

Sacrifice of Praise

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

¹ Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶ So we can say with confidence, >"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever....

¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

A lawyer once asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. "Eternal life" then did not mean life that just went on and on. It meant life that really mattered and so endured. It was the life of the new age—living by God's ways. As the lawyer summed it up, it was to love God with everything one has and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus responded with the story of the good Samaritan: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25-37).

Most people want to live such a life and to be good persons. Today's passage sums it up too: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (v. 16). The Letter to the Hebrews also spells it out, offering a short catechism of what it means to do and to be good. **Frederick Borsch**

This is our sacrifice of praise to God, who has given us life, love, security and salvation! There is nothing on earth quite like living in Christian community. Our congregation, for many, serves as extended family. For many, the congregation is our first priority for free time apart from family or work. The churches of childhood show up in our fondest dreams.

However, congregations can also be places of contentiousness. Your stomach can clench in knots as you turn into the church parking lot. A radio preacher was once heard to cry, "When the devil fell out of Heaven, he landed in the choir loft!" Many a finance committee could go the choir one better. Indeed, the natural tendency to think of church as "family" risks importing into the sanctuary all the strife we fled when we left home. So, it may be a good thing that we don't have a choir or a lot of money!

Contentiousness, however, *is* energy, energy that can readily be transmuted into adoration of God, loving respect for one another, and service to the needy world. It is far better to be contentious than have no energy, because even the energies that make our churches sometimes painful to occupy are usually signs of life.

If we want to move more centrally into the zone of the actual will of God for our congregation, the passage we consider from Hebrews 13 offers much that is vitally essential for making the transition from lifelessness to contentiousness to being the very front porch of God's kingdom, where we give God our sacrifice of praise.

What are those vital elements? There are three. The first and most basic is found in verse 15: "Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name." *Worship*, in effect. When the New Testament church thought of worship, they did not contemplate a headlong rush from pages 355 to 366 in some worship manual within the statutory one-hour slot, offering the worshipers all the spiritual scenery of a subway ride. No. Look at how they describe it: "a sacrifice of praise to God." They were describing happy effort. The work of actually praising God and meaning it is transformative; it changes us.

Here is how it works. You come to resemble what you admire. People who admire money get green and crinkly. People who admire computers grow user-unfriendly. People who admire youth get juvenile. People who actively and deliberately admire Jesus Christ come to resemble him as he actually was and remains today, unchanged from age to age: generous, merry, tender, fierce, courageous, somewhat mischievous, fully open to others after his self is sorted out. Real worship is the engine of personal

transformation. Congregations that craft worship out of love for our Lord more than out of love of respectability are well on their way to kingdom level vitality.

The second element in becoming a vital congregation is *fellowship*. "Let mutual love continue" (Heb. 13:1). Souls that emerge from a worship service in which people actively admire and praise our Lord are in a somewhat fluid, molten state. The issue then is, how will my molten soul "set up"? Will I rush back into my normal routine, to be shaped once again by the world's mold? Will I sit docilely in some class where a teacher or pastor tells me exactly what to believe and practice and exactly how to do it? That would be like pouring my molten soul into somebody else's ice tray—and calling it "growth"! Far better to gaze around the coffee hour for eyes equally ablaze and forge relationships with them, letting my self-in-transformation be shaped in our mutual discovery of Jesus' high adventure. **Gray Temple**

Some years ago, commentator Lanny Peters was traveling alone and passed a hitchhiker. His first impulse was to pass hitchhikers by, and putting biblical mandates aside, he would not want to advise anyone else to do otherwise. That day, though, something in the face of the old man with his thumb out made him pause. Perhaps it was his snaggletooth grin or the way he happily waved as Lanny passed. In any case, Lanny found himself hitting the brakes and pulling over. Lanny watched in the rearview mirror as the man moved toward his car, hurriedly, despite a prominent limp.

In a moment, the man crawled in the seat beside Lanny, shook hands, and said exuberantly, "Thank you for the ride, young man. My name's Henry." Henry was quite a talker, or perhaps he had just not had a chance to talk in a while. He ended up telling Lanny a lot of his life story and was interested in Lanny's story as well, not hesitating to ask questions that many might consider too personal from a stranger. He was retired and did not own a car. One of his children was in the hospital several hundred miles away, and he was going to make a hospital visit. Lanny told him he was going only about half the way before he would turn and go in another direction.

At one point, the man began talking about a place he liked to eat near where Lanny would leave him. Thinking he was going to ask for money, Lanny was considering how much to give him when he pulled out the most ragged billfold Lanny had ever seen. He searched through it and said, "I think I've got enough here and would like to buy us both a supper."

Lanny laughed and said, "No, no, I can buy my own supper. In fact, I can buy yours if you like."

"Nope," he replied, "you've done enough already giving me a ride this far."

They ate a great little meal at a roadside diner where the waitress knew his name, and Lanny left him there to continue his journey. Later, Lanny suspected he had entertained one of God's angels without knowing it. **Lanny Peters**

The third element of congregational vitality is *ministry*. By ministry the New Testament rarely means what we would call "church work." You can do church work without prayer. Try "remembering" (that used to mean visiting and feeding) those in prison and those being tortured—I will bet you cannot do *that* without prayer. The prayer will not be some rote, feeling less formula; it will be more like "*Help!*" God tends to prefer that kind of prayer, you will discover. You will notice that the most robust ministries, both within and outside the church building, grow spontaneously out of the new relationships forged between worship-molten souls.

These three elements occur in this Hebrews passage in close proximity. That suggests they must not be separated. *Worship* that does not melt the soul and lead to deepened relationships with fellow servants of our Lord becomes a fussy, on its last legs custom, what we just do out of habit. It becomes a cause of strife and contentiousness rather than a fresh way of addressing our love to God. *Fellowship* that does not grow out of spirited worship and point into courageous ministry becomes boozy, gossipy, and, as this passage warns, potentially adulterous. Cliques in a congregation are fine, provided they give new ideas and positive energy, but disconnected from worship or ministry, they are a circle of wagons on the congregation's prairie. *Ministry* that does not grow out

of worship-forged friendships becomes proprietary and sour, something to fight others about, rather than something to offer to them. If the payoff for ministry is not the love of God and love of others, it will decay into prestige maintenance.

Suppose our congregation, or any other, were to face into and lay claim to the energies with which we have voiced contentious discontent, asking God's forgiveness only for its target, not for its power and energy? Suppose we were to direct that same energy into passionately adoring Jesus Christ? Suppose we applied the judgment that formerly shaped our gossip into appreciating the excellence of potential friends in the congregation? Suppose those energies made us brave in the face of the world's many needs?

Just imagine it. There would be no institution quite like *our* church anywhere in the world—where we model mutual love and have the reassurance that the best model for mutual love is Jesus Christ himself, who "is the same yesterday and today and forever." This indeed will be our sacrifice of praise! To which we can say, Amen. **Gray Temple**

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