

How Do Believers Offer Their Sacrifices?

With the usual acknowledgement that in what follows I am somewhat over-simplifying, the answer to this question falls into eight parts. Let me also admit that I have already discussed some of this material, but I include it here for sake of completeness. In eight ways, therefore, believers offer their sacrifices.

1. Believers offer their sacrifices in and through the Lord Jesus Christ

Although believers are priests, in no sense are they priests in their own right.

Let me repeat my earlier explanation of this point. I want to make myself clear. Every believer is a priest. But he is only a priest because he is in Christ. He is not a priest by his own power or ability or right. Nor does he exercise his priesthood in his own name.

Believers are certainly not consecrated priests by their fellow-men! Being 'in Christ' is the only consecration needed to make a sinner a priest. It is the only consecration that can make a priest who is acceptable to God. 'For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified [or made holy]' (Heb. 10:14). All their priestly status, privileges and responsibilities flow directly from their union with Christ, and only from that union. Believers, being priests only and entirely because they are 'in Christ', can only offer their sacrifices through him: 'Through Jesus... let us... offer to God' (Heb. 13:15, NIV). 'Through Jesus'. There is no acceptable sacrifice apart from sacrifice in and through him.

Believers, 'as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 2:5), who is 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6). 'Through Jesus Christ'.

There is no access to God except through the one and only mediator: 'For there is one God and one mediator between God

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and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5), the one who rightly claimed that 'no one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). But in Christ there *is* such access: 'Through him we... have access by one Spirit to the Father' (Eph. 2:18). It is only in Christ, and 'through faith in him', that believers may approach God, but in Christ, with the apostle I say again, there *is* such access: 'In Christ Jesus our Lord... we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in him' (Eph. 3:11-12). Paul, himself, I cannot help pointing out, did say it again – in the same letter (Eph. 2:18; 3:11-12). John spoke of 'the confidence we have in approaching God' (1 John 5:14-15, NIV). And the writer to the Hebrews stressed it:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone into heaven [footnote], Jesus the Son of God, let us... then approach the throne of grace with confidence... Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience... (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:19-22, both NIV).

Believers offer their sacrifices by giving them into the hands of Christ, who is their great high priest, so that he might present them to the Father on their behalf: 'Since we have a great priest... let us draw near'.

What a contrast to the old covenant! Under that covenant, a man might give his sacrifice to the priest, but that priest might turn out to be, say, one of Eli's sons, who 'were corrupt; they did not know the LORD'. If so, the result would have been catastrophic: 'This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they [or men] were treating the LORD's offering with contempt' (NIV); 'the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred [or despised, footnote, NKJV] the offering of the LORD' (AV) (1 Sam. 2:12-17). Nevertheless, even under the best conditions, even if the priest had been Aaron himself, an Israelite had to depend on a fellow-sinner to present his offering.

Now, in the new covenant, to whom does the believer present his sacrifice to offer to God? He goes to Christ, Christ 'the Son of [God's] love' (Col. 1:13), who always pleased his Father (John 8:29). He is the one by whom and through whom believers present

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their sacrifices and offerings to God. ‘By him let us... offer the sacrifice’ (Heb. 13:15). All is done ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’; the sacrifice of thanksgiving is given ‘to God the Father through him’ (Col. 3:17). Believers do not, believers cannot, offer their sacrifices in their own name or merit; all is done in and through Christ. And only through him. But what an intermediary! What a high priest!

2. Believers are always priests, and always engaged in their priestly work

Believers are always about their duty as priests; their ministry is continual. In other words, they do not reserve their worship for stated times, nor is it confined to special places. Let me remind you of what I said earlier: ‘The “house of God”, as a building, is the language of the old covenant... not the new’. Unpopular it may be to say it, but the meeting house is not the ‘house of God’, however traditional it may be to call it such. I am not making a fuss about nothing. Serious misunderstandings and consequences can follow the basic mistake. Naturally, I am not advocating treating the meeting house with contempt, but I am arguing for a proper new-covenant approach to ‘sacredness’ and worship. For those who want to justify the ‘house of God’ approach, they will look in vain for support from the New Testament. There are six references to the ‘house of God’, three of which, in the Gospels, all refer to the tabernacle in the days of Abiathar the priest; that is, they are old covenant. The remaining three (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:21; 1 Pet. 4:17) all refer to the spiritual church, the children of God united in assembly. And, when alluding to the believer or the church by reference to the temple or a building, the New Testament, without exception, speaks in spiritual terms.

