

(S) "Altering the Altar"
 Joshua 22
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In the book, The Body, Chuck Colson and Ellen Vaughn recall the incident at the Emmanuel Baptist Church on the outskirts of Boston.

(B) It was the right hook that got him.

Pastor Waite might have stood in front of the communion table trading punches with head deacon Ray Brison all morning had not Ray's fist caught the pastor right on the chin, two minutes and 15 seconds into the fight.

Pastor Waite went down for the count right there at the altar.

Two of the pastor's teeth were loosened and Deacon Ray's hand was broken in two places.

Nothing in the history of that rather typical New England community could have prepared them for that Sunday morning donnybrook.

The church had been in the community for generations.

Following WWII it had prided itself on being a defense against all the forces of compromise and worldliness in Christianity.

And when the Jewish population began to grow and the Baptist population began to sink, the church developed a motto that read, "God is with US at Emmanuel Baptist" with the "US" in bold letters.

Over issues that are probably a foggy memory now, the pastor and deacons divided into two camps with the deacons calling for the pastor's resignation.

Most of the congregation chose sides as well.

When the deacon chairman, contrary to the pastor's wishes, walked to the platform to announce a business meeting to fire the pastor, Pastor Waite wouldn't give him the microphone and proceeded to announce a hymn.

At that, Ray the deacon, pulled the microphone cord out of the wall and turned to walk away, but tripped on the cord.

When Pastor Waite reached out a hand to help him, Ray, thinking he had been intentionally tripped, swung and hit the pastor squarely on the nose.

Within an instant a majority of the congregation converged on the communion table and began exchanging punches with members from both sides of the aisle.

The organist tried to play, "Bless be the Tie that Binds" to get everyone to stop, but to no avail.

The fight ended when the police arrived.

The following Wednesday the deacons and the pastor were in court sitting in uncomfortable silence when the judge, a prominent Jew, came into the room.

The judge finally looked up from the report in front of him and said, "I'm dismissing the case. No charges will be pressed BUT I'm urging you to work this out in your own church. Your Jesus may allow this sort of thing in his followers, but I will not allow fistfights as a regular order of service in the churches in my district.

The leadership of the church filed out quietly and drove off in their cars still bearing the bumper stickers: "God is with US at Emmanuel Baptist."

It sounds so fantastic we can't imagine how it came to that.

But it actually happened.

It also happened right here in our own city within the past two months.

The leaders of a small church in SE Metro Denver met in an apartment and wound up in a fistfight after one of the women in the meeting threw a telephone at a man.

About 15 years ago my home church in Wisconsin split with the pastor and half of the congregation literally stomping out of a heated meeting to go to start their own church.

The church wasn't much more than 250 people before and now combined the two churches are fewer in number.

Friends split and families split.

What was supposed to have been worship of God and fellowship with each other eroded into anger and alienation.

How could it happen?

Let me give you a rather enigmatic answer:

(S) "They were worshipping at the wrong altar."
Now let me explain why I say it that way.

(B) In our on-going study of the book of Joshua we come to an incident in the life of the people of Israel that ends with an interesting twist.

I want to tell you the story rather than you looking at it, so you don't see how it ended yet.

The army of Israel, made up of soldiers from all 12 tribes of Israel, had subdued the people of Canaan and had taken the land for themselves – as God promised and provided.

When the major wars were completed, the men who had already been given land on the east side of the Jordan were ready to go home.

(S) While Moses was still alive the army of Israel had defeated the Edomites and Moabites east of the Jordan.

The descendants of Reuben, Gad and ½ of the descendants of Manasseh asked Moses if they could have that land instead of the land they were invading west of the Jordan.

Moses consented but on one condition.

The armies of Reuben, Gad and ½ of Manasseh had to join the rest of the armies in subduing the people of Canaan on the west side.

5-7 years later the armies of Reuben, Gad and ½ of Manasseh were ready to go home.

Before they leave, Joshua **commends** them for their faithfulness to their brothers.

- (S) Joshua 22:2-3 “You have done all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. For a long time now--to this very day--you have not deserted your brothers but have carried out the mission the LORD your God gave you.”

But he not only commends them, he also **challenges** them:

- (S) Joshua 22:5 “But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.”

These aren't idle words.

- (S) Joshua knows that the future of the nation of Israel rests on their relationship with their God.

They need to follow their God wholeheartedly - “to love the Lord...and serve him with all your heart and all your soul.”

He wants them to know and love **the Person** of God.

- (S) It is imperative that they remember that God, determines their relationship to God, not them – “to walk in his ways...to obey his commands...to hold fast to him...”

Living in relationship with God is freedom but it's not democracy – The Creator and Redeemer of their lives, the lover of their souls, is Lord.

- (B) With that challenge ringing in their ears, those men leave for their homes on the east side of the Jordan.

As they neared the Jordan River, which separated their land from the others, they stopped and built a large, attention-getting altar.

- (S) Joshua 22:10 “When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh **built an imposing altar** there by the Jordan.”

(S) An altar was the means of accessing God.

An altar was how you approached God.

An altar was where sacrifices were made, making atonement for the peoples' sins so that they could approach a holy God and have a relationship with him.

