

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

By definition, priests offer sacrifices. A non-sacrificing priest is a contradiction in terms. The levitical priests had their sacrifices under the old covenant. They were ineffective, of course, but nevertheless they had them, and they offered them again and again. Why? What did those sacrifices represent? What was going on when those priests offered their God-appointed sacrifices to God?

In the first instance, when the levitical priests offered the appointed sacrifices to God, particularly the blood of those sacrifices, they were actually worshipping God through the ceremonial death of a victim, through the blood which they were offering to him, and which he was pleased to accept. More particularly, they were worshipping God by means of sacrifice for sin. And this sacrificial worship, this offering of a sacrifice for atonement, is the highest aspect of worship.

But, of course – and this is of the utmost importance – the sacrifices offered by old-covenant priests obtained only a symbolic atonement for the sin of the people of Israel.

Nevertheless, although the sacrificial system under Aaron was ineffective, it was a symbol of, a representation of, the one great and final sacrifice to be offered by our Lord Jesus Christ in establishing the new covenant. In this way, God was instructing the people of Israel about the coming Christ and his effective sacrifice. Through Christ, through trust in the blood of his one sacrifice for sins, sinners truly come to God, sinners truly worship God.

But now that Christ has come and offered his one effective sacrifice in the new covenant, what place remains for ‘priesthood’ and sacrifice? For the aaronic priests and their sacrifices, none! In fact, to go back to that system would be an abomination beyond words. With the coming of the new covenant, the old covenant and its priestly system has been fulfilled and abolished. It is obsolete. To return to old-covenant worship would show the utmost contempt for Christ. As I have explained, that, in a nutshell, is the essence of Rome’s blasphemy.

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

Even though the old-covenant sacrificial system has been abolished, nevertheless, in the new covenant, since believers are priests, they, too, must have sacrifices to offer, otherwise their ‘priesthood’ would be a sham; it would be a priesthood in name only, a meaningless slogan, empty. But believers do have sacrifices to offer. Not only that. They have an altar upon which to offer them (Heb. 13:10). True, these sacrifices are not those of the levitical order, nor is their altar that of the tabernacle or temple. In fact, notice how the writer to the Hebrews underlines the point: ‘We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle *have no right* to eat’ (Heb. 13:10).

Believers do not dress in special robes; they do not go to a special place; they do not use a physical altar, fire and incense; no longer does the blood of an animal victim flow freely. Above all, believers do not offer sacrifices for atonement. Even so, believers really do sacrifice, and they really do have an altar upon which to make their offerings. I stress the ‘really’. Real! The sacrifices believers offer are real and spiritual, and are truly acceptable to God. For that reason, they are glorious. What is more, their sacrifices are, in fact, more glorious than the old. They are better and more pleasing to the Lord than any bull or goat ever offered by Aaron.

Besides which, believers are not only priests; strange as it may seem, in addition, they are both the temple itself (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; see also Eph. 2:19-22) and the sacrifice (Rom. 12:1)! And, as I have already observed, note that the references to the temple are both individual and corporate. Believers are priests as individuals and as a body. In all these ways, the new regime is better by far than the old.

Before we go any further, a word of warning is necessary, however. Under the old covenant, the levitical priests did not dare invent their own sacrifices – or if they did, like Nadab and Abihu (see below), they were severely punished. God demanded obedience and faithfulness to his revelation, and he required it precisely. Even a pagan king knew that much. ‘Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it diligently be done for the house of the God of heaven’ (Ezra 7:23). So said Artaxerxes, king of Persia, addressing Ezra. ‘Whatever is commanded’ – that and

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

nothing else; nothing more, nothing less. Partiality in the law was anathema to God (Deut. 10:17-18; Mal. 2:9). This ‘partiality’ refers to the temptation to show respect of persons, giving preferential treatment to one and not another (Ex. 23:1-3,6-8; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:16-17; 16:18-20), possibly for a bribe or a fee (Mic. 3:9-12); ‘partiality’ in applying the law towards those addressed. But Christ had stern words for those ‘teachers of the law and Pharisees’ of his day who emphasised certain parts of the law at the expense of other stipulations: ‘You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel’ (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42, both NIV).

So much for the old covenant. But it is the same under the gospel. God will not receive ‘will worship’, ‘self-imposed religion’, ‘self-made religion’, ‘self-imposed worship’ (Col. 2:23, AV, NKJV, NASB, NIV respectively; see also Col. 2:18). Just as in the old, so in the new. God demands, God requires, God will receive only that which he has commanded, and if it is offered in the way he has commanded. Would to God that churches today obeyed Artaxerxes’ positive stipulation for the returning Jews (Ezra 7:23), and, on the negative side, followed their Master himself when he cleansed the temple of all its worldly clutter (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-17; see also Mal. 3:1 – 4:6).