Believers, under the new covenant, do not wait until they reach the meeting house in order to worship. If they are not in an attitude of worship as they drive to the place of assembly, it is hardly likely that they will in the right frame of mind and heart when they enter it. I am not saying that God cannot, and does not, work wonders in overcoming our sins and misunderstandings in such things, but believers must get into thinking of themselves as those who are

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always engaged in God's worship. The fact is, the notion of 'switching on' worship as we cross the threshold of some building, and switching it off as we leave, is repugnant in new-covenant terms. *It is far from being unknown, however.* It ought not to be. Believers, in essence, should be no different inside the meeting house than outside. They are always priests, always 'on duty', and always offering their sacrifices to God through Christ:

By him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God; that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name (Heb. 13:15).

We are told to 'pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks' (1 Thess. 5:17-18). Paul declared that he and his friends 'pray always' for the church at Thessalonica (2 Thess. 1:11). As he said to Timothy: 'I desire... that... men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting' (1 Tim. 2:8). God promised, through Malachi, that under the new covenant he would establish perpetual worship from his priests throughout the earth:

From the rising of the sun, even to its going down, my name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place, incense shall be offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts... He [Christ] will purify the sons of Levi, and purify them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant [or pleasing] to the LORD (Mal. 1:11; 3:3-4; see also Zeph. 3:9-10, NIV).

Thus, God's name is always being praised. In every place – not just the meeting house – at all times, his priests are always before him, engaged in his worship. And it pleases him. He has ensured that it is so, through Christ, in the gospel.

3. Believers do not offer their sacrifices to try to atone for their sin, but because they have been redeemed from their sin

Strictly speaking, I suppose, this is not a 'how', but a 'why'. Nevertheless, the 'why' certainly has a big effect on the 'how'. Or should do!

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Believers do not offer their sacrifices *as* an atonement for their sins. Rather, they sacrifice *because* they have been redeemed. How important a point is this. Let me emphasise it. Believers have been made priests, and so can offer sacrifices to God, from first to last because their sins have been atoned for, and they are a redeemed people. There is only one sacrifice for sins; the blood of Christ is the only way of atonement. And that blood has been shed, sacrificed and offered to God by Christ. There is no other sacrifice of atonement. Even to think of such a thing would be the highest insult to God in Christ, nothing short of blasphemous.

For in Christ, God has fully satisfied his just claims upon sinners. ‘God set forth [his Son] as a propitiation by his blood... to demonstrate his righteousness... to demonstrate at the present time his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’ (Rom. 3:25-26). ‘God... made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin [or a sin offering] for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him’ (2 Cor. 5:20-21). Christ ‘offered for all time one sacrifice for sins’ (Heb. 10:12, NIV), so that there is no longer any sacrifice to be offered for sin (Heb. 10:18).

Believers, therefore, do not offer their sacrifices to God to *obtain* his mercy. It is only because they have received such mercy that they do offer. Their sacrifices are a direct consequence of their enjoyment of the redemption accomplished by Christ’s atonement. Certainly, it does not represent any attempt to earn that redemption, or merit salvation. ‘In view of God’s mercy... offer’ (Rom. 12:1, NIV). *In view of*, I stress. In view of God’s mercy, we have to offer, we should offer; in view of God’s mercy, we want to offer, and we do offer. Paul certainly did *not* say that we have to offer in order to *obtain* God’s mercy!

