

“*Altaring the Past*” Genesis 22.1–14 and I Corinthians 10.14–22
 The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 2 March 2003

During our centennial year, I plan to occasionally look at some of the characteristics that help make us who we are. One of the qualities that gives our denomination strength and vitality is our view of the past. We can’t alter it, of course, but we can reinterpret it. We are able to incorporate elements of that make sense to us from the great traditions of Christianity: interpreting the Bible in each generation, using the creeds as testimonies (not as tests) of faith, the writings and thoughts of the Reformation, and from the four strands of our United Church of Christ heritage: German Evangelical, German Reformed, Congregational, and Christian. We have considerable freedom in the way we worship and approach our faith, which is one of the things the first German Congregationalists appreciated about our tradition.

I’d like to take a quick survey: how many of you were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition? The Episcopal or Anglican Communion? Lutheran? Anabaptists (Mennonite or Brethren)? Unitarian? Then there is another side of the family, called the Reformed tradition: Presbyterian? Disciples of Christ? Christian Reformed? Reformed (Dutch, French, Swiss)? Baptist (of any flavor)? Congregational? Evangelical and Reformed?

This last group – the *Reformed* family – is where we find ourselves sitting, and each of those denominations has, to some extent, been influenced by the Reformation thought of a Frenchman name Jean Cauvin, or John Calvin as he is more widely known, and the Swiss theologian Huldreich Zwingli.

The Reformers sought to use scripture as the basis for all aspects of our faith practice and changed nearly every aspect of the way we worship. Growing up, I never ever saw a UCC minister wear a stole or a cassock alb (that linen robe I sometimes wear) – they were “too Catholic,” which goes back to Calvin’s rejection of vestments. “Luther had already championed **art, music, and the physical presence of Christ on the altar**,” writes church historian Roland Bainton. “It was Zwingli...who was to transmit the rejection of all three to English Puritanism.”¹ Music in the early Reformed churches was either forbidden or limited to the a cappella singing of the Psalms, and organs were certainly not allowed. Religious art and stained glass windows were avoided as being idolatrous. And while Calvin rejected the crucifix (the cross with the corpus of Jesus), he allowed for the empty cross, which symbolizes the resurrection. (Our English Puritan foremothers and fathers, however, rejected even the empty cross; the church we belonged to in Connecticut has only had one for 15 years, and it’s still controversial!)

I spent one of my undergraduate years at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, which was a seat of the Scottish Reformation. St. Andrews Cathedral was consecrated in 1318 with Robert the Bruce present, but it was sacked by a mob whipped up by the preaching of John Knox at the parish church in 1559. They dragged out the altar, removed the candlesticks, trashed the art, and turned the towering stone cathedral into an effective stone quarry for the next century. These people were serious about their faith, and for them, the altar symbolized everything that was wrong with Catholicism.

So, how do you feel when we move the altar to the side and seat the choir in the chancel? Does it feel as if I and the Board of Deacons have decided to do what those early Presbyterians did in St. Andrews? I don’t want to make light of it, though, because for

¹ Bainton, *Christendom*, v. II, p. 32.

many of us, the image of what the church looks like, especially up front, carries a lot of weight and familiarity. One minister describes shifting the chancel around as “rearranging the furniture of heaven,” and another says that it’s “changing the face of God.” If that’s true for you, I would invite you to ask why: not so that you change your mind, but so that you make an intentional understanding of the meanings it carries for you.

So, what is the function of an altar, anyway? Let’s look at it not just in terms of Christianity, but in various religious traditions.

Richard Giles, in his book about church architecture, writes, “The basic instinct of humankind, evidenced in most primitive societies, is to offer sacrifice in order to appease the wrath or procure the favor of a deity.”²

The great megaliths of Stonehenge encircle a stone altar that may have been a place of sacrifice: a human being laid on the altar on the solstice and killed as an offering. That sounds pretty primitive, but the druids and Aztecs weren’t alone.

Our text from the Hebrew Bible this morning is one of the most terrible texts in the canon, which talks about altars as a place of sacrifice. First, Abraham builds an altar, collects wood as fuel to burn the body of his son (by the way, the technical term for an offering that is fully burnt is *holocaust*), ties up his son, puts him on the fuel, and is ready to stab him to death. Then the angel appears and says, “this is test...this is only a test...in the event of a real sacrifice, you would be directed to kill your child.” It’s an **awful** story! So, Abraham ends up sacrificing a ram instead (which isn’t such good news here in CSU country).