Let me illustrate the point from the old covenant. Uzza paid dearly for touching the ark, though his motive was good. He had no right to touch it (2 Sam. 6:6-7; 1 Chron. 13:9-10; 15:13). Again, false fire or sinful sacrifice upon God’s altar was an abomination to the Lord (Lev. 10:1-3; Num. 16:1-50; 1 Sam. 2:29; Jer. 19:5-6; Hos. 8:13; 9:4; Amos 5:22). False or unauthorised fire, even if offered by the right men, was unacceptable. Nadab and Abihu were Aaron’s sons – right men – but they offered the wrong fire (Ex. 6:23; 24:1,9; 28:1; Lev. 10:1-3; Num. 3:2,4; 26:60-61; 1 Chron. 6:3).

To meet God’s stipulations, for the sacrifice to be acceptable to him, both had to be right; the priest had to be the right man (in the

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

sense of his birth), and he had to offer the right sacrifice; that is, as appointed and revealed by God. Such, and only such, was acceptable to God. Nothing more, nothing less would do. No higher blessing could be desired for a man in this regard other than that God would accept him and his sacrifice (Ps. 20:3). And for that, it had to be as God stipulated.

Such were the terms of the old covenant. It is no different under the new. Only believers can offer acceptably to God, and even they must not invent their own ways of worship. They dare not. The Lord has made known what he requires, the sacrifices that he will accept. These, and these only must believers offer to God. He will not accept any worship, any sacrifice or any offering devised by man, even by one of his own priests. Paul expressed it thus:

We are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).

We are the true people of God – *we* – we who worship God in the only way that God will accept, the way he has made known in his word; that is, ‘in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh’. As Christ promised, in the new covenant, ‘the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’ (John 4:21-24). In short, believers. What are the sacrifices that God has made known that believers are to offer?

There are six. As before, I do not pretend that they exist in six watertight compartments. In what follows, there will be considerable overlap.¹

1. A broken and a contrite heart

The first sacrifice that God requires of believers is that of a broken and a contrite heart. ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a

¹ Stevens spoke of the ‘three dimensions of the priestly ministry for the [people] of God. *First*, there is the priestly ministry of access to God through worship and intercession... *Second*, there is priestly ministry through service in the world... *Third*, there is priestly ministry in daily life’ (Stevens pp179-180).

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, you will not despise’ (Ps. 51:17).

Why is this the first and leading sacrifice? Because a contrite heart is at the core of conversion, and is the essential, fundamental mark of the spiritual man. Indeed, in a sense, it is not really *one* of the sacrifices a believer offers; it governs and pervades all of them. In truth, it is the heart of the matter. It is, I say, the mark of the godly man, and one which delights the Almighty:

The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit (Ps. 34:18).

Thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones’ (Isa. 57:15).

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18-19).

Thus says the LORD: ‘Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool... But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word’ (Isa. 66:1-2).

And the very first beatitude is: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:3).

What is this contrite, broken-hearted sacrifice believers offer to God? How does it show itself? Those who have a contrite, broken heart rightly come to God with a sense of their sin; they feel the burden of their guilt; they are stripped of any pride over any pretended spiritual abilities; they take the position that is rightly theirs – true humility in God’s presence; they feel a sense of obligation to him, and their inability to meet that obligation; and they cast themselves entirely and without reserve upon his free mercy in Christ. This is what it means to come to God in Christ for salvation, and to come with a contrite, broken heart.

And this, and this alone, is what pleases God in those that would approach his throne. ‘A broken and a contrite heart’, therefore, is the first sacrifice which believers are to offer to God as priests, and it is the sacrifice which must accompany and season all the rest. Forgiveness and not deserts; duty, not rights; humility, not pride; a heart empty of self-confidence, and full of amazement at the mercy of God. Such is the attitude that is pleasing to him.

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

In the old covenant, the incense (the corn and oil, also) had to be ground, pressed, crushed, beaten or pounded (Ex. 29:40; 30:34-36; Lev. 2:14-16; 16:12; 24:2), bruised in order to extract its sweetness and fatness. In the new covenant, sinners are brought low in conviction before God. Christ strikingly illustrated this in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’, was the cry of one who would not lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast in contrition, and it met with the open approval of the Saviour. This, and this alone, was acceptable to him. But it *was* acceptable to him – and *this* is the point. ‘This man went down... justified... He who humbles himself...’ (Luke 18:9-14).