4. The sacrifices of believers are true sacrifices

Believers offer *sacrifices* and, by definition, a sacrifice is a *sacrifice*. The sacrifices which believers offer carry a cost. If they bore no cost, they would not be sacrifices. But in their hearts, spiritual men and women are determined to meet this cost. God gives them grace to find pleasure in serving him. As David said: ‘I

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will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing' (2 Sam. 24:24, NIV). Only the best was good enough to be offered to God under the old covenant. Any defect in the creature to be sacrificed led to its summary elimination as a prospective offering (Lev. 22:19-25; Num. 19:2; Deut. 15:21; 17:1). Whatever its defect, it was totally unacceptable to God.

So it is today. God demands the best. God demands all. Believers are commanded, believers are exhorted, to give their all to God (Rom. 12:1). And, moved by the Holy Spirit, believers, from their heart, want to meet this command and fulfil this exhortation. God deserves the best; he deserves their all. From their hearts – knowing that they fall short, and are hypocrites even as they sing – believers nevertheless delight to take the words of Frances Ridley Havergal, and want to make them their own:

*Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for thee.*

*Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from thee.*

*Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold;
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as thou shalt choose.*

*Take my will and make it thine;
It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is thine own;
It shall be thy royal throne.*

*Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure-store;
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for thee.*

5. Believers know that God accepts their sacrifices

Believers offer their sacrifices confidently. They do it in the certain knowledge that the Lord gladly accepts them and their worship. They and their offerings are ‘acceptable’ to him. They do not offer blindly, superstitiously, vaguely hoping that somehow or another they might be able to reach him. They do not worship out of craven fear, seeking to appease a tyrannical God. In his word, God has assured his people that he delights in their sacrifices when they are offered in obedience to his commands. The priestly work of believers is, therefore, a confident work. They offer to God knowing that the Lord accepts them and their worship in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, he more than accepts them and their worship. He delights in them and wants them to come to him: ‘The Father is seeking such to worship him’ (John 4:23). So much so, he invites and commands them to come boldly to his throne, promising them grace if they do (Heb. 4:16; 10:19).

6. Believers must offer their sacrifices willingly

Believers must offer willingly. ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Cor. 9:7). God takes pleasure in the free-will giving of his people. If they give through bad, inferior or wrong motives – such as a mere sense of duty, formally as when forced to attend ‘church-parade’, or to obtain merit or favour – he will not accept their offerings. God does not want the reluctant giving of his people. He loves the cheerful giver who gives from a full heart.

7. Believers must offer their sacrifices in holiness

Believers must offer their sacrifices in holiness. In the old covenant, not only did the animal offered in sacrifice have to be the best of the flock or herd, free from blemish, but the priests themselves had to be holy (Lev. 21:6,17-24; 22:1-9,17-25). When, after the exile, under Ezra, the Jews reformed their unlawful marriages, the priests came first in the record – both of guilt and reformation (Ezra 9:1; 10:18-44). The priests, having first purified themselves, were then able to purify the people (Neh. 12:30,43-47).

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It is the same in the new covenant. Believers are priests, and they must be holy. ‘As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written: “Be holy, for I am holy”’ (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Where was it ‘written’? In the old covenant, of course, and not once but three times (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7). But Peter repeats it to believers in the new covenant. Nothing could be clearer. Whichever covenant, old or new, second best will not do for God. Both priest and sacrifice must be holy. Indeed, if God set such a high standard under the old covenant, how much higher under the new?

The priest himself must be holy. ‘Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false’ (Ps. 24:3-4, NIV). The believer, therefore, must be ‘pure in heart’ if he is to come to God. He must not cherish sin in his heart: ‘If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me’ (Ps. 66:18, AV; Matt. 5:8). Even under the old covenant, ‘one who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination’ (Prov. 28:9). God, through the prophet, put it bluntly to Judah: ‘When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood’ (Isa. 1:15). The principle was widely understood, right from the beginning (Job 27:8-9; John 9:31).

Look at Jeremiah 6. Israel was under God’s judgement because of their sin, particularly that of the prophets and priests (Jer. 6:13). God spelled it out in detail. Not only that; he called the people back to himself and his ways. But they refused (Jer. 6:16-17). This, of course, meant further judgement (Jer. 6:18-19). Despite this, the people still went on offering their sacrifices to God! But he left them in no doubt as to what he thought of *that*! Until they reformed themselves according to his word, their sacrifices were no use (Jer. 6:20).