The idea of sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem persisted in Jesus’ day. If you remember the story of the cleansing of the Temple in the gospels, Jesus clears away the money changers and the people selling doves that worshippers were buying to sacrifice. The priest would take the animal and slaughter it.

It is from this type of sacrifice that the Roman Catholic Church began to reinterpret the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as an act of sacrifice upon an altar. For many Roman Catholics (at least traditionally), the notion is that the priest transforms the elements of bread and wine into the physical body of and blood of Christ, and re-enacts Jesus’ own self-sacrifice on the cross. But, do you see the broader connection with sacrifice and altar? Can you see how this fits into the ways diverse religious traditions use altars?

In the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church and in the 1928 Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, the priest would stand facing the altar during the mass...like this... which might not seem like such a big deal, until you realize that they probably didn’t have good amplification. How would you feel if I celebrated communion with my back to you, way on up here in the chancel? What message does that send to the congregation?

The altar was never a part of the earliest Christian worship; communion was celebrated by people in house churches, sitting around a table. “The sociological process by which the Church, after Constantine,” writes Giles, “ceased to be a community of equal commitment and required a professional clergy to keep the show on the road, was soon reflected in the internal layout of its buildings.” (p. 40) “The altar was moved away from the people...dignified with a ... canopy...and ‘protected by low walls.” (p.41) Eventually, the altar was also raised, not so that it could be seen by the people, but so that it could be kept from them.

But, this is **not** the way we in the Reformed traditions of the church see communion **at all**. Luther, of course, condemned transubstantiation (the idea of

² Giles, *Repitching the Tent*, p. 11.

physically turning the bread and wine into the body and blood), and Calvin went even further. He said, “The opinion that the supper is a sacrifice deviates from that of Christ, and must therefore be condemned. . . it is a memorial of the **one** sacrifice, at which we ought entirely to stop.” So, the primary way we still interpret communion in our tradition is to remember the last supper: the meal that Jesus established, not the re-enactment of a sacrifice, but of a table open to sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. It is a table open to us all.

“For the Reformed tradition,” writes historian James White, “everything tended to focus on the centrality of the pulpit. Balconies became an earmark of Reformed churches since they brought many people within hear distance of the preacher. (This was true in our former church building on Whedbee Street.) For the eucharist, tables were placed across the front or down the aisles and the congregation sat around them at communion.”³ It is not insignificant, that the communion table is down on the same level with the congregation, nor is it insignificant that most Reformed churches today have a communion table – not an altar – that has the words of Jesus, “Do this in remembrance of me,” inscribed around it. And so, I don’t view the altar in our chancel as a true altar, on which we make sacrifices.

What’s more, in our tradition, lay people – our deacons – serve the communion elements to the congregation, which is not done by accident. In our tradition, each one of us participates fully in the Lord’s Supper.

What do you think: did God demand a blood sacrifice of Jesus to expiate the sins of the world? That’s part of the traditional “washed in the blood of Jesus” theology that I find so offensive. Sure, you can find it mentioned in two sentences of the pastoral epistles,⁴ which probably weren’t actually written by Paul, but Jesus is never, ever recorded in the gospels as saying that his own death was meant to appease an angry God because the world had sinned.

If God didn’t want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, why would God demand the sacrifice of his own son? The sacrifice of Jesus is very real, but it is a **self-sacrificial** act, not a live offering meant to appease an angry God.

If we don’t see the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a re-enactment of a sacrifice, the altar has very little place in our UCC traditions: Evangelical, Reformed, Christian, or Congregational. The one exception to this is that we have one vestige left: the offering. We collect the offering, which is meant to be sacrificial on our parts, we sing and pray to ask God’s blessing of the offering, and then where do we put it? On the altar.

As for me, I don’t think of this table as an altar at all, which to some of you will sound blasphemous! I tend to think more of Paul’s notion that we can follow the example of Jesus; that we each can be “living sacrifices” that are “holy and acceptable to God” by trying to follow the way established by Jesus in the life that he led, the things he did and said, and in his willingness to put his very life on the line because of his faith in God.

May the faith that was in Jesus be also in us. And may we strive to remember always the power that we derive from sharing the open table with one another.

Amen.

³ White, *A Short History of Christian Worship*, p. 139.

⁴ Ephesians 5.2 & Hebrews 10.12