

STUDY 2

The True Nature of Priesthood

Martin Bleby

THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST AND HIS PEOPLE

It is readily acknowledged that in the New Testament the word ‘priest’ (*hiereus*) is not used of any individual official or functionary within the church. It is used only (a) of Christ himself; and (b) of his people as a whole. Examples of each are as follows:

- (a) Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19–22).
- (b) But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

We note that both these examples relate centrally to the saving death of Christ and the mercy of God that this has brought to us.

Since Christ and his saving gospel have come, and have brought finality in this matter, any understanding of the true nature of priesthood must now be based solely on this usage. Resort to any other alternate (pagan) or even precedent (Israelite) usage of the term to form our understanding of true priesthood will be misleading or confusing, and will diminish or distort our appreciation of what Christ has brought. These other notions must now be seen in the light of Christ and his action with and for his people, and be discarded or reinterpreted accordingly.

PAGAN NOTIONS OF PRIESTHOOD

We discard, then, any pagan shamanistic or mediumistic notions of priesthood as contributing to our understanding of true priesthood. Such are enumerated in Deuteronomy 18:

The True Nature of the Priesthood

When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so (Deut. 18:9–14).

We reject such attempts on the part of human beings to appease or cajole the deity as we find among the prophets of Baal:

So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, ‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made . . . Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response (1 Kings 18:26, 28–29).

We join Paul’s appeal to the priest of Zeus and the crowd in Lystra after the healing of a crippled man:

When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, ‘Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.’ Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them (Acts 14:11–18).

We note the way that false and idolatrous misuses of priesthood can become established even among God’s people, and the abuses that follow:

This man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and installed one of his sons, who became his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes . . . Then Micah said to him, ‘Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a set of clothes, and your living.’ The Levite agreed to stay with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons. So Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, ‘Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because the Levite has become my priest.’

In those days there was no king in Israel . . . When the men went into Micah’s house and took the idol of cast metal, the ephod, and the teraphim, the priest said to them, ‘What are you doing?’ They said to him, ‘Keep quiet! Put your hand over your mouth, and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?’ Then the priest accepted the offer. He took the ephod, the teraphim, and the idol, and went along with the people . . . Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time the land went into captivity. So they maintained as their own Micah’s idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh (Judg. 17:5–6, 10–13; 18:1, 18–20, 30–31).

The True Nature of the Priesthood

Those who are in Christian ministry will not be unaware of these pressures and tendencies.

THE PROVISIONAL NATURE OF ISRAEL'S PRIESTHOOD

The letter to the Hebrews makes plain that in the transition between the old covenant and the new covenant there has been 'a change in the priesthood' and 'a change in the law' (Heb. 7:12). The Aaronic priesthood, and the law which specified it, 'has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities' (Heb. 10:1; cf. 8:5), and so by comparison is 'weak and ineffectual', making 'nothing perfect' (Heb. 7:18–19; cf. 8:6–13). Hence, while it has many features that point to and illuminate the priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of his people, as we shall see, it cannot be determinative of this true priesthood. It relates to a provisional situation that now has been replaced by its heavenly precursor and fulfilment.

A number of differences between the priesthood of Aaron (Levi) and the priesthood of Christ are enumerated in the letter to the Hebrews, many of them centring on the figure of Melchizedek:

- Aaron is temporary and mortal; Christ lives and is effective forever (7:3, 8, 15–17; 23–25).
- Aaron is inferior in status; Christ is superior, in receiving and giving (7:4–10).
- Aaron is from the tribe of Levi; Christ is from the (kingly) tribe of Judah (7:13–14).
- Christ's priesthood is confirmed with God's oath; Aaron's is not (7:20–22).
- Aaron has sin of his own; Christ has none (5:3; 7:26–28).
- Aaron's ministry is repetitive; Christ's is once for all (7:27; 10:1–18).
- Aaron ministers in an earthly sanctuary, made with human hands, pertaining to this age; Christ ministers in the heavenly reality, pertaining to the age to come (8:1–6; 9:1–12, 23–24).
- Christ's offering entails the shedding of his own blood; Aaron's of the blood of calves and goats, not his own (9:13–14, 18–28).
- Christ's ministry brings forgiveness of sins; Aaron's cannot take away sins, but rather is a reminder of the consciousness of sin (8:12; 10:1–18).
- Aaron serves the former covenant; Christ is the mediator of the new covenant (8:6–7, 13; 9:1, 15; 12:24).
- Christ gives access to God in a way that was denied to Aaron (4:14–16; 9:6–14; 10:19–22; 12:18–24; 13:10).

