

## *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

The Bible must be its own interpreter. Its pages speak of several kinds of priest. Melchizedek was a priest; there were the levitical priests of the order of Aaron; there were the high priests; and there is the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. How does the priesthood of believers fit into all that?

The great original priesthood in human history is that of Melchizedek. Christ was a priest in his order. In the age which came between Melchizedek and Christ, the old covenant, the priesthood of the house of Aaron, served as an earthly copy of the true heavenly priesthood of the Redeemer, a picture, an indistinct silhouette of Christ and the work he would accomplish. The levitical priests were appointed to ‘serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven’ (Heb. 8:5, NIV). A copy and shadow, please note, a copy of what was already established, at least in the mind and decree of God, in heaven. All the regulations of worship and sacrifice of the earthly sanctuary were but material copies of the work of the true – the spiritual, the heavenly – sanctuary (Heb. 9:1-28). In fact, the new covenant – or the heavenly covenant – is the original covenant (Heb. 9:23). It was planned by the triune God in eternity, accomplished through the mediator in his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, is experienced in time when the elect are called, and will be finally and completely fulfilled in eternity. ‘He is the mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance’ (Heb. 9:15; see also 9:26).

So why did God set up on earth, for the Jews, this shadowy picture of Christ’s heavenly priesthood? The reason is plain. The idea of a ‘copy’ or ‘picture’ tells all. God was instructing Israel concerning Christ, the true priest, and his one effective offering for sin. Blurred and shadowy as a copy though the old covenant was, nevertheless it demonstrated to the Jews what Christ would accomplish when the appointed time had arrived, and God would send his Son into the world to save sinners (Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 1:15).

## *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

It would also foreshadow what Christ would be permanently engaged in doing in heaven (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:24-25). But with this difference; on earth, Christ would accomplish and offer his sacrifice to his Father, once; in heaven, he would continually plead the merits of that sacrifice.

In other words, the levitical system had a demonstrating or instructing role for the Jews.<sup>1</sup> Day after day it cried out to them: 'God demands sacrifice as an atonement for sin'. And it kept on telling them that God would accept only a blood-sacrifice of atonement and propitiation, a blood sacrifice as appointed by him. But it spoke such things not only for them. The old priesthood performs a similar task for us, even now, even though it was abolished and fulfilled along with the old covenant, 2000 years since, when Christ brought in the new. We, today, still gain valuable instruction from the old covenant. By meditating on the ministry of those earthly priests, we learn much about the priesthood of our Saviour. As I have explained, by examining the old priesthood, we also come to discover more about what is meant by saying that all believers are priests. So let us remind ourselves of the qualifications and duties of priests, especially the high priest, by turning once again to Hebrews 5:1-4:

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was (Heb. 5:1-4, NIV).

Under the old covenant, a priest had to be a man, not an angel, so that he could represent other men before God; he had to have compassion upon those with whom he dealt and for whom he made representation before God; he had to be called of God for the work; he had to be separated from the world unto God; he needed sacrifices to offer; he was to speak *to* God *for* the people, and speak *for* God *to* the people.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am not saying that this was its only role. See my forthcoming book on the law.

### *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

The old-covenant priests, therefore, knew they were an elect company, chosen by God to minister in his presence on behalf of others. They were to offer sacrifices. They were a special people to God. He stipulated that they had to come before him clothed in holy garments. He went further. Israel as a whole, the priests in particular, could declare: 'He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness' (Isa. 61:10, NIV). Symbolic, of course, in the old covenant.

Again, God looked upon the priests as his ministers, his servants whom he would use to instruct the people in the knowledge of himself. He ordained that the priests should 'teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses' (Lev. 10:11; see also Deut. 17:8-13). 'The lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts' (Mal. 2:7). This instruction was carried out both privately (Hag. 2:11-13; Zech. 7:1-7, say) and publicly – the latter, perhaps, along the lines of Nehemiah 8:

All the people assembled as one man in the square... They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So... Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon... in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion... Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded: 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites... instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there. They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear [or translating it], and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah... Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people, said to them all: 'This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep'. For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law... Then all the people went away to... celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them (Neh. 8:1-12, NIV).

