

How Have Believers Become Priests?

How have believers become priests? The answer lies in the epigraph to this section: ‘Jesus Christ... has made [them] kings and priests to his God and Father’ (Rev. 1:5-6). In saving sinners, Christ makes them priests. But how, precisely, has God in Christ made his people priests?

Under the old covenant, the levitical priests became such by reason of their birth into the right family. If they belonged to the right tribe, the tribe of Levi – and the right family, the house of Aaron – they were eligible. If they were born outside that tribe and that family, it was impossible for them to become priests (Ex. 29:9; Num. 16:1 – 18:7; Heb. 7:5,13-14). The priesthood was barred to them. Such were the terms under which men became priests in the old covenant.

In the new covenant, too, Christians are priests by virtue of their birth. *But not their natural birth.* The new covenant is a spiritual covenant. Its priests, therefore, are spiritual priests, and they become such only through their *spiritual* birth; or, rather, through their re-birth or regeneration. They have been born again (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8). Sinners by nature in Adam, they are made priests by the sovereign, mighty act of God the Holy Spirit regenerating them in Christ:

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared... Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ... gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people... When the kindness and the love of God our Saviour towards man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Tit. 2:11 – 3:7).

This, at first glance, may appear to teach regeneration by water baptism. It most definitely does not. The washing is not literal, but figurative. It speaks of the cleansing, renewing nature of regeneration, the ‘freshness’, the ‘newness’, of the new man. I

How Have Believers Become Priests?

have given my arguments in my *Infant Baptism Tested* and my *Baptist Sacramentalism*. The passage, in short, speaks of the cleansing renewal by the sovereign, direct act of the regeneration of the elect by the Holy Spirit. And in the ‘purify’ (Tit. 2:14), we are reminded of God’s new-covenant promise through the prophets:

Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshippers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings (Zeph. 3:9-10, NIV).

He will purify the sons of Levi, and purify them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant [or pleasing] to the LORD (Mal. 3:3-4).

As the writer to the Hebrews declared, God has fulfilled this promise with the coming of Christ, and his work:

God... in these last days has spoken to us in his Son... When he had made purification of sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:1-3, NASB).

Zephaniah: I will ‘purify’, said the Lord; ‘he will purify’, Malachi promised; ‘he... made purification’, said the writer to the Hebrews. Peter declared to the assembly at Jerusalem: God ‘made no distinction between us [the Jews] and them [the Gentiles], for he purified their hearts by faith’ (Acts 15:9, NIV). And when he wrote his first letter, he returned to the theme: ‘You have purified yourselves by obeying the truth’ (1 Pet. 1:22, NIV). James could address double-minded sinners: ‘Purify your hearts’ (Jas. 4:8, NIV).

Putting all this together, in the new covenant, by the work of Christ, the elect, being regenerated, are purified and made priests. Peter, as we have seen, wrote to those who have been ‘begotten... again to a living hope... having been born again’, and are ‘newborn babes’ (1 Pet. 1:3,23; 2:2). And it is they, and they only, the regenerate, who are ‘a royal priesthood’ (1 Pet. 2:9). And they become such, I say again, by God’s sovereign intervention. As Ezekiel foretold, when speaking of the new covenant:

‘For on my holy mountain, on the mountain height of Israel’, says the Lord GOD, ‘there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall

How Have Believers Become Priests?

serve me; there I will accept them, and there I will require your offerings and the first-fruits of your sacrifices, together with all your holy things. I will accept you as a sweet aroma when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will be hallowed in you before the Gentiles' (Ezek. 20:40-41; see also chapters 40-48).

And Isaiah: "'I will... take some¹ of them for priests and Levites", says the LORD' (Isa. 66:21; see 56:4-8). 'I will take', I emphasise. If that's not sovereign intervention, I don't know what is. God takes those who by nature are far off from him, and brings them near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13), setting them apart to be his priests. God claimed the Levites as his firstborn under the old covenant (Num. 3:12; *etc.*). Under the new covenant, God takes his

¹ Why 'some'? Aren't *all* believers priests? Indeed they are. So why 'some'? First of all, while 'some' is in the NKJV, NASB and NIV, it is not in the AV. Nor does E.J.Young (*The Book of Isaiah*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1972, Vol.3 p529) use it in his translation. Nevertheless, 'I will... take of them' (AV), while not so definite as 'I will... take some of them', still leaves the door open to the view that only some believers are priests. But such an interpretation runs so contrary to the overwhelming weight of Scripture, it cannot possibly be right. I think the explanation lies in the prophet's use of old-covenant language to describe new-covenant privileges. I will look at this point more fully in my book on the law. I certainly do not accept Calvin's view that the prophet was speaking 'in a special manner' of 'ministers and teachers' (*Commentaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979, Vol.8 Part 2 p437). Nor do I agree with Gill who went further than Calvin, and thought the prophet was not speaking of the priesthood of *all* believers – though he cited 1 Pet. 2:5,9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10 – but 'the ministers of the word'. For this claim, Gill cited no text! I'm not surprised! He didn't because he couldn't! Nevertheless, he continued to talk of 'the ministers of the word, who, in Old Testament language, are called priests, though never in the New Testament' (*Commentary*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, Vol.3 p1049). Enough said! He was playing with fire! In other words, I can hear ominous echoes of Cyprian – he who introduced the disastrous notion of applying the old covenant to the church. See my other works. Spurgeon got it right: 'Under the gospel dispensation, God will select both out of Jews and Gentiles a chosen people, who shall stand before him spiritually as the priests and Levites stood before him typically' (*Metropolitan... 1871* p289; see the entire sermon, 'A New Order of Priests and Levites', pp289-300).