Believers always approach God with the sense of his undeserved, unmerited mercy and grace to hear and pardon them. (See 1 Cor. 15:8-10; 1 Tim. 1:11-16, for instance). The prophet, long before, had put it this way:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins, and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips [that we may offer our lips as sacrifices of bulls]’ (Hos. 14:1-2, NIV).

A broken spirit, a contrite heart, then, is the first sacrifice believers offer as priests to God under the new covenant. The truth is, it is the way in which they offer *all* their sacrifices.

2. Thanksgiving, praise and worship

The second sacrifice which believers have to offer to God is that of thanksgiving, praise and worship. God seeks true spiritual worshippers. He desires such (John 4:23-24). God delights to be adored by his people, and praised for all that he is, and for all that he has done. He demands it of his people: ‘Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me’ (Ps. 50:14-15). The spiritual man responds: ‘I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD’ (Ps. 116:17). Such a sacrifice honours God. He desires it, he delights in it, he demands it. ‘Whoever offers praise glorifies

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

me' (Ps. 50:23). 'We... worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh' (Phil. 3:3). 'Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name' (Heb. 13:15, NIV). 'I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips' (Ps. 34:1, NIV).

Note the 'continually' and 'at all times'. The praise of God is to be a continual sacrifice – an unceasing offering of thanks to the Lord. This should be every believer's continual aim, in every part of his life. Believers are priests, and offer praise, worship and thanksgiving to God, not merely in so-called 'worship' meetings on the Lord's day, and such like; the believer's worship is not confined to a special hour or two on a special day in a special place. Every day, every hour, every moment of every day and night, is to be devoted to the praise and glory of God. 'Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor. 10:31). 'Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3:17).

Here is another of the ways in which the new covenant exceeds the old in glory. Under the old covenant, the sacrifices were made at appointed times and in stated places. Under the new covenant, believers, by offering a continual sacrifice, worship God at all times. And there are no stated or special places in which it must be offered.

A friend of mine is apt to answer the question: 'Where do you worship these days?' with the retort: 'Everywhere!' The reply to the parallel question: 'When do you worship?' ought to be: 'When do I not?' I am making a serious point: 'Worship' is not something which is confined to a church meeting or assembly at a stated time. That is *public* worship, corporate worship. *Private, personal worship is unceasing*. The believer as a priest is always a priest, and everything he does has a sacrificial, priestly aspect to it, a sense of worship. Or should do! He is never 'off duty', never on furlough. Worship, like worldliness, is an attitude, not merely an action.

In saying this, I am not, of course, in any way intending to contradict the express command of Hebrews 10:25, or belittling the public assemblies of the Lord's people. Nor do I think I am. I

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

wouldn't dream of such a thing. Not at all. But, under the new covenant, the worship and praise of God is an individual matter first and foremost; public, corporate worship follows. Without the former, the latter is sheer hypocrisy.

One particular aspect of sacrificial worship is the praise of God by means of word and song. It was certainly a feature of the old covenant: 'It is good to give thanks to the LORD, and to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your lovingkindness in the morning, and your faithfulness every night' (Ps. 92:1-2). 'Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing' (Ps. 107:21-22).

The same goes for believers as priests under the new covenant. Individually, or whenever believers assemble, whether in private or in public, they are called upon to worship God with their praises, both in word and song. But there is a remarkable difference compared with the old. In the new covenant, there is a horizontal aspect to this sacrifice of praise, as well as a vertical:

Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18-20, NIV).

The apostle, when saying a similar thing to the Colossians, added: 'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3:16-17, NIV). The words we sing, therefore, must be worthy, in a doctrinal and spiritual sense. They must be mutually edifying, as well as God-glorifying.

What dignity, therefore, has God bestowed upon his children in this. Not only has he saved them from their sins, but he regards the praises of his people – indeed, their daily life, as lived to and for him – as a real sacrifice, and it delights the Almighty to receive them and their praise. 'I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving. This also shall please the LORD better than [the sacrifice of] an ox or bull' (Ps. 69:30-31; see also Prov. 15:8; 21:3,27; Jer. 6:20; Amos 5:22). If this could be said under the old covenant, how much more so under the new!

3. Believing prayer

The third sacrifice which pleases the Lord is that of believing prayer.

