

The Christian's Altar (Hebrews 13:10)

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Introduction

1. The New Covenant church has no material altar as used in Judaism under the Old Covenant.
 - a. The OC relied on material, external, and tangible means of worship (tabernacle, altar, priesthood, etc.); the NC has no external means, being spiritual and immaterial.
 - b. OC Judaism was type and shadow, pointing to the anti-typical reality to come; the NC rests on the fulfillment of the typical with no need for symbols.
 - c. The purpose of the book of Hebrews was to demonstrate the superiority of Christ in His person and sacrifice, the fulfillment of typical Judaism being everything pointed to in Judaism.
 - d. The context of verse ten points to a *spiritual* altar through which NC saints offer spiritual sacrifices (v. 15).
 - e. Verse ten also reveals that this spiritual altar is off limits to the priests that served the tabernacle of the OC. We will explain what this means later.
2. The spiritual altar belongs to NC saints—*“We have an altar.”*
 - a. The meaning of this declaration requires that the reader keep in mind the stated aim of the epistle, which is to demonstrate the excellency of Jesus Christ and His superiority over Judaism.
 - b. Sometime in early Christian history, Christians began to revert to the material symbols of Judaism, Christianizing them with buildings, altars, rituals, and ceremonies warned against in Scripture (note v. 9). This tendency can be noted in how verse 10 is often interpreted to refer to material altars in churches, even the Lord's table.

I. The True Altar

- A. Jesus Christ is the true altar. NC believers have Christ and, thus, have no need for Judaism's typology.
 1. Jesus is the great High Priest, of which Aaron and his successors were but a faint resemblance. *“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)”* (Hebrews 9:11).
 2. Jesus *“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”* (Hebrews 9:12).
 3. His sacrifice once and for all time secured eternal redemption: *“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, 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”* (Hebrews 9:13, 14).
 4. All that God designated for Moses to make for the earthly tabernacle mimicked the *“greater and more perfect tent not made with hands”*—brazen altar, golden altar of incense, bread of the presence, mercy seat, and ark of the covenant. These all pointed to Jesus and were fulfilled in Him.
- B. Christ's declarations establish the fact that He is both altar and gift (Matthew 23:19, cf. John 17:9).
 1. The book of Hebrews supports this fact, the lengthy first part of the epistle showing the unique glory of Christ's person before speaking of His sacrificial work.

2. The whole of Scripture shows this fact, each instance of altar building pointing in faith to the true altar that brings reality to what the sacrifices promised in hope. Here God met with sinful humans on His condition.
 - a. The first act of Noah upon leaving the ark to enter the flood-cleansed earth was to build an altar (Genesis 9:1).
 - b. The first thing Abraham did upon entering the land promised by God was to build an altar between Bethel (house of God) and Ai (heap of ruin) (Genesis 12:7, 8).
 - c. Isaac (Genesis 26:25)
 - d. Jacob (Genesis 33:20)
 - e. Moses (Exodus 17:15; 24:4)

II. Eating for the Altar

- A. The altar was foundational to Israel’s worship, being the sole means for Israel to approach God (Exodus 29:42; cf. John 14:6).
 1. By divine designation, Israel’s altar was for Israel only, and only the altar provided a way to God.
 2. The importance of this truth lay at the root of the Hebrew Christians’ temptation to return to Judaism, the subject of the Hebrew epistle.
 - a. At issue here is the basic tendency for sinful humans to rest their hope on what can be seen and felt. Returning to Judaism offered these wavering saints the objects of worship the heart craves.
 - b. Salvation turns the tables by asserting that “we” Christians also have an “altar,” one that is spiritual (truly real) but also forbidden to Judaism due to the fact that it is strictly spiritual in nature.
- B. *Eating* refers to the participation in the offering by those who brought it (Leviticus 6:14–16; 7:1, 6, 15). “*It is good for the heart to be strengthened [confirmed or established] by grace.*”
 1. The connection of this with our text is evident from the warning of verse nine: “*Do not be led away with diverse and strange teachings.*”
 - a. These teachings are not God’s gracious means to *establish* the heart because they center on mere externals—in this instance, *foods*.
 - b. The specific matter referenced in the prohibition is “*not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.*”
 2. Here we must be very careful to read what the apostle states, particularly his reference to the eating of the sacrifices because doing so did not *benefit* the eater.
 - a. The grave error of Judaism is the root failure of *devotion* to objects of worship, not the God these objects were designed to represent. This is the fatal error of external religion.
 - b. The sole remedy is the grace of God that alone can establish the heart before God (John 6:51–58).

What can we take away?

1. Are you a true partaker of the Altar—of Christ?
2. How does this relate to the Lord’s Supper?