Under the new covenant, we know that ‘without holiness no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14, NIV). And this must not be confined to the ‘no condemnation’ of Romans 8:1. Not at all. Sanctification is the issue here. I will have much more to say about this in my book on the law, but notice how Paul moves from

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justification to sanctification in Romans 6:11-23; 7:1-6; 8:1-4, and beyond – right to the end of the book (see Rom. 12:1, for instance), gathering together and applying the teaching he had set out in Romans 3:21 – 8:4.

An unholy priest, an unholy believer? A contradiction in terms! Offerings presented by unclean hands, sacrifices stained by unholy living, are not acceptable to the Lord. And since, in the new covenant, the priest and the offering are one and the same – the believer himself – the believer is to give his best, give his all, to God, and do so in a holy way. He must give himself as a *holy* sacrifice to God. He must ‘abstain from sinful desires’ (1 Pet. 2:11, NIV). Just as the animal had to be free from blemish in the old covenant (Lev. 22:17-25; Mal. 1:8,14), only ‘righteous sacrifices’ are a delight to God (Ps. 51:19, NIV). ‘You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures’ (Jas. 4:3). The believer’s aim should be to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31).

God’s priests are to be holy, and they must offer righteous sacrifices. God will allow such priests bearing such sacrifices, but only such, to approach and worship him. Nevertheless, such worship *is* acceptable to the Almighty, pleasing to him. Moreover, in the new covenant, he has taken all necessary steps to ensure that his priests do offer him this worship. I have already quoted Malachi 3:3-4; that is, the prophetic declaration that through Christ, the Lord would raise priests who will bring acceptable sacrifices. This prophecy, this privilege, this responsibility, God has ensured is fulfilled in each and every believer as one of his priests. In Christ, through the imputed righteousness they have received by faith, believers are free from condemnation, and they and their offerings are ‘acceptable’ to God (Rom. 8:1; Eph. 1:6). And, although their sanctification is far from perfect in this life, if they come to God relying on the blood of Christ to cleanse them, and if they desire to live a life pleasing to God, they and their offerings continue to be ‘acceptable’ to him (Rom. 12:1; 14:18; 15:16; 2 Cor. 5:9; 8:12; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 4:18; 1 Tim. 2:3; 5:4; Heb. 12:28; 1 Pet. 2:5,20).

8. Believers must offer their sacrifices in obedience to God's commands in Scripture

Believers must offer their sacrifices in obedience to God's revelation, and in no other way. 'Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than to sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams' (1 Sam. 15:22, NIV). The children of God are to follow the example of their Redeemer who, as David prophesied, declared to his Father: 'I delight to do your will, O my God, and your law is within my heart' (Ps. 40:6-8). In the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), when God sent his Son into the world, Jesus did not come to sacrifice in the levitical way, but to fulfil David's prophecy, by doing his Father's will, culminating in the sacrifice of himself on the cross:

Therefore, when he came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin, you had no pleasure. Then I said: "Behold, I have come – in the volume of the book it is written of me – to do your will, O God... Behold, I have come to do your will, O God"' (Heb. 10:5-10).

In this regard – obedience to God's command – as Christ, so his people. Did not Christ himself set the supreme example? He told us:

My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work... I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who sent me... The works which the Father has given me to finish – the very works that I do... I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me... I do nothing of myself; but as my Father taught me, I speak these things... I always do those things that please him (John 4:34; 5:30,36; 6:38; 8:28-29).

Sinai, of course, was a covenant of law. Nevertheless, so is the new – but the law is a new law. Believers, 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16), the true circumcision (Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3), are under 'the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2), 'under law towards Christ' (1 Cor. 9:21). But just as the new covenant is *new* (Luke 5:36-38), so is Christ's law; he gave his disciples 'a *new* commandment' (John 13:34). But a command he did give them. And how! There is no

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mistaking it. Note the Lord's words: 'This is my commandment' (John 15:12); 'keep my commandments' (John 14:15,21,23-24; 15:10,12,14,17). As he said:

I... your Lord and Teacher... have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you... If you know these things, blessed [happy] are you if you do them... A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another... If you love me, keep my commandments... He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me... He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me... Abide in me... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you... You are my friends if you do whatever I command you... These things I command you, that you love one another... Remember the word that I said to you (John 13:13-17,34; 14:15,21,24; 15:4,12,14,17,20).