What does God think of the prayers of his people? Those prayers are, no doubt, feeble in themselves, but to God they are like the clouds of sweet incense that ascended daily before him in the old covenant. Rather, the other way round; the incense of old was a picture of the prayer that would be offered to God by his saints in the new covenant. Look how David put it: ‘May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands [in prayer] be like the evening sacrifice’ (Ps. 141:2, NIV). John, in his vision of the new covenant, saw not only the ‘golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints’ (Rev. 5:8), but the angel with the ‘golden censer’ who ‘was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand’ (Rev. 8:3-4). This, of course, is not to be taken literally, but figuratively. Believers use no physical incense. Nevertheless, the symbol is pregnant with meaning. In this regard, Rome shows its old-covenant hand yet again, shows its longing for the symbol and missing the substance. The more the physical incense, the less the true spiritual prayer.

Moreover, even in the old covenant, the incense did not ascend just at specific times. It ascended without a break; it was ‘a perpetual incense before the LORD’ (Ex. 30:8). Likewise, believers are to ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess. 5:17). This, as the previous sacrifice, teaches us that prayer, like praise, is an attitude and not merely an action. Prayer, like worship, is a perpetual duty and privilege for the priests of the Lord. It cannot be confined to special times and special places. A believer should cultivate the sense of doing everything as unto God, looking to him in all things.

The comparison with incense reminds us that just as the incense had to be made in accordance with the detailed laws laid out by God (Ex. 30:30-38), so it is with prayer. In the old covenant, no strange fire could appear on God’s altar; God will allow no false prayer under the new covenant. Christ himself instructed us how we should pray (Matt. 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-13), and this instruction

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

he completed through his apostles. Believers must pray ‘always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit’ (Eph. 6:18), ‘praying in the Holy Spirit’ (Jude 20). Now, just as the incense had to be beaten and pounded in order to extract its essence, and then subjected to fire so that the sweetness of its perfume might ascend to God, so with the offering up of prayer by believers. Is this part of the discipline to which God subjects each of his children (Heb. 12:5-11)? I think so. Some plants only give up their perfume after they have been crushed. A camomile lawn yields its sweet fragrance after being bruised as it is walked-on and trodden down.

Acceptable prayer is prayer which comes from a warm heart, a heart that is strong in faith, and looks only to the Lord. It is the offering up of the soul’s desire unto God in utter dependence upon his answer, and in hope and earnest expectation of it. And God is truly worshipped by such expectant prayer (Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4). He delights in this regular, continuous sacrifice from his priests in the new covenant.

4. Good works

God also regards the good works of believers, and their practical demonstrations of love to other believers, as pleasing sacrifices offered to him by his new-covenant priests. ‘And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased’ (Heb. 13:16, NIV). The Lord takes pleasure in the good works of his people, and calls them holy and acceptable sacrifices. This ‘doing good’ involves the ‘hands-on’ support of needy Christians, and, perhaps especially, the maintenance of the gospel ministry, and the spread of the gospel throughout the world according to Christ’s commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:8). As we know, such assistance is vital, since the gospel must not be advanced in the world by pagan support. John’s commendation applies:

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for his name’s sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow-workers for the truth (3 John 5-8).

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

Such giving by believers, whether for the care of needy believers, or for the advance of the gospel, is ‘a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God’ (Phil. 4:18, NIV). ‘You did it for me’, is the response of Christ to such sacrifices (Matt. 25:40, NIV); ‘you did it *to* me’ (NKJV). Those who carry out such works of generosity are offering sacrifices to God, sacrifices he will never forget (Heb. 6:10).

Even under the levitical priesthood, practical giving was to be joined to the ceremonial sacrifices. So much so, if the practical care of others was absent, God rejected the ceremonial sacrifices (Deut. 14:28-29; Isa. 58:5-9; Hos. 6:6). Micah, the prophet, left the people in no doubt about it:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Mic. 6:6-8, NIV).

How much more for believers in the new covenant. Believers are to ‘put on love, which is the bond of perfection’ (Col. 3:14). Just as sympathy is a mark of their great high priest, the Lord Christ, so it must be a mark of his people (Heb. 4:15 – 5:3). And our love for our fellow-believers must be more than just in word. The standard of our love to one another is that of Christ himself:

By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things (1 John 3:16-20).

‘He laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’. What a standard! What a demand!

When believers express that sympathy toward one another in good works, they perform a ‘service’ to God. He loves the cheerful

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

giving of his servants, and he ensures that it brings benefit to more than the receiver – in that God is glorified. The giver, too, is blessed (2 Cor. 9:1,6-15; see also Prov. 19:17; 22:9).

