

High Priest – John 17

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (Romans 8.34).

INTRODUCTION

It was the reformer John Calvin who “popularized” the work of Christ as consisting of the three offices: **prophet, priest and king** (cp. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II. xv. 494-503). Jesus is spoken of as prophet, priest and king in a general way throughout the New Testament. **These three Christological portraits of Christ accent his mediatorial work.** However, one must not understand these offices to be exclusive of each other, as they are fulfilled simultaneously. Even in the Old Testament the offices overlapped and were not uniformly distinct (e.g., Moses and Samuel). **Jesus had knowledge greater than a prophet, holiness greater than a priest, and more power than a king.** In these offices Jesus makes God the Father known to mankind (Hebrews 1.1-4). Like lost sheep mankind is in need of a redemptive Shepherd (Hebrews 13.20). Jesus, unlike the Levitical priest, was able to secure mankind’s salvation through an intercession that included the forfeiture of his life as an acceptable sacrifice. **Such a propitious work makes him the only true mediator between God and mankind (Hebrews 8.6).** These offices address three functions of Christ. Millard Erickson describes them as **revealing, ruling and reconciling**. “It is appropriate to think of these aspects of Christ’s work as his commission, for Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one. In the Old Testament, people were anointed to particular roles which they were to perform (e.g., priest or king). So when we speak of Jesus as the Christ, or anointed one, we must ask to what role(s) he was anointed. It will be important to maintain all three aspects of his work, not stressing one so that the others are diminished, nor splitting them too sharply from one another, as if they were separate actions of Christ” (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 2, p. 763).

Last week we focused on the reign of Christ and this week we shall consider his Priesthood, but before we do, it may be worth an aside of a few lines to be reminded of his prophetic office. Jesus claimed to be a prophet who was sent to preach the good news to the poor with an anointing from the Holy Spirit, and the general population recognized Him as such (Luke 4.18-21; 13.33; John 8.26-28; Matthew 21.11). Some people thought Jesus might be the prophetic fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18.15-18, others thought He might be Elijah. However, His prophetic role was much greater than anyone’s expectations, as it became increasingly evident (e.g., His transfiguration - Mark 9.7; cp. Matthew 12.41). The teaching of the prophets was authoritative because the revelation had its origin in the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1.20). However, Jesus’ teaching was authoritative because He himself uttered it (Matthew 5.21-28). Moreover, Jesus’ teaching was self-focused as is evident in the Sermon on the Mount: “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*” Also, “*Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Matthew 5.11, 17; cp. 7.24-25). Regarding Jesus’ teaching John Stott noted: prophets are self-effacing, but Jesus was self-

advancing. They pointed the people towards God and away from themselves. Jesus said, *I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (John 14.6; cp. 12.26). He was a prophet like no other. The prophetic or revelatory role of Jesus is inseparably linked to his role as priest and king, inasmuch as his teaching helped his disciples understand the significance of his crucifixion and resurrection. Their later appreciation of the ascension, exaltation, session and priestly office of Christ are based in part on his prophetic office.

BACKGROUND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The concept of Messiah as the High Priest is a New Testament concept, but its roots are to be found in the Old Testament. Israel itself was to be a kingdom of priests: *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Exodus 19.4-6). Priests were appointed by God to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. They were responsible to make intercession to God on behalf of Israel. By this Israel became a holy nation. The high priest was selected from among men to represent them before God, to offer sacrifices for sins, to instruct the ignorant gently, and to help restore those who were going astray. The duties of the priesthood are outlined in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 1-7. God spoke to the people through his prophets and he ordained priests to speak to him on behalf of the people. It was the function of the priest symbolically to demonstrate the reconciliation between God and men through substitutionary sacrifices. Though the requirements for the priesthood were rigidly restrictive, no priest could claim to be free from the debilitating effects of sin. As a sinner he was obligated to offer sacrifices for himself, as well as for the people (cp. Hebrews 5.1-3). The entire Old Testament is saturated with the theme of vicarious, sacrificial atonement (cp. Hebrews 9.22). However, the sacrifice of animals or produce is not adequate reparation for mankind's sin. Thus, the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement with all of its solemnity was nothing more than a shadow. No matter how rigorously its rules were followed, no sacrifice would bridge the chasm that separates the believer from God.

JESUS AS SACRIFICE & PRIEST

Regarding the priestly office, Calvin highlights the twofold work of Jesus as outlined in Hebrews - namely, the reconciliation and intercession of Jesus. First, "as has been said, we or our prayers have no access to God unless Christ, as our High Priest, having washed away our sins, sanctifies us and obtains for us that grace from which the uncleanness of our transgressions and vices debars us. Thus we see that we must begin from the death of Christ in order that the efficacy and benefit of his priesthood may reach us. It follows that he is an everlasting intercessor: through his pleading we obtain favor" (Calvin, p. 502). Christ inaugurated a new covenant wherein he is both priest and sacrifice: *Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself* (Hebrews

7.27). The mediatorial work of the Levitical priesthood, in itself insufficient to atone for sins in an ultimate way, anticipated the final work of salvation completed by Jesus' perfect sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9.26). Jesus' sacrifice fulfilled God's righteous demands: *But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises* (Hebrews 8.6).

Jesus alone is fit to be both sacrifice and intercessor. His perfect offering propitiates the righteous anger of God, and his priestly role causes the Father to be favorably disposed towards Christians purchased by the blood of his Son: *For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him* (Hebrews 9.24-28). In the Jewish temple there were no chairs because the priest's work was never done. By contrast, the author of Hebrews informs us that when Jesus finished his work he sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10.12). His work of atonement is finished! The way to God is open. In Christ believers may draw near to God with every assurance in faith: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4.16).

JESUS AS HEAVENLY INTERCESSOR

As we have noted, the priest was tasked to intercede before God on behalf of the people. Not infrequently he failed to do so (e.g., Amos 7.10-17). Occasionally, Israel benefited from the godly intercession of a righteous man (e.g., 1 Samuel 12.19-26). Until Christ assumed the role as high priest, the priestly office was transitory: *This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them* (Hebrews 7.22-25; cp. Romans 8.34). The Lord Jesus lives in the presence of God and continually makes intercession on behalf of the redeemed: *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time* (1 Timothy 2.5-6).

Yet in his human nature alone Jesus could not of course be such a great high priest for all his people all over the world. He could not hear the prayers of persons far away, nor could he hear prayers that were only spoken in a person's mind. He could not hear all requests simultaneously (for in the world at any one moment there are millions of people praying to him). Therefore, in order to be the perfect high priest who intercedes for us, he must be God

as well as man. He must be one who in his divine nature can both know all things and bring them into the presence of the Father. Yet because he became and continues to be man he has the right to represent us before God and he can express his petitions from the viewpoint of a sympathetic high priest, one who understands by experience what we go through. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 628).

It is precisely because Jesus is our high priest, interceding on the believer's behalf that he or she is able to approach with confidence God's throne with his or her petitions. Jesus warned Peter that he would be tested by Satan, then he encouraged him by telling him that he had prayed that his faith would not fail (Luke 22.31). Jesus frequently instructed his disciples to pray (e.g., Matthew 6.5-14; John 14.23-24). The intercessory prayer of John 17 is a model of priestly prayer for all believers. Paul's epistles are saturated with reminders that he regularly prayed for the church (2 Corinthians 13.9; Ephesians 1.16) and he often asked for their prayers on his behalf (Colossians 4.3; 2 Thessalonians 3.1). It is a reassuring thought to know that believers are lifting up holy hands in prayer and it is even more encouraging to know that Christ is praying for us even when we are negligent.

It is a consoling thought that Christ is praying for us, even when we are negligent in our prayer life; that He is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds and which we often neglect to include in our prayers; and that He prays for our protection against the dangers of which we are not even conscious, and against the enemies which threaten us, though we do not notice it. He is praying that our faith may not cease, and that we may come out victoriously in the end. (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 403)

The sacrificial and intercessory work of Christ as high priest fulfills the promise of Exodus 19.6, *And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*. He fulfills the covenantal promise of Jeremiah 31.31. In Christ and through faith in him Christians may approach God with freedom and confidence (Ephesians 3.12).