

The Cross and the Altar

by G.W. North

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the altar represents the primal life-principle of the Church and God, where sacrifice and self-giving are essential for unity and reconciliation.

Scripture: Matthew 5:23

Topics: "Reconciliation", "Sacrifice"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the pervasive issue of spiritual blindness in both ancient and modern contexts, urging believers to understand the significance of reconciliation before offering gifts to God. He explains the distinction between the cross and the altar, highlighting that while the cross represents judgment and sin, the altar symbolizes unity and self-giving. North illustrates how Jesus, through His sacrifice, reconciled humanity and transformed the cross into an altar of acceptance. He concludes that true sacrifice is the foundation of the Church and God's relationship with humanity, resolving the complexities of sin and righteousness. The sermon calls for a deeper understanding of these principles to foster unity among believers.

Transcript

Spiritual blindness is a malady by no means limited to olden days and ancient Israel; it is a widespread modern disease too. Few there are who recognise the Christ or understand His meaning or the import of His apostles' words. Consider this statement by Jesus, 'if thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest thy brother hast aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift'.

The altar is an expression of a basic principle of God's way of life; it symbolises unity by union based upon the sacrifice of self-giving. How then can He possibly accept a gift upon His altar if it is offered in face of possibility of disunion between brethren? First go and be reconciled to thy brother, then come and offer thy gift, He says.

Too few have fully grasped: (1) the difference between the cross and the altar, and (2) the identity of the cross with the altar. In material, shape, size and purpose the Roman cross was as different and distinct from Israel's altar as it could possibly be. One was an instrument of punishment and shame devised by a barbaric heathen nation to apply civil justice to extreme criminals, the other was a piece of religious equipment whereon gifts and offerings could be given to God. One was the place of rejection, the other the place of acceptance. In some ways they are alike, even as regards their physical associations, for the

altar, like the cross, was a place of physical death and each was a representation of sovereign power, the first God's, the second Caesar's. There the resemblance ends.

There is that about the cross of Christ which in no way resembles the altar because of its association with sin. The cross was the pillory upon which God chose to identify His Son with old Adam; He impaled Him there in order that He should thereby be punished to death without mercy. In that respect therefore Jesus had no place at the altar and was cut off from it. The cross was the direct antithesis of the altar; it points to God's judgement on sin and the sinner and the whole rejected manhood of sin. But having conquered in that sphere and finished that part of His work on the cross, the Lord then proceeded to use it as an altar whereon He offered Himself without spot to God. This done, He had completed His work and He dismissed His spirit.

In fulfilment of His own statement, on behalf of mankind with its age-old rivalries and divisions and enmities, at Calvary He did five things: (1) He brought His gift to the altar and (2) (so to speak) left it there while He (3) went to the cross of and for reconciliation and (4) having accomplished it in one body, (5) came and offered His gift. By so saying and doing He made sacrifice the primal life-principle of the Church as well as of God; it was in view of the cross that He made His earliest statement about the altar. That was His art. He who knew no sin was made sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

In the midst of all that sin, right there at the heart of it, was righteousness, for He remained righteous throughout. This is the great mystery which resolved the problem of sin and iniquity. By this God was able to deal with the impossibility of redeeming, reconciling and regenerating and receiving man and at the same time, by one act, righteously finalising and eternally dispensing with the temporary measures of atonement and the need for man-made altars.

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