Good works, then, are an integral part of a believer's priestly sacrifice to God.

5. Gospel service

Gospel service – work to advance the gospel in the world – is another aspect of the sacrificial work of believers. Paul led up to: 'I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God', by saying:

I have written to you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus... with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:15-17, NIV; see Rom. 11:13).

In essence, all believers can say something similar. Yes, they can!

One or two very important points must be made, however, as I have already mentioned. First, unless we are careful, we could mistakenly allow the juxtaposition of gospel service and 'priestly duty' in the same verse to lead us into the errors of sacramentalism and, more particularly, into its Siamese twin, sacerdotalism. As I have explained, but it bears repeating, by sacramentalism I mean the erroneous notion that spiritual grace is conveyed, or made effective, by an outward act. As I have shown elsewhere, and putting it mildly, to go down this road would be a grave mistake. Sacerdotalism? What is this? Sacerdotalism is the delegation of our worship into the hands of others, who we feel are better able, more qualified, to carry it out for us. In such a system, worship is a task best left to a special class – priests. Hence has arisen the unbiblical notion of the clergy and the laity. But in the new covenant there is no justification for sacramentalism, sacerdotalism, or any notion of clergy and laity. It certainly cannot be argued from Romans 15:15-17.

I will have yet more to say on this. But for now, let us not forget that we are talking about *the priesthood of all believers* in the new covenant. I have stressed the point. And there is need. It is the priesthood of *all* believers, we are talking about. Consequently,

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

all believers are ministers of God, and *all* their work is sacred. And in particular, under this heading, and in Romans 15:15-17, we are talking about preaching, preaching the gospel of God. All believers are engaged in this priestly work.

Nor must we go astray on this question of preaching, either. I said I would return to this question. Of course, a preacher can stand in a pulpit or on a platform to proclaim the gospel. But we must not limit the word 'preach' to such. Sinners can hear of Christ in many ways other than by a formal preacher, standing in a pulpit. Why, reader, I am preaching to you now as I write this. I make no apology for it. People tell me they can hear my voice as their eyes run over the page, but so be it. In fact, I am glad. It might even be that I shall continue to speak to an unborn generation or two even after I am dead (Heb. 11:4). Stranger things *have* happened. So, I am quite prepared for the criticism that this book is too 'preachy'. I set out with exhortation and application in mind!

In the same way, a believer preaches when he or she engages someone in a spiritual conversation, or witnesses to an unbeliever. When the early church was persecuted, the believers were driven out of Jerusalem. 'Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went... telling the message... telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus' (Acts 8:4; 11:19-20, both NIV); that is, they talked to people, they told them about Christ, they 'gossiped' the gospel. The believers in question certainly did not stand in non-existent pulpits in non-existent places of worship at stated pre-arranged times! How did Acts 13:44 come about?

What I am saying is this: If you are a Christian, then you are a priest, and, as a priest, you too, in this sense, are a preacher. It is your responsibility and your privilege to so live before men that if they are moved to ask you, you are 'always... prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15, NIV). Actions do speak louder than words, and this is certainly more than an old saw (1 Pet. 3:1-6). Nevertheless, it must not be made into an excuse for silence. To tell others about Christ and his gospel, is a part of your priestly ministry.

For biblical examples of it, see Mark 5:18-20; John 1:29-36,41-42,44-46; 4:28-30,39-42; Acts 8:26-38; 9:20. Why, even in the

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

context of Romans 15:16, note the apostle's emphasis on all-body ministry (Rom. 15:14-17; not forgetting Rom. 12:3-8). See again 1 Corinthians 1:4-7; 12:4-31; 14:1-40; Galatians 6:1-2,10; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11,14; 1 Peter 2:2-5; 4:10-11; Jude 20-23, for instance. I am in the habit of reminding churches with, say, twenty members, that they have twenty ministers or preachers. Not in a formal sense, of course, but, nevertheless, a church with twenty members has twenty ministers. It has twenty priests!

All this comprises the priestly duty of preaching the gospel, and yet none of it, perhaps, comes under what we know today as the formal task of preaching in a pulpit. To be engaged in any way in the spread of the gospel is to be engaged in a work of the greatest dignity and importance. It is a 'priestly duty'. Preaching the gospel, both formally and informally, is, therefore, a most noble work. I would rather be a priestly preacher for Christ, than be the king of Ruritania.