How Have Believers Become Priests?

elect, regenerates them, brings them to faith in Christ, makes them his sons and daughters, and appoints them his priests.

But how, precisely, does regeneration lead to, and produce, this priesthood of all believers?

In regeneration, the elect are brought to repentance and faith, and so called into fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). In other words, they are united to Christ by their spiritual baptism, their baptism with/in/by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12:13).

Union with Christ! 'In Christ'. This is a huge theme, of immense importance, which I have explored a little more fully in other works. For now, I simply note that believers are 'in Christ', and Christ is in them (John 17:21,23; Rom. 8:10; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27). God regards believers as he does Christ. They are one with him. Indeed, in eternity God will conform them to the likeness of his Son, even in the body (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). But even now, all believers are spiritually 'in Christ', united to him, and, being united to Christ, they receive as their own all that Christ is and has done for them. In short, they died with him, they were buried with him, they rose with him, they ascended with him, they are seated in heaven with him (Rom. 5:12 – 8:39; Eph. 1:1 – 2:22). They are 'in Christ'.

And that is why the children of God are called Christians; they are CHRISTians (Acts 11:26), 'in Christ' and Christ in them. They partake of him. They participate in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). They are members of Christ, even of his body (1 Cor. 6:15; 12:27; Eph. 5:30), Christ being the head (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18,24; 2:19). And just as in a well-ordered man, the head governs, the members submit; the head commands, the members obey – so with Christ. All depends on him, the head. It used to be thought that a man died when his heart stopped. For many years now, 'brain-dead' has been the more reliable term. A man can be kept alive without his heart – but not without his head. We now know that the head is the most vital organ of them all. Further, Christ is the vine; believers are the branches (John 15:1-10); they draw all their life from and in him. Again, as he is anointed of God ('Christ' means 'anointed'), so are they anointed, in him (2 Cor. 1:21; 1 John 2:20,27). In all these biblical metaphors which describe the union

How Have Believers Become Priests?

of Christ and his people, there is an emphasis upon life, ‘oneness’ and ‘likeness’. Christ and his people are one.

In particular, as Christ is the great high priest of the new covenant (Heb. 4:14-15), the ‘minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle’ (Heb. 8:2), so his people, being ‘in Christ’, are priests or ministers of that covenant by virtue of their union with him. Their spiritual ministry arises directly from their union with Christ, the one great high priest and minister. Ezekiel, prophesying of the new covenant, spoke of how God would, by his Spirit, regenerate his elect and live in them:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean. I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you... I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live... David my servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd... I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them... I will be their God, and they shall be my people... (Ezek. 36:25-27; 37:14,24-28).

Isaiah, also prophesying of the new covenant, spoke of Christ’s coming and his saying: ‘The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound...’ (Isa. 61:1). The prophet went on: ‘But you shall be named the priests of the LORD. They shall call you the servants of our God’ (Isa. 61:6), ‘ministers of our God’ (NIV). And the apostle stated it:

Such confidence... is ours through Christ before God... Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit... As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people... I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters’, says the Lord Almighty (2 Cor. 3:4-6; 6:16-18, both NIV; see also Lev. 26:11-12; Jer. 32:38-40; Ezek. 37:24-28).

Here we have it. Christ is a priest – so are his people. And they exercise their priestly ministry in and through him. Jesus has a permanent priesthood; he is always exercising his ministry, even

How Have Believers Become Priests?

though he offered only one sacrifice; he now appears seated in the presence of God on behalf of his people (Heb. 7:24; 9:24; 10:12). It is because Christians have such a great high priest that they are able to 'draw near' to God; what is more, are encouraged so to do (Heb. 10:22). But this 'drawing near' to God is a priestly action. It is precisely the way in which a priest carries out his work – by drawing near to God. Believers draw near to God, in and through their great high priest, and they draw near as priests themselves, having been given that right as priests in Christ.

I would not be misunderstood. Every believer is a priest. But he is only a priest because he is in Christ. He is not a priest by his own power or ability or right. Nor does he exercise his priesthood in his own name. Nevertheless, every believer is a priest.

In this way, believers approach God as priests 'in Christ', sprinkled, washed in the blood of Christ the Lamb of God, united to him. They come as Christ comes. They are as acceptable to God as Christ his Son is. In the words of Catesby Paget:

A mind at perfect peace with God:

Oh, what a word is this!

A sinner reconciled through blood:

This, this indeed is peace.

By nature and by practice far,

How very far from God!

Yet now by grace brought nigh to him

Through faith in Jesus' blood.

So nigh, so very nigh to God,

I cannot nearer be;

For in the person of his Son,

I am as near as he.

So dear, so very dear to God,

More dear I cannot be;

The love wherewith he loves the Son,

Such is his love to me.

Why should I ever anxious be

Since such a God is mine?

He watches o'er me night and day,

And tells me: 'Thou art Mine'.

How Have Believers Become Priests?

Believers, therefore, approach God in unqualified confidence, directly as a result of the presence of Christ, their great high priest, at God's right hand in heaven (Heb. 1:3; 4:14-16). They come, and come boldly, right into the Most Holy Place (Heb. 10:19-22). And this priestly entrance is made possible only by virtue of their union with Christ. 'We... have access to the Father by one Spirit... In [Christ], and through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence' (Eph. 2:18; 3:12, both NIV). 'Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand' (Rom. 5:1-2). This is how believers have become priests.

So then, we have three priesthods to think about. First, and by far the greatest, we have Christ's priesthood. But coming to priesthood as it exists among men, we have the historical and now-abolished priesthood of the old covenant, and the priesthood of all believers under the new covenant. How do these last two compare?