



OFFERING & SACRIFICE

A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Dear brothers and sisters,

Over the past year I have shared various thoughts and writings with you regarding the subject of offering. My intent is not to create a mandate on how each member should give to the church. Rather, I would propose that this is a matter of personal responsibility where each member comes to a richer understanding of the biblical and theological foundations regarding:

- Worship, thanksgiving and praise
- Offering, sacrifice, and tithing
- Support of those in need based upon Christian charity
- The higher purpose of wealth vs materialism
- The practical financial realities of supporting the mission of the church

With this information, we can then give of free will and in a manner that reflects our personal feelings toward God as well as our perception of the value of the church within our daily lives.

So within this culture of continual learning, we have asked our New Apostolic Church International theologian, Dr. Reinhard Kiefer, to provide a synopsis of the theological basis for offering, sacrifice, and tithing. We have used his research to compile the following discussion points that we hope will fuel our small group and congregational discussions for the next months. Part two of this discussion will appear in the Autumn edition of the VISION. -LRK

In the Old Testament, we see offering as a sacrifice; a material gift as a means of atonement. Its purpose was to strengthen the fellowship between God and man and to remove the impairments/obstacles which have come into being through man's sinful behavior. Here a variety of offerings/sacrifices were carried out: the sacrifice (the offering of animals), food offerings (the offering of baked goods), burnt offerings (the burning of incense).

In a broader sense, material gifts were also included in offerings (precious metals, materials, money, food) for the purposes of

supporting the maintenance of the priests and the costs of the congregation (Exodus 30:10, Nehemiah 10:33, 38)

Tithing, however, was the tax of the Levites, who first exercised their priestly service among the tribes of Israel, but later became helpers to the priest at the temple in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 25:26). In Malachi 3:8-10 Jews were criticized for sacrificing incorrectly and for neglecting their tithes. The Old Testament saints who lead a God fearing life, also fulfilled these duties, which were understood not as a requirement of man, but as God's commandment.

In contrast to ancient Judaism and paganism, the early Christian congregation no longer recognizes the idea of a sacrifice for atonement given the context of Jesus' death on Calvary. His sacrifice is unique and has a lasting atoning function, making all other sacrifices unnecessary. It is eternally valid.

Sacrifice as surrender

Although through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament sacrificial system has lost its basis, the term "sacrifice" is not only found in connection with the death of Jesus, but also with the new spiritual life of the Christian. An example is Romans 12:1: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.* Here, Apostle Paul requests in response to the mercy of God, the offering of a sacrifice by the believer and from those who are freed from sin. In the Greek translation it speaks of a "physical sacrifice", it is a sacrifice of myself, my person, my entire being. Further the sacrifice goes beyond the physical man; God's mercy urges man to devote all aspects of life to Him.

This devotion is spiritual, but also is expressed in concrete attitudes and behaviors towards others and has clear material aspects. Based upon this verse (Romans 12:1), we should ponder the consequences of a New Apostolic understanding of sacrifice.

Sacrifice as a category of Christian life

Romans 12:1 has a direct impact on the lives of Christians. In this verse, the concepts of sacrifice and service to the church as a form of divine worship are transferred directly to the life of the believer. "Sacrifice" and "divine worship" are now not only the responsibility of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, but have a prominent place in the midst of our everyday lives. The ritual sacrifice has been replaced within the Christian faith by a personal and voluntary self sacrifice.

Sacrifice as a material gift

The devotion of the body, of which Apostle Paul speaks in Romans 12:1 evolved in different ways in the early church. The first Christian congregation in Jerusalem contributed all their earthly possessions for the common good. The community property of the first Christians, which is reported in Acts 4:32-35, has its basis in the consciousness of the Christians of that time, that God is Lord also of the material goods and therefore the believer brings his belongings to the congregation for all to benefit: *Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.*

This concept of community property was not sustained and is believed to have been relinquished relatively quickly within the congregation of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the believer was not released from the obligation to contribute some of his property to the congregation. Apostle Paul organized a money collection for the needy congregations in Jerusalem in the Christian churches of Macedonia. Even the Corinthians were asked to contribute.

Here, Apostle Paul makes it clear that the wealth of faith and knowledge should lead also to generosity in giving and indicates the extent to which love works in the believer: *But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others.* (2 Corinthians 8:7-8) The right kind of love, it is suggested here, is one of physical

sacrifice, material gift for others and for the needs of a functioning community. ... *but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality.* (2 Corinthians 8:14)

Further, material possessions should not be used to fulfill selfish desires, but rather used responsibly:

- Personal responsibility with regard to myself, so that wealth does not destroy faith due to an unrestrained materialism.
- Personal responsibility to others that I perceive their need and decide to serve them in love. Material possessions cannot be separated from faith and from the focus on the Gospel of Christ.

The material sacrifice is one of good works, which by itself does not bring salvation, but all the same is an expression of faith and love. Therefore, Apostle Paul says, *"He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver."* (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)

Sacrifice as inner devotion to God

Lastly, sacrifice as written in Romans 12:1, represents an inner devotion to God. Proper sacrifice requires a "right attitude" towards Him. The requirement that sacrifice, behavior and attitudes are coherent, is already found with the Old Testament prophets. They called this sanctification.

When Christian life is understood as a "sacrifice" and "divine worship", an internal and systematic focus to the will of God is established. A life of sacrifice, divine devotion and worship is valid when lived according to the standards of God. In practice this means that the Christian "sanctifies their sacrifice." Sanctification of the "sacrifice" may mean, for example, that one asks whether a life dedicated to materialism, extravagance and self indulgence is in agreement with a life committed to Christ. It may be necessary to change ones internal alignment. - RK