And when any are converted under such a ministry, God is pleased to receive such as an offering to him. He calls them 'first-fruits' (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; Jas. 1:18; Rev. 14:4). We know that under the old covenant, 'first-fruits' were offered to God in worship (Ex. 22:29; 23:16,19; 34:26; Lev. 2:12; 23:10,17,20; Num. 18:12; 28:26; Deut. 18:4; 26:2,10; see also Prov. 3:9; Jer. 2:3; *etc.*). Consequently, when, in the new covenant, the Holy Spirit uses the priestly ministry of believers, both prayer and preaching, when he makes the call of the gospel effective, when he saves sinners and sanctifies saints by it, God looks on this as a sacrificial, priestly duty and an offering pleasing to him. So much so, he regards all those who benefit from his people's labours as first-fruits to him.

Let me take this further by returning to a passage to which I have already referred:

Such confidence... is ours through Christ before God... Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:4-6, NIV).

'He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit'. I do not for a minute think the use of 'ours', 'our' and 'us' speaks only of the apostles. If it does, then it would appear that Paul might have been implying that, while he and his fellows were competent, the Corinthians, and all believers since, were and are

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

not. In the apostolic age, non-apostle believers, I suppose, just had to relax, sit back, not bothering their heads and bewildering themselves with things far beyond them, and let the apostles – who alone were ‘competent’ – do it all for them.

I cannot agree. How it would tally with Acts 17:11 baffles me. And what the equivalent is for believers after the apostolic age, including us today, I dread to contemplate – if only the apostles were ‘competent’. We would be bereft of a competent ministry today, and no believer would have any competence to edify another. This is so out of step with the overwhelming impression the New Testament gives of believers exuberantly engaged in spiritual activity, edifying each other – or being encouraged to – that it cannot possibly be right. Note the excessive spiritual behaviour of the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14. Note further that Paul did not reprove them for trying to do things beyond their capacity. Not at all. He just wanted better order, better edification. He certainly did not want silence and inaction! By the way, reader, do you think the apostle would have to administer the same rebuke to most churches today? Why not?

Getting back to 2 Corinthians chapters 2 to 4, without question Paul *is* speaking of his own ministry, and that of his fellow-apostles and fellow-workers, yes. And the specially-endowed – the apostles – were, and their writings and works remain, absolutely essential and fundamental to the gospel, yes. Coming down the scale of authority, there is, there always has been, an essential role in the church of God for able teachers and preachers – and these are not ten-a-penny. Only God can make them ‘competent’.

All that is perfectly true. But notice how the apostle uses ‘we’ in these three chapters. Sometimes by ‘we’ he does mean, perhaps, just himself, maybe with other apostles and fellow-workers in mind (2 Cor. 2:17; 3:1; 4:7-15), although it is not absolutely certain in all these cases. But notice how he quickly moves into ‘you’ (2 Cor. 3:1-3). So what should we make of the ‘we’ and ‘ours’ in the next verse, leading on to the words I quoted above? And it is, I think, unlikely that the ‘we’ in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 4:16-18; leave alone 5:1 and on, should be limited to Paul himself, or to Paul and his fellow-apostles.

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

In any case, it is undeniable that *all* Christ's people are kings, priests and prophets by reason of their union with Christ. The prophets foretold it, and Christ established it. Not in a literal sense, of course, but in a spiritual sense. Believers, therefore, are ministers. I think we may justly argue that they are 'competent'; all of them are 'competent as ministers'. Each believer has God's Spirit and can, to a measure, teach others. The point can be broadened. God equips all his people to fulfil that particular ministry which he has for each of them. To deny it is to fly in the face of the provisions of the new covenant (Isa. 54:13; 61:6; Jer. 31:31-34; 33:14-22; Zeph. 3:9-10; John 6:45; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 Thess. 4:9; 5:11; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:15-18; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; 1 John 2:20-21,27; 5:20).

Nevertheless, because all believers are 'ministers', it does not mean there is no need for recognised and stated able preachers who are to edify the church by their teaching. The very suggestion shows a lack of understanding of what the New Testament means by the many different words it uses for 'preach' and 'teach'. Obviously the promise that no member of the new covenant will need a human teacher (Heb. 8:11; 1 John 2:20-21,27) cannot possibly mean what it appears to be saying at first glance. The writer to the Hebrews, and John were both teaching as they were saying it! Of course we need teachers and preachers, ministers!

But my point here is that all believers are competent ministers, gifted by God. And that includes the ability to strengthen, encourage, reprove and confirm fellow-believers. Moses' wish (Num. 11:29) has been more than amply fulfilled.