Those who wish to revert to an Aaron-type priesthood (as did those to whom this letter was written, and as the church did increasingly and officially from at least the

The True Nature of the Priesthood

time of Clement in 95–96 AD¹), will tend to suffer from its limitations, and to that extent will close people off from the advantages and benefits of the ministry of Christ.

A number of the differences cited above overlap with each other. It is principally in the matter of access to God that the marked difference lies. Aaron served in a situation where, notwithstanding God's determination to dwell among His people (as in e.g. Exod. 29:43–46), nevertheless, on account of the sin of the people, this dwelling was necessarily hedged around with stringent precautions and purified buffer zones (as in e.g. Exod. 19:9–25; Lev. 15:31; 16:15–19, 33). Aaron, though permitted to enter the Most Holy Place—he was the only person who was, and that only once a year—yet with his children was still very much on the sinful side of the divide, and was by no means an easy go-between (see e.g. Aaron's pitiful part in the affair of the golden calf in Exod. 32; the 'unholy fire' offered by his sons in Lev. 10; and how he went into the sanctuary at peril of his life, Lev. 16:1–6, 12–13; Exod. 28:33–35). This is very different from how our access to God is spoken of once 'the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom' at the time of Christ's death (Mark 15:38), by virtue of which we now 'have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him' (Eph. 3:12; cf. 2:18).

THERE IS ONE MEDIATOR

It is often assumed unthinkingly that priesthood implies mediation between God and human persons. 'A priest represents God to the people and the people to God' is a common sentiment. As if priests, with their privileged access, were able somehow to be a go-between or middle person between God and humanity, moving freely between them. We need to be wary of this. We have seen that Aaron and his sons were very much on the sinful side of the divide. Aaron needed a mediator as much as the rest of us do. The provisions for the priesthood and the tabernacle/temple and its activities in the Old Testament appear to be more concerned with doing justice to the holiness of God in the midst of a sinful and defiling people than with setting up a privileged caste of an elevated character with special mediatory functions. When the priests offended against that holiness, they were duly judged (as when the sons of Eli 'were blaspheming God'; see 1 Sam. 2:27–36; 3:11–14; 1 Kings 2:27; or when the unfaithful Levites were demoted in Ezek. 44:10–14).

¹ See 1 Clem. 40–44. Also the *Didache*, Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17), and Hippolytus (*Refutation of All Heresies*, preface, c.200 AD). See D. A. Hubbard, 'Priests and Levites', in *New Bible Dictionary*, Second Edition, IVP, Leicester, 1982, p. 972. See also John Chrysostom (about 400 AD), *On the Priesthood*; the very title being 'an indication of a prevailing disposition in that age unduly to magnify the ministerial office by borrowing the terms, and investing it with all the peculiarities, of the levitical priesthood' (Preface, 1844 edition, translated by Edward Garrard Marsh, published by Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, London). The unfolding of this tendency is traced in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change*, trs. John Bowden, SCM, London, 1981. Note that T. F. Torrance, in an attempt to come to an ecumenical understanding of the church and its ministry, entitles his book *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Second Edition, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1993), thus still participating in and perpetuating the confusion: e.g. 'Within the corporate priesthood of the whole Body, then, there is a particular priesthood set apart to minister to the edification of the Body until the Body reaches the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13)', p. 81. Eph. 4:11 refers to apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, but not to priests as such.

The True Nature of the Priesthood

Nowhere in the Bible is the word ‘mediator’ used of Aaron, or of any priest. The law is said to have been ‘ordained through angels by a mediator’ (Gal. 3:19; cf. Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2). While angels are mentioned here, the ‘mediator’ would appear to be Moses. The circumstances of Moses’ mediation arise from a sinful and deficient situation, where the people are in fear of death after being addressed directly by God (see Exod. 20:18–21). In Galatians 4 the need for a mediator in the case of the law underscores the inferiority and subsidiary nature of the law, in relation to the promise of the ‘offspring’ given directly from God. It also impugns the oneness of God (see Gal. 4:20) and, by implication, His desire to be one with us in a direct relationship (as in e.g. John 14:20, 23; 17:11, 20–26), rather than in a secondary way or at one remove.

It follows from this that the true mediator must come, not as some kind of halfway intermediary, but from the very oneness of God (as in John 10:30). This is how the apostles speak of Jesus Christ (as in e.g. 1 Cor. 8:6; John 1:18; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 7:17; Rom. 1:7; etc.). in particular:

For
there is one God;
there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human,
who gave himself a ransom for all
—this was attested at the right time (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

There is no one else in this position, who can claim true mediatorship. Christ is the one and only possible mediator—he is unique. In him alone priesthood and mediatorship coalesce.

All other true priesthood, then—both the Levitical priesthood in the Old Testament and the priesthood of believers in the New Testament—cannot be mediatory of themselves. Their priesthood must relate to him as the one mediator. William Arthur writes of the priesthood of believers:

The usual idea of priesthood is that of a power standing between man and God, through which alone we may draw near and find mercy at his hands. But so far from any such characteristic belonging to the ministry of the gospel, it is distinguished as being an office, the special labor of which is to point each man *direct* to God, and to assure him that between him and the throne of grace there is no power, visible or invisible, and no mediator but One to whom alike apostle, evangelist, and the humblest penitent must look. True, all were not apostles, all were not evangelists, all were not prophets; but, in the only sense in which any were priests, all were priests. The one altar of the Cross, the one sacrifice of the Lamb, the one High Priest within the veil, were alone to be named in any light of peacemaking with God. To all, the privilege of offering up the sacrifices of praise and of prayer, of living bodies and of worldly goods, was equally open. No man was made a depository or storehouse wherein spiritual favors should be laid up for the use of those who might purchase or implore them at his hands. He was most honored who could most successfully turn the trust of men away from all other advocates, and fix it upon the Son of God alone.²

² William Arthur, *The Tongue of Fire: Or, The True Power of Christianity*, New and Revised Edition, Methodist Book Concern, 1894, reprinted Wipf and Stock, Eugene, 2001, pp. 59f.

The True Nature of the Priesthood

THE TRUE POINTER

Having said this, we must note the extraordinary dignity of the priesthood in Israel, as it betokens the coming priesthood of Christ. When Aaron's priestly authority was contested by the rebellious Israelites, it was Aaron's rod that budded, blossomed and fruited (Num. 17:1–11). God promised that, in the time of the Messiah, the continuation of the Levitical priesthood, alongside the Davidic kingship, would be as sure as God's covenant with the whole of creation, and as integral to it (see Jer. 33:14–22).

The priestly tribe of Levi was chosen by God 'to stand and minister in the name of the LORD' (Deut. 18:5). The priestly duties are summarised as follows:

Aaron was set apart to consecrate the most holy things, so that he and his sons forever should make offerings before the LORD, and minister to him and pronounce blessings in his name forever (1 Chron. 23:13).

There are a number of often surprising ways in which the priesthood in Israel anticipated and pointed in some way to the true priesthood of Christ. Each one of these would be worth a study on its own.

A Human Person Appointed by God

There are places where the writer to the Hebrews makes a positive comparison between Aaron and Christ:

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

'You are my Son,
today I have begotten you';
as he says also in another place,
'You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek' (Heb. 5:1–6).

While it goes on to talk about the Sonship and eternity of Christ, the emphasis here is on God's appointment of one who became 'like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people' (Heb. 2:17).

The Bearer of Judgement and Guilt

In wearing the breastpiece and the turban into the sanctuary Aaron was symbolically bearing the people and their sins before God:

So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before the LORD . . . thus Aaron

The True Nature of the Priesthood

shall bear the judgment of the Israelites on his heart before the LORD continually . . . Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favour before the LORD (Exod. 28:29, 30, 38).

Jesus said of himself:

‘Now is the judgment of this world . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12:31, 32–33).

So Peter said of Jesus:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross [or *carried up our sins in his body to the tree*], so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24).

Something to Offer

Central to the function of the priesthood is to be the agent in the offering of a sacrifice:

They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the Lord’s offerings by fire, the food of their God; therefore they shall be holy (Lev. 21:6).

This is supremely so in the case of Jesus:

For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer (Heb. 8:3).

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:13–14).

