

First Principles

‘Priesthood’ is a concept written large in Scripture, in both the Old Testament and the New. In truth, it is not too much to say that unless we come to terms with what God says in his word about ‘priesthood’, we will never grasp how we, as sinners, may approach him, and be saved from our sins. This is not to say that we are saved because we understand all the ins-and-outs of ‘priesthood’. No! *But unless we are resting in what God has accomplished through ‘priesthood’, we are still in our sins.* And, for those of us who have been saved from our sins, the more we comprehend the biblical meaning of ‘priesthood’, the better will we appreciate what God has done for us in and through Christ. In light of these facts, it is clearly impossible to overstate the importance of ‘priesthood’.

For ‘priesthood’ lies at the heart of the biblical answer to that ancient, all-important question, that question which all of us should ask: ‘How then can a man be righteous before God?’ (Job 25:4, NIV). How indeed! And the question should be made personal: How can *I* be righteous before God? It should be made even more direct: Reader, how can *you* be right with God?

And you need to be made right with God. Make no mistake about it. ‘Who can say: “I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?”’ (Prov. 20:9). Note the ‘then’ in Bildad’s question. ‘How *then* can a man be righteous before God?’ Note also the ‘before God’. We are not talking about our standing and reputation before men – but God! The context brings out what Bildad had in mind – the sovereign holiness of God, his infinite power, and the smallness and sinfulness of man. Oh yes, it was because Bildad recognised that all men are sinners and, unless they are made right with God, that all will die and perish as sinners, that he asked his question: ‘How then can a man be righteous before God?’

Reader, on the authority of God’s word, the Bible, I tell you as plainly and as lovingly as I can, you are a sinner – as we all are. And your sin makes you ‘unright’ with God. It must be dealt with. I tell you the truth. I cannot leave you in the dark. I cannot pull the wool over your eyes. I dare not. As I have to answer before God

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for what I say, unless *you* are made right with God, *you* will perish. You will perish because you are a sinner who has not been made right with God.

Sin. What are we talking about? The word, as you will have noticed, has come up several times already. As it will, again and again. It's bound to. It's the origin of the catastrophic state man finds himself in, and the cause of all the misery in the world. And there's more than enough of that to go round! Would anybody disagree? I think not. Well then, let me say it again. Sin is the cause of all this wretchedness.

Yes, sin is the problem. *But man simply will not face up to it.* He'll do anything but call it by its name. Euphemism is the order of the day! It is has been so since Adam fell. Mankind has not been slow at finding comfortable ways of describing the horrible thing, and so avoiding the cutting word. Sin? Never! Not me! My behaviour is, perhaps, at times, 'inappropriate'. I 'make mistakes'. I have 'failings', 'shortcomings'. My actions are 'unfortunate' or 'improper'. I 'blunder'. I 'stumble'. I 'sometimes get it wrong'. And so on. No! Away with such evasion! Let's call it by its proper name – by its one-syllable, three-letter name. Sin it is, and sin is what we are talking about.

Sin! What is sin? What is a sinner? The Bible tells us. Sin, at root, is defiance of God. Let me explain.

God has made himself known to us in his works in nature; that is, in creation. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (Ps. 19:1, NIV). 'What may be known of God is manifest in [all men], for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead' (Rom. 1:19-20). God has not left himself without witness, in that he does good to all, giving us rain from heaven and consequent harvests, and so on (Acts 14:17). In all this, and more, God has made himself known to us.

But what does man do with this knowledge? He stifles it. Yes, it is true. He stifles it. 'Men... suppress the truth in unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18). And when we stifle the knowledge of God, all sorts of appalling consequences follow:

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Men... suppress the truth in unrighteousness... Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things... [They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen (Rom. 1:18-25).

Never! You can't mean it! Making images and worshipping idols? Well, that can't be true, can it? 21st-century man in the west is far more civilised than that! We have out-grown the primitive, and the use of such foolish things as idols!

Oh? Really? Don't be so sure. The invented gods of the cultured mind are as heinous in God's sight as any totem pole. And modern man has devised countless gods of that 'sophisticated' sort – sex, entertainment, power, reputation, money, sport, greed, gluttony, lawlessness, violence, perversion, for a start. The list is endless. And, don't forget, God's complaint is that sinners 'worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator'. Ah, creature worship! *That's* common enough. And there's one creature in particular who always gets our first and best attention. Self. That's him! Self. At bottom, the great god for sinful man is, as it has always been, SELF! As Martin Luther said: 'I have within me the great pope, Self'.¹ Self – not God. And self-worship is the root and height of sin.

But if man suppresses God's revelation of himself in nature, how much more does he suppress God's revelation of himself in Scripture! Above all, how much more does sinful man suppress the gospel of Christ, defying God in Christ as he offers salvation to all, and commands and invites all to repent and trust his Son!

God has spoken to us through Christ. 'God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son' (Heb. 1:1-2). And what sort of things has he said by his Son to us sinners? How about this for a start:

¹ famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/martin_luther_quotes.html

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Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me has everlasting life... If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink... He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die (John 6:47; 7:37; 11:25-26).

What is the sinner's response to such free, generous invitations, to such plain commands and such gracious offers? Staggeringly, amazingly, he turns his back on them, or brushes them aside, and snubs Christ. By nature, sinners refuse God's offers of mercy, refuse his invitations to come to him through Christ and so be saved, and refuse his commands to repent and believe, even though they are unmistakably warned of the consequences of refusal (Prov. 1:20-32). And they *are* warned:

He who believes in [Christ] is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil... He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:18-19,36).

In light of such invitations and such warnings, sinners say: 'No' to God in Christ? Sinners refuse his offers and overtures of mercy? Sinners ignore his commands? Sinners dismiss his warnings? Can it be possible? It is altogether too possible, I am afraid. Left to ourselves, it is the universal response of sinners to God in his gospel. And in our refusal of God's offers of mercy, our defiance of God has reached its zenith. We, as sinners, are in rebellion against his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews of Christ's day were guilty: 'He came to his own, and his own did not receive him' (John 1:11). 'We will not have this man to reign over us' (Luke 19:14). Christ had to tell them: 'You refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:40, NIV), complaining that, though he would often have gathered them to himself, they were not willing (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34).

Nothing has changed. It is still the same today, and the same for us all. As unregenerate sinners, we are determined to go our own way. We will not submit to God in Christ. God is not in all our

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thoughts. We do not reverence him as we ought (Rom. 3:10-18). 'The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be' (Rom. 8:7). To 'the natural man', spiritual things – 'the things of the Spirit of God' – are 'foolishness'. As Paul said, 'the natural man does not receive', welcome or accept, them (1 Cor. 2:14). When I was a boy, and I did something wrong, my mother would tell me I was 'ardened'. I didn't know what she was talking about, except that it was bad. I only later came to realise what she meant. I was, of course, 'hardened'.

This, in essence, is what sin is. It is saying 'No' to God as he has revealed himself in his works of creation, in Scripture and, above all, in Christ in the gospel. We are all sinners. We all, by nature, set ourselves against God. We are hardened, defiant. Sin, rebellion against God, is ingrained in us.

What does God do about it?

We are sinners. We are in rebellion against God. Now what does God do about it? Well, he certainly does not stand by, helplessly wringing his hands. Oh no! Men rage against God, defy him – defy him and his Christ; they would, if they could, abolish both him and his law (Ps. 2:1-3). But 'he who sits in the heavens shall laugh. The LORD shall hold them in derision. Then he shall speak to them in his wrath, and distress them in his deep displeasure' (Ps. 2:4-5; see also 37:9-15). And how does *that* show itself? Let me return to the earlier extract from Paul's letter to the Romans, and include a bit more, and take it a bit further:

Men... suppress the truth in unrighteousness... Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. *Therefore God also gave them up...* [They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. *For this reason God gave them up... And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over...* (Rom. 1:18-28).

