

ALTAR

The word “altar” shows up quite often in gospel songs, sermons and testimonies among many Christian groups in discussing their salvation experience. Such as “I went to the altar and prayed through” -- “I found the Lord at the old-fashioned church altar” -- “Come and kneel at the altar here before God and pray.”

The altar usually consists of some sort of rail across the front of the sanctuary. In these congregations, sinners are invited to come forward to kneel at the altar and find salvation.

What are the origins of this practice, the Bible? The word “altar” has its origins in the Old Testament and the worship of God by the Hebrew people. The word literally means “slaughtering place” and an altar was a place where a sacrifice to God or gods was made. In the tabernacle and temple, the altar of burnt offering was the centerpiece of offering the animal sacrifices required by the Old Testament law. There was also the altar of incense where the incense was burned.

Jesus makes a reference to the altar by saying to the audience who were Jews under the Old Testament law, that when you bring your gift or sacrifice there and have something against a friend, go first and reconcile before you leave your gift. The other New Testament mentions of “altar” refer to the Old Testament worship. The book of Revelation also has reference to a figurative altar in heaven.

There is no reference in the practice of the early Christian church, either in the New Testament books or history, of an “altar” in the church. Why? Quite simply, because Christ became our sacrifice for sins. We no longer bring our sin offerings to the priest, as the Old Testament law required. A casual reading of the book of Hebrews explains the fact that Jesus is our high priest and our “sacrifice.” The Old Testament required a priest, a sacrifice, and an altar. Christ is all of these for us. We no longer need the blood of bulls and goats. Christ’s body and blood are the means of our salvation, now.

So, there is no “altar” today in the church of the New Covenant. The practice of praying at a rail and calling it an “altar” is a man-made theology based on the false idea that we need to “pray through” to find out if we are among God’s elect and therefore saved. It is a notion that has no origin in the Bible at all. One becomes a Christian, not by praying but by faith, confessing Christ, repenting of our sins and being buried with Him in baptism to rise in a new life.

If there were to be an altar in the church, it would actually be the Communion Table, because there is where we remember that Jesus was the sacrifice for us on the cross, thus eliminating the altar of burnt offering. That is where we as priests eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (There is reference (Heb 13:10) to the altar or table where we as Christians have a right to eat.

In the Lord’s church, the practice of remembering Christ around his table became the center of worship. Replacing the sacrifice of animals, the New Testament teaches that we sacrifice by bring our lives in worship to God, and giving our offerings to spread the word and assist others in need.

We are not saved “at the altar.” We are not saved by “praying a sinner’s prayer.” There are absolutely no examples of either in the New Testament, at all.

We are saved when we accept and appropriate the blood sacrifice of Jesus to our lives and our table of the loaf and cup becomes the Christian’s altar, remembering that God’s son offered up his life for us.