

Mercy and Sacrifice in Hebrews 13

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In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession Melancthon recalls Hebrews 13:15-16 when he argues that the sacrifices which are presented by the congregation to God in the divine service are eucharistic sacrifices, “the sacrifices of praise” (Apol XXIV. 25). Among these sacrifices of thank offerings he lists the good works of the saints, the good works that are done for the glory of Christ (Apol XXIV. 25, 32).

In this essay in honor of Glenn Merritt as the first director of LCMS Disaster Response and his contribution to the works of mercy done by the church through that agency, I would like to explore the connection in Heb 13:15-16 between the thank offerings of the church and its works of mercy and show how it builds on God’s care for the poor and needy in the Old Testament.

1. The Old Testament background to Hebrews 13:15-16

The teaching in Heb 13:15-16 on the presentation of God-pleasing offerings by the Christian congregation in the divine service has its origin in the Old Testament. It recalls two liturgical traditions: the divine legislation for thank offerings and the divine requirement that the people’s offerings be shared by the Levites and the landless poor.

The legislation for the thank offering, which is called a “sacrifice of praise” in the Septuagint, is found in Lev 7:12-15. There it is classified as a kind of peace offering. The

peace offerings had three main components: a first born male animal from the flock or herd of an Israelite family, some fine wheat flour that was mixed with olive oil, and some wine. While some portions of these offerings were burnt on the altar to consecrate the whole offering, the breast and the thigh of the animal and some of the flour belonged to the priests as holy food for them and their families; the rest was eaten in a holy meal by the people that presented it and their guests.

The thank offering differed from the peace offering in four respects.¹ First, it was offered as an act of thanksgiving for the Lord's deliverance of an Israelite from life-threatening danger in answer to a plea for help from him in such instances as are listed in Ps 107:1-32. Second, the animal for the thank offering was presented with three different kinds of unleavened bread as well as loaves of leavened bread of which one of each kind was given to the priest on duty. Third, and most uniquely, the presentation of the offering was accompanied by an individual psalm of thanksgiving, such as 30 and 116, which was either recited by the person or sung by a member of the Levitical choir. In that psalm of thanksgiving that grateful person told how he called on the Lord in his trouble and how He had delivered them from death so that they could bear public witness to God's grace by thanking and praising Him in the presence of his guests at the temple. Four, since all the holy meat and holy bread from the thank offering had to be eaten on the day that they were offered, the amount of food was more than could be eaten by any single family. So the person who presented it had to invite other guests besides the

¹ See John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 68-72, for an analysis of Lev 7:12-15.

members of his own family to join with him in that holy meal and rejoice with him in thanksgiving for his deliverance.²

The author of Hebrews also recalls a second liturgical tradition from the book of Deuteronomy. There God instructs His people to share the offerings of their families with the Levites, their male and female servants, resident foreigners, widows, and orphans in their respective communities (Deut 12:12, 18-19; 14:27; 16:11, 14-15). Since these folk had no land to cultivate and graze, they had no offerings to present to the Lord from the produce of His land. Hence the wealthy Israelites who had land to provide them with their livelihood, were required to invite them to be their guests at the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles and join them in their holy meals at the temple. Thus those Israelites who had more than they could eat since they were so richly blessed by the Lord (Deut 16:10, 17), shared their bounty with the Levites, their servants, and their disadvantaged neighbors. In addition to that, every three years all landowners had to pool the tithe of their produce, which by right belonged to God, for distribution to the poor and needy in their towns (Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-13). God reassigned that holy offering to them as His provision for them.

Thus already in the Old Testament the food from the people's offerings that were given to God were shared by Him with those in need. He provided food for them from what had been given to Him. Since He Himself had no need of them (Ps 50:9-13), He

² In Ps 116 the psalmist does not just offer a song of thanksgiving to the Lord but also themselves in the Lord's service as a thanks-giver. Since he had been delivered from death, his life now belongs to the Lord (116:3-9). He therefore dedicates himself to the Lord as his devoted servant (116:16) and promises to call on the Lord with thanksgiving for as long he lived rather than just on this one occasion (116:2). He, as it were, becomes a permanent member of the Levitical choir (cf. Ps 30:11-12).

gave what had been offered to Him back to the priests and the Levites, the Israelite families with their children and servants, and to those who were economically disadvantaged, widows, orphans and a landless foreigners. They all ate the holy food that came from His table.