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Man defies God. Therefore God gives man up. ‘Therefore God also gave them up... For this reason God gave them up... And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over’. This is not the only place in Scripture where we learn of it. When Moses was on Sinai receiving the law, the Israelites under Aaron sinned by making and worshipping an idol. ‘Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven’ (Acts 7:41-42). God gives sinners over.

How does this ‘giving up’ of sinners by God show itself? Paul spelled it out. God gives sinners over so that men receive ‘in themselves the penalty of their error which was due’. God gives men up ‘to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves... to vile passions... a debased mind’. And it shows itself in sins. The list reads like tomorrow’s headlines! Perversion of every kind, all manner of wickedness, cruelty, malice, hatred, envy, murder, strife, deceit, hatred of God, violence, pride, bragging, untrustworthiness, grudge-bearing... (Rom. 1:18-32; see also Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:1-3; 4:17-19,22,25, 28-29,31; 5:3-8,11-12,18; Col. 3:5-9; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3-4; 2 Pet. 2:10-22).

The catalogue seems remorseless and endless. It is. It never stops. Listen to tomorrow’s news. Of course, I am no prophet. Nevertheless, I guarantee it will include a record of sins and evils – some of which we admit to be massive, some of which we consider trivial. But there is nothing trivial about this business. Nothing! Sin leads to sins. All the sins listed by the apostle in Romans 1 are the consequence of the fundamental original sin of defiance against God. We are all sinners. And we daily live to prove it. And for this we are all under the wrath of God. The apostle opened this section in his letter to the Romans in this way. He certainly did not mince his words: ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...’ (Rom. 1:18). In saying this, he was simply following his Master, Christ. The sinner who has not had his sin forgiven and dealt with, says Christ, ‘is condemned already’ (John 3:18). ‘The wrath of God abides on him’ (John 3:36). So that we – all of us – must justly say of ourselves: ‘We... [are] by nature

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children of wrath' (Eph. 2:3). There is nothing – nothing – trivial about *that!*

We are *all* sinners, I say again. *Our* sin – *our* heart, mind and will bent on defiance of God, and God's consequent giving of *us* up to *our* sin – shows itself in *our* sins; that is, in *our* sinful thoughts, words and actions. Christ told us so: 'Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications [sexual immorality], thefts, false witness, blasphemies' (Matt. 15:18-19).

I go further. Deep down, we all *know* we are sinners. How? Because God has written the knowledge of it within us. And he has used indelible ink. Indelible ink, I say. Much as we try – and we certainly do try – we cannot expunge what God has written in our conscience, nor can we stifle God's persistent voice. Pilate said it: 'What I have written, I have written' (John 19:22). How much more with God! Quiet it may be, but God's voice is insistent. It *will* keep rising to the surface of our mind. It troubles us, disturbs us. It torments our conscience. It makes us feel embarrassed, not to say ashamed. It makes us blush – even in secret. I know it does. Right from Adam and Eve's first sin, mankind has known fear, tried to cover up and hide from God (Gen. 3:7-10). And I know it not only by experience – though that certainly verifies it – but by Scripture. God has told us so.

Reader, you know you are a sinner. Your conscience bears witness to you, and your thoughts continually accuse or else excuse you. The Bible says so. Speaking of sinners in general, Paul declares in terms that 'their conscience also bears witness, and between themselves their thoughts accuse or else excuse them' (Rom. 2:15). That's putting it in the third person. Coming closer to home, we have to say: '*Our* conscience also bears witness, and *our* thoughts accuse or else excuse *us*'. Speaking for myself, I have to admit: '*My* conscience also bears witness, and *my* thoughts accuse or else excuse *me*'. And, of course, I say to you: '*Your* conscience also bears witness, and *your* thoughts accuse or else excuse *you*'. And we all accuse or else excuse one another. Deep down, we know that we are not right with God. I know it. You know it. We all know it.

And that's not the end of it

And another thing. There is another aspect of this wretched business that we – all of us – know by nature; all cultures and societies instinctively share the knowledge of what I am talking about. They certainly show it. What is that? Just this: We know we *need* to come to God. We all know we *must* come to him. *All* peoples have this sense of the need – the duty, the obligation – to worship God. Of course they do. God has placed this sense of need, duty, obligation in us all. Note the ‘so that’ in the following:

God, who made the world and everything in it... has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, *so that* they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:24-28).

It is highly significant, is it not – and could not be more relevant in dealing with modern man – to note that Paul raised this point with the Athenians, and raised it because he had seen the utter stupidity – and worse – of their use of idols. The Athenians! Of all people! The Athenians, renowned for their love of debate and meticulous investigation, their insatiable curiosity for ideas, actually showed their true colours – their ‘ignorance’, their superstition – by the inane way in which they tried to satisfy their inbuilt sense of the need to worship God. They were a ‘very religious’ people, with many ‘objects of... worship’, including ‘an altar... to the unknown god’, by which they foolishly thought they might be able to worship the true God, whom they did not know (Acts 17:21-30)! Nevertheless, there it is. A people, renowned for their free-thinking and their sophisticated love of enquiry, actually exposing their crass ignorance, and making fools of themselves! But – and this is the point I wish to make here – it showed that, with all their sophisticated intellectualism, with all their boasted love of reason and the modern, they still could not disguise the fact that they had an innate sense of the need to worship God, and that they had to satisfy its insistent demand. It was instinctive.

Paul had met a similar thing at Lystra when the people stupidly thought ‘the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men’,

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and ‘the priest of Zeus... brought oxen and garlands... intending to sacrifice with the multitudes’ because of the miracle wrought through Paul. Barnabas and Paul had their work cut out in trying to stop the nonsense. So much so, ‘they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them’. Nevertheless, the pagans’ opinion soon swung violently; having been incited by Jews from Antioch and Iconium, ‘they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead’ (Acts 14:8-20). Excessive praise soon led to blind rage; worship to hatred. Natural man is nothing if not fickle! He is as unstable and unreliable as an over-free weather vane swinging in the slightest breeze.²

In these episodes, we meet the exposure and explosion of one of the greatest myths Satan ever perpetrated on the human race. Fallen man, deceived by our arch-enemy, prides himself on his rational, calm ability to weigh the evidence, sift the various theories, and come to a sane and stable conclusion about God, his own soul and eternity, does he not? He can stand back and, with level-headed detachment, can work it all out.

The truth is, nothing could be further from the truth. It certainly didn’t happen at Athens or Lystra, 2000 years ago, not by a long chalk. Nor is it happening anywhere today.

The madness shown in the ancient world has been repeated again and again down the centuries. And it is still the same for us moderns. Man is ever the same, everywhere and at all times. Even today. Even modern man. Even us! So much has changed in the world, so much ‘progress’ – and with what speed! *But not this*. We know we need to come to God, but we continue to display our utter foolishness in the way we try to do it.

We all know we need to come to God, and that we cannot come empty-handed

In addition to knowing that we must come to God, we seem to know by nature that we cannot come empty-handed. We must

² Acts 14:19 could mean that the Jews persuaded the pagans, and turned them against Paul and his teaching. So much so, the pagans stood back while the Jews stoned the apostle and dragged him out of the city. If so, it does not alter that fact that pagan opinion very quickly swung 180°.

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bring a sacrifice, an offering. Right from the fall of man, God showed Adam that he needed to be covered with the skin of a victim – whose blood, obviously, had been shed (Gen. 3:21). Adam's sons, Cain and Abel, knew they must bring an offering to God (Gen. 4:3-4). As did Job (Job 1:5). Bearing in mind that the book of Job is one of the earliest books in the biblical canon, if not the earliest, this reference carries more than usual significance. Right from the entrance of sin into the world, men felt their guilt, and knew they could not come to God empty-handed. And that knowledge has never been erased from the human psyche. It is ingrained in us all. It is there, deep in the conscience. The attempt to atone for sin, and to erase a sense of guilt, has never ceased. All cultures – pagan, idolatrous, whatever – are basically religious, sacramental. As I noted in my *Baptist Sacramentalism*, even Hitler's Germany and the Soviet bloc felt compelled to satisfy the fundamental human need for sacral rites. The notion that the gods must be propitiated by some offering – human, animal or some other – is (as far as I can tell) universal. All men everywhere, all societies, in all generations, seem to display the conviction. All societies. Even ours!

