

Why no Altars or Sacrifices? Why no Mass?

John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapters 1:1-11:4*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 2009), pp. 695, 697-698, 703-705.

In his sermon from Genesis 8:20-22, preached December 25, 1559, John Calvin explained why Christian churches lack altars and the sacrifice of animals and why the Mass is completely unbiblical:

“Now it is true the altar and the sacrifice are particularly noted here, but we do not practice their use today because our Lord Jesus Christ put an end to all former shadows and figures. So the fathers [under the old covenant] made use of sacrifices, which are now abolished. But even though we differ in external practice, the substance and the truth, as I have already said, remain common to us. . . .

Now we do not have such ceremonies today because our Lord Jesus Christ has come to be the one and only perpetual sacrifice by which we are reconciled to God (cf. Rom. 5:10). Those sacrifices were repeated every day because they were not sufficient to obtain grace and favor and make God propitious toward men. But today our Lord Jesus Christ has satisfied God our Father so perfectly that his work cannot be repeated.

Why is the Mass opposed to the Gospel?

And in that, we see the stupidity of the papists, who want to sacrifice daily and even boast of offering our Lord Jesus Christ to God his Father as if he were like the priests of old and the offering always had to be repeated. On the contrary, Scripture declares that the offering which he offered up once on the cross is always in force (cf. Heb. 9:25-28; Heb. 10:10, 12, 14). That is why the apostle, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, says that the blood is always fresh and never decays, never dries out, and that its power is permanent (cf. Heb. 9:14).

That is also why he adds in another passage that we can offer sacrifices of praise to God (cf. Heb. 13:15). In other words, the sacrifices of praise are through our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have a way to praise God better than all the ancient fathers had and, by grace, we are ordained as priests in the name of Jesus Christ because we share in all his benefits (1 Pet. 2:9). That is how we have the freedom to claim God’s name and bless and magnify it in all the gifts he bestows upon us. And then, instead of the blood of dumb animals, we have the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed once, which cleanses our tongues and our prayers today and sanctifies them to God (cf. Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7) so that they are acceptable but would otherwise be abominable. Thus, let us understand that if we have to have recourse to God and pray to him, he pities and helps us in times of distress and need, and we also understand that the blood of Jesus Christ must come between him and us. In other words, by faith we receive the perpetual washing which cleanses us of our blemishes. . . .

Why no altars in churches? Because Jesus Christ is the altar!

On that point, we have to condemn the papists’ audacity: They built altars at will to sacrifice our Lord Jesus Christ. We see how Noah proceeded. So let us learn that there is no other altar than Jesus Christ on which to place and support our offerings. When he and his grace are our foundation, our works will be honored by God even though they are sinful. In other words,

there will always be some flaw, some weakness and vice, but God still accepts our works willingly when the blood of Jesus Christ is in the midst of them to cleanse every blemish.

Here we have to note first that since God was pleased with Noah's sacrifice, so also he will never reject what we offer to him by faith. That fact ought to give us courage to serve him, for poor unbelievers will be greatly afflicted, but they can do nothing with a sincere and pure affection because they have doubts and fears and do not know how it is between them and God. It is true they will glorify themselves as do the papists when they go running off on pilgrimages, when they play games with their masses and all the rest of their idolatrous activities, when they found some devotion and build altars and chapels. In all that rubbish, they will display their pageantry, thinking God is obliged to accept it all—or he finds fault with them!

. . . And when one asks them, 'Who instructed you to do that?' 'Oh, we think we are doing the right thing.' 'You think so? And do you think God changes his will and counsel to suit your fantasy?' That is why unbelievers will always be in doubt. But when we are certain God accepts what we offer him even though it has no value, that has to strengthen us even more so that we will be even better disposed to serve him with a joyful heart, as they say.

. . . [And] we must not doubt, inasmuch as we are reconciled to him, that our Lord pities us, that our worship pleases him, and we must remember that our acts of worship will not only please him, but that he will bless us and the earth because of us and will withdraw his wrath in order to spare us."