2. An analysis of Hebrews 13:16 in its immediate context

⁸Do not be carried away by diverse and strange teachings, ⁹for it is good for the heart to be established by grace, not by foods which have not benefited those who walk in them. ¹⁰We have an altar from which those who serve at the tent have no right to eat, ¹¹for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought by the high priest into the holy places as a sin offering are burnt up outside the camp. ¹²Consequently Jesus also suffered (death) outside the gate to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³So let us go out to him outside the camp, bearing the same ridicule (as he did), ¹⁴for here we have no city that remains, but we seek the one to come. ¹⁵Through him therefore let us offer up a sacrifice of praise³ regularly⁴ to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶But do not forget the practice of well-doing and the common offering⁵, for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased.

³ In the Septuagint θυσία αἰνέσεως is the regular translation for a זבח תודה, “a sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Lev 7:12, 13, 15). This is the term both for animal that was offered (2 Chr 29:31; 33:16; Ps 50:14, 23) and the psalm of thanksgiving that accompanied its presentation (Ps 107:22; 116:17).

⁴ Or “continually.”

⁵ See the use of κοινωμία and its cognates as a technical term for a common offering given by the congregation in Acts 2:24, 27; Rom 12:13; 15:26, 27; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Gal 6:6; Phil 4:15; 1 Tim 6:18.

After emphasizing the constancy of Christ and the faithfulness of previous pastors in 13:7-8, the author warns the congregation in 13:9 against being **carried away by diverse and strange teachings**. The greatest threat to the peace of the congregation as a liturgical community is propagation of unprofitable teachings that destabilize the congregation by shifting it away from reliance on Jesus Christ who is always the same across all generations. Just as he always remains the same, so the teaching of him remains the same. Unlike the things that were taught and modelled by its former pastors, these new teachings are described as **diverse** and **strange, diverse** because they appealed to the bored imagination by their colorful novelty, showy variety, and superficial glitter, and **strange** because they were unauthorized by Christ and those whom he had appointed to teach God's word.

The exact content of these **strange teachings** is left unexplained. We may, however, surmise what they are from the reason that is given for this warning. They deal with the supposed benefits that were held to be gained by eating various kinds of **food**. That warning most likely alludes to the use of the dietary regulations from Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 to argue that the members of the congregation could remain holy only as long as they ate ritually clean food. Only ritually clean food could be sanctified as holy food by the invocation of God's holy name when grace was said for it. In this view their status as holy people with access to the heavenly realm depended on their consumption of clean food and their abstinence from food that was unclean. That issue had already been raised in 9:9-10 where the preacher had argued that these Levitical regulations could not perfect the conscience. Those who advocated this way of life held that the congregation would be **benefited** by it spiritually, because they would be kept holy by eating holy food. Their holiness would thus be maintained and confirmed by what they ate.

The author does not condemn these teachings as false and wrong. Instead he claims, rather tactfully, that they are unbeneficial, unhelpful, and unprofitable. They do

not accomplish what they seek to deliver. They may make people feel good about themselves, but do not provide any certainty for the hearts of people, because they do not make the conscience sure and certain of its status before God. A “good conscience” (13:18) depends on God’s grace, the grace that is shown to them by His “good word,” His gracious utterance (6:5), the word of pardon spoken by Christ’s blood (12:24). That is summed up tersely in the proverb: **it is good for the heart to be established by grace.** The establishment of the heart by God’s grace benefits them in every way. It is good socially as the source of “good works” (10:24) and spiritually as the source of a “good conscience” (13:18). It’s good for the heart, because it provides a far more certain basis for their faith than any kind of physical food. The heart’s assurance, its confidence that it is clean and holy, comes from God Himself. He establishes the heart by sprinkling it with the blood of Jesus, the blood that makes them clean and holy.

The explanation of how God establishes the heart in 13:10 begins with a congregational confession of faith in its possession of a new altar. With it comes a complex argument by ritual analogy that assumes familiarity with the regular public services in the Old Testament. The focus in this verse is on only one function of the altar for burnt offering in the tabernacle. It provided most holy food for the priests who served at it in the daily service. Since that altar was most holy, it sanctified the foodstuff that was offered to God on it (Ex 29:37). While the meat and bread from the daily peace offerings and grain offerings of the Israelites provided holy food to eat for them and their families as well as the priests and their families, the meat from their sin offerings and guilt offerings and the bread from the daily public grain offering was the most holy food from God that was reserved exclusively for the priests on duty; it was the food that sanctified them. Only those priests who served at the altar had the right to eat that sanctifying food from the Lord’s table. The altar belonged to the priests and the priests to the altar. That was their priestly inheritance! Yet even though they ate the meat from

the sin offerings of the people, they had no right to eat the meat from their own sin offerings. That was burnt outside the camp.