I realise that I am touching a very sensitive point, saying something contrary to common practice in many churches, and this, perhaps, will disturb some readers. Some might go as far as to think – and accuse me of it – that I am subverting the preaching and teaching ministry. So let me try, yet again, to set any anxious heart at rest. *I am, myself, anxious – anxious **not** to give the impression that I am dismissing the need for stated, and recognised, gifted teachers.* I am not! Let me give one example to prove it. A few pages back, I quoted Acts 8:4; 11:19-20, showing how 'ordinary' (I detest the word in this context) believers 'preached' the gospel. By God's grace, they were 'competent':

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

‘The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord’ (Acts 11:21, NIV). But go on to Acts 11:22-26. Barnabas recognised that these ‘established’ believers, along with the new converts, needed solid teaching. The ‘ordinary’ believers were ‘ministers’, yes, all of them, but none of them were gifted sufficiently to sustain an edifying ministry to the church – which the church was crying out for. (The church always is. It is today! I certainly hope churches are praying for, and on the look-out for, able teachers). Barnabas rose to the occasion. He brought Paul to Antioch, and the pair of them, both gifted teachers, ‘for a whole year... met with the church and taught great numbers of people’ (NIV). And they were successful, for it wasn’t long before the Antioch church had three more capable ‘prophets and teachers’ listed alongside Barnabas and Paul (Saul), who was listed last! (Acts 13:1; see also 15:35).

I think that all this speaks for itself, and should calm the fears of any who think I might not hold to a stated, gifted ministry. I certainly hope so. I could not be more emphatic on the need, and the biblical warrant, for an able, stated preaching and teaching ministry.

My point here, however, must not be lost. All believers have a ‘ministering’ gift and ability. All of them. And this is an aspect of their priestly ministry under the new covenant. This ministry needs emphasising – and exercising!

6. *Self-sacrifice*

The last sacrifice that believers offer under the new covenant – at least, the last which I shall mention – is the greatest of them all. Indeed, it is not really a separate sacrifice at all. In one sense, it is the rest of the sacrifices put together in one. God does not require his people only to offer praise, worship, practical demonstrations of love and service, and to witness for him. He calls for more. Much more. God calls for the total *self*-sacrifice of his priests, the offering of *themselves*. He requires not only the service of his priests; he wants *them* – he wants their total dedication to himself – without reserve or rival:

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

Offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness... Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness... Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual [or reasonable] act of worship (Rom. 6:13,19; 12:1, all NIV).

If Solomon could say: 'My son, give me your heart' (Prov. 23:26), we can see what God requires of his sons and daughters. And believers, surely, will gladly respond: 'I will praise you, O LORD my God, with all my heart, and I will glorify your name for evermore' (Ps. 86:12). I shall soon be quoting Frances Ridley Havergal's 'Take my life'. It would fit here equally well. Let me instead quote Henry Francis Lyte:

*Redeem'd from guilt, redeem'd from fears,
My soul enlarged, and dried my tears,
What can I do, O love divine,
What, to repay such gifts as thine?*

*What can I do, so poor, so weak,
But from thy hands new blessings seek,
A heart to feel thy mercies more,
A soul to know thee, and adore?*

*O teach me at thy feet to fall,
And yield thee up myself, my all!
Before thy saints my debts to own,
And live and die to thee alone!*

*Thy Spirit, Lord, at large impart,
Expand and raise and fill my heart!
So may I hope my life shall be
Some faint return, O Lord, to thee.*

'Offer yourselves'. God requires believers to live holy lives, totally dedicated to him, totally given up to him. And as they do, he looks upon this dedication as spiritual and true worship; a priestly sacrifice which is pleasing to him. God is not interested in worship that consists only of words or forms which are gone through on special formal occasions. He demands the whole heart and life. As Christ put it to Peter: 'Do you love me more than these?... Do you

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

love me... Do you love me?' (John 21:15-17). Anything less he condemns (Matt. 15:8; Luke 14:25-33).

What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits towards me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD now in the presence of all his people (Ps. 116:12-14).

* * *

These, then are the sacrifices of believers as the new-covenant priests of the Lord. They are real sacrifices. Let me also stress the obvious; it is clear that we are talking about these sacrifices as spiritual and not literal. We are not to kill Gentiles in sacrifice, for example (Rom. 15:16). Again, the offering of our body (Rom. 12:1) does not mean hair shirts, self-mutilation, flagellation or worse. God intends us to understand these sacrifices in a spiritual sense.

