

Spiritual Practices for Lent

Repentance, Penance, and Healing



Lent is a season of intensified self-examination and repentance. While these practices are part of regular Christian life year-round, we give them special attention during Lent to ensure they do not devolve into mere rote activities. Here are some ways to give special attention to the work of self-examination and repentance during this season.

Daily Examen

One of the long-established spiritual practices in Christianity, championed by Ignatius of Loyola (a Spanish reformer and contemporary of John Calvin, who sought to reform the Roman church from within), is a discipline of self-examination and repentance Ignatius called *examen*. Lent is a most appropriate season for Christians to engage this daily practice of taking inventory of our lives and resolving prayerfully to grow spiritually.

In his daily spiritual exercises, Ignatius invites us to begin each morning reminding ourselves of the “defects” in our lives we hope to amend today. At midday we take a first inventory: How has today gone so far with regard to the amendments we are seeking to make in our lives? Finally, at the end of the day, a full *examen* is undertaken: Where today did we experience a special awareness of Christ’s presence and transforming power, and where did we feel absent from him? We thank God for the places where we can discern our Lord’s presence with us, and repent for those places where we strayed from the way of Jesus. Ignatius speaks of the former as *consolations*, and of the latter as *desolations*.

The spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius constitute a thorough, systematic immersion in attention to Jesus, examination of self, and acts of repentance. They can be found online at ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.all.html. Lent offers an opportunity to begin a daily practice of examen that might not be so thorough but is nevertheless

powerful. This “entry-level” practice might consist at first of taking time each evening in Lent to list the consolations and desolations of the day, lifting them up to the Lord in prayers of thanksgiving, confession, and repentance. Some will find it helpful to share their consolations and desolations with friends or family members who serve as prayer partners; others will want to keep a daily journal listing the flow of consolations and desolations they have encountered.

Genevan Discipline

The “Consistory” in Geneva during the time of Calvin (comparable to our session) was the local church’s governing body, made up of elders and ministers. Among its regular tasks was the administration of discipline to those who had strayed from the way of Christ. The purpose of discipline was not to punish, but to heal and restore the fallen. Each week the Consistory met to hear cases, listen to appeals, make judgments, and determine appropriate penance for the errant.

While Ignatius offers us *personal* disciplines of repentance, Geneva commends *corporate* practices of penance and healing. The Consistory’s consistent counsel to the wayward was: attend worship weekly, hear instruction from the Word of God, and come to the Lord’s Table to receive the bread and the cup that seal the forgiveness and wholeness proclaimed by the gospel. The Word is not for the spiritually elite, nor the Table for the spiritually worthy; rather, those who need the transforming power of the Holy Spirit most are especially invited to hear, eat, drink, and be healed.

In some churches, the Lord’s Supper is celebrated each Sunday during Lent. Nothing could be more appropriate. Whether or not we celebrate the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s Day during Lent, in our Reformed tradition the core spiritual practice for all church members during Lent is to be especially diligent, to gather often with brothers and sisters, to hear God’s Word proclaimed, and to receive with thanksgiving the gifts of Christ’s body and blood, broken and shed for us that we may be made whole. Churches I have pastored have held special midweek worship services with Holy Communion through Lent to offer the church community the opportunity to engage practices of thanksgiving and repentance more intensively during this holy season.

Article written by Rev. Sheldon W. Sorge.