Like those priests, the congregation possesses **an altar**, since they serve as co-priests with Christ in the heavenly tent. It is not the same altar that was located in the tabernacle and the temple, but a different altar, an altar that it has as part of its eschatological inheritance from God. Their altar is the Lord's table (1 Cor 10:21), the place for the presentation of offerings to God in the divine service as well as for the consecration of bread and wine in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.⁶ That altar is located before God in the heavenly sanctuary as well as on earth in the assembly of the congregation for its participation in the divine service together with the angels and all the saints in earth and heaven.⁷ It is the place where the exalted Lord Jesus presents his body and blood to the congregation on earth. The priests who serve at the earthly tent in Jerusalem have **no right to eat** any food from that altar because they do not serve with Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. But by implication the congregation may eat from it. It is his gracious provision for them.

In 13:11 the fact that the priests were debarred from eating the meat from the sin offerings on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:27) establishes a ritual precedent for the new covenant. The precedent is for the priests who **serve at the tent**, the term in Hebrews for the tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem. On the Day of Atonement the high priest made atonement for the whole tent and its altar (Lev 16:33). He **brought the blood from the sin offering** into the Holy of Holies, so that he could use it to purify **the holy places**, the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place, and sanctify the altar for burnt offering (Lev 16:11-19). On that day neither the high priest nor his fellow priests were

⁶ See Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 503; Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 90; Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 228-29.

⁷ See Ruager, "'Wir haben einen Altar' (Hebr 13,10)," 76.

allowed to eat the meat from the sin offering for the people, as was their usual right (Lev 6:26, 29), let alone from their own sin offering which they were never allowed to eat (Lev 6:30). Instead **the bodies** of these **animals** were taken **outside the camp** and **burnt** there. So, just as the priests had no right to eat the meat from those sin offerings, they too have no right to eat the sin offering from Christ's altar. That right belongs to those who are **outside the camp**, those who are outside the congregation of Israel. This marks the most striking innovation in the new covenant, for if all the people who belong to it have the right to eat the food from Christ's offering for sin, they must be priests who ritually clean and have no need for any further sacrifice for atonement.

In 13:12 comes the main part of this argument by ritual precedent, an argument that compares and contrasts the sin offerings of animals on the Day of Atonement with Christ's death as his self-offering. Both are sin offerings. Yet they differ in three significant respects: the identity of the high priest who offers the sacrifice, the location for the death of the victim, and the beneficiaries that are sanctified by its blood. First, Jesus is the high priest who does not serve in the order of Levi at the temple in Jerusalem. He serves in a different tent, the true tent that has been set up by God Himself in heaven (8:1-2). What's more, unlike the high priests who served at the tabernacle, he had no need to offer any sacrifice for himself, because he himself was without sin. He has therefore presented himself as a sin offering for others rather than for himself.

Second, he **suffered** death **outside the gate** of the holy city. In the old covenant the animals that were to be offered on the altar were ritually slaughtered in the inner courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. They died in that holy place to keep it holy. But Jesus was put to death **outside the gate** of the temple and of the holy city. The ritual topography of this is symbolically significant. Both the temple and the city of Jerusalem are holy places, the temple as God's holy house, His earthly residence, and the city as a holy camp, the home for God's holy priests and people. The area **outside the gate** of

the camp, beyond the gate of the city, is common ground. It belongs to those who are outside the congregation of Israel. That includes those who are not the people of God, the Gentiles.

Third, while the blood from the sin offerings that were offered by the high priest on the Day of Atonement purified the sanctuary, the priests, and the people (Lev 16:16, 19, 30, 33), it sanctified nothing apart from the altar for burnt offering (Lev 16:19).⁸ In contrast with that, Jesus died as a victim **outside the gate** for **the people** who were **outside the gate**. They are the beneficiaries of his sin offering. What's more, as high priest he now ministers before God in order **to sanctify** them with **his own blood**; he consecrates them to serve as co-priests together with him outside the temple and the city of Jerusalem. That's where they now serve the living God as they celebrate the Lord's Supper (9:15; 12:28).⁹

The conclusion of the argument by ritual analogy is given in 13:13 by an inclusive cohortative exhortation. In it the author invites the congregation to join him and all the saints as they **go out** to Jesus **outside the camp**. The location for the divine service is

⁸ The only time that the blood from sin offerings were used to consecrate a person was at the ordination of the priests. Then the blood from both the offering for ordination and the sin offering for it was taken from the altar and mixed with the most holy anointing oil before it was sprinkled on the priests in order to sanctify them (Ex 29:21; Lev 8:30).

