

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#41—Christology—Part VII¹
The Background of the Priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ
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The next study will be on the success and greatness of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the fall humanity's greatest problem lies in its alienation from its Creator. If we remain alienated, we suffer spiritual death. If we are somehow able to obtain access, we can have spiritual life. God has established definite channels for obtaining and retaining access to Himself. The "institution" that God has used to picture and solve this problem is called priesthood. It is found in many places in the Bible and yet it is very much neglected by most believers. I believe that very few Christians are able to cite the key passages that teach it, and even fewer really understand what it is all about. The doctrine of priesthood is like litmus paper, which tests for the presence of acid or base chemicals. It provides a spiritual test for doctrinal understanding. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews says that his readers appear to fail the test. We will return to this after studying the basic concepts of priesthood as background to understanding Jesus' priesthood.

1. Priesthood and biblical history

Priesthood exists because of the separation from God that Adam and Eve created in the Garden. Prior to their sin they lived in perfect fellowship with God. The moment they disobeyed God he caused them to be separated from him spiritually and they knew they were alienated from him. This separation is spiritual death. The fact that they hid from him as he called to them for the normal walk they had in the cool of the day in the Garden shows their shame stemming from guilt. At the moment they sinned they began to die physically. Since then every human being is born spiritually dead—separated from God—and destined for physical death.

There is a spiritual gap between God and us that we cannot bridge but that God bridges for us. Here is a definition: Priesthood is a complex but understandable system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation, of separation between a holy God and sinful human beings. A priest who is authorized by God is one who works to try to or to successfully take human beings across the gap. Under the levitical system God established a priestly function under which many priests worked in connection with the gap problem. All were ultimately unsuccessful. The Lord Jesus Christ was the only completely effective priest, functioning as a High Priest did under the law.

a. Sacrifices and approaching God in the early Old Testament

The earliest record of God's activity in regard to access is found in Gen 3:21, where, after the fall, God Himself provides coverings for the guilt of Adam and Eve, which was reflected in part in physical embarrassment. Of course the first and most telling indicator of their post-fall state was their hiding from the God with whom they had earlier had perfect fellowship (3:8). It is significant that they first tried to cover themselves (3:7). But God showed His demand for a superior covering. This duality between the attempt to face God with sin exposed and God's demand for and provision of a unique approach on His own terms is continued throughout the Bible.

Shortly afterward, in Gen. 4:1-15, sacrifices appear in the account of Cain and Abel—an incident associated with approaching God. Interestingly, we are never told whether or not Abel knew that he was to bring animal

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sacrifices. It appears, though, that he was doing what he was supposed to do—as directed by God. Even though Cain brought what he must have felt would be acceptable because he had toiled over it, his offering was rejected. We may safely conclude that Abel brought what he had been told to bring and was accepted for his obedience (see Heb. 1:4).

In this account there are at least three important pairs of contrasting elements. First, there is the polarity between God’s appointed way of approach and man’s self-designed way. The second pair consists of the opposing stances of the righteous and the unrighteous toward each other, reflected, for example, in Ps. 2 where the nations and their leaders plot against *the* Man of God, His anointed. A third pair consists of human beings in rebellion against God. Hence Cain’s murder of Abel (John actually calls it *slaughter* in 1 Jn. 3:11).

God solves the problems associated with all three pairs of conditions by establishing a successful way of approach to him (Heb. 9:22—“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”), removing the enmity between human beings and Himself (2 Cor. 5:18—“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ”) and making it possible for human beings to love each other as they are loved by God (Eph. 2:14—“made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . .”; 1 Jn. 3:11-12a—“This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one, and murdered his brother.”)

The continual biblical emphasis, then, is that God Himself, by His grace, provides a means for human beings to approach Him. This is reflected in the establishment of sacrificial systems through the Old Testament. Actually, until the law, we are told very little about what sacrifices do and how they are to be carried out. In Gen. 8:20 Noah sacrifices animals after the flood subsides, apparently in thanksgiving for deliverance. But we learn (vv. 21-22) that God viewed it also as a request-sacrifice, since in response to it He gave the Noahic Covenant. Apparently here Noah is acting in the role that we later see as that of a priest, bringing sacrifices.

b. Melchizedek: the first named priest of God

The next important scene in the sequence of the unfolding of priesthood is in Gen. 14