'Wait a minute! That's an overstatement if ever there was. You can't tell me a 21st-century man sitting on the Clapham omnibus is thinking about sacrificing animals in order to appease God! Come off it!'

Quite right! I'm pretty sure that particular gentleman doesn't spend his time thinking about appeasing God by the sacrifice of a bull or a goat. Mind you, I wouldn't rule it out altogether. Oh no! Animal sacrifice in the UK in the early 21st century is not as rare as some might like to think! But I'll concede the point. Nevertheless, *this* I do assert. The man on the Clapham bus *instinctively feels and knows that he has to do something to be right with God*. Oh, yes he does. I'll prove it. Ask him whether he thinks all will be well with him in the end, and how. It won't be long before he's telling you he's sure of it, adding: 'I do my best', or some such. That's it. 'I do'. Sinners are always harping on about it. 'I do... I do...'. A young man asked Christ: 'What good thing shall I *do* that I may have eternal life?' (Matt. 19:16). The Jews asked Christ: 'What shall we *do*, that we may work the works of

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God?’ (John 6:28). The jailer asked Paul and Silas: ‘What must I *do* to be saved?’ (Acts 16:30). Do, do, do. Sinners know they cannot come empty-handed to God. They have to do something. They have to bring what they’ve done. They have to bring something – a sacrifice. They *want* to bring something. The hardest thing to get a sinner to do is to come to God empty-handed. ‘*Something* in my hand I bring’, unbelievers really mean, even though, from time-to-time, they might sing the exact opposite.

Do, do, do. Bring, bring, bring. In one way or another, God must be appeased. So men know. So men try. In some societies it might be a sheep, a goat, a chicken or... a child! In the ‘cultured’ west, it might be... decency, keeping the rules, playing the game, being baptised – or, more likely, sprinkling my baby – saying my prayers, chanting the rosary, going to church or chapel, keeping the festivals, Christmas, Easter, going to Mass... It might be anything and everything. The list is endless. But whatever it is, it is natural man’s attempt to satisfy the urge to make himself right with God. And it all boils down to *doing* something. And that’s what the sinner brings to God, that’s what he offers him.

That’s why I stick by my assertion. We all know we need to appease God. We have to bring something. Call it an offering or a sacrifice. Call it what you will. But we have to do it. We have to bring it. We know we can’t come empty-handed. We *want* to bring something to God. And the more mystifying and complicated it is... the better we are pleased. Remember Naaman? How he raged because he despised Elisha’s non-appearance and his simple, humiliating counsel! He wanted action! He wanted Elisha to come out and do something spectacular. And the more spectacular the better (2 Kings 5:10-12)!

We all know we need a priest

We all know we need to come to God, and we all feel we need to bring or do something. Furthermore, we seem to know by nature that we cannot come directly to God with our worship and sacrifice, but that we need an intermediary, a priest to present our sacrifice for us. We seem to know instinctively that we dare not

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approach God directly. Hence the widespread practice of priestcraft.³

‘Just a minute! There you go again. You aren’t telling me the man on the Clapham bus has a priest, are you?’

Well... let me assure you that even if *he* doesn’t, not a few of the many people who get on that bus *will* have a priest, and will regularly be turning to him, for his services and his ministrations. It might be mumbo-jumbo, it probably is mumbo-jumbo – that’s what many think – but, even so, they are determined to use the priest and his ‘magical’ potions; they need him and his professional competence. But as for the gentleman we are talking about, sitting quietly on the bus, perhaps he doesn’t have a priest at the moment. Even so, just wait! Wait until a death occurs in his family, especially if it’s a particularly close member. Nine times out of ten, and more, he will be only too relieved that some priest – he might be called a minister, pastor, elder or whatever – some ‘reverend’, ‘ordained’ official will, for a fee, ‘do the necessary’ at the funeral or cremation, won’t he? What’s that if it isn’t priestcraft? If it is objected that evangelicals and the Reformed have ‘a minister’ to conduct their funerals, and this has no ‘priestcraft’ overtone, that may well be so. I was referring to *unbelievers* calling in a professional ‘to do the job’. What ‘job’? And may I remind evangelicals and Reformed not to forget the ever-present danger of ‘priestcraft’ on such occasions?

And that’s only one example of what I’m talking about. Time and again, such priests are called in ‘to do the job’. Individually, and nationally, whenever disaster or trouble occurs, the majority of men wheel out the priest to perform his religious ministrations. And he, of course, is perfectly willing to fit the bill. Priestcraft is rampant.

Why, I knew of an undertaker who, if he had not called upon a certain minister or priest for a while, got a phone call: ‘You haven’t asked me to conduct a funeral for some time. Why not?’ Why, I wonder, did the undertaker get that phone call? I can hear fingers twitching for some pocket money! As I will show, they are only aping the priests in Malachi’s day.

³ Let me explain my terms. By ‘priesthood’, I mean the system God has set up in his word. By ‘priestcraft’, I mean the system(s) set up by men.

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C.H.Spurgeon, in his usual pithy way, got to the root of it:

All the world desires a way to God. Hence men set up priests and anoint them with oil, and smear them with I know not what, only that they may be mediators between them and God. They must have something to come between their guilt and God's glorious holiness.⁴

In short, as I showed in my *Infant Baptism Tested*, it seems to be an almost, if not entirely, universal phenomenon: men seem to know they need – or, at least, they seem to want – a priest with an ability to offer sacrifice to appease the 'gods', or 'God', or whoever... or whatever... somehow or another... to 'make things right'. I cannot account in any other way for the priestcraft which seems to be the feature of almost all, if not all, societies. Priests, witch doctors, medicine men, tribal holy men, gurus and all the rest – how can we account for them? The love of altars, ritual, robes, vestments, the fetish, smells and bells, and all the rest – where does it come from? Where? How is it that so many societies have sacral rites? How is it that *all* of them do?

The answer is plain. It does not arise as a matter of mere imitation. It's more than copy-cat. Priestcraft is endemic. And it is endemic because men have an innate sense of the need to approach God, and yet, I say, they instinctively realise that this can only be done by means of a specially 'ordained' man using his unique power of sacrifice and ritual. In this way, and only in this way, can they make effective contact with the Almighty.

Although this is to anticipate slightly, do not forget Israel's tendency, to put it no higher, to copy pagan gods, altars, sacrifices and priestcraft, directly in contravention of God's explicit command. My point is, where did all the paraphernalia come from? It was there for Israel to copy. There was certainly no shortage of it. See, for example, Deuteronomy 12:2-4,29-31; 13:1-18; 16:21 – 17:7; 20:17-18; 28:36,64; 29:17-18,25-26; 30:17; 31:16-18,20,29; 32:12,15-18,21,37-38; Ezekiel 20:32. And, as a classic case, take Judges 17 and 18. Where did it come from? The fact is, the need for a priest is not just a *common* experience. It is a *fundamental* of the human race.

⁴ spurgeon.org/sermons/3442.htm

We need a priest because God has ordained it so

The need for a priest is more than ‘natural’. We really do need a priest who will offer a sacrifice to make us right with God. How do I know that? How can I be so dogmatic? Because we have been left in no doubt about it. We really do need the services of an intermediary who will offer a sacrifice to make us right with God. God himself decreed that it should be so. Not only that, he has told us so, declaring it to us in Scripture. God has told us that we sinners can only be right with him by the agency of a priest and his sacrifice. That’s the truth of it! We *can* only come to God through a priest. He will not deal with us sinners except through a sacrificing priest, and on the basis of his sacrificial work. God could not have made it more patent. He has categorically stated it in Scripture.

And not only in Scripture. God, in history, has taken steps to make the principle plain. At Sinai, through Moses, God established a covenant with Israel, based upon the principle of ‘priesthood’: ‘Under it [that is, the levitical priesthood] the people received the law’ (Heb. 7:11). However that verse is interpreted, we can say that the ‘priesthood’ was absolutely fundamental to the Mosaic covenant. No ‘priesthood’, no communion with God. It was only through ‘priesthood’, only on the basis of ‘priesthood’, that God would deal with Israel. Priests, whom he appointed, offering the sacrifices which he ordained, and offering them precisely when and how he specified, formed the core, the basis of the covenantal system under which God would deal with his people. In no other way, and on no other basis, on no other ground, would he deal with the Hebrew people.

In fact, returning to a point I made a few moments ago, long before Israel – let alone the levitical priesthood – existed, God had, right from the fall of Adam, established the principle that sacrificial blood must be shed to atone for sin (Gen. 3:21; 4:4), reinforcing it in such episodes as Abraham’s sacrifice of a ram in the place of his son (Gen. 22:8,13). Observe how often – and, please note, how often *before* the giving of the law – we are told that so-and-so ‘built an altar’ upon which to offer sacrifice to God. Noah did it (Gen. 8:20); so did Abraham (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:4,18; 22:9), Isaac (Gen. 26:25), Jacob (Gen. 31:54; 33:20; 35:1,3,7,14;

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46:1), Moses (Ex. 17:15) and Jethro (Ex. 18:12) – frequently at God’s express command, but sometimes not. And all this *before* the establishment of the levitical priesthood for Israel at Sinai. (For this, and other religious practices, see also Gen. 14:18; 47:22,26; Ex. 19:22,24; 20:2-26; Job 12:19, NKJV footnote; Job 21:14-15; 22:17,27; 36:14, NKJV footnote; Job 42:8; Heb. 7:1-6,13-14).

Man is nothing if not religious.

Above all, in the period before his revelation of the levitical system at Sinai, God had made the sacrificial principle clear in the Passover, by his promise as he was bringing Israel out of Egypt: ‘When I see the blood, I will pass over you’ (Ex. 12:13).⁵ The sacrificial lamb had to be killed, the blood had to be shed, and that blood had to be applied to the door-post and lintel. And God, as always, kept his promise! The angel of death, seeing the blood, ‘passed over’ those sheltering beneath it. Those trusting in the shed blood of the sacrificial lamb were delivered. Those not under the blood perished.

And all this was leading up to the momentous event which took place within a few weeks of the exodus, following hard upon the Passover. God, at Sinai, in a majestic revelation of glorious and solemn ritual, finally established the Hebrew people as a nation under the levitical system, declaring to Israel: ‘You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Ex. 19:6).

There was no mistaking what this meant. At the confirming of the covenant, Moses set up an altar at the foot of Sinai, and made sure that young bulls were sacrificed upon it. With half the blood, he sprinkled the altar, and with the other half he sprinkled the people – having read the book of the covenant to them (Ex. 24:1-8). Sacrificial blood confirmed the covenant, and consecrated both the altar and the people. ‘You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Ex. 19:6), the LORD declared. They were consecrated to this by sacrificial blood. ‘Not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood’ (Heb. 9:18).

⁵ And not only in the Passover. In the plagues leading up to the final, crowning plague – the slaughter of the firstborn – the point constantly at issue with Pharaoh was liberty for Israel to worship God in sacrifice (Ex. 3:18; 5:1,3; 7:16; 8:1,20,25-27; 9:1,13; 10:3,7-9,11,24-26; 12:31-32,38).

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The nation, yes, was to be a ‘kingdom of priests’, but as he made clear, God restricted the priesthood itself – the actual priesthood – to Aaron and his descendants (Ex. 28:1; 29:9; Num. 3:3-10; 16:1 – 18:7; 25:10-13). In establishing this priestly system, God could not have spelled it out more precisely, even down to the oil and incense:

And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister to me as priests. And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘This shall be a holy anointing oil to me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on man’s flesh; nor shall you make any other like it, according to its composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on any outsider, shall be cut off from his people’. And the LORD said to Moses: ‘Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with these sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure and holy. And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people’ (Ex. 30:30-38; see also Ex. 25:6; 30:1,7-9,27; 31:11; 35:8,28; 37:25-29; 40:5,26-27; Lev. 16:12-13; Num. 4:16; 1 Chron. 28:18; 2 Chron. 13:11).

What is more:

You shall put the holy garments on Aaron, and anoint him and consecrate him, that he may minister to me as priest. And you shall bring his sons and clothe them with tunics. You shall anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may minister to me as priests; for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations (Ex. 40:13-15).

And it was not only the priests’ garments that had to be holy. The priests, themselves, had to be particularly holy, and in precise detail⁶ which God spelled out:

And the LORD said to Moses: ‘Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: “None shall defile himself... he shall not

⁶ Please read the passage in its entirety.

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defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself... They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God..."... Speak to Aaron and his sons, that they separate themselves from the holy things of the children of Israel, and that they do not profane my holy name by what they dedicate to me... "While he has uncleanness upon him, that person shall be cut off from my presence... I the LORD sanctify them... I the LORD sanctify them" (Lev. 21:1 – 22:16).

As the priests were ordained to their task, a bull and two rams had to be sacrificed, after Aaron and his sons had laid their hands upon the creature-victims. The shed blood was then used symbolically to sanctify the whole process, to sanctify the entire apparatus of sacrifice and worship, and to make atonement for sin. The procedure was repeated for seven days. In this way, the tabernacle (the tent where God met with his people) and the priests were consecrated to God by the blood of sacrifice – right from the very start (Ex. 29:10-28,35-46).

What is more, as biblical passage after passage makes clear, the priests, in their regular ministry, had to offer sacrificial blood to God, and do it as he had appointed. No other course was open. In this way, and this way only, could Israel approach God Almighty, God the all-holy.

Of course, sacrifice was not the priests' sole duty. Guidance for Israel (Num. 27:21), judicial settlements and pronouncements for the people (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 13:9-23; Num. 5:11-31; Deut. 17:8-13; Mal. 2:7; and so on), and intercession with God for the children of Israel (Ex. 28:29-30), were also part of their responsibilities. Apart from the unique initiatory Moses-Joshua period, and before the institution of the monarchy (when Israel hankered after the way of the pagans, and got what they wanted), the priests were the peak of the hierarchy in Israel (Num. 18:20-32; 35:25,28,32; *etc.*).

Nevertheless, the priest's primary task was to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people he represented. God was thus showing that he will deal with sinners only through an intermediary; that is, by a priest offering the right sacrifice to him, the Almighty, in the appointed way, and offering that sacrifice for sinners, and on their behalf. Thus God finally established the principle of 'priesthood' once and for all. It is hard, if not impossible, to imagine how God

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could have made the concept of ‘priesthood’ more impressive or more definite.

To illustrate its importance, let me cite two striking historical episodes in which God showed that he would only accept a man who offered the right sacrifice to him, but he would accept such a man if he did offer the right sacrifice. The first predates Sinai; the second speaks of a time after the giving of the law to Israel.

First, consider the events immediately following the flood and Noah’s leaving the ark, long before Sinai. What was the first thing that Noah did when setting foot on dry land after the deluge? How did he mark God’s deliverance of him and his family? How did he mark this new beginning for the human race? The Bible tells us:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in his heart: ‘I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease’ (Gen. 8:20-22).

And, realise it or not, appreciate it or not, every human being – indeed, every aspect of the entire natural world – *has* reaped (both literally and figuratively) the benefit – and *is* reaping the benefit, day in and day out, night in and night out, year in and year out – of that promise of God to Noah, which promise arose directly through Noah acting as a priest, and offering acceptable sacrifices to God. The principle of ‘priesthood’, the priority of ‘priesthood’, could hardly have been made more explicit – in the first place to Noah, and, if we will heed it, to us all.

Secondly, consider the events immediately following the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon (Ezra 1:1-6), long after Sinai. By Ezra’s time, the priesthood had been allowed to degenerate into an appalling state of decrepitude. Sorting out the priesthood was the first thing the Jews did upon their return to their land. The *first* thing, please note. There was need, as I say. The priesthood had fallen into decay and disuse. And it was a calamity. Sorting it out was the highest priority for the Jews. And in sorting out the priesthood, they allowed no compromise. Those who could

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not establish their genealogical credentials ‘were excluded from the priesthood as defiled’ (Ezra 2:62; Neh. 7:63-65). What is more, it is expressly recorded that the Jews, having completed their reformation, even though there was no temple, and even though they were afraid of their enemies all around them – it is expressly recorded, I say, that despite their fear, nevertheless ‘they set the altar on its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening burnt offerings’. They also kept the feasts and daily burnt offerings as God had ordained. ‘From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, although the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid’ (Ezra 3:3-6).

And when the temple foundation had been laid? What was their next concern? Just this:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: ‘For he is good, for his mercy endures for ever towards Israel’. Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid (Ezra 3:10-11).⁷

And when it was completed? We are told expressly:

The temple was finished... Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. And they offered sacrifices at the dedication of this house of God, one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin-offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. They assigned the priests to their divisions, and the Levites to their divisions, over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses (Ezra 6:15-18).

And when Ezra the priest (Neh. 8:2,9) came from Babylon, and had meticulously handed over to the temple authorities all the valuable material he and his entourage had brought with them to

⁷ It is interesting to note that the priests joined in the physical work, but at least some nobles did not (Neh. 3:1,5,22,28). I will return to this.

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Jerusalem, what was the first thing he and his fellow-returners did?
Just this:

The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD (Ezra 8:35).

And, at the dedication of the city wall, after it was rebuilt:

The priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall... Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off. And at the same time... [those appointed gathered] the portions specified by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered. Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son (Neh. 12:30,43-45).

It could not be made more emphatic. ‘Priesthood’ and sacrifice was at the very heart of Israel’s worship and service of God. And all was to be carried out as God had prescribed in Scripture. I do not see how God could attach any greater importance to ‘priesthood’ than he did in the old-covenant history of Israel.

Take the book of Leviticus. The first nine chapters are taken up with the subject. Chapter 10 deals with false priestly-worship; that is, unauthorised or profane worship. Chapters 11 to 17 deal with various laws administered by the priests. Chapters 21 and 22 deal specifically with regulations for the priests. And the other chapters are part of the overall purpose of God for Israel: ‘These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai’ (Lev. 27:34). And throughout the book, ‘priesthood’ is an ever-present and recurring phenomenon. Indeed, as it is throughout the rest of the Old Testament. In short: ‘Under it [that is, the levitical priesthood] the people received the law’ (Heb. 7:11). And, to anticipate, nothing has changed in this regard as we come into the New Testament era. The principle of ‘priesthood’ is absolutely fundamental to all our

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dealings with God. It has been so from the fall of man, and it will remain so for ever.

Take Israel's crossing of the Jordan and entry into Canaan. In setting out from their camp, crossing the river, and the victory at Jericho, God could not have made the priests any more important or necessary to Israel's well-being than he did. Before they could take a step, the Israelites had to wait until the priests themselves moved. When *they* moved, the people could move, but not before. And when the people did follow the priests, they had to keep close to them – but not too close. Without the priests, nothing was accomplished (Deut. 20:2-4; Josh. 3:2-4,6-17; 4:10-11,15-18; 6:1-27). See Numbers 35:25 for the key role played by the high priest in the law of the cities of refuge. And see 1 Chronicles 6:48-49; 15:1-29 for the priests' pivotal role in the temple, and bearing the ark. And so on, and on...

Thus God showed Israel how important 'priesthood' was – to him and, if they would only realise it, to them. And Israel, in their better moments, got the point; they saw what 'priesthood' was about, they put it into practice, they delighted in it, and reaped its benefits. (See, for example, 2 Chron. 22:10 – 24:16; 29:1 – 31:21; 35:1-19). But, alas, Israel was not always in one of its 'better moments'! I have already drawn attention to the way Israel frequently aped the world's idolatrous worship. And that leads us to the next point.

Before I get to that, however, let us remind ourselves that some of the Old Testament saints drew even greater benefit from 'priesthood', blood sacrifice, and other old-covenant principles and practices. In such things, they 'saw' (but only dimly, it is true) the coming of the new covenant and the day of Christ, and they delighted in it, and looked forward to it. Though he pre-dated the old covenant, Abraham undoubtedly did (Gen. 22:7-8,13-14 with John 8:56). He was not unique (Matt. 13:17; Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

Sadly, it was only a remnant which had 'eyes' to 'see' such things. Why, as I have just said, Israel often failed to appreciate what we might call the 'every-day' benefits of priesthood, allowing it to fall into disrepute. And what a harvest they reaped!

The damage caused by a corrupt priesthood

Just as the sacrifices were a blessing to Israel, what a curse it was to be without them (Joel 1:9,13; 2:14-17)! Again, it was a mark of judgement when, for instance, Azariah the prophet had to confront King Asa to tell him: ‘For a long time, Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law’ (2 Chron. 15:3). As it was when Ezekiel warned: ‘They will seek a vision from a prophet; but the law will perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders’ (Ezek. 7:26). The reason for the warning is clear. Right from the start, God had 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). The instruments of guidance, the Thummim and Urim, were with Levi (Deut. 33:8). And even before the establishment of the levitical priesthood, God gave Aaron to Moses as a mouthpiece for him: ‘You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do. So shall he be your spokesman to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God’ (Ex. 4:15-16).

No wonder, therefore, that when Asa’s son, Jehoshaphat, came to the throne, as part of his work of national reformation, he reinstated this ordinance – this ordinance which had fallen into disuse. He sent leaders, Levites and priests out to the people. To do what? ‘They taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the LORD with them; they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people’ (2 Chron. 17:1-9). What a blessing – to have God teaching the people through his priests. What a curse to be without it!

Even worse, perhaps – whenever the priests kept up the form of their ministry, but corrupted it, the consequences were serious in the extreme, both for them and the nation. Worse? I think so. When there were no priests, at least the people knew it. *False* priests, however, might easily have pulled the wool over their eyes. Might? They did! Not that the people always minded, let me hasten to add. Oh no! It was not unknown for the people to realise that they were being misled, and yet to like it that way, and to draw encouragement from the false, corrupt ministry to enable them to

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press on in their disobedient ways (Jer. 5:29-31). An absent ministry would have been the lesser of the two evils!⁸

A corrupt priesthood was worse than no priesthood. It was bound to be so. Since God's commands were clear, and since the declared benefits of obedience were so great, the Israelites could not fail to know that the consequences of disobedience were commensurately dire. Whenever the 'priesthood' was corrupted, reformation was the foremost priority. Until the 'priesthood' was put right, nothing would be right, nothing could be right. The Bible records not a few occasions of it. We have just noted the reformation carried out in Ezra's time.

But it was not the first time that reformation was needed, not by a long shot. As I have already remarked, Israel's first sin after Sinai was the making of the golden calf and their sacrifices to it (Ex. 32:1-6). *After Sinai?* The debacle was going on even as Moses was on the mountain receiving the law at God's hand!

It was, for instance, a great pity that reformation did not take place when Eli was priest. In those days, his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests, but they 'were corrupt; they did not know the LORD... The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD'. And this had very serious consequences. So grievous was their sin, they cut themselves off from God without an intercessor, with no atoning sacrifice. Eli, for his part, had failed to rebuke them, and his house would pay the price. God made it clear to him, that he (the LORD) would visit him and his house in judgement. And so he did. And not only Eli and his house. Through their sinful ways, his sons had taught Israel to despise 'the offering of the LORD', and to trespass against God. Because of this, God judged the entire nation (1 Sam. 2:12-17,22-25,27-36; 3:11-14; 4:1-22), not just the priests. A corrupt priesthood cast a long and fearful shadow.

Again, after Israel had split itself into two kingdoms, Jeroboam, who ruled the northern kingdom, not only set up idols at Bethel and Dan, but 'he made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi',

⁸ The same goes for the churches today. I myself would prefer a silent pulpit to a pulpit occupied by a false teacher, a teacher who corrupts the gospel, and thus ruins many.

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installing them to serve his idol at Bethel (1 Kings 12:26-33). Even so, God did not leave him without witness: ‘A man of God went from Judah to Bethel by the word of the LORD’ and cried out against the abomination (1 Kings 13:1-3). Not only so, when Abijah came to the throne in Judah, the southern portion, and war threatened between the two kingdoms, he rightly – though hypocritically, for he himself rebelled against God (1 Kings 15:1-3) – challenged the people of Israel, the northern kingdom, over their deliberate rebellion against God’s order:

Hear me, Jeroboam and all Israel... With you are the gold calves which Jeroboam made for you as gods. Have you not cast out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made for yourselves priests, like the peoples of other lands, so that whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bull and seven rams may be a priest of things that are not gods? But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him; and the priests who minister to the LORD are the sons of Aaron, and the Levites attend to their duties. And they burn to the LORD every morning and every evening burnt sacrifices and sweet incense; they also set the showbread... the lamp stand... for we keep the command of the LORD our God, but you have forsaken him. Now look, God himself is with us as our head, and his priests with sounding trumpets to sound the alarm against you. O children of Israel, do not fight against the LORD God of your fathers, for you shall not prosper! (2 Chron. 13:4-12).

How regularly the chorus, or similar, is repeated: ‘Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin’ (1 Kings 16:26,31; 22:52; 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29; 13:2,11; 14:24; 15:9,18,24,28; see also 1 Kings 16:3; 21:22; 2 Kings 9:9).

God, through Zephaniah, had to complain of Jerusalem:

Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law (Zeph. 3:1-4, NIV).

The link between the effect – Jerusalem’s rebellion, defilement, disobedience, lawlessness, arrogance, lack of trust in God and ignoring of him – and the cause – in part at least, the priests who

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displayed irreverent contempt for the temple, and drove a coach and horses through the law – is plain for all to see.

Again, in the days of Malachi, the priests brought God's judgement upon themselves, and the nation, through their sinful ways. As God told the priests:

'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. But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi', says the LORD of hosts. 'Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, because you have not kept my ways, but have shown partiality in the law' (Mal. 2:7-9).

And God spelled out their sin. Had they not offered the blind and the blemished to him in sacrifice? Had they not performed their service for a fee? Had they not sneered at their work, calling it wearisome? For these, and other sins of a like nature, God said he would curse them. See the entire book of Malachi.

By these examples – and there is no shortage of them – we see what God thought of the priesthood he established for Israel. It was a principle and practice of the utmost importance to him, precious to him – so important, so precious, that he would not let those who brought dishonour upon it go unpunished. It was an insult to God himself. He must visit his people in judgement for their sin. So great was the dignity God placed upon 'priesthood', so strong his condemnation of the priests who defiled it, and the nation which allowed it to be defiled, and often liked it that way, that he exclaimed:

'Shall I not punish them for these things?' says the LORD. 'Shall I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?' An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and my people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end? (Jer. 5:29-31).

Jeremiah grieved for Zion's degradation, and he knew where to lay the blame. It was 'because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests' (Lam. 4:13). See 2 Chronicles 36:14.

In light of all this, no words of mine can express the dignity, the value, the importance we should place upon 'priesthood'. God could not regard it any more highly than he does. As a

consequence, if we fail to get to grips with ‘priesthood’, if we fail to value it as we should, we do so at our eternal peril.

Priesthood under the new covenant

Centuries later than Jeremiah, after the coming of Christ, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews set out the principles of ‘priesthood’ in detail. But before we look at these principles, a question naturally arises: Why did God, in the letter to the Hebrews, so thoroughly explain, *and explain to New Testament believers*, the details of ‘priesthood’ – especially concentrating on the levitical priesthood he gave to Israel? Surely, with Christ’s triumph on the cross, the old covenant and its priesthood were abolished? So they were. The writer to the Hebrews said so in unmistakable terms (Heb. 7:18; 8:13). So why would he spend so long writing about a priesthood which had been abolished, and going into so much detail about it? Although I will not stop to answer that fascinating question now, I will return to it shortly. It goes without saying that God had a good reason to make sure his servant went into such detail. A very important principle must be involved.

There certainly is! Nevertheless, as I say, leaving that to one side just for the moment, let us first look at the principles of ‘priesthood’ as set out by the writer to the Hebrews:

Every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this, he is required, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. And no man takes this honour to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was... Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices... When Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying: ‘This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you’. Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission (Heb. 5:1-4; 8:3; 9:19-22).

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But – and what a ‘but’ – the Sinaitic covenant with Israel was only a shadow, an earthly picture, not the heavenly reality itself. It was ineffective. It had inbuilt weakness. For a start, as the writer to the Hebrews pointed out, the priest himself was ‘subject to weakness’. The truth is, of course, the priest was a sinner himself. So much so, he had to sacrifice for himself as well as the people. Actually, he had to sacrifice for himself *first* – before sacrificing for the people! This point had been driven home, as we have seen, by the way God demanded sacrifice even at the ordination of Aaron and his sons. And this fact alone, therefore, immediately exposed the fundamental flaw in the old covenant. How could a priest, who was himself a sinner, offer an effective sacrifice for another sinner? He couldn’t!

This is the ultimate futility of all priestly systems (apart from one! – see below). Why? Because of the circular argument involved. This fundamental flaw is unavoidable. Let me expose it by setting out the Roman Catholic priestly system. At the bottom of the pile, an insignificant member of ‘the faithful’ goes to his priest to confess his sins and receive absolution. Very well. Where, in his turn, does the priest himself go? Perhaps to the senior priest in his area. Where does that senior priest go? To his bishop? Where does he go? To the cardinal? Where does he go? To the Pope? Where does he go? To his private priest. Where does he go? To his senior priest? And so on and on. Round and round for ever and a day. A circular argument *par excellence*. But it’s no joke! Millions of sinners are living, and dying, and entering eternity, based on such a misguided, ineffective system. Catastrophic! I am not making this up. Every Pope has his own personal and private confessor.⁹

⁹ In answer to the question: ‘Does the Pope go to Confession’, Msgr Vincent Tran Ngoc Thu, who served Pope John Paul II as a secretary for 8 years, replied: ‘Yes, the Pope confesses every week. The Pope’s confessor is an elderly Polish monsignor who comes on Saturdays, or if the Pope is abroad, the following Friday’ (zeitun-eg.org/JPII.htm). An email to me from the Catholic Enquiry Office (15th Aug. 2011): ‘Dear David, Thank you for your email. Yes the Pope does have a confessor. With best wishes, Jo’.

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What is more, by God's ordination, the levitical system itself demanded repeated sacrifices, and this, yet again, served to highlight its inherent inadequacy, its intrinsic weakness. Their very repetition proved the ineffectiveness of those sacrifices. An effective sacrifice, once offered, would have put an end to all other sacrifices. But the old covenant had no effective sacrifice. So the sacrifices had to be repeated again and again and again...

This, of course, is one of the stupidities of, say, the Roman Catholic Mass. According to their dogma, they offer Christ repeatedly in the Mass. Not only is this blasphemous, it is self-evidently ineffective. If such a sacrifice, offered by a Roman priest, *was* effective, that would be the end of it. The fact that the next Mass is already arranged – before this one has finished – trumpets the uselessness of the system so loudly that only the deliberately deaf can fail to hear it. The number of bequests for repeated Masses to be said in order to release the one who has died from purgatory is testimony to the grip this nonsense has on the minds of the duped. If a million Masses haven't done the job, a million and one certainly won't. Can't they see it? Won't they see it?

This is the point about even the law of God itself. Because of the frailty of the flesh, it was, therefore, weak – in fact, it was powerless and useless – in regard to the removal of sin (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 7:18, both NIV). Its priests, and their repeated sacrifices, could never take away sin, could never make sinners perfect. The truth is, God had decreed it to be so. His wrath, he made clear, could not be propitiated, nor his justice satisfied, by the priests and their sacrifices which he had ordained under the first covenant, the law:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered?... For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins... Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins (Heb. 10:1-11).

So why did God give the law? Why did he set up this ineffective, repetitive priestly-system?

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For two reasons. God gave it to Israel to foreshadow the coming reality in the new covenant. In addition, he was using the old-covenant system as a temporary guide, teacher or pedagogue¹⁰ to instruct the Jews until the establishment of that new covenant. By the levitical priesthood, he was instructing Israel concerning the coming of Christ and the gospel. That is why this old Jewish economy lasted until the coming of Christ, the Seed according to the promise given to Abraham (Gal. 3:16-25). But with the coming of the Seed – that is, with the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:16) – more particularly, with his triumph on the cross, and the rending of the temple veil (Matt. 27:50-51; Luke 23:45; Heb. 10:19-21) – the old covenant was abolished, and the new established. And all was entirely as God had planned from eternity past. All had been leading up to the new covenant. ‘The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17).

The new covenant

The new covenant! The effective covenant! In this covenant, by his grace, in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), ‘what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin’ (Rom. 8:3). That is, as he had always decreed, at the right time, God established a new covenant, an effective covenant, thereby abolishing the old covenant, having made it obsolete (Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:23-28; 10:1-18). The old and the new covenants are not different administrations of one covenant. Not at all! The old and the new are very different covenants – chalk and cheese. If you have any doubts, reader, please read Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In fact, it is the new covenant – or the heavenly covenant – which is the original covenant (Heb. 9:23). In particular, the Mosaic covenant copied the heavenly covenant in the matter of priesthood. The new-covenant priesthood is the true priesthood; the old was the shadow. Hence John 1:17. And this principle applies right across the board. The old covenant was the shadow of the new.

¹⁰ A stern disciplinarian, not an instructor. See my *Christ is All* p128.

Indeed, the old covenant had to be fulfilled and abolished before the new covenant could be established. ‘The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing’ (Heb. 9:8). Christ ‘takes away the first that he may establish the second’ (Heb. 10:9).

But, in abolishing the old covenant, and setting up the new, God did not abolish the principle of ‘priesthood’. Oh no! Far from it! Abolish it? He confirmed it and made it glorious! At long last, but at the appointed time (Gal. 4:4), ‘priesthood’ had come into its own. In the new covenant, God in Christ established the *effective* priesthood, *the* one and only effective priesthood. The new covenant has this effective priesthood at its very heart. The covenants certainly changed, but the principle of ‘priesthood’ did not. Different covenants, different priests, but ‘priesthood’ constant. As I have already observed, just as ‘under it [that is, the levitical priesthood] the people received the law’ (Heb. 7:11), under the priesthood of Christ, we receive the gospel.

And this is the answer to the intriguing question I raised a moment or two ago: Even though the old-covenant priesthood was ineffective, and was abolished by Christ along with the old covenant, why did God, in the letter to the Hebrews, so thoroughly explain, *and explain to New Testament believers*, the details of ‘priesthood’, especially concentrating on the levitical priesthood he gave to Israel, and yet was now abolished? Why?

The answer is that God always had in mind, even from eternity, the real ‘priesthood’, the only ‘priesthood’, the priesthood of Christ in the new covenant. And in setting out, for believers, this new-covenant priesthood of Christ, God made full use of the principles of ‘priesthood’ he had established and revealed to Israel in the levitical system. Moreover, God warned Moses expressly to make sure that everything in the old covenant was securely based on the true heavenly covenant (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1; see also Col. 2:17). So, when he brought in the new covenant, God went back to the old to teach his people the spiritual and heavenly realities of the new covenant in Christ. This was one of the major purposes of God giving Israel the old covenant. But all along, his intention had been the coming of Christ and the new covenant. The

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new-covenant priesthood of Christ has been, and still is, the real and only priesthood.

Let me spell out this new-covenant priesthood. Long before he instituted the levitical priesthood at Sinai, God had given Abram a remarkable revelation of what he would one day establish through Christ his Son. ‘Melchizedek, king of Salem... the priest of God Most High’ met and ‘blessed’ the patriarch after Abram’s victory over the kings. And Abram gave Melchizedek ‘a title of all’ (Gen. 14:18-20). In this way, this mysterious figure suddenly appeared in Scripture and, almost at once, disappeared.¹¹

What did this strange, brief encounter signify? What was God showing to Abram? Nothing less than Christ as the great high priest of the new covenant. And Christ’s priesthood stemmed not from Levi (who had not yet been thought of, let alone born) but from Melchizedek.

And here we come across one of the glories of the new covenant. While the ‘priesthoods’ in the two covenants (old and new) have many principles in common, there is one way in which the new-covenant ‘priesthood’ differs from that of the old. Under the old covenant, it was impossible for a king to be a priest. King Uzziah tried it – to his cost:

[King Uzziah’s] heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the LORD his God by entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. So Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him eighty priests of the LORD — valiant

¹¹ Who was (is) he? Up till now, I have held that Melchizedek was none other than Christ himself, making a pre-incarnate appearance, but, having been challenged about this, I am not so sure. Turning to some familiar weighty commentators, I found my thinking further exposed to question. John Brown: ‘Some... have strangely held that he [Melchizedek] was the Son of God’ (*An Exposition of Hebrews*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1961, p261). John Owen was a little kinder to me: ‘That he was the Son of God himself... some learned men have conjectured and contended. Howbeit, this... is directly contrary to the text, wherein he is said to be “made like unto the Son of God”’ (*An Exposition of Hebrews*, 7 Volumes in 4, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Evansville, Indiana, 1960, Vol.3 Part 2 p297). With Brown, all I can now definitely say is that Melchizedek was the ‘king of Salem... the priest of God Most High’ (Gen. 14:18).

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men. And they withstood King Uzziah, and said to him: 'It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honour from the LORD God'. Then Uzziah became furious; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And while he was angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the incense altar... The LORD had struck him. King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death (2 Chron. 26:16-21).

Yet, under the new covenant, the concept of the kingly priest is at its heart. Zechariah prophesied of it. 'An elaborate crown' was 'set... on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest'. This, of course, was prophetic – prophetic of Christ:

Make an elaborate crown, and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Then speak to him, saying: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, saying: "Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From his place he shall branch out, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. Yes, he shall build the temple of the LORD. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on his throne; so he shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both"' (Zech. 6:9-15).¹²

This should not surprise us. Melchizedek, the great original of the new-covenant priesthood, was both king and priest. He was 'king of Salem' and 'priest of God Most High' (Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:1,4). As Melchizedek, so Christ. Christ is king and priest.

So what does this priesthood of Christ involve? The writer to the Hebrews explained. God the Father, from eternity, had appointed his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as priest of this new covenant, this great, final covenant – and under this covenant, he, this glorious, sinless high priest, came into the world to offer one effectual sacrifice for all time for all his people. And that sacrifice he *did* offer. In exultation, on the cross, he cried out in glorious triumph: 'It is finished!' (John 19:30); 'it is accomplished!' (see John 19:28). By his one offering – of himself, of his own blood – he perfected for ever all the sinners on behalf of whom he died:

¹² Surely Isa. 22:20-25 speaks of the same thing. For 'branch', see Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. For 'root', see Isa. 11:10; Rom. 15:12; Rev. 5:5; 22:16. See also Ps. 85:10-13; 110:1-7.

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Christ did not glorify himself to become high priest, but it was he [God the Father] who said to him: 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'. As he also says in another place: 'You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.'... Though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him, called by God as high priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek'... If perfection were through the levitical priesthood... what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron?... Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant... Because he continues for ever, [he] has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore he is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For such a high priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins and then for the people's, for this he did once for all [time] when he offered up himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected for ever (Heb. 5:5-10; 7:1-28).

The writer to the Hebrews went on:

Christ came as high priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands; that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood he entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of an heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason, 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. 9:11-15).

In short:

This is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens... If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; and who

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serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things... But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises... This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified (Heb. 8:1-6; 10:12-14).

‘This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down...’. Sat down? What a small thing to pick on! Seemingly small, it is, in fact, something which carries far-reaching consequences. The aaronic priests were always active, walking here, there and everywhere, constantly doing one thing after the other, lifting this and pouring that, moving from one piece of apparatus to another. Busy, busy! Always on the go! What a contrast with Christ. ‘It is finished’, he cried, and, entering heaven, he ‘sat down’. The writer to the Hebrews makes much of the fact (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

And what does that tell us? It shouts it from the roof-tops. The priesthood and their sacrifices under the old covenant never saved a sinner. That is why the old-covenant priests never sat down, but were always active, never finishing their work. The levitical priests’ work was never done. They were always sacrificing. Christ, in glorious contrast, by his one sacrifice, has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified. He offers no more sacrifice. And that is why he sat down.

In the above-extracts from the letter to the Hebrews, we have the doctrine of ‘priesthood’ which, I say again, underlies all biblical teaching on the answer to the question with which I opened my book. How can sinners be made right with God? Here is the answer. By ‘priesthood’, and only by ‘priesthood’. No priest – no redemption! No sacrifice – no salvation! But, and what a ‘but’, it must be the right priest, the only priest – Christ. And it must be the right sacrifice, the only sacrifice – Christ’s precious blood. No other priest, no other sacrifice will do.

It cannot be the levitical priesthood, offering the old-covenant sacrifices. That will not do! The law was weak, powerless, ineffective (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 7:18). Perfection could not be obtained by the levitical order (Heb. 7:11). No! A different priesthood was called for. And one was ready! God had, from eternity, purposed it

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and prepared it (Heb. 10:1-10). And that priesthood had to be of the order of Melchizedek. And so it is. The old covenant will not do; it has to be the new covenant.

And if *that* is so – and it certainly is – if the old-covenant priesthood and sacrificial system which had been set up by God himself, as a temporary instructor for the Jews, was ineffective – as it was – and has long since been fulfilled and abolished – as it has – how much more is it true for priestcraft. That is, any and every priestly system devised by men must be ineffective.

I say again, for a sinner to be able to come to God, he must have the right priest and the right sacrifice. No other priest, no other sacrifice will do. And Christ is the one effectual priest – Christ, priest in the order of Melchizedek. Not only that, Christ himself is that one effective sacrifice. Christ is both priest and sacrifice. Christ and his shed blood, which he as priest offered in sacrifice to God, does save from sin all those who trust him. Save? Yes, indeed. By offering his sacrificial blood to his Father, Christ redeems, sanctifies, justifies, delivers and washes the sinner from the guilt, the condemnation, the pollution, the power and – one day – the presence of sin. Christ takes all who trust him and his sacrifice, and presents them faultless to his Father. Having completed his work on the cross, having accomplished the redemption of his people in his sacrificial death (Matt. 1:21; John 19:28,30; 1 Tim. 1:15), he was buried, rose from the dead and ascended into glory, back to his Father. And there he sits, his believing people can say, ‘even at the right hand of God’, where he ‘also makes intercession for us’ (Rom. 8:34), making ‘intercession for the saints according to the will of God’ (Rom. 8:27). As we are told, ‘he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Heb. 7:25). To overhear the sort of things he prays, may I suggest you read through John 17?

Earlier I quoted Spurgeon. Let me take the extract further:

All the world desires a way to God. Hence men set up priests and anoint them with oil, and smear them with I know not what, only that they may be mediators between them and God. They must have something to come between their guilt and God’s glorious holiness. Oh! if they knew it, what they need is Christ. You need no priest, but the great ‘apostle and high priest of our profession’. You need no mediator with God, but the one mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who is

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also equal with God. Oh! world, why will you grieve about to seek this priest and that other deceiver, when he whom you need is appointed by the Most High?¹³

Reader, if you are trusting in the merits and sacrifice of that great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, to save you from your sin, then you have inherited all the eternal benefits of the work of your glorious Redeemer. He is yours, and you are his, for ever. He has taken all your sins, and you have received all his righteousness. ‘God... made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin [or a sin offering] for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him’ (2 Cor. 5:20-21). In other words, God has justified you. By Christ’s death, by Christ’s righteousness, you are accounted righteous in God’s sight (Rom. 5:18-19). Moreover, with all the saints you can say: ‘Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5:1). You are free of condemnation, now (Rom. 8:1,33-34). Christ has sanctified you, perfectly separated you unto God (John 17:19; 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 2:11; 10:10,14) by his Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). Not only that. Christ, having accomplished your salvation on the cross, and, having been raised from the dead, entered heaven, where he ever lives to plead the merits of his person and his finished work on your behalf.

In company, therefore, with all who trust the Lord Jesus Christ as both Lord and Saviour, you may rejoice. You may delight in God, and with a deeply-felt sense of peace, rest in the glorious assurance that you are at all times – and for ever – welcome in his presence. From your heart, not merely with your voice, you can sing of your great high priest who represents you in the courts of heaven, and always speaks for you. You can delight in his priesthood, you can sing of it. It is no fantasy! The Lord Jesus, your Redeemer, lives, prays and reigns in heaven for *you*. Perhaps the following words, by Charitie L.Bancroft, will enable you to express in song what you now know to be the truth, and what you have come to feel in your heart:

¹³ In the extract (downloaded from spurgeon.org/sermons/3442.htm), I have changed Spurgeon’s four uses of ‘want’ to ‘need’ – which is, of course, precisely what he meant.

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*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great high priest whose name is love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

*My name is graven on his hands,
My name is written on his heart.
I know that while in heaven he stands¹⁴
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end of all my sin.*

*Because the sinless Saviour died
My sinful soul is counted free.
For God the just is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me.*

*Behold him there the risen Lamb,
My perfect spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I AM,
The King of glory and of grace.*

*One with himself I cannot die.
My soul is purchased by his blood,
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Saviour and my God!*

And that's not the end of it. One day, this glorious high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8; Jas. 2:1), will come and take you to himself into eternal glory (Heb. 9:28), making you completely like himself (John 17:24; Rom. 8:29-30; 1 John 3:1-2). You will then be utterly, completely and eternally saved from your sin. And your joys will never end.

One final note. Not only does Christ, as priest and sacrifice, save his people from their sin, he unites them to himself here and now. The fact is, this is how he saves them from their sin. This is how he justifies them. All that he is, all that he has accomplished,

¹⁴ Would the hymn writer have preferred 'appears', but poetic licence, and all that? The truth is, as I have just explained, Christ now sits. But, let us not forget, Christ stood to receive Stephen (Acts 7:55-56).

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belongs to each and every one of his people. He and his people are one.

And a corollary or effect of that union with Christ – a very important corollary, too – is that all believers are themselves priests of God. Yes, it is true. Staggering as it may seem, nevertheless it is a fact. By reason of their union with Christ, as a consequence of their union with Christ, believers themselves are made royal priests of the Lord God himself (1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Why leave it in the third person? Believer, all this is *yours*. In and through Christ, *you* are a priest. As such, *you* are a member of that select band, ‘the priesthood of all believers’. And exploring that priesthood is what this book is all about.