

Column

“We sacrificed to send our children to college.” “The founding fathers of the country sacrificed security for freedom.” “An elected official sacrificed his integrity [sold his soul] by taking a contribution from the XYZ Corporation.”

We’ve all heard such statements. Perhaps you have made them yourself. Sacrifice is praiseworthy when a lesser good is set aside for a greater, but it can go in the opposite direction as well, as my last example shows. Honor, integrity and virtue can be set aside for something that is false, degrading and dishonoring.

‘Sacrifice’ has a religious and cultic connotation as well. The practice of offering slain animals goes all the way back to the dawn of time. Some theologians have suggested that God Himself offered the first sacrifice when he took animal skins and covered Adam and Eve after they had sinned. What is clear is that from then on animal sacrifice and worship went hand in hand. It was the means whereby the fallen sons of Adam could approach a holy God and have their sins dealt with.

In some cultures, the practice went further still. Humans as well as animals were offered to their gods and goddesses. The Canaanites spoken of in the Bible offered children to the god Molech, a practice strictly forbidden by God to His covenant people. In Leviticus 18:21, we read: “And thou shalt not let any of thy seed [children] pass through the fire to Molech, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.”

Animal sacrifice, however, was an approved and accepted practice. Animals were offered by Noah in the prediluvian period. They were offered in the tabernacle during the days of Moses, later in the Temple in Jerusalem and later still in the rebuilt Temple in Jesus’ day. Nevertheless, even in the Old Testament these sacrifices were viewed as in some sense incomplete. For example, in Hosea 6:6, God speaking through the

prophet said: “For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

This sense of the incompleteness of the old system becomes even more apparent in the New Testament. Here, Jesus is proclaimed as the true sacrificial lamb that takes away the sin of the world and opens the way for people to come safely into God’s presence.

His death on the cross was where those animal sacrifices offered for millennia were pointing and received their power. Unlike them, this sacrifice was once and for all. No more animals needed to be offered, as made clear in Hebrews 10. The Temple itself had been rendered redundant.

What about sacrifices today? As we have already seen, the concept remains alive and well. In the general sense, people still give up one thing for another.

But what about sacrifice in religion? I want to suggest that it remains operative in this realm as well. True, bulls and goats are no longer offered on altars of stone, but followers of Jesus still offer a sacrifice. They do so every time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. There, the death of Christ is brought forward in time and the faithful stand looking up at the sinless Lamb of God dying in their stead on the cross. Only one sacrifice is left to them: the sacrifice (offering) of praise and thanksgiving. An ancient practice come of age and found its true meaning.

Keep the feast! Offer your sacrifice! Give thanks and live out the Jesus story in the world!

We earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness, mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching thee to grant that, by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we, and all thy whole Church, may obtain

remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion. And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee . . .” (The Book of Common Prayer).

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