

The Offering

Why do you think we take up the offering during our worship services on Sunday? Not just why we take up an offering, but why we do it during worship. Of course, there are some practical reasons for doing it then. Obviously, like any other organization, the church needs money to do its work, and for most of you, this is the only time during the week you're here at church. So when else would we take up an offering? I'm not sure there is any other time we could do it, and no doubt that's part of why we do it during worship.

But that's only a small part of why we do it, and one that's less and less important these days, since the fact is that more and more of us are making our financial contributions to the church electronically, and not by putting them in the offering plates when they're passed during the service. So if that were the only reason we had an offering during worship, I think it'd only be a matter of time before we stopped doing it, just another one of those practices that have faded away over the years.

But such practical considerations have never been the real reason, by which I mean the theological reason, we have an offering during worship. The fact is an offering of some sort has always been a part of Christian worship, going back to the earliest days of the church, though I will grant you that passing plates down the pews, like we do it today, is a relatively modern innovation. But there's always been an offering. In part, it simply reflects a sense of worship on the part of God's people going back to Old Testament times, when people brought an offering to the Temple as a sacrifice. The language we use even today about our offerings—words like *tithe*, or the *first fruits* of the harvest—reflect and recall those ancient traditions, a tradition that has always been a part of worship.

Another part of it, though, goes back to the meal that was the heart of early Christian worship. Not the symbolic, ceremonial meal we have today that we call the Lord's Supper, but a real meal, just like the meals Jesus shared with his disciples, particularly after his resurrection. Worship was the meal, and the offering then was literally the act of setting the table, putting the food on the table that the people had brought as their offering for the community. Which is why the sacrament of the Lord's Supper even today comes right after the offering, right after the table's been set. Which is another reason the offering is, and always has been, a part of worship, as much a part of worship as anything else we do on Sunday mornings.

But there's yet another reason why an offering has been a part of Christian worship from the early days of the church, and this goes back to the apostle Paul. Interestingly enough, this is something that Paul did that we very seldom if ever talk about, unlike most of the things that Paul did that we seem to talk about all the time. In fact, you'd almost get the impression

sometimes that Paul did it all, that he was single-handedly responsible for spreading the gospel during the early years of the church, which was certainly not the case.

But this one thing was a part of Paul's work that often goes unnoticed, overshadowed by his powerful proclamation of the gospel, his work founding churches, and frankly the controversy that always seemed to follow Paul wherever he went. In fact, over the course of my entire career, I can't remember ever having mentioned this particular effort of Paul in a sermon. I'm talking about the collection, or offering, that Paul organized among the churches he visited for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem, that is, the members of the church in that city, the congregation that was really and truly "the mother of us all." This collection was something of great importance to Paul, and in fact, it was his insistence on personally delivering the proceeds of this offering to Jerusalem that led to his arrest there, and his subsequent transport to Rome for trial and ultimately execution. This offering literally cost Paul his life.

But as important as this offering must have been for Paul, we don't really know why. We don't know what his motivation was for going to such lengths, not only to collect the offering from a number of churches, but then to deliver the proceeds to Jerusalem. He never really says just why it was so important to him for these churches to provide for the saints in Jerusalem. Now there's no question but that they badly needed it, for a lot of reasons, but I suspect that was true of Christians in many parts of the world at that time. So why the church in Jerusalem? Was it just because they were the mother church? I don't think so; at least, Paul never says anything to suggest that. No, I think it was something else.

What makes this question so interesting is the fact that Paul was often at odds with the church in Jerusalem, and particularly with its leaders, most of all, James, the brother of Jesus, who was the head of that church. Why at odds? Because the Christians in Jerusalem had a history with Paul. They knew Paul all too well from his zealous efforts to persecute the church there, to persecute *them*, that Paul in fact had been present at, and approving of, the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Stephen was their friend and their brother in Christ, and it seems pretty clear that they never really forgave Paul for that, and so never really accepted him as a genuine follower of Jesus Christ, and certainly never really trusted him, much less considered him to be a true apostle.

So why did Paul go to such trouble, and eventually even risk his life, for the sake of the very people who had so bitterly opposed him pretty much every step of the way, and caused him considerable trouble in his missionary efforts, not least in Corinth? He never really says in just so many words, at least not in the letters of his that we have. But I think an answer to the question can be found in something Paul did say to the members of the church in Corinth in what we call his 2nd letter to that congregation, in fact, in the portion of that letter we read this morning as our epistle. For in urging the Corinthians to fulfill the pledge they had made the year before for this offering for the saints in Jerusalem, he reminds them of the gracious example of Jesus himself, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes had become poor, so that by his poverty, we might

become rich. We, Paul is suggesting, should do the same for others, because Christ did it for us, even those of us—like Paul—who had been his mortal enemies. Which is why, I think, Paul was so determined to provide help for the Christians in Jerusalem, even the very folks who most despised him. Because that's the gospel.

Which is why the offering is not something we just so happen to do during worship; it is worship. It is an act of worship, a liturgy in the literal sense, every bit as much as the singing of a hymn or the praying of a prayer. In fact, in a very real sense, the offering is a proclamation of the gospel every bit as much as the reading of scripture or the preaching of a sermon, in some ways actually more so because it actually costs us something. When we give a portion of our possessions to help others, and not just our friends, not just the people we like, but all those who need it, even those who may despise us, we are proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because that's what he did in giving up his life, that we might have life, in dying, that we might live. Which is why there is, and always will be, an offering in worship. And why those offering plates are every bit as holy, as the chalice and platen holding the elements of communion.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*