But mere outward conformity to regulations does not satisfy the Lord. As with Christ, 'delight' is the word. The believer is to delight in obedience to God's word, take pleasure in obedience from the heart. Loving obedience to me, said Christ, spelling out his law for his disciples, is the badge of all true believers, the evidence of their spirituality: 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35). 'Abide in me... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples' (John 15:4,8). 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love'. And all is to be 'just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (John 15:10). He who says: 'I bestow upon you a kingdom' (Luke 22:29), who 'has made us to be a kingdom' (Rev. 1:6; 5:10, both verses NIV, NASB, NKJV footnote), (see also Col. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:12; Rev. 1:9), has every right to give us his people the rule and pattern of that kingdom.

And so he does:

He who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments... [against adultery, murder, stealing, false witness, covetousness], and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

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Indeed, under the old covenant, love and obedience were inextricably entwined (see Deut. 11:22, for instance). In my forthcoming book on the law, I will have more to say on this vital link. Certainly, love and obedience are Siamese twins under the new covenant. Believers live and die as Christ's liege-men, and count it a privilege to be so honoured. They are such from the heart. And Christ commands his people to love one another. It is their badge before the world. Let me re-quote our Lord: 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

John is definite: If we do not love our brothers, we are in darkness, whereas love for our brothers in Christ is a sure mark of our spiritual well-being, a convincing evidence that we truly know God, and are being made like him (1 John 2:9-11; 3:14-19; 4:7-13,16-21; 5:1; 2 John 1,5).

But that 'love' has to be more than in name, more than mere talk. An ounce of practical love for brothers and sisters in Christ is worth a ton of theoretical, highfalutin and sentimental talk about loving Christ (1 John 3:16-19; 5:2-3; 2 John 6). I have used the word 'practical' a number of times. As I have already observed, under the old covenant, when the Jews returned from exile, the priests joined in the physical work, whereas at least some nobles did not (Neh. 3:1,5,22,28). I said I would return to this. I do so now to point out that 'practical' can involve the menial. Those who build walls tend to get their hands dirty, chafed, rough and sore, and have to bend their backs. Believers, likewise, need to learn how to stoop and use the towel (John 13:1-17, especially verses 14-17). While the parallel may not be exact in our temperate climate in the UK, the application of New Testament foot-washing (1 Tim. 5:10) to our us and circumstances is plain enough.

The priesthood of believers, therefore, is a priesthood of those who are members of the kingdom of Christ, and who, as such, lovingly obey him as their Lord and Master. They do this in whatever way he may choose to make use of them, as he makes his will known to them through the Spirit's providential leading in accordance with his revelation in Scripture. To help an aged or infirm believer with a daily chore, for instance, is as much a 'priestly' or 'ministerial' service as standing in a pulpit and

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addressing a thousand. God prizes both – equally. I must confess that I am tempted to put the menial first. I often say that, at the roll-call, a certain unknown and unrecognised lady – a ‘Mrs Unheard-of’ let us call her – will be selected first by the Lord for recognition. After all, we know that ‘many who are first [now] will be last [then], and the last first’ (Matt. 19:30; Mark 10:31).

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These are the ways in which believers show they are God’s priests. This is what it means to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ.

Believers offer their sacrifices in and through their Redeemer, their great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ; they are always priests, always engaged in their priestly work; they do not offer their sacrifices to try to atone for their sin, but because they have been redeemed from their sin; their sacrifices are true sacrifices; they must offer their sacrifices in holiness; and they must offer their sacrifices from the heart in obedience to God’s commands in Scripture. As they do, they can be confident that God delights in, and graciously accepts, both them and their sacrifices.