

Is Lent about self-denial?

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I grew up around evangelical church leaders who were hardcore about spiritual fasting, sometimes going a week on just water or 40 days on just fruit juice. (I never made it more than a day.) When I started running in mainline circles, I was thrown by the way people used the word "fast" to mean giving up chocolate or beer or television.

So I have some sympathy for Jeffrey MacDonald's [call](#) for recovering serious self-denial as a Lenten discipline. I also appreciate Tim Suttle's [point](#) about constant satiation, the status quo for Americans of any degree of privilege:

The sad result of satiation is that we lose any sense of mystery and wonder. Satiation dulls the imagination and healthy spirituality loses out to the pursuit of the ultimate experience. In our culture satiation is much easier to achieve than character. Lent can be the antidote.

I'm struck, however, by the fact that neither MacDonald nor Suttle addresses the fact that [for Protestants, Lent has never been just about self-denial](#). Historically, those Protestants willing to acknowledge Lent at all have done so in large part by observing spiritual disciplines. Instead of (or in addition to) eliminating bad or superfluous things, we've added good ones.

But in MacDonald's view, U.S. Christians are "remaking [Lent] as a type of spiritual self-help whose effectiveness is measured by how well it entertains us and affirms what we already believe." He continues:

Today Lent is widely ignored in Christian America. Seasonal sacrifices, if observed at all, tend to be token.

For Catholics, "abstaining" can now consist of sumptuous fish dinners on Fridays; even a Good Friday "fast" can include two small meals. Some Protestants

conveniently eschew sacrifice altogether - if no one can earn divine favor, why bother? Still others bring a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, marked by promises to exercise daily or do without sweets for a few weeks. True deprivation is rare. As a pastor I know once told me, giving up something for Lent "is kind of a big joke."

How did Christianity's most serious season become a joke in this supposedly religious country?

I'll fess up to not being above joking around about Lenten disciplines (search [this page](#) for the phrase "jelly beans"). But candy-based disciplines aside, I'm drawn most to those Lent practices defined positively, to increased attention to prayer and meditation and fellowship (with [soup and bread](#)).

What do you think? Is MacDonald onto something here, or does his argument suffer from too narrow a view of what Lent is?