⁹ See Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1878), 367; Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 503; Jukka Thurén, *Das Lobopfer der Hebräer: Studien zum Aufbau und Anliegen vom Hebräerbrief 13* (Åbo: Akademi, 1973), 204; H. P. Ruager, "Wir haben einen Altar (Hebr 13,10)," *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (1990): 72-77; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 712; Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 204; Knut Backhaus, *Der Hebräerbrief* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 470, for scholars who argue that in Heb 13:10-17 we have a clear allusion to the Lord's Supper.

not the temple in the city of Jerusalem, but in a place **outside** the former **camp**, the place where he sanctifies them with his blood, the place of assembly where his blood gives them access to the heavenly realm (10:19-20). His presence and his blood makes them and that place holy. That, however, is an insecure place with little or no earthly protection for them. Just as Jesus went outside the city of Jerusalem to suffer there, the congregation may also have to suffer with him by **bearing the same ridicule** that he had to endure. Unlike members of an ethnic community who could count on the backing of their kinsfolk for their safety, and unlike Roman citizens who were protected in foreign places by their status as citizens of Rome, they did not belong to any single tribe or any powerful city but only to Jesus as citizens of the heavenly city. Since Jesus is their only protection, they go out join him and seek safety with him.

In the face of the temptation to play it safe by assimilation with the pagan world, the congregation is reminded in 13:14 that they may join Jesus outside the earthly city of Jerusalem in his heavenly city, the place where he reigns as king at God's right hand. The congregation is, as it were, an earthly colony of that great heavenly city. Unlike the city of Rome which foolishly claimed to be eternal, and unlike the earthly city of Jerusalem which some too mistakenly claimed would one day become an eternal city here on earth, this city which is **to come** is **a city that remains**. It will therefore not be shaken but will remain forever in God's presence (12:27). Their citizenship in that heavenly city is both the cause for their persecution by those who reject its king and their only protection here on earth. Their proud boast is: "We have city that remains."

In 13:15 we have the final cohortative invitation for the congregation to join in corporate praise as they participate in the divine service. Their service of God has three distinctive characteristics.

First, in it they offer **a sacrifice of praise** as they receive the body and blood of Jesus. The Lord's Supper is their thank offering. The public service of the old covenant revolved around the daily burnt offering by which God cleansed His people in the rite of

atonement, met with His people at the altar to bless them, and sanctified His priests by providing most holy food for them to eat. When it was performed at the temple, a song of praise accompanied the daily burnt offering (2 Chr 29:27-28).¹⁰ In contrast with that, we have a new service that now is entirely a **sacrifice of praise**, a thank offering, because the death of Jesus is the final, comprehensive sin offering for all people. By his death he has done away with the need for the any further sacrifices to atone for sin (Heb 9:26; 10:11-18). As Jeremiah had foreseen, all sacrifices for atonement would be replaced by a service of thanksgiving in the age to come (33:10-11). So we now have a holy meal in which the most holy body and blood of Jesus are received with thanksgiving. The celebration of that meal is marked by thanksgiving and praise, thanksgiving to God for what He gives them as a gracious gift in it, and praise which tells what God has accomplished for His people through His Son.

Second, the sacrifice of praise is offered up to God **through** Jesus. He is not just the host of the holy meal; he is the high priest who presents his offering to God by leading the congregation in thanksgiving and praise. As their anointed high priest who sanctifies them with his blood, Jesus now takes over the role of David the anointed king as the leader of Israel's praises (2:12; cf. 2:13^a; 13:6).¹¹ To be sure David did not do this by himself; he appointed the Levitical choir as his representatives to stand in for him with their performance of the Lord's song in the daily service at the temple (2 Chr 7:6). The congregation now inherits the mantle of the Levitical singers, the choir that once sang the Lord's song as the daily burnt offering was offered to God. It now offers up a **sacrifice of praise** together with Jesus. It gives praise to God **through him**, just as it comes near to God "through him" (7:28).

¹⁰ For the significance of this correlation see John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song* (JSOTSupp 156. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 100-81

¹¹ See John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song* (JSOTSupp 156. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 185.