The Death of the High Priest

With regard to the manslayer’s protection from the avenger of blood in the cities of refuge, an unusual provision is made:

For the slayer must remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest; but after the death of the high priest the slayer may return home (Num. 35:28).

Nowhere else is the death of the high priest used as such a marker. While no direct reference is made to this in the New Testament, it fits with the significance of the death of Christ himself as our high priest, especially as set out in Hebrews 9.

The Assembly of the Firstborn

The priestly tribe of Levi was taken by the Lord as a substitute for the firstborn of Israel, who belonged to God, just as the whole of the firstborn of Israel had been saved from the angel of death by the blood of the Passover lamb (see Exod. 12:12–13;

The True Nature of the Priesthood

13:1–2, 11–16; 22:29b; 34:19–20; Num. 3:11–13, 45; 8:5–19). Like all those who were descended from Abraham through Isaac, the Levites would have known particularly, and would have been a reminder to Israel, that their lives were forfeit to God, and that they lived to Him only by virtue of a substitute sacrifice provided by God. This applies no less to all who believe in Christ, who have come ‘to the assembly [Greek *ekklesia*] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven’ (Heb. 12:23).

The LORD Is Their Inheritance

The priestly tribe of Levi was distinguished from all the other tribes of Israel by the remarkable fact that they had no land they could call their own:

The levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no allotment or inheritance within Israel. They may eat the sacrifices that are the LORD’s portion, but they shall have no inheritance among the other members of the community; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them (Deut. 18:1–2).

This points Israel towards an inheritance with God beyond that of the promised land (consistent with Heb. 11:13–16). Jesus himself had ‘nowhere to lay his head’ (Matt. 8:20), and he not only looked forward to but actually inaugurated ‘the renewal of all things’ (Matt. 19:28; see 26:29; Heb. 2:10; 12:2), in which it could be said:

See, the home of God is among [human people].
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them (Rev. 21:3).

The Blessing of God

All of this, centred on the matter of atonement, is summarised by T. F. Torrance as follows:

Aaron’s supreme function as high priest, bearing the iniquity of the people (Exod. 28:38; Lev. 10:17; Num. 18:1, 23; cf. Lev. 16:1f; Num 14:18f) was to ascend into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. At the risk of his very life and relying upon the blood of atonement, in the strictest obedience to the divine ordinance, he was to make intercession for Israel, and to receive the divine peace in a renewal of the Covenant. Then he returned from behind the veil to the waiting congregation with the blessed ‘peace be unto you’, to put the Name of God upon them in benediction (Num. 6:22f).³

There could be no higher calling than that given to Aaron:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.
So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them
(Num. 6:22–27; cf. Gen. 1:28; 12:1–3).

³ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, p. 4.

The True Nature of the Priesthood

So Paul the apostle, in his ‘priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 15:16), expected to come ‘in the fullness of the blessing of Christ’ (Rom. 15:29)—the one who himself, risen from the dead, ‘came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you”’ (John 20:19).

Priesthood and the Prophetic Word

It remains to be noted that priests, no less than prophets, were to be engaged in speaking the word of the Lord:

Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says the LORD of hosts. My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts (Mal. 2:4–7).

(See also Deut. 33:10; Ezra 8; 2 Chron. 15:3; Jer. 18:18; 5:31; Ezek. 7:26; and Micah 3:11 for this expectation, and the judgements that come upon neglect and abuses of it.) This is important not just for Jesus as the one who is and speaks the word of God (see John 1:18; 14:10), but also for all who exercise the ‘priestly service of the gospel of God’ (Rom. 15:16), which is seen to be primarily an enworded ministry.

Priesthood and Kingship

There are strong intimations in the Old Testament also that priesthood would burst beyond its Levitical bounds and be closely associated with kingship: ‘King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High’ (Gen. 14:18). ‘David’s sons were priests’ (2 Sam. 8:18), even though they were of the tribe of Judah. The ‘prince’ has a particularly enhanced function in the new temple of Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek. 46:1–10). The strange prophecy of the crown(s)⁴ placed on the high priest’s head (Zech. 6:9–14) speaks of priest and king together being in ‘peaceful understanding’ in the time of the ‘Branch’.