Further, these sacrifices are not to be thought of as individual sacrifices, a kind of pick-and-mix or *à la carte*. No child of God could choose to offer sacrifices 1, 2 and 4, say, and leave out the others. The sacrifices of God stand or fall together. They are inseparably linked. As in the old covenant, partiality is forbidden (Mal. 2:9). They are all part and parcel of the worship of God. Thanksgiving to God, the praise of his name, love to other believers, witness to unbelievers... are all joined in the service of the Lord. Giving to God and supportive care of other believers cannot be separated (2 Cor. 8:5). I have just quoted Acts 8:4; 11:19-25, pointing out that the first Christians, as competent ministers, able to 'preach' for Christ, submitted themselves to able teachers for edification. But now go on to observe that Luke records that it did not stop with head knowledge. Those very same believers were just as 'competent' at practical giving to needy fellow-believers (Acts 11:27-30). Likewise, praise and practical works are bound together (Heb. 13:15-16). A contrite heart and a holy life are one. God demands all; he deserves all. It may well be said of the sacrifices that God requires of his people: 'What God has joined together, let man not separate' (Matt. 19:6).

To apply Christ's words to the woman at Jacob's well, the time has now come when God's true worshippers worship the Father by

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

the Spirit (John 4:21-24); and they do so at all times, without ceasing, everywhere, in no special place. God has no desire for special places. We treat our meeting houses with respect, of course, but we have no sacred buildings. The ‘house of God’, as a building, is the language of the old covenant (Matt. 12:4, plus scores of Old Testament references), not the new. Our meeting house is not ‘the pillar and ground of the truth’, Christ is not ‘a high priest over’ it, nor does ‘judgement... begin’ there (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:21; 1 Pet. 4:17). The church – the assembly of the saints – *this* is the house of God in the new covenant; not the building in which the house of God assembles.

In the old covenant, places were special, yes, and God himself, not the people of Israel, fixed the sites. The temple, for instance, was located in Jerusalem, and nowhere else would do (Deut. 12:5,11,13-14; 2 Kings 21:4; 2 Chron. 7:12); Bethel and Dan, for example, were ruled out. Jerusalem was the place. The woman at the well (John 4:20) was right, as were the Jews and Greeks at feast-times (John 11:55; 12:20; Acts 2:5,9-12), as was the eunuch from Ethiopia (Acts 8:27) – under the old covenant (1 Kings 8:41-43).

But we are living in the gospel age, and the abolishing of special places is one of the glories of the new covenant. The concept of Jerusalem and the temple as a special place was one of the reasons why Judaism could never conquer the world. The release from this emphasis upon places is one of the reasons why the gospel *is* conquering, and *will* conquer the world. Islam, Romanism, Sikhism, Hinduism emphasise special places for pilgrimages and the like. False religion always does. Look how Judaism, false Christianity and Islam are fighting even today over a few acres in Jerusalem. It is, of course, vital to remember that the new-covenant prophecies in question of Jerusalem and Zion (Ps. 2:6; Isa. 2:1-5; 28:16; Jer. 30:18; 31:38-40, for instance) do not refer to Jerusalem, Zion and the temple in the local sense (Rom. 9:33; 11:26; Gal. 4:25-27; Eph. 2:19-22; Heb. 12:22-24; 1 Pet. 2:6, for instance).

As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well: ‘The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father’ (John 4:21). Christ, of course, was not saying

What Are the Sacrifices That Believers Offer?

that in the new covenant nobody would worship in Samaria or in Jerusalem. Rather, he was declaring that ‘the hour is coming’ or, as the NIV, ‘a time is coming’ – meaning Pentecost and on – ‘a time is coming and has now come’ (John 4:23, NIV), when true spiritual worship would be offered to God independent of place. That time has come. Even in the old covenant, God never really dwelt in tabernacle or temple; in the new, he certainly does not (Acts 7:48-50; 17:24-25). In this gospel age, God has no spiritual interest in place, building or art-work representation. Nor should we. Under the new covenant, what God *does* desire is spiritual worship, worship with the understanding, worship in truth, worship from the heart, worship from those who have experienced his salvation:

The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

Or, as I have quoted more than once already, as the apostle put it: ‘We... worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh’ (Phil. 3:3).

I call upon all true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ: Lift up the voice, lift up the heart, and let the words resound: We – we believers – *we* are the true people of God. It is *we* who are the circumcision. It is *we* who worship God in the Spirit, *we* who rejoice in Christ Jesus, *we* who have no confidence in the flesh. This describes *us*. This is what it means to be believer-priests of God in the new covenant. And this is what we are!