Third, the sacrifice of praise is **the fruit of lips that confess the name** of Jesus, God's Son. It is the fruit of that confession in three complementary ways – its product, its content, and meal from it. It is the product of that confession which is both the presupposition for it and the result of it. As the product of that confession it is also its content, for their praise recounts what the congregation believes, and why. The Lord's Supper is the fruit from it, the meal that they enjoy because they confess that Jesus is God's Son, their great high priest (3:1). So the congregation holds onto its confession of faith (4:14) and retains the hope of that confession by its regular sacrifice of praise as it participates in that holy meal (10:23).

The following verse, 13:16, connects the congregation's sacrifice of praise with **the common offering** that was presented to God in the divine service, an offering that consisted of food stuff and money, the offering from which the bread and wine were taken for consecration as Christ's body and blood. So the exhortation to offer up the sacrifice of praise leads immediately to an instruction that the congregation should not to **forget** that offering. The collection of an offering was a regular part of the divine service in the Early Church.¹² It was collected in the service to support their pastors, the needy members of the congregation, and others in need. Yet, unlike the practice at the temple, that contribution was not offered individually but by the whole congregation as its common offering to God. It was sanctified by being offered to God in the service, just

¹² See Th. Harnack, *Christliche Gottesdienst im apostolischen und altkatholischen Zeitalter*, Erlangen: Theodor Bläsing, 1854, 82-85, and Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, London: SCM, 1966, 118-121, for the common offering as one of the four main parts of the divine service in Jerusalem. The four parts were teaching God's word, the presentation of a common offering, the breaking of bread in the Lord's Supper, and congregational prayer.

as the congregation was sanctified by the blood of Jesus and consecrated for priestly service as the earthly members of the heavenly choir.

The practice of well-doing refers to the acts of mercy that either accompanied the distribution of these gifts or were done in addition to them. They are the diaconic deeds of love done by the holy congregation in the name of Christ (6:10), the good works of providing food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, hospitality to strangers (13:2), clothing for those who lacked it, care for the sick, solidarity with those who were persecuted (10:33), and material help for those who were imprisoned (10:34; 13:3). Both the gifts of mercy and the deeds of mercy are holy sacrifices that are offered to God and through Him to others, sacrifices that are just as well-pleasing to God as their sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise in their celebration of Holy Communion. They are well-pleasing to Him because they do not just acknowledge His gifts of grace and mercy but also offer them to the people who need them most. Thus by their works of mercy the holy people of God do not just give holy gifts; they give of themselves personally to their fellow saints and anybody else in need.

Conclusion

The congregation to which I belong operates an agency for community care. Every Sunday members put some food for it in baskets at the foyer of the church. These baskets are brought forward with the congregation's offering after the sermon and placed next to the altar as our thank offering to God. The food in them is consecrated by the word of God and prayer in the Offertory, so that through it all the goods that are distributed to the disadvantaged people in our community.

That simple ceremony shows how the church at large is involved with Jesus in his provision of gifts of mercy and works of mercy locally, nationally, and internationally. The gifts of mercy and deeds of mercy are offered in the name of Christ. They are not do not come from any single person but from the church. More correctly, Christ gives

them indiscriminately, with no strings attached, to those who need them. The only qualification for their reception is their need.

The teaching in 13:16 on the presentation of a communal offering and on communal involvement in works of mercy has influenced the church in its understanding of the connection between Holy Communion and care for people in need. Both the offering and the works of mercy are God-pleasing sacrifices, holy offerings by His holy priesthood in its holy service of Him. They are corporate acts of faith and love, faith since they are offered to God through Jesus, and love, since they are given for the benefit of others.

In the Lutheran tradition the offering of the congregation is taken up and presented after the sermon. The location of the offering is significant. It is a sacrifice that is offered to God by His holy priesthood through Jesus in response to his self-offering for them and to them. After hearing the holy gospel which confirms their faith and sanctifies them, the faithful people of God offer themselves and their money, their thanksgiving and their intercessions for the church and the world, as God-pleasing sacrifices. Part of the offering is used to care for the poor and the needy. The two go hand in hand. The giving of ourselves and our money to God issues in the giving of ourselves and material help to others in need.

The ministry of mercy stems from Christ himself and his holy supper, that great mercy meal. Christ's own gift of mercy to needy sinners, people who depend on his charity for their salvation, issues in the congregation's gifts of mercy and deeds of mercy to others in need. Those who have received mercy give of themselves mercifully to others as their thank offering to God the Father for the gift of His Son.