



**A** SON honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? <sup>7</sup> Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. (Malachi 1:6-7)

The term 'Altar' has taken on a more complete meaning with the coming of Christ since His Cross became the last altar with which the Christian has anything to do. The Old Testament is filled with blood sacrifices to atone for sin, but these were only to foreshadow the perfect sacrifice to come which would abolish the need for further sacrifice.

In almost every Protestant Church I have visited, be it Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc, the Table at the front of the sanctuary is almost universally referred to as the 'altar.' I do not believe the congregants consider that table as a traditional altar, but words and terms are important, so we should be accurate in our language – especially that of public worship.

A few years ago, a Baptist minister friend of mine visited our church. When he observed the Table at front and center, he exclaimed, *Why, you are more Roman Catholic than Protestant! Why do you believe so?* I asked. *Because you have a cross on your altar, and a candle on either side. Those are IDOLS!*

I said, *Look, friend: I know in your church you refer to that Table as an Altar, but we do not. We call that Table the 'Lord's Table.'* We have no need for an altar since Christ has made the

*ultimate sacrifice for us – the only sacrifice sufficient to propitiate for our sins. So, we place a cross at the center of the Lord’s Table because that cross reminds us of the sufficiency of that sacrifice. The cross is empty because Christ is no longer on that cross, but is risen and sits at the right hand of the Father to make intercession for us.*

The Baptist minister (a good man) said, *We do not need a cross to remind us of that sacrifice. Why place a material ornament at the center of your worship area? Well, I responded, when passing by your church I observed a cross lifted far above on your steeple. Is that a bad thing, or a reminder to all that you are a Christian Church.* He uttered something unintelligible under his breath and continued, *and what of these candles? That is nothing more than Roman superstition. Not so, I responded. The candle on the right (facing out) represent the Gospel Light going forth into all the world; and the candle on the left represents the Light of the Epistles going forth. Symbols are not necessary to express the beauty of worship, my friend responded. Then why did Jesus make frequent mention of material objects to symbolically represent heavenly truth – objects such as pearls, white stones, manna, morning star, talents, bread, sheep, Shepherd, vessels of wood stone and silver, and even the cross (take up thy cross daily and follow me)?*

Jesus warned us about failing of faith in churches: *4 These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth. 5 And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed.* (Revelation 11:4-5) Remember the Lord’s dire warning to the Church at Ephesus: *5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.* (Revelation 2:5) A besetting mean streak in my soul prompted me to remind my Baptist friend: *We still have OUR candles!* He smiled and left the battlefield.

Unfortunately, many Protestants and, especially Anglicans, have resorted to referring to this Table as an Altar. The notion comes from the Roman practice of the so-called sacrifice of the Mass. We do not sacrifice Christ anew at the utterance of the prayer of consecration and, for the 1928 BCP, the Invocation over the elements. The elements have no personality – only emblems representing the blood and body of our dear Lord. Is there a Real Presence at the Holy Communion? Certainly, there is, but it is real spiritual and mystical Presence and not the physical elements of bread and wine. The wine and bread represent His spiritual Presence!

The first sacrifice of flesh was made in Eden by God Himself to cover with skins the nakedness (sin) of our primal parents. Thus, began the Lord to use blood sacrifice symbolically to represent the One True Sacrifice to come – His own only Begotten Son. Anything that is placed on the altar of God is sacred just as Isaac became sacred as the beneficiary of the Promise of a Redeemer made to Abraham. But the blood of Isaac would have availed nothing – only one sacrifice would be sufficient to atone for our sins – the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a beautiful hymn that asks the question: *Is your all on the altar of God?* That really means *have you dedicated the all you have received from God back to Him* since we have no ALL apart from God’s grant. We can give God nothing that we have not received from Him and which truly belongs to Him. At the moment of our passing into our reward, we leave all behind except our souls and whatever treasures of love we possessed in life.

There is a sense in which we may make reference to an altar. I believe Clement of Alexandria summarizes the term well: *Will they not believe us when we say that the*

*righteous soul devoted to God is the truly sacred altar, and that the incense arising from it is holy prayer?* This is true insofar as each has dedicated his life to be One with Christ, and Christ is both our Altar and our Advocate.

The Bronze Altar at the gate of the Tabernacle was the means by which an applicant could have his prayers offered by the intercessory High Priest. He must have brought his blood sacrifice to the gate of the Tabernacle to be offered in order to have his prayers heard. Nothing has changed since that time. We still must bring our Blood offering to the gate of the Temple for our prayers to be heard, but there is one great difference – that Blood Sacrifice is our trust and election in our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Sacrifice and His cross was the Burnt Altar. Christ has become our High Priest – no other needed.

All the old sacrifices of animals were clearly insufficient to cover sin. They were simply shadows and examples of that mighty Sacrifice to come in Christ Jesus.

Jesus spoke prophetically of the importance of that sacrifice to be placed on the altar: *17 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? 18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the **GIFT** (Jesus Christ) that is upon it, he is guilty. 19 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? 20 Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon.* That Gift is Christ, and the Cross was the altar that sanctified the Gift.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only sacrifice we need or from which we can benefit; and the cross is our only altar. That sacrifice has been satisfied and the cross (altar) emptied of further necessity.

**B**UT *Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; <sup>12</sup> Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. <sup>13</sup> For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: <sup>14</sup> How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? <sup>15</sup> And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.* (Hebrews 9:11-15)

Friends, just remember- in the English Reformation Book of Common Prayer, there is never a mention of an Altar. That which is improperly called an Altar by mainline churches is truly more appropriately called the Lord's Table. It is at that Table that we have Communion as One with Him. We do not observe a Mass, but a Holy Communion, or Lord's Supper. And He is just as powerfully with us then as He was when He broke bread and gave to the two men on the Road to Emmaus – at which time, they recognized Him as Lord.