



9 For thou, Lord, art high above all the earth: thou art exalted far above all gods. 10 Ye that love the Lord, hate evil: he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked. 11 Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. 12 Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness. (Psalm 97:9-12)

Altars, Candles, and Crosses – which of these symbolic articles may be out of place in the worship of the Church? Consider your response carefully before answering.

Just a few years ago, a clergy friend of mine who happened to be Baptist, visited my office. He wanted to have a look at our small sanctuary. When he saw the cross and candles on the Table, he complained we were too much like the Roman Catholic Church. I asked why? He said it was because we had candles and a cross on the altar, and the altar was the central article of furniture (with the pulpit off to the right side facing out). When I asked him if he had an altar in his church, he responded, “Of course we do have – we are a Baptist church!” “What is the purpose of the altar?” I asked. He replied, “It is for serving the Lord’s Supper.”

The minister had unwittingly talked himself into losing the argument. There is no “ALTAR” in Anglican Churches of the English Reformation tradition – only a Lord’s Table. The term Altar is in no rubric of the traditional Book of Common Prayer (1662, 1928, or other Commonwealth Prayer Books). But the furniture from which the Lord’s Supper is served is called the Table of the Lord. The Rubric immediately preceding the Prayer of Humble Access (prior to partaking of the Lord’s Supper) reads, like many other of the rubrics, “**¶ Then shall the Priest, kneeling down at the Lord’s Table, say in the name of all them that shall receive the Communion this Prayer following.**” Why is this reference to the Table (instead of Altar) important?

In language, precise meanings are important. According to Webster's New World Dictionary, the definition of an altar is "a place, especially a raised platform, where sacrifices and offerings are made to a god, an ancestor, etc." It goes on to offer a popular definition that is not consistent with biblical claims, i.e. that "the Communion Table is sometimes referred to as an altar in some churches." That sometimes reference would be incorrect and misleading. Always in Scripture, an altar is a place of offering sacrifices. In reading the justification for calling the Lord's Table an Altar in the apostate 1979 Book of Common Prayer is that it "means the same thing as Lord's Table" Altar in no way bears the same meaning as Table. We have the Lord's Table to partake of the Holy Communion of the Lord just as He shared with his apostles at the Last Supper. That was a TABLE and not an ALTAR. The loose theology of the modern Anglo-Roman churches derive from the Oxford Movement emendations that proposed a return to Roman Catholic worship. We do partake of that Table with the Lord with His Spiritual Presence, but the wine and bread are not magically transformed into the actual and physical blood and body of our Lord as the utterance of the 'sacerdotalist' priest suggests. So, we have no altar as my Baptist friend has because it represents the error of Rome. Actually, he does not have an altar either.

Next, seeking to 'justify himself, he critiqued our use of CANDLES on the Lord's Table. Candles are symbols of Light, and Light is symbolic of our Lord Jesus Christ. I explained to my friend that we have candles on either side of the Lord's Table. On the strong side (left side facing Table) is the Gospel Candle representing the immutable Gospel of Jesus Christ going forth in the midst of our worship. It is for this reason that the Gospel text is read from that same side of the chancel (or sanctuary). On the other side of the Table is the Epistle candle representing the apostolic light of the early church. The symbols remind and inform spiritual truths to our worshippers. The clergyman said, "Yes, but those resemble the Catholic Church and the 'altar of the mass.' I responded that the Roman Catholic Church also recites the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed. Did he consider those unbiblical? He had no immediate response and I did not, out of courtesy, press the point. But I did remind my friend of the words of the Lord in the Book of Revelations: *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.* (Rev 2:5-6) Just out of pure meanness, I reminded the preacher we in the Anglican Church still have our candles! (smile)

OK, maybe I could convince the man of the Table and Candles, but wasn't the CROSS going a bit too far? It depends on in what manner you consider the cross. If you look upon it as an object of worship, that would not be appropriate; but as a reminder of the sacrifice that our Lord made for us, and in our stead, is quite proper. My friend thought it was too showy to be placed right at the central place of the sanctuary. I asked if he had not placed a cross at the very pinnacle (steeple) of his church? Yes, but that was different. Why was it there, I asked? "It is to reveal to all passersby that we are a Christian Church" was his answer. That is commendable of him to say so. The cross on the steeple announces the Lord's sacrifice to all without, but the cross on the Lord's Table INSIDE reminds every worshipper of the sacrifice Christ made for them. *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.* (Matt 18:20) The cross reminds us of the Spiritual Presence of Christ. It also represents a borrowed grave from which Christ arose. It is not a crucifix, still bearing the body of Christ, but an empty CROSS symbolizing the once and for all sacrifice Christ made for us. He is no longer to be sacrificed, but has arisen and sits today on the right hand of God.

The symbols of our faith are important. As the churches gradually dispense with the symbols that have been our ancient stones of remembrance, faith is cheapened and less meaningful. Christ used symbols constantly in teaching a people whose minds were incapable of comprehending the greater spiritual meaning of which He spoke. He used

terms such as pearls, mustard seeds, dragnets, fish, and many others – even crosses that we must take up daily to follow Him. The Apostle Paul reminds us of various natures of vessels: *But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.* (2 Tim 2:20-21) If Christ and the Apostles used such symbols to remind us of spiritual truths, why cannot an apostolic church do the same?

It seems to me that, like those of the time of Christ, our people have no comprehension of spiritual truths, and they have no symbols to assist their ignorance of them.