

# WEEKLY REFLECTION

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First Congregational Church Newsletter  
East Longmeadow, MA

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Dear Friends,

I always find it interesting when something I've been thinking about related to the lectionary scripture readings for the week, dovetails with a conversation I have with someone in the church. I sense the movement of God's Spirit in those special times.

This morning provided such a time. I had been contemplating this week the words of Hebrews 7:23-28, and in particular the writer's description of the difference between the priests who had served in the temple, and Jesus, who is our high priest. The writer says of Jesus, "He holds his priesthood permanently, because He continues forever." (v. 24) and "Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins (of which Jesus has none), and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priest those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son, who has been made perfect forever." (v. 27-28)

This passage is vital to our Christian faith, and it provides me a daily reminder that in Christ, my sins are forgiven, and I receive the amazing gift of God's grace (that is: God's unmerited favor) through my faith in Christ alone. No longer are we required to make sacrifices to God on altars. Instead, we celebrate the victory over sin and death, once and for all, in Christ Jesus, around tables of communion.

This morning, I met with the members of the Flower Committee in our church. We were talking about sanctuary flowers and decorations for the coming months, through the Advent and Christmas seasons. In our conversation, they kept mentioning an "*altar*" and a "*communion table*". This led to a discussion that is a familiar one for me; as fully a third of the members of congregations I've served, have come from a Catholic background, and those folks often continue to call the piece of furniture on which we place the bread and cup for the Lord's Supper an "altar".

This gave me an opportunity to talk with them about the difference between those two pieces of "furniture," and to share that in our UCC tradition, we do not have altars in our sanctuaries. I shared with them that this is not just an issue of semantics, and that it's more than just a matter of two interchangeable terms. Those terms relate to an important theological distinctive that largely defines the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

The altar in the Old Testament was the place of sacrifice. This is also the meaning of the word in the Greek (*thusiasterion*—the *place* of sacrifice). The Latin word *altere* refers to the lifting up of the sacrifice from the earth.

The Roman Catholic Church today uses the word *altar* because it teaches that the mass is a sacrifice. The Missal (instruction book for the mass) teaches that at the mass the wrath of God is appeased and the soul redeemed.

The Communion table, on the other hand, as taught by the Reformed and Evangelical church (and the UCC!) is not a sacrifice, but a remembrance of the "once for all" sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:10). Nicholas Ridley (Bishop of London, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) gave three biblical reasons why we no longer use the word *altar*:

1. Because the word *altar* speaks of the sacrifices of the law of the Torah, and both the law and the sacrifices of the law have been fulfilled in Christ. (Matt 5:17-20 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill..." and Romans 8:1-4 "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death...").
2. Because Christ instituted the sacrament on a table and not on an altar. The Apostles after this always used the table rather than an altar in the administration of the Lord's Supper.

3. Because an altar is for sacrifice and a table is for communion. We do not sacrifice Christ again and again; we feed on Him spiritually who was once for all offered for sin.

In addition, it is important to notice the differences between the Roman Catholic mass, and the Protestant celebration of Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper:

1. According to Roman Catholic teaching, in the mass, the actual body and blood of Christ are eaten. Transubstantiation is a Christian doctrine that states that the bread and wine used in the Eucharist are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ during communion. The bread and wine's substance changes, but their accidents (that is, their appearance, taste, and texture) remain the same.
2. According to Protestantism, when Christ instituted the Lord's Super it was not offered to God as a sacrifice; Jesus gave the bread and wine to His disciples as symbols. The disciples were commanded to *partake* of the feast, not to *offer* it as a sacrifice. It follows therefore that the Protestant minister is not offering Christ to the people as a sacrifice, but is partaking with them in communion with Christ.

The celebration of the Eucharist on the "altar" as it is known in the Roman Catholic Church developed in the Middle Ages. It is not apostolic (i.e., it was not taught by the Apostles in the New Testament). The use of the word *altar* in the celebration of the Lord's Supper was not used by the church fathers; both Augustine and Athanasius used the phrase "tables of wood" when they spoke of the furniture of the sanctuary.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (the bread and wine changed into the real and actual body of Christ) as it is taught today was absolutely denied by Pope Gelasius in 492. In 637 a friar named Anastasius first raised the idea, but it was not until the ninth century that it was fully developed by the Abbot of Corbie in France, Paschus Radbert.

The term transubstantiation was first used about 1100 by Stephen, Bishop of Augustodunum, and was formally adopted at the Lateran Council in 1215 and reaffirmed by the Council of Trent during the Counter Reformation. Luther and the Reformers believed that the primary problem in the Roman Catholic idea of transubstantiation is the Mass involves an ongoing sacrifice. This practice takes away from the absolute sufficiency of Christ's work completed for us once-for-all on the cross.

Luther offered instead, a doctrine of consubstantiation; that is, the body of Christ is physically present in the elements because Christ is present everywhere.

When we, as Protestants, come to the communion table today, we do so by faith in the finished work of Christ, remembering (1 Corinthians 11:24–25) what Christ has done for us personally. The bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ that was sacrificed, and the believer coming to the table of communion is remembering what Christ has done for them. This is the great comfort found at the communion table, a means of grace.

I share all of this with you, in the hope that your understanding of the Lord's Supper will be more complete; but more so, that your experience of communion will be deepened by your appreciation of the meaning and context for our sharing the elements of bread and cup in Christ's presence, and with one another, each and every month in our sanctuary at our communion table.

Grateful for God's gifts of grace,  
Pastor Denise

*Some of the information for this article came from "Communion Tables" or "Altars" – What's the Difference?" by Aaron Dunlop, at thinkgospel.com*

*Additional sources:*

*John Jewel, Works, 2:602.*

*Nicholas Ridley, Works, 322-323*

*John M'Donald, Romanism Analysed (Scottish Reformation Society: Edinburgh, 1894).*