Thus in the New Testament the one who makes the sacrifice of himself is none less than ‘the King of the Jews’ (John 19:19–22), ‘descended from Judah’ (Heb. 7:14), ‘the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star’ (Rev. 22:16). Equally with himself, Jesus invested his disciples, in connection with their temple responsibilities, with the freedom of the sons of the King (see Matt. 17:24–27: the coin in the fish’s mouth), and claimed for them the immunities and privileges of the Davidic king and the levitical priests with regard to the observance of the sabbath (see Matt. 12:1–8). Hence John is able to say:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Rev. 1:5–6).⁵

⁴ The Hebrew has ‘crowns’ in the plural, even though they are set on only one person’s head.

⁵ See further: Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the*

The True Nature of the Priesthood

Priesthood and the World

When God introduced to the whole of Israel that they were to ‘be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation’ (Exod. 19:6), He prefaced it with the words ‘for all the earth is mine’ (Exod. 19:5, RSV⁶). Israel’s priesthood has to do with God’s sovereignty over the whole earth and the fulfilment of His purpose for the creation. Ultimately, priesthood cannot be contained within Israel. Any priesthood that is within Israel will give way to that towards which it points:

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the LORD.

For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the LORD;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the LORD (Isa. 66:18–23).

Paul appears to see his gospel ministry among the nations as a direct fulfilment of this prophecy (see Rom. 15:16). Peter applies Exodus 19:6 to his readers (1 Pet. 2:9), which no doubt included Gentiles as well as Jews. It is the world that is to be reconciled to God:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:17–19).

This is the true action of the royal priesthood.

APOSTOLIC PRIESTHOOD

P. T. Forsyth writes tellingly of what must constrain our priestly ministry in these days:

Reformation to the Present Day, Epworth, London, 1960, e.g. p. 197.

⁶ NRSV has ‘*Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation*’, as if these were somehow in opposition. It seems to me that it is better that they be translated in congruence with each other, as in the RSV.)

The True Nature of the Priesthood

In many directions it appears that for the hour the religious world is more engaged with man's contribution to God than with God's contribution to man. This is the large interpretation of the sectional phenomenon of ritualism. We find it no less in the humanism than in the ethicism of the day. Erasmus, the earnest scholar, has taken the upper hand of Luther in the Christian tone of the prosperous educated hour. It is the spirit of Erasmus that rules educated society and colours the bench of bishops, who are scholars in Church history more than in the theology of Christian experience. They may not like the priest who takes himself thoroughly in earnest, but they have more sympathy with him than with the evangelical minister of the Word. To take extreme cases, they would probably find themselves more at home with the meticulous Laud than with the mighty Jonathan Edwards. They certainly are not able to cope, except by the aid or fear of the State, with *the priest who does strive to realise the despair of human guilt and deal seriously with it. Whoever is to cope with the priest must follow him to the roots of human sin, only he must go deeper.* A humanist reformation is little more than reform; it is not regeneration. And it is *regeneration* that the soul needs. But the Erasmic mind of the scholarly and pastoral clergyman misses the apostolic priesthood and ministry of the Word. His altar is much more than his pulpit, his every day is a day of trivial visitation, and he is more a director of consciences than a prophet of *the amazing, wrestling, living Word, which is hammer and fire upon the flinty rock of self-satisfaction.* He tends to confessions more than conversions. And for the mending of the Church he would remove abuses, cherish a kindly, philanthropic Churchmanship, secure for the clergy a place midway between the Catholic and the Puritan with the force of neither, cultivate a reverence which is half aesthetic and good taste, soften dogma by ethical interpretations, and urge moral improvement in a spirit of not too much zeal. He does not gauge as even the literary man does *the great human tragedy*; he knows not *the stung soul's exceeding bitter cry*, nor does he thrill to *the world's woe* or the *central chord of expiation on the cross.* He is institutional even more than ethical, and ethical more than sympathetic or enthusiastic. He is quietly devout and subduedly active; but he has no burthen, and he does not *compel them to come in by the native compulsion of the Gospel word.* He has never truly reached the real marrow of Christian theology, the fundamental war of law and Gospel in the history of the soul.⁷

We would do well to examine our own ministries in this light.

⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *Rome Reform and Reaction: Four Lectures on the Religious Situation*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1899, pp. 231–232, emphasis added. (With thanks to Mrs Elizabeth Rechner.)