

The Present Importance of Obsolete Symbols

Hebrews 9:1-14¹

Many people today do not sleep well. They go to bed and toss and turn, finally falling into troubled sleep. Some try new ideas for beds: new mattresses, latest beds, air comfort mattresses. Others turn to alcohol or drugs. Some put blinders over their eyes and cotton in their ears. Others give up and get up, turn on the tube or a movie and sit in dazed stupor until sheer exhaustion drives them under.

And frankly, the problem is not bad beds, or noise, or caffeine. What is keeping many a Christian awake at night is not outward discomfort, but the quiet and persistent voice of a condemning conscience. All of us have had times like this. We kept hearing in our inner voice that we are wrong in this attitude or in that action. So we try to quiet it, or ignore it and eventually we get used to it.

I have tinnitus. Probably most of you would not know it. I have a constant ringing in my ears. One evening, we were sitting at the table and the noise in my ears just seemed to become unbearable. I put my head in my hands and commented on it (probably, more like, I complained about it). The family all laughed and said, "It's the crickets. We all are hearing the noise because the crickets are making a racket." So, I have the constant chirping of crickets in my ears everywhere I go all the time. There are times when I want to think or meditate or pray, that I just long for quiet. I never truly have it.

I do not know one person who does not hunger for quietness of conscience. Yet we are constantly thinking and doing and feeling in ways that wake that persistent ringing in our souls that gives us no peace and no rest and no quiet. Don't you long for quietness and clearness of conscience? How do we get it, then?

This is the present importance of these obsolete symbols: we can have a clear conscience.

The Sanctuary that then Existed (v.1-7)

¹ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. ² For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, ⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. ⁵ Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

We read these words with a tremendous sense of foreignness. These are old and dusty and difficult to imagine. The whole idea of worshipping around a tent sounds weird. It has little connection to the concrete realities in which we live. How do we deal with the difference and distance we feel from its oldness and strangeness?

Ignore it. We dismiss such ideas and considerations as irrelevant to us, our day or our situations. In this day of computers and airplanes and antibiotics and cloning, why should I care much about something so obsolete and passing that it is no longer around today?

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Idealize it. We can search through its typology for transcendent principles that apply, not only to them, but also to us. We look for eternal significance divorced from its historical setting.

Learn from it. We approach it saying that this is Scripture, this is redemptive history that has been and still is, under God's sovereign control. Through these passing and obsolete symbols, God is establishing categories and truths and object lessons which point to Christ and which Christ illuminates.

So let's not choke on the dust nor turn away in frustration at the difference. Let us listen carefully to see if God will tell us what the design of all this has to say.

Its Covenant Principle (v.1)

God made an agreement, a contract - what the Bible calls a Covenant - with God's people, Israel. In that contract, God gave precise regulations for worship. They knew exactly what was required. In order to be near to God and His Presence, they had to follow these regulations exactly. Part of these regulations was a tent or tabernacle. Later, Solomon took these instructions and built a Temple.

There was no escaping the fact that God had prescribed exactly how this was to be built and exactly what was to happen in it.

Its Physical Structure (v.2-5)

These verses summarize for us the construction of the tent. In fact, let me play tour guide for a moment and let's walk through it. Around the tent was a courtyard marked off by a fence. There was one gate. As we walk through this gate, we come immediately to a large altar. Here is where we would bring our sacrifice. As we walk past the altar, we come to large bowl set on a pedestal somewhat like an immense cup and tea set. From it, we can see water pouring out of sockets and the priests wash there. Next, there is the tabernacle. It is like an oblong box over 8 feet high with a large covering over its top and going down on either side. As we enter the door, we come into a room that is 2/3 of the whole. On our right, by the wall, is an ornate table with twelve dishes, each one containing a loaf of unleavened bread. On our left, is a large lamp stand with seven branches. At the end of each branch is a cup for lamp oil and a burning wick floating in it. In front of us is a double curtain. Standing in front is a small altar designed to burn incense on it.

If we go through the curtain, we would come into a smaller room called the Holy of Holies. This room contains only one piece of furniture. It is a gold box, with a cherub on each side of the top whose wings arch over the lid of the box and touch over its center. Inside this box, the Ark of the Covenant, are the second of the two tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments, a golden pot of manna and a walking stick with small knobs all over it where it once had budded.

And I can only echo with our author: we cannot go into detail about all of this now. For this structure was gaudy, elaborate and rich in artistic detail. There were all sorts of fancy instruments and bowls and pans and utensils designed to assist and aid in their worship.

Its Priestly Service (v.6-7)

Next, we are told what went on in this place of worship. The priests sacrificed at the altar in the courtyard. They washed at its fountain. They entered the outer room to eat or change the bread daily. They maintained the lamps on the lamp stand. They cleaned and replenished the incense. But they never ever went into the inner room.

Once a year, on a special day called the Day of Atonement, the High Priest offered a sacrifice at the altar and sprinkled its blood for himself. Then he offered another sacrifice and took its blood into the tabernacle, passed through the double curtain and sprinkled the blood on the lid

of the Ark of the Covenant. If God accepted that sacrifice, then the High Priest was allowed to return to the people, otherwise, he died.

Now we must never imagine the Old Covenant believer entering the Tabernacle to worship. No, at best, he entered the courtyard around it and offered his or her sacrifice there. But the tabernacle, the tent itself, was off-limits to everyone except the priests. All of it was off-limits to Gentiles.

So, what does all this mean? One thing for sure. It tells us that worship in the Old Covenant had exacting details and difficult rituals and precise places for its worship. The detailed instructions were almost wholly taken up with the external and the physical.

So why should we care about all this?

The Significance for us Now (v.8-10)

⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing ⁹ (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

What makes all this significant are two key phrases:

The Holy Spirit *was showing* (v.8).

This is an illustration *for the present time* (v.9)

All of these obsolete and passing rituals are very important because the Holy Spirit wants us to see something and feel something very important. He was doing “show and tell” with the regulations and the sanctuary of the Old Covenant. I can stand up here and talk about what it is like to be around a 15 or 20 foot python or a 2 ton Cape Buffalo. But let me bring in 15 feet of skin or a massive set of killing horns, and you will see and feel with greater power what I am trying to say. So it is with what God through the Holy Spirit was doing. And all of this was not just for their day (v.8) but is an illustration for ours (v.9).

So what is it that these external, physical rituals and sanctuary were teaching them and us?

The was no Personal Access (v.8)

While an earthly tent or temple or sanctuary stood, the way for everyone into the very Presence of God *was blocked*. The very externals that were given by God so that men and women and boys and girls could express their faith and deal with their sins, also kept them from entering into the Presence of God.

Imagine the frustration. Suppose that God Himself lived in this *in a physically visible way* which in the Old Testament was called the Shekinah Glory of Cloud. But you cannot enter this room. In fact, you cannot enter the lobby. You come to worship, to sacrifice and to be near God, but you have to stand in the parking lot. And yet, just through two sets of doors is GOD HIMSELF.

This was the day in and day out experience of Old Testament saints.

There was no Perfected Conscience (v.9)

Not only could they not come into the presence of God, they went away with their conscience still not satisfied. That internal voice was not silenced or appeased by animal sacrifices nor the spilling of hot blood. What we experience and actually may have relief and release from, they apparently did not. Even when they did exactly what God prescribed, God was satisfied, but their consciences were not silenced.

It really opens up for us the anguish and wrenching cries of the Psalmist, doesn't it. They who believed God heard them and accepted them and fellowshiped with them did so with a grace enabled faith that shames us. For the very externals of their religion showed them what they were missing and barred them from nearness and inner wholeness.

There was no Permanent Effect (v.10)

These things were merely external. They were structures and forms and rituals. They were in place only until the time of the new order. They were to be ending when the age in which we live began. This age of the New Covenant began with coming of Jesus, in His doing and dying. This new age began with the advent and ascension of Jesus. Jesus. The old age was passing away and disappeared at the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD (Hebrews 8:13).

All of this is to bring us to Jesus Christ. Verses 11-14 show us is that what the external religion of the Old Covenant could not do, Jesus Himself has done.

The Sacrifice that Changed it All (v.11-14)

Jesus came to bring us the good things we already are now experiencing.

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

We do not have access to God and purity of conscience through the old ways of external rituals and sacred tents or temples. We have access and purity through the sacrifice of Jesus - through the outpouring of His life in His blood on the cross.

In its Contrasts

Two major contrasts are drawn here.

Where He went

Jesus does not enter an earthly physical temple to offer sacrifice. No, He entered the eternal, heavenly Temple that is not man-made. He entered heaven for us.

How He went

Jesus does not sacrifice an animal and then takes its blood. No, He sacrificed Himself on the altar at Calvary. He enters heaven, not because of animal blood, but because of His own.

Now notice carefully verse 12. Do not misread this. And certainly do not misuse this. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus entered the heavenly place with a human body *by* not *with* His blood. We must not think in some slavishly literal way that Jesus gathered up every drop of the red liquid flowing through His veins and took it into heaven in a bowl and there splashed it on the throne of God.

The words on the cross were, "It is finished." There, the life of Jesus as represented in His blood was both shed and sprinkled. The punishment for sin was done. The purification of conscience made possible. The way to heaven opened when Jesus entered heaven as our priest and our mediator. It is because He is alive and living there that we have all these good things now.

In its Finality (v.11-12)

The stress in verses 11-12 is the finality, the completeness of what Jesus has done. He *went through...* He *entered...* He *obtained...* and all these completed action verbs are *once for all*. What Jesus has done in dying and living for us is done. It is completed. That is why there are no more earthly sanctuaries or priests. There is nothing more to be done.

In its Sufficiency (v.13-14)

Our author uses one of those wonderful “how much more” that brings home to sin-sick and conscience stricken souls the release so hungered for. The argument runs like this: “If the external, physical rituals made sinners outwardly clean, then how much more will the sacrifice of Jesus make sinners inwardly clean.”

The sacrifice of Jesus is entirely sufficient to pardon sin and purify consciences. Our sins are not just covered as they were in the Old Covenant--no they are cleansed. They are washed away.

I cannot move on without pointing out the Trinitarian aspect of Jesus’ sacrifice. Verse 14 says it is the blood or sacrifice of Christ - here is the Son. He offered Himself through the Spirit - here is the Holy Spirit. He offered Himself to God - here is the Father. So the sacrifice of Jesus was *of* the Son *by* the Spirit *to* the Father.

How can people with stained consciences draw near to God? We know that what keeps us away from God is not dirty hands or wrong clothes or hair length or unacceptable music or even physical distance from an altar or a priest. What keeps us from God is real sin echoing in a condemning conscience.

And we know that the presence of sacred rituals and formal worship and proper external structures do not bring us the purity of conscience that allows us to draw near to God. In fact, those very externals may be guarding the way to real personal access and real inner peace. What allows us to draw near to God is the sinner’s soul purified by the final and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Here is why many today - why I spent many of my teen years - why many of you - do not have the freedom in drawing near to God. You are trying to deal with your condemning conscience *in Old Covenant ways*. You have all sorts of regulations and external rules that bind you tight to law living and hinder you from worshipping in spirit and truth. You have little freedom of conscience that gives you freedom of access. Some of you may still be trying to come to God and be accepted by God on your own goodness or your own works. And no matter how good you are and no matter what you do, that small still voice shouts through your quiet moments that *all is not well*.

What must you do? You must abandon all that is passing and obsolete and failing. You must cast yourself on the mercy of God and He will cleanse your conscience by the blood of Jesus. Then you will have the fullness and freedom to draw near to God. In fact, your conscience will be cleansed from all your dead works so that you may serve the living God.

Reflect and Respond

Let me bring this all home with a couple of very important conclusions.

While the focus in the Old Testament is on all the exact and right and strict rules and regulations on worship, the New Testament is stunningly silent on it.

There is no text that describes a worship service in its entirety. There is nothing about worship places, worship times, worship dress, worship music, length of sermons, or worship order.

All of this frees us and frightens us.

It frees us to find time, place, dress, style, music and order that radically orients us to the supremacy of Jesus.

It frightens us because the way we put worship together - the way each of the Biblical parts is related to the whole - is culturally shaped rather than Biblically commanded.

Why do we tend to create, in their absence, external and concrete and unchanging forms and structures for worship.?

Human nature is wired so that we construct as quickly as possible, a manageable, man-made religion.

Old Testament had all this prescribed in amazing detail. So we think that we must have some sort of transcendent, unchanging structure in which to express our worship, failing then to realize that even God-ordained structures became obsolete and passing.

Why does this amazing freedom exist in the New Covenant? One author answers this question for us:

Because the New Covenant is a missionary faith. It is going to all cultures and people groups with the good news that Jesus is Savior and Sovereign. So the grace of God is calling out God's chosen from every language and culture and ethnic background to worship God in spirit and truth. So almost all the mandated, ritualistic, formal, external aspects of public worship are gone. What is left is the passion and purity of people loving God and neighbor in every sphere of life - at home, at work, at play, at church. (Piper)

We must recognize that our consciences are trained to condemn us based on what we perceive is right and wrong.

The condemning effect of conscience is called guilt. When your conscience announces a verdict against you, what you feel is guilt.

The conscience does not know the difference between breaking God's commands - sin - and breaking our own personal law - standards. When either is violated, our conscience condemns and we feel guilty. This is easy to illustrate.

If I have taught my conscience that stealing is wrong, then when I steal my conscience will condemn me and will make me feel guilty. This is what it is supposed to do.

If I have taught my conscience that drinking from clear plastic glasses is wrong, then my conscience will condemn me and will make me feel guilty. This is what it will do.

But there is a very important difference. Stealing is sin; drinking from clear plastic glasses is not. But I will feel equally guilty. Both acts will keep me from drawing near to God because of my conscience. The sacrifice of Jesus deals with both. It has atoned and redeemed and paid the penalty for sin. It has released us from of universal, external rules and rituals and given us amazing freedom to obey God with a clear conscience.

In matters of sin, purify your conscience by coming to Jesus and receiving from Him the pardon and cleansing that His final and sufficient sacrifice has purchased for you.

In other matters, keep heeding your conscience *all the while retraining it with the Word*. Keep your conscience tender toward sin, but free in all else.

Here is the challenge for you today. Draw near to God with a conscience cleansed by Jesus' sacrifice. Trust Him. Bow to Him. Be cleansed by Him. Serve Him today with all your heart.