

"HOLY SACRIFICE"
RESPONSE TO PAPER BY
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INTRODUCTION: For Millard Reed to criticize the work of Alex Deasley is to call to mind the story of David and Goliath. Except, in my case, my trip to the brook exposed no smooth stones-only a few granules of sand to throw at the giant.

While the expression, Holy Sacrifice, is worthy of consideration, in any conference that considers Holy God, Holy Spirit, Holy Church, Holy Persons, and Holy Mission, I join with Mr. Deasley in his comment in paragraph one, page one, "Nowhere in Scripture is the significance of sacrifice spelled out specifically." He comments, further, "It appears simply as a fact of religious life whose meaning was presumably well-understood by worshippers" and that it is widely agreed "that sacrifice is a feature of religion around the world." I suggest that for these very reasons, the Christian tradition has faced the challenge for nearly two millennia in defining the meaning of Christ's death as sacrifice-often without agreement on the issue. However, the matter as to the nature and meaning of Christ's death, particularly in relationship to an understanding of the function of the atoning death of Christ, this issue becomes of great significance for dialogue within the church in the 21st century.

Dialogue Within Scripture Itself Concerning the "Merit" of Sacrifice

At the outset, I must note that the scriptures themselves hold differing views concerning the merit of sacrifice. The most obvious are in the Old Testament which both establishes the sacrificial system and denies its efficacy.

I would speculate that those who follow the priestly tradition would affirm the sacrifice, while those of the prophetic tradition might question the value of sacrifice or at the least question its misuse as a meritorious act. In other words, within the canonical text itself, a dialogue takes place as to the appropriate role of sacrifice. In order to remind us of this dialogue, let me share scriptures that express the skeptical view concerning at least the inappropriate understanding and practice of sacrifice:

Psalms 40:6: "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire . . . burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require."

Psalms 51:16-17: "You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Proverbs 15:8: "The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him."

Proverbs 21: 3: "To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

Daniel anticipates the abolishment of sacrifice in Chapter 12:11: "From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished . . . if only for a while."

Hosea 6:6: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."

This criticism of the inappropriate, perhaps even manipulative or meritorious, nature of sacrifice is not limited however to the prophets. Our Lord himself was particularly concerned with such a misuse of sacrifice as is demonstrated in his quoting the prophet Hosea: "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." Matthew 9:13.

I would raise the question that perhaps should be further explored: Does the prophetic criticism of sacrifice as well as Christ's skeptical view toward sacrifice reflect the people's separation of sacrifice from covenant? As the sacrificial system of ancient Israel worked within the context of the LORD's covenant with Israel—a response to the covenant love of God and not a meritorious means to gain or earn the love of God or somehow to appease God—does a perverted understanding of sacrifice result as it is separated from the broader context of covenant? What are the ramifications then if the sacrificial nature of Christ's death is separated from the covenant love of God?

Sacrifice as a Device of False Meritorious Piety or Divine Manipulation?

I fully agree with Deasley's statement that "sacrifice is a feature of religion around the world." However, would raise the following question in the light of the scriptural criticisms of sacrifice: Is sacrifice a desirable feature of religion or a device of false meritorious piety claims that assume a desired result can be extracted from the divine? And if it is a device of false meritorious piety even to the point of manipulation of the deity, might the Christian tradition too easily take a misuse and perversion of sacrifice (as critiqued by both the prophets and Christ) and inappropriately apply it to the death of Christ? I find no reason to contend with Deasley regarding the detailed definitions of sacrifice in religious nomenclature in the practice of the Old Testament and the usage of the New. I do raise the question: are those understandings of sacrifice consistent with the once-for-all sacrifice made by Christ in the records of the New Testament?

A question that has haunted me in recent months relates to sacrifice as a means of grace: Is the term "means" as in "means of grace" singular or plural? It would seem to be plural. But I'm inclined to believe that the word might more appropriately be understood in the singular. Deasley's paper has further provoked my mind.

The variety of categories or images that are used in the New Testament to convey the meaning of the death of Christ illustrates the uniqueness (or once and for all nature) of his redemptive sacrifice. His death was for all and in Christ's death all die.

Deasley's quote from James Denney that the work is finished before the gospel is preached emphasizes a unique singularity of the means of grace.

Death of Christ as an Act of Divine Love

Deasley has particularly observed well that Christ's death for us is the "fruit of his love." Of particular significance are his observations that the sinner stands under the judgment of God and cannot produce salvation for himself, yet he "bore our guilt"--not bore our sins, but rather he bore our guilt in love. The purpose of the death of Christ is reconciliation--reconciliation made possible by the death of the Son and that uniquely so. The barrier was removed, but it was removed from God's side.

Christ reconciles the world to himself. All that he requires in his holiness, he provides in his love. Well articulating this matter is Thomas C. Oden's contrast of internal with external necessity in speaking of the necessity of the cross: "There is no intended implication that God is under any external necessity to resolve the dilemma caused by the history of sin. The moral necessity of atonement is a requirement of God's moral will. It is necessitated only by the freedom of the holy God to love rightly." And I would add indiscriminately that it then is not in terms of some conditional response to a meritorious piety. Therefore, whatever understanding we have of the atonement of Christ must give first priority to the self-giving/life-giving love of God. Perhaps a glimpse of this divine love is seen in the God who passes between the pieces in the story of the covenant with Abram in Genesis 15. This is not a God who is appeasing himself in some type of meritorious act. Rather, this is a God who daringly risks giving of his very divine being in order to demonstrate his faithfulness to what he has promised.

Summary

In summary, I would pose once again the question: Is the term "means" as in "means of grace" singular or plural? Sacrifices may be plural, but Holy Sacrifice, I think, must be singular and our sacrifice may be spoken of as "holy" only by a participation in His "once and for all" sacrifice. In the end, the provocation that I would make would call for a clear and singular function for the redemptive sacrifice and would expose any so called meritorious piety as lacking in virtue. Perhaps the question could be articulated in this way: What does it mean to believe that the sacrificial death of Christ is the demonstration of God's love or favor rather than an act of merit to gain God's love or favor.

--Millard Reed