

Re-thinking Ash Wednesday

Written by Calvin Fox

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It is time for many to observe Ash Wednesday. That is the annual occasion to attend a special Church Service where their Priest or Pastor puts his thumb in a little container of ashes and then makes the sign of the cross or simply his thumb print on their forehead with those ashes. We are Episcopalians and our Church observes Ash Wednesday, but I do not participate. Here is why.

In the Bible, it was the common custom for people to put ashes on their heads or even to cover themselves with them, along with wearing sackcloth, as a sign of great grief and mourning- Jer 6:26

This was often accompanied with ripping of garments and much wailing- Jonah 3:4-10, Matt 11:21

Sometimes, fasting was added as well as prayer for mercy and forgiveness of sins- Dan 9:3

Sorrow and mourning are a fact of life- a common place for many. And absolutely, there is need for genuine grief and repentance over the sin in our hearts. But all my life I have known neighbors, friends and co-workers who went to Church on Ash Wednesday and received the thumbprint of ashes on their foreheads and never once have I seen any evidence in them or from them of grief and mourning for their sins, let alone repentance or change of behavior in any way. I have never seen anyone wear sackcloth or rip their regular garments mourning over their sins. There is never weeping, wailing or beating one's chest. If they fasted, it was not a matter of going without food, but without meat. What my neighbors, friends and co-workers have done on Ash Wednesday was not based on any Biblical example or teaching. I concluded a long time ago, that receiving ashes was done only as a religious, church mandated, Ritual or simply the customary way to begin Lent (along with Pancakes). The original Biblical and spiritual reason for the use of ashes was not involved. Ash Wednesday has long been shorn of all shriveness. I see no need to participate in a meaningless Ritual which has a strong scent of superstition about it.

Furthermore, verses used to support Ash Wednesday do not actually do that, they condemn it, eg-

Isaiah 58 tells the Israelites that, instead of Ash Wednesday- type Services, God wants His people to show repentance of their sins by doing Justice in the world. He says, it is far better to feed the poor than to have ashes on the face. The latter is no substitute for righteous living.

Jesus very specifically forbids what is done on Ash Wednesday. In a text read during the Ash

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Wednesday Service (Matthew 6:1-18), Jesus says do not put ashes on your face when you fast and pray. Wash your faces. Fast and pray in secret so no one will know you do it. And yet people come out of the Service, where they hear those words from their Lord, with ashes on their faces plainly visible to every one. To me, the Service has a strong hint of hypocrisy about it, the very thing that Jesus condemns!

The other reason used for participating in Ash Wednesday is that doing so, we are told, is a reminder of our mortality. When the Priest applies his dirty thumb, he says, " Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return". We need a Priest to remind us of that? I sure don't. All kinds of things remind me of that truth every day. And that reality especially confronts me at the death and funeral of family and friends several times every year.

My conclusion is that there is no Scriptural reason for Ash Wednesday. And there are strong Scriptural reasons not to observe it! Personally, when I am torn up with grief or my heart broken with sorrow over sins committed or death experienced, I won't need ashes on the forehead to show it. God and the people closest to me will know it.