## *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

Why did God want his people taught his law? Besides the obvious answer – that God would never have given it to Israel unless he wanted the people to hear and understand it – the Lord intended that the ministry of the priests, under the law, should turn many from the paths of sin into the way of righteousness. It would, perhaps, be better stated the other way round: The Lord intended that, under the ministry of the levitical priests, the law should turn many from the paths of sin into the way of righteousness. (See Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:11,13,21; Rom. 7:10; 10:5). In ideal circumstances, it would have done so, but the law was weak through the inability of sinful man to keep it, and therefore the levitical ministry failed in this regard (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:20; 7:7 – 8:4; Gal. 2:16; 3:21; Heb. 7:11,18-19; 9:9; 10:1). Christ, of course, was born a man, born a Jew under the law, and, as a Jew, kept the law, but was cursed under it, and by offering up his obedient life in sacrifice (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8), earned salvation for his people (Gal. 4:4-5; see also Matt. 1:1-16,21; Luke 2:21-27; John 1:14; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; 9:5; Gal. 3:13; Phil. 2:7-8; 1 Tim. 1:15).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the priests and Levites were responsible for the care of the place and apparatus of worship. Again, God allowed only the priests to come near to him. Above all, the high priest alone could come into the Most Holy Place, and that but once a year (Lev. 16:2; Num. 3:5-10,25,31-32; 16:5; Deut. 21:5; Heb. 9:7-8). Such were the duties and qualifications of the priests of God under the old covenant.

In a spiritual sense, within the limits as defined by the New Testament, such are the fundamental elements of the qualifications and duties of believers as priests of God under the new covenant. These elements are of such importance, let me list them. Under the old covenant:

1. A priest had to be a man, not an angel.
2. A priest was a member of an elect company, one who offered sacrifices to God.

---

<sup>2</sup> I will say more about this important point in my forthcoming book on the law.

### *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

3. A priest was a teaching minister. He not only taught the people the law of God, but he also administered justice.
4. The aim of his teaching the law was to turn the people to God. (This ministry failed, however, because of the ‘weakness’, the sinfulness of the people).
5. The priests had the responsibility of the care of the place and apparatus of worship. They alone could approach God.

As I say, within the limits as defined by the New Testament – that is, in a spiritual sense – such are the fundamental elements of the qualifications and duties of believers as priests of God under the new covenant.

It is plainly self-evident that there are real differences between the covenants, and corresponding differences between the priesthoods, differences which carry enormous consequences, now that Christ has fulfilled and abolished the old covenant and set up the new. Nevertheless, just as the old-covenant priesthood teaches us a great deal about Christ and his priesthood, so it teaches believers about their privileges and responsibilities as priests in the new covenant.

To begin with, all the children of God are the elect of God, born again of the Spirit of God, and so become spiritual men and women, made into kingly priests. ‘You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood’. All believers are called of God and separated from the world, sanctified and washed in the blood of Christ.

Furthermore, all believers, as priests of the Lord, have sacrifices to offer to him, and they are consecrated to this service, having been made clean through the blood of the Redeemer, anointed with the Holy Spirit and clothed with Christ. It is because of this that they, and they alone, can come near to God.

Again, as ministers, all believers have the responsibility and privilege of preaching the gospel – in the full breadth of what the New Testament means both by ‘minister’ and ‘preach’. I acknowledge that this must sound incomprehensible to many believers, even ridiculous, if not frightening. Me? Preach? Yes, but notice the qualification, ‘the full breadth of what the New Testament means by “preach”’. Although I have already hinted at

### *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

this, and I will not stop to explain further now, the point I am making is of such importance, I will come back to it.

Moreover, as priests, believers are required to keep God's temple holy – a priestly duty. These references to the temple can be both individual and corporate. Both as individuals, and together as a body, they have to be holy. Godliness in the individual *and* in the assembly (Matt. 5:8; Rom. 6:15 – 7:6; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; Eph. 5:3-11; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Heb. 12:14) is essential.

Finally, as holy, anointed priests, believers come right into God's presence, right into the holiest of all; and they come with confidence into the Most Holy Place, not just once a year, but at all times and in every place (John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:28-30; 9:22-24; 11:5; 12:1; 1 Cor. 2:6-16; 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 1:21; 5:21; 6:17; Eph. 1:3-14; 2:13,18-22; Phil. 3:9; Col. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 4:16; 9:14; 10:19-22; 12:18-24; 13:15-16; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:9; 1 John 2:20,27; Rev. 1:5-6).

All believers, therefore, really are the priests of God. They all have all the necessary qualifications. They are, amazingly, the spiritual royal-priests of the Lord and, as such, truly are priests. In fact, it could be said that they are more 'priestly' than any old-covenant priest ever could be.

But how, precisely, have believers become priests of God?