

Jesus' obedience and ours

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Opening the book of Hebrews is a bit like stepping into Transporter Room on the starship *Enterprise*. A few verses are all it takes to beam us suddenly down into an alien world filled with angels, sacrificial purification rites and Melchizedek. There's very little about Hebrews that looks, sounds or feels familiar to 21st-century people, all of which makes dealing with this letter a challenge (and explains why so many of us avoid it).

I remember teaching a youth Sunday school class comparing the Levitical system of annual atonement sacrifices with the once-and-for-all sacrifice that, according to Hebrews, Jesus has made for our sins. Wrapping up the lesson, attempting to drive the main points home, I was firing questions at the kids and getting answers, call-and-response style. We were on a roll until I got to the final question. "And why," I asked, "don't we sacrifice animals anymore?"

A sixth-grade girl piped up: "Animal rights!"

Culturally speaking, there's a lot about the book of Hebrews that gets lost in translation. The New Testament gives us many ways to talk about Jesus, but I'll bet that "high priest" is not a phrase that appears frequently in our Christological vocabularies. I wish it did. The image is so rich, so loaded with descriptive significance: Jesus the high priest is the one who intercedes for us, who sacrifices for us, who is holy for us. There's a nice sermon series there for anyone willing to take it on.

When it comes to Jesus' high priestly role, however, what captures my imagination is the emphasis that Hebrews puts on his *obedience*. Verse seven tells us that, because of Jesus' reverent submission, God heard the prayers and supplications he offered up with loud cries and tears. "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (8-9).

What makes Jesus an effective high priest? His obedience. What makes him the source of eternal salvation? *Our* obedience.

Of all the alien, unfamiliar aspects of Hebrews—both inside and outside of the church—the central role of obedience in defining the kind of people God wants may very well be the most foreign. That's exactly why we need to hear more of it.