

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

(Hebrews 11:4)

When I started out as a Methodist Local Preacher in July 1979

- What to do in a Methodist service was pretty simple – whatever else happened you had five hymns
- These were the bread of what is often called ‘the hymn sandwich’
- Between these five hymns would come two prayers and the Lord’s Prayer
- Two (sometimes three) Bible readings, the notices, the collection and the sermon
- Some preachers had the sermon before the fourth hymn and others before the fifth hymn
- And occasionally a minister might read a Collect or a Psalm – but five hymns is what we did
- And we had boards on which to put the hymn numbers, which were positioned with due solemnity

By the time I emerged from ministerial training college in 1983, something had happened

- The ‘worship wars’ which had previously been confined to relatively small areas
- Had spread like wildfire across every church and denomination
- And the various merits of the church organ as against a variety of other instruments, mainly guitars
- And the traditional hymn as against a variety of other songs (still in those days called choruses)
- Were, in all kinds of churches, being debated with some vigour ... one might even say ‘anger’

I suppose this unseemly row could be defended by saying that at least worshippers were taking it seriously

- But I have two hunches – firstly, that often it was really to do with personal musical preference
- And, secondly, that there has always been some resentment by people who offer formal worship
- Towards those who offer what I might call ‘fervent’ worship

After their evangelical conversions in 1738, both John and Charles Wesley took to itinerant preaching

- But hymn-singing was a big part of the revival and Charles wrote thousands of hymns
- The Methodists became known for the fervour of their singing and the ‘enthusiasm’ they showed
- At a time when ‘enthusiasm’ was a dirty word in the life of the church, implying excessive emotion
- Within two generations, the more sedate ‘Wesleyanism’ was challenged by the Primitive Methodists
- Causing the Bishop of Lincoln to call on the government to ban itinerant preachers, so-called ‘ranterers’
- Later, across the Atlantic, the evangelical duo of Ira Sankey and Dwight Moody travelled together
- Preaching and publishing books of Christian hymns – what is ‘traditional’ today was ‘fervent’ back then

While there is an obvious danger in making ‘fervent’ synonymous with ‘sincere’, there is little point

- Praising the greatness and goodness of God, claiming his grace and forgiveness, offering thanksgiving
- (all sound stuff) if we are not sincerely seeking God’s blessing and greater knowledge through his word
- In other words, worship can never be just about singing, neither can it be just about a particular form
- It has to be from the heart and soul and mind, it has to be in spirit and in truth – what I call ‘fervent’
- Without praise, confession, forgiveness, thanks, instruction and a commission to serve
- It is just self-serving not God-serving and that, I fear, is all too common in the church-life today

In his discourse on faith, the writer to the Hebrews makes reference to the ancient story of Cain and Abel

- Showing that the critical matter in their offerings was ‘faith’
- It was because of that faith that God spoke well of Abel’s offering and he was commended as righteous
- And, says the writer to the Hebrews, by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead
- So when considering Abel, the first of the long procession of men and women of faith
- We think of his offering, his faith and his witness

I HIS OFFERING

While the story of Adam and Eve is at best considered a myth today, the NT assumes its historicity

- Jesus also spoke of Abel as if he were a historical figure (Mt. 23:35); we cannot address all the issues here
- But I accept, without understanding everything, that these ‘ancients’, as they are called, were real people
- After the account of the Garden of Eden, we move to life outside of paradise
- Cain and Abel were both sons of Eve but not necessarily the primeval couple’s only children at that time
- Whether Eve shows humility or arrogance in saying she has brought forth a man (4:1) is hard to say
- It is difficult to translate but a recurring theme is the failure of human effort to gain God’s blessing
- In any event, Cain, the older son, did not inherit God’s blessing – for this God provided a younger son

While Cain was engaged in agriculture, growing crops, Abel was a shepherd, tending sheep and goats

- And in making an offering to God, each brought something from their own work
- When the LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering but not on Cain and his offering
- Cain was angry and his face was downcast
- No information is given as to why Abel’s offering was pleasing to God and Cain’s was not
- There is no scriptural evidence that offerings of produce were less acceptable than animal offerings
- The Genesis account does not spend time evaluating the offering itself
- Instead it seems as if the writer’s purpose is to show what kind of worship is pleasing to God
- Such worship springs from a pure heart. Such worship is offered by faith.
- It seems the Lord gave Cain a second chance – to enter into dialogue about the true nature of his offering
- But no response from Cain is recorded. Instead, all will be revealed after the offerings have been made
- Cain’s reaction of jealous anger (and murder) reveals the state of his heart at the time he made his offering

II HIS FAITH

Scripture never says there was anything inherently superior in Abel's offering

- But there was something better about Abel, a righteous man (Mt. 23:35; 1 John 3:12)
- Abel was right with God and his offering was a demonstration of his faith
- it was not the types of sacrifice that Cain and Abel offered which caused the distinction
- but the attitude in which it was given that made Abel's 'a better offering' (Heb. 11:4)
- the fact that what is happening inwardly is more important than what is happening outwardly
- is a constant theme in the Bible – God would rather have obedience than offerings (1 Sam. 15:22)
- God would rather have repentance and genuine contrition than offerings (Ps. 51:16-17)

Interestingly enough, while the writer to the Hebrews uses Abel as the first example of faith

- Genesis does not refer to Abel's faith; Cain was told that if he did right he would be accepted (Gen. 4:7)
- Suggesting that Abel's attitude and manner of life were different from Cain's
- But the writer to the Hebrews offers an interpretation – living the right way with the right attitude
- Is a pointer to faith – therefore, Abel's offering is made by faith which in short is 'believing God'

Born in Germany in 1805, George Müller offered to work with Jews in England and arrived in March 1929

- By mid-May, he had fallen critically ill and was sent to Teignmouth to recuperate
- After a time he became minister of Ebenezer Chapel in Shaldon and soon committed to live by faith
- Two years later he moved to Bristol and devoted himself to opening schools and orphanages
- The whole project was entirely by faith, they said grace at table when they had no food
- Only for the baker to give enough bread and the milk cart to break down at the front door and donate milk

III HIS WITNESS

In the New Testament the word ‘martyr’ and the word ‘witness’ are the same

- In English we use the word ‘martyr’ to mean someone who has witnessed even to the point of death
- The first readers of the letter to the Hebrews were shrinking back from persecution
- Therefore, the writer reminds them that they must have faith, like Abel
- For figuratively speaking, his martyr’s blood continues to speak powerfully to that faith
- Abel’s sacrifice pleased God because it stemmed from genuine trust, a matter of the heart not just of ritual
- The later Hebrew prophets tried to bring spiritual reformation in the days of dead religion. For example:
- Amos (5:21-25) denounced religious offerings if the people did not practise righteousness and justice
- It is because of his faith that the martyred Abel keeps on speaking to us (Hacking) urging us on as it were
- He is not to be thought of as one long-since dead for his faith is a living voice (Morris)

Cain did not do what was right (4:7) because he was not right spiritually

- In contrast, the attitude and action of Abel were an example of faithfulness
- That continues among people of faith – the link between internal attitudes and external actions is shown
- In other places in the Bible men and women are exhorted not to follow the way of Cain
- This does not specifically mean that we are not to murder – but that we are not to lack faith
- The essence of lacking faith is doubting God’s word, the heart of faith is believing God
- As Raymond Brown has written:

The Bible does not seek to mock us when it outlines the achievements of its great characters. It records the truth about them so that, amongst other things, we recognize that they were ordinary people who, by God's grace alone, were enabled to do extraordinary things.

Abel offered a sacrifice which was more acceptable than that presented by his brother Cain

- It was a valuable offering, a sincere offering, we might even note that it was a blood offering
- For while there is no indication that it was the nature of the offering that made it superior
- Nevertheless, it was the first blood sacrifice and inevitably points to the perfect blood sacrifice

So we might easily conclude by saying that we should offer sacrifice that is valuable and sincere

- But I think that would be profoundly wrong – instead, once again it is a matter of believing God
- And this belief is focused on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
- For the heart of faith is to believe in the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross and his blood shed for us

But what is the saddest part of the story? In one sense, of course, it is Cain murdering his brother Abel

- But for me, the saddest part of the story is Cain's pride, his jealousy, his refusal to repent, his denial of sin
- And stubborn, bitter remorse – we do not know how it could have turned out but surely better than it did
- In a very real sense, Cain knew his own heart but instead of responding with repentance to God
- He responded with resentment to his brother – and all I can ask is whether or not there is a lesson there?
- I was reading a book, feeling that the author was on the right track, when on the next page he quoted me!
- Obviously a writer of considerable insight and judgment – but the theme of the book would surprise you
- It was – why are some people who go to church so angry with some of the other people who attend?
- Why do they look so miserable? If they do what is right, will they not be accepted?
- It is about having victory over temptation and sin and having a heart that is right. How? 'By faith'