in religious practice, but the hollowing-out of hope.

If Lent is to be a season of preparation for Easter, it should be a time for unsustainable practices, practices that do not and even should not make their way into Ordinary Time.

One way to make Lenten practices unsustainable would be to make them so demanding that we could not possibly perform them for very long. Extreme rigor might have the effect of keeping Lenten disciplines from becoming everyday ethics. Yet this effort would not alter the logic of the practice. It would present Lenten disciplines—and with them, everyday ethics—as impossibly difficult; that would produce striving (and despair), but it would not open into hope for an Easter that is more than we can ask or imagine.

An unsustainable Lent would involve not just practices that we could not extend into Ordinary Time but practices that we *should not try* to extend into Ordinary Time. It would involve practices that resist generalization into everyday obligations.

The logic of such an unsustainable Lent is implicit in the best understandings of fasting. We fast not because food is bad, but to live into the truth that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We fast, as the Benedictine Damasus Winzen wrote, not to train the will but to manifest the power of the new creation. The purpose of fasting is not to help us fast more, or more perfectly, but to prepare us to receive the Easter gift of being sustained by food and more than food. Fasting, then, is not an obligation that can be made applicable to all times. It is not a form of healthier eating or ethical eating. It might even involve practices that are imprudent or unhealthy—practices that we really should not continue beyond a limited season. In this respect it is unsustainable, and so it points beyond itself to an Easter fulfillment that is more than more of the same.

The example of fasting suggests a whole range of unsustainable Lenten disciplines. A congregation might give up meetings—not because they are bad but because we

sometimes live as if they were the source and meaning of the church's life—and devote the time to works of mercy and prayer. An athlete might skip soccer practice every Friday during Lent. An activist might make a retreat. A scholar might limit reading and writing and redirect those energies to corporate works of mercy. A worshiping community might give up saying "Alleluia," as an old liturgical tradition recommends. None of these practices should be turned into everyday duties—not because they are too difficult but because they involve giving up *good* things. They require limiting activities that can give glory to God. Living by such unsustainable disciplines all the time would not just be difficult or unpleasant. It would be unfaithful.

Unsustainable Lenten disciplines are born of recognition that what Paul called the powers and principalities of this world work their ways not only in things we might name as bad but also in ideas, practices and institutions that are good. If Lent is a time of loosening our grip on the goods offered by the powers in the hope that the grip those powers have on our own lives will finally be broken, then Lenten discipline involves something deeper than giving up bad habits. It involves a letting go even of the good we are called to do so that it can be received again as gift. Unsustainable Lenten disciplines refuse to become everyday ethics. They rebuke the pretensions of even the best obligations of Ordinary Time to fulfill the promises of Easter. But they do not undo those everyday ethical obligations. Instead they renew them, just as fasting renews our recognition of the extravagant grace in an everyday meal.

The questions I will ask myself this Lent, then, are about which good things in my life need the renewal that comes with a reminder of their limits. They are about what unsustainable combinations of fasting, almsgiving and prayer can press those limits upon me and so serve as a means of grace for myself and others. And they are about what kinds of hope these unsustainable limits might make manifest, what it would mean to yearn in that hope, even what it would mean to receive the Easter gift of its fulfillment.