

Hebrews 13:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.

Analysis

We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. This verse addresses the relationship between Old and New Covenants. 'We have an altar' refers to Christ's cross and the spiritual privileges Christians possess through His sacrifice. Unlike the literal altar in Jerusalem temple where certain priests and worshipers partook of sacrificial meals, Christians partake of Christ Himself spiritually through faith.

The phrase 'they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle' emphasizes discontinuity between Old and New Covenants. Those who continue serving the Mosaic tabernacle/temple system rather than embracing Christ's once-for-all sacrifice have no share in the gospel's superior privileges. This doesn't mean ethnic Jews are excluded—rather, that clinging to Old Covenant ceremonies while rejecting Christ means forfeiting New Covenant benefits.

This illustrates the Reformed understanding that Old Testament ceremonial law has been fulfilled and superseded in Christ. While moral law remains (summarized in Ten Commandments), ceremonial regulations (sacrifices, food laws, temple service) pointed forward to Christ and are no longer binding. Attempting to maintain both Christ and Mosaic ceremonies demonstrates failure to grasp the gospel's sufficiency. We approach God not through priestly mediators and animal sacrifices but through Christ our High Priest and His perfect sacrifice.

Historical Context

The Jerusalem temple still stood when Hebrews was written (destroyed 70 AD), making this teaching highly relevant and controversial. Jewish Christians faced pressure from unbelieving Jews to continue temple worship and maintain ceremonial observance. Some attempted to combine Christian faith with Jewish ritual, not understanding that Christ's coming rendered temple system obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). The author insists on choosing: either remain in Old Covenant ceremonies (which can't save) or embrace Christ's New Covenant (which alone saves). Within decades, Rome's destruction of the temple would forcibly end temple worship, dramatically confirming this teaching. The early church's transition from Judaism to distinct Christian identity involved painful separation from ancestral traditions.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does understanding Christ as your altar and sacrifice free you from depending on external religious ceremonies?
2. What modern equivalents of 'serving the tabernacle' tempt Christians to add human traditions to Christ's sufficient work?
3. In what ways should you more fully embrace New Covenant privileges rather than clinging to shadows and types?

Interlinear Text

ἔχουσιν	θυσιαστήριον	ἐξ	οὗ	φαγεῖν	οὐκ	ἔχουσιν
We have	an altar	whereof	G3739	to eat	no	We have
G2192	G2379	G1537		G5315	G3756	G2192
ἐξουσίαν	οἱ	τῇ	σκηנῇ	λατρεύοντες		
right	G3588	G3588	the tabernacle	which serve		
G1849			G4633	G3000		

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 10:20 (Sacrifice): But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.

1 Corinthians 9:13 (Sacrifice): Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar?