

Ash Wednesday: A Reformed Perspective

In Reformed theology, the observance of Ash Wednesday is not typically viewed as a required or mandated practice. However, many Reformed believers appreciate the spirit of the season of Lent and see its focus on repentance, humility, and preparation for the celebration of Easter as beneficial for spiritual growth. The key principle in Reformed theology is that all aspects of the Christian faith must be grounded in Scripture, and so any liturgical practice must be evaluated by its biblical warrant and its alignment with the teachings of Scripture.

1. Ash Wednesday and Repentance

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season, which is traditionally a time for reflection, repentance, fasting, and prayer. While Ash Wednesday itself is not directly prescribed in Scripture, the concept of repentance is deeply rooted in biblical teaching. Reformed theology emphasizes that repentance is a continuous aspect of the believer's life, not just during particular seasons.

- **Scripture References:**

- *Joel 2:12-13* - "Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."
- *Matthew 4:17* - "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

The ashes used on Ash Wednesday are often seen as a symbol of mourning and repentance, reflecting the biblical practice of putting on sackcloth and ashes to show humility before God (e.g., *Daniel 9:3*). The act of receiving ashes on one's forehead is a physical expression of this repentance and acknowledgment of our mortality (*Genesis 3:19*).

2. Humility and Mortality

The ashes also symbolize human mortality: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (*Genesis 3:19*). This reminder of human frailty is important in Reformed thought, which emphasizes the sinful nature of humanity and the need for divine grace.

- **Scripture Reference:**

- *Psalms 103:14* - "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

Reformed believers can use the Ash Wednesday observance as a reminder of their need for daily repentance and the ongoing work of sanctification in their lives. The ashes point to the reality of sin and death, but they also point to the hope found in Christ's victory over sin and death.

3. Focus on Christ and the Gospel

In Reformed theology, the focus of all liturgical practices—including Ash Wednesday—is on Christ and the gospel. While Ash Wednesday may not be an essential or required observance, believers may choose to engage with it as a way of preparing their hearts to reflect on Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection.

- **Scripture References:**

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- *Romans 5:8* - "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
- *1 Peter 2:24* - "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

Lent and Ash Wednesday provide an opportunity to focus on Christ's redemptive work, emphasizing that it is through His death and resurrection that believers find forgiveness and new life.

4. No Mandate in Scripture

Although the observance of Ash Wednesday can be meaningful for many, Reformed theology stresses that the Bible does not mandate specific liturgical observances outside of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, Reformed Christians are not bound to observe Ash Wednesday, but they may choose to do so as a voluntary act of spiritual discipline.

- **Scripture Reference:**

- *Colossians 2:16-17* - "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

This passage underscores the freedom of the believer in Christ, indicating that while traditions and practices can be beneficial, they are not a means of earning salvation or favor with God.

5. Spiritual Growth Through Reflection

The season of Lent can serve as a time of spiritual renewal, where believers reflect on their need for Christ and repent of sin. In Reformed theology, this is an opportunity for believers to engage in self-examination and draw closer to God through prayer, Scripture reading, and acts of charity, ultimately focusing on the cross and Christ's work of atonement.

- **Scripture Reference:**

- *2 Corinthians 13:5* - "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?— unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"
- *Philippians 3:10-11* - "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

The focus should not be on the external practices, like receiving ashes, but on the internal heart attitude of humility, repentance, and gratitude for the work of Christ.

Conclusion

While Ash Wednesday is not a required practice in Reformed theology, it can be a meaningful time for believers to reflect on their need for repentance, humility, and the hope found in Christ. Any observance of Ash Wednesday should be approached with the understanding that it is not a means of earning favor with God, but a reflection of the believer's desire to grow in grace and to prepare their heart for the celebration of Easter. Ultimately, the focus remains on Christ and His finished work on the cross.