No altar, no sacrifices, no God!

(B) Now on first thought building an altar sounds like a good thing to do.

It would seem to indicate that these men understood their relationship to God and were doing something very spiritual.

It all seems right until we see the reaction of the other Israelite tribes remaining on the west side of the Jordan.

(S) Joshua 22:11-12 "And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.

These "brothers", these fellow-members of the people of Israel, were ready to go to war because of this new altar.

Why?

The rest of the Israelites sent a delegation to challenge the ones who had made this new altar.

A priest named Phineas is in charge of the delegation.

(S) They indicted the others with these words:

Joshua 22:16-20 "How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the LORD and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the LORD! And are you now turning away from the LORD? If you rebel against the LORD today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel. If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the LORD's land (on the West), where the LORD's tabernacle

stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the LORD or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the LORD our God. When Achan son of Zerah acted unfaithfully regarding the devoted things, did not wrath come upon the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin.' "

This is strong language.

And they obviously mean it because they are set to go to war against their brothers over this issue.

Five times in this short speech they say the new altar is an act of rebellion, a turning away, a breaking fellowship with God.

And furthermore it is rebellion against them – the rest of Israel.

(S) There are two results of this new altar: by it they break fellowship with God and by it they break fellowship each other.

Do you see how serious the charge is?

That new altar would destroy their relationship with God (their worship) and destroy their relationship with each other (their community).

(S) How is that possible?

Because it's the wrong altar!

Years earlier God had declared very strongly that his people were to worship only at the place he establishes.

(S) Deuteronomy 12:14

"Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.

(S) Leviticus 17:8-9

"Say to them: `Any Israelite or any alien living among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to sacrifice it to the LORD--that man must be cut off from his people."

In a very objective, concrete way God was declaring that there is only one way to him – the way he provides.

If you try any other way, it won't work and it will bring destruction.

Is God just being “picky”, arbitrary, or capricious?

(S) Why does God demand that worship and community center on one altar?

Because God knows the issue is not religion, the issue is atonement.

If the issue was just religion then any old religion would do.

If the issue was just sincerity then any religious practices would satisfy.

But the issue is atonement.

People have sinned against a holy God and the justice of God must be satisfied - that sin must be atoned.

- It's not atoned by giving God something.
- It's not atoned by making up for it.
- It's not atoned by trying harder next time.

(S) The altar is where sacrifice is made – Atonement is only made by the sacrifice but a very particular sacrifice.

The writer of the book of Hebrews makes it clear that the blood of bulls and goats (the Old Testament sacrifices) could never atone, satisfy, take away sin.

Those sacrifices were symbols picturing what would eventually happen when Jesus, the Lamb of God himself, came making full and final sacrifice for the sins of his people – true atonement.

Any other altar was a statement that people could reach God on their own terms.

Any other altar was an attempt at making their own sacrifice for sins.

And our sacrifices can't satisfy the justice of an infinite, holy God.

Only God's sacrifice of his own Son can accomplish that.

(B) If the tribes on the east side of the Jordan built their own altar they would not reach God.

(S) I want to remind you today that our relationship with God is on the same basis – Jesus and his “cross-work”.

By his “cross-work” I mean what he accomplished in his death and resurrection.

If we try to come to God on any other basis than Jesus’ “cross-work” – we won’t connect with God.

(B) Most people have an uneasy feeling about death and even a greater uneasiness about life after death.

They are concerned that life after death does exist and that they don’t have any control over what it will be like.

And so people live with an uneasy idea of God – afraid not to believe in him but ignorant of what to do about it.

But we won’t know God by our own altars.

Man-made religions of Islam, Hinduism or Mormonism proclaim a different way to God; they build a different altar.

And we won’t get to the Father God through our efforts at being good or by our sincerity.

(S) Jesus said it so clearly when he proclaimed: John 4:23-24 “True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth.”

“In spirit and truth” is genuine, heartfelt worship of God through Jesus and his “cross-work”.

The only way to worship the Father is through the Son and what he has done.

Jesus said it even more succinctly in John 14:6 “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

(B) And even once we have become Christians, by grace through faith in Jesus and his “cross-work”, we don’t continue to come to him on the basis of our efforts or sincerity.

Our worship of him must continually be on the basis of his grace through Jesus' "cross-work".

- (S) As we approach him in everyday experience or in crisis, we approach him on the basis of what Jesus has already done. Hebrews 10:19-21 "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith..."

To try to approach him in our own merit, on the basis of our having done things sufficiently right to earn his attention, is to go to the wrong place – it is to be praying at the wrong altar.

- (B) I try to get my sin all confessed, I try hard to live right, I spend time reading my Bible and going to church so that when I need God I can expect him to respond.

And when he doesn't respond, I look quickly to my altar to make certain I have constructed it correctly.

But I'm at the wrong altar.

- (S) The only access I have to God is through the altar he constructed – the altar of Jesus and his "cross-work".

Both Baptism and the "Lord's Supper" speak to this essential basis of our relationship with God and each other.

- (S) Romans 6:3-4 "don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

- (S) 1 Corinthians 11:26 "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

If we try to come to God by any other altar we won't be worshipping him; we'll be worshipping a false God, usually ourselves.

The Israelites had a second problem with the new altar.

(S) Here's the way they said it: Joshua 22:20 "But do not rebel against the LORD **or against us** by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the LORD our God.

That new altar was not only a threat to their relationship **with God** but it was also a threat to their relationship **with each other**.

(B) It seems almost axiomatic that if they worshipped at different altars they would drift apart.

But this is not a sociological issue this is a theological one.

Spiritual community (true fellowship, the church) is not based on blood relationships.

Spiritual community is not based on common race, geography, culture, language, lifestyle, or even most doctrines.

Spiritual community is based on the "cross-work" of Jesus.

Not only our worship of God but our relationship to each other is by the same altar.

Put in the context of Israel, 1500 years before the cross, Phineas the priest knew that if the others built a different altar, soon the others would include different criteria by which to judge who is part of the group and who is not.

What was supposed to be one community of believers, united at God's altar by God's standards, would quickly become a divided community separated by their own standards.

A different altar would destroy the people of God.

In the early chapters of 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul speaks very pointedly and passionately about unity – unity in the people of God – the church and in each church.

As you probably remember, the people in the church in Corinth were quarreling, they were hugely divided on a number of issues.

They were dividing over issues of preference – some wanting one leader and others another.

There is some indication they were dividing over lesser doctrinal issues.

And they were dividing over lifestyle issues.

They were constructing altars of their own and demanding that others worship at their altar or they weren't part of the family.

And what is Paul's response?

(S) He asks in 1 Corinthians 1:13 "Is Christ divided?"

It is as if he says, "Don't you realize that when you separate from each other in that way and with those attitudes you are pulling the body of Christ apart."

Don't you understand, you are brothers and sisters in the Lord, you belong to each other?

Or as Paul said it to the people, the church in Ephesus:

(S) Ephesians 2:8-20 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast... For he himself is our peace, who has made the two (Jew and Gentile) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... and in (his) body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

(S) What the text say is the basis of our relationship with each other in Jesus' church? **It is the cross-work of Jesus!**

When you became a Christian; when you were brought into the family of God, how did that come about?

- Did it happen because you wisely understood a superior philosophy of life?
- Did it come about because you understood all the fine points of biblical doctrine?
- Did it happen because you got your act together and were living a holy life?

No, it came about because God brought you to the cross – and there you saw your need for the savior AND you saw the Savior meeting that need through his death and resurrection for you - all by grace.

And then Paul's major point: How did every **other** Christian become a Christian?

At the same altar – the cross.

(B) We are not brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not one body of believers BECAUSE we live the same way, or even that we believe exactly the same way about spiritual issues, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we are members of the body of Christ, we are part of the church **because we all came to the same altar**, the same cross with empty hands and pleaded the mercy and grace of God in Christ.

All ground is level at the cross.

How can we who have been

- bought with the same blood of Jesus,
- equally loved by the same Father,
- and indwelt by the same Spirit,
possibly now erect different altars and demand that others can only be a part of our personal fellowship if they meet our standards?

There is in all of us the great danger of constructing our own altars.

We are tempted to assume that our understanding of the Bible and our understanding of how the Christian life should be lived are both part of the Gospel.

When another Christian doesn't agree with us we see it as an attack on us, we are offended.

We like to think we are defending the faith when probably we are only defending our own altars of our egos.

Today in the church some separate over whether they are:

- Democrats or Republicans,
- Pro-life or pro-choice,
- Whether we drink alcoholic beverages or not,
- Whether we favor women elders or not,
- Whether we speak in tongues or not,
and the list goes on.

We begin to equate Christianity with our system of beliefs and our lifestyle choices.

But those are our altars not God's – His only altar is the cross.

If you have come to the Father-God through Christ and his "Cross-work" then you are my brother or sister with a far stronger bond than blood, race, culture, politics, doctrine or lifestyle.

(S) There is only one altar, the cross of Jesus, and when we come to it, we stand in right relationship with God and with each other.

Any other altar destroys both.

That is why Phineas and the Israelites were ready to go to war with the others.

(B) The story ends rather anticlimactically.

After they confront the others who had made the new imposing alter, the others respond that they had no intention of worshipping at the new altar – it was simply a memorial to in fact remind future generations on both sides of the Jordan that there was only one place to worship – the altar at the Tabernacle.

(S) And so the others said, Joshua 22:27-29 "On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the LORD.' "And we said, 'If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica of the LORD's altar, which our fathers built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a

witness between us and you.' "Far be it from us to rebel against the LORD and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, grain offerings and sacrifices, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle."

Phineas and the others are satisfied and war is averted.

It turns out that the 2 ½ Tribes were not building a new altar but a memorial to the one true altar.

As I said, it a rather anticlimactic ending but the author makes his point: There is only one way to gain and maintain a relationship with God – at his altar.

- We are forgiven because of what Jesus did.
- We are his children because of what Jesus did.
- We can expect his response to our prayers because of what Jesus did.
- We have a relationship with each other because of what Jesus did.

Only One Altar!