

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΟΥ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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Those Millennial Sacrifices

Kevin T. Bauder

One of the classical challenges for premillennialists is to explain the necessity and significance of sacrifice in the millennial temple. Non-millennarians frequently find these sacrifices to be the most objectionable aspect of the premillennial interpretation of Scripture. The problem can be stated simply: in Christ, the Levitical system of sacrifices has come to an end. Jesus' cross-work has secured redemption once for all. Therefore, the resumption of sacrifices during the Millennium is not only unnecessary, but contradictory and offensive.

Premillennialists have commonly responded with the theory that millennial sacrifices are to be memorials of Jesus' death. According to this theory, animal sacrifices during the Millennium will not be expiatory. Rather, they will serve much the same purpose that the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper serve during the present age. They will picture and call to memory the work that Jesus did on the cross.

This theory is not impossible. We cannot rule out a priori the possibility that the millennial sacrifices could function as memorials. Still, this theory creates a tension when it denies that millennial sacrifices could be expiatory in any sense. Ezekiel 43:19 explicitly identifies one of the sacrifices as a sin offering. The sin offering was one of two sacrifices that were explicitly expiatory under the Levitical system. The original recipients of Ezekiel's prophecies would almost certainly have understood the millennial offering to be identical with the Levitical offering. In the face of this consideration, it becomes difficult to maintain that the millennial offerings will be nothing but memorials.

A second theory concedes that the millennial sacrifices will be more than memorials, but still stops short of recognizing them as expiatory offerings. Those who hold this theory note that the Levitical system included many sorts of sacrifices. Broadly, the sin offering dealt with the guilt of sin, while the trespass offering dealt with the harm that sin caused. These two sacrifices were expiatory in nature, while others (burnt offerings, wave offerings, heave offerings, thank offerings, and so forth) were expressions of gratitude or devotion.

According to this theory, the millennial sacrifices will be patterned after those Levitical offerings that expressed devotion and gratitude. Probably the most important of those offerings was the burnt offering, which Ezekiel mentions specifically (Ezek. 43:18). The burnt offering signified devotion to Yahweh, often in view of blessings received. Given the unparalleled blessings of the millennial kingdom, such an offering would certainly not be inappropriate.

This theory, however, still does not resolve the tension. What it suggests—namely, that believers during the Millennium will offer sacrifices that signify their devotion to God in view of the blessings they have received—is entirely plausible. The main problem, however, remains untouched. Ezekiel names not only the burnt offering, but also the sin offering. The original recipients of his prophecy would have understood this as a reference to the sin offering with which they were familiar, and that offering was expiatory in nature. Insisting that the sin offering in Ezekiel’s millennial temple is not expiatory seems arbitrary at best.

This brings up a question: Exactly what did the expiatory sacrifices of the Old Testament do? In what sense have they come to fulfillment in Christ?

On the one hand, those sacrifices symbolized a spiritual truth. That truth is that God’s sense of justice demands retribution for guilt in order to be satisfied. Under the Levitical system, the sacrifice served as a symbolic substitute to bear the guilt of the offerer. The emphasis is on the word *symbolic*, for (as Hebrews makes clear) the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. In other words, from a divine point of view, no animal sacrifice was truly expiatory because no animal sacrifice could satisfy the demands of God’s justice. Only the sacrifice of Christ could do that. The sins of all believers in both testaments were paid in full at the cross. Jesus’ death and resurrection is the real basis for all human salvation at all times and in all places. In terms of dealing with human guilt before God, the Levitical sacrifices were a symbolic teaching tool. They made people remember their sins, but they carried no spiritual efficacy of their own.

On the other hand, those sacrifices also had a legal status within the theocracy of Israel. An Israelite who sinned would incur both spiritual guilt both before God and civil guilt in the eyes of the law. Guilt before God brought the penalty of ultimate condemnation, but guilt in the eyes of the law usually brought some immediate legal penalty. One of the functions of the expiatory sacrifices was to fulfill the legal penalties that were prescribed under the Mosaic legislation. Particular behaviors demanded cleansing by the offering of particular sacrifices.

Not every civil sin or crime could be dealt with through sacrifice. Sins committed with a high hand called for immediate penalty. Sins such as adultery and murder demanded the death of the perpetrator. No sacrifice could take the victim’s place. Any mercy that was shown had to come entirely from outside of the sacrificial system. This is part of what David meant in Psalm 51:16-17: “For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” Under the terms of the law, David (who had committed murder and adultery) deserved

to die. There was no sacrifice prescribed for these sins. The full penalty of the law could rightly have been inflicted. Knowing this, a broken David cast himself entirely upon the mercy of God.

The situation during the Millennium will be similar to that in the Old Testament theocracy. Open rebellion (sin with a high hand) will not be tolerated. The penalty for such activity will be immediate execution (see Zech. 13:3 for an interesting instance of this).

Still, the Millennium will be populated with people who are sinners, some of whom will have been saved and some of whom will not. Even those who are saved will occasionally commit sins. Under the utter justice of the Millennium, such sins could produce disastrous legal consequences. A sin of ignorance or even weakness, however, is not the same as a willful sin. It is possible that one purpose of the millennial sacrifices will be to remit the legal penalty for sins committed in ignorance or weakness.

Such sacrifices would be legally expiatory within the theocracy of the Millennium, just as the Levitical sacrifices were within the theocracy of Israel. They would not, however, satisfy the demands of God's eternal justice with respect to sinners. Neither did the Levitical sacrifices. Only the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross could do that.

Will people offer expiatory sacrifices during the Millennium? The answer to this question depends upon exactly what one means by "expiatory." If it means "fulfilling the legal demands of the theocracy," then the answer is yes. If it means "satisfying the demands of God's eternal justice," then the answer is no. If this distinction is maintained, then the presence of sin offerings in the millennial temple will in no way contradict the finished work of Christ. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Sonnet XIX: When I Consider How my Light is Spent

John Milton (1608-1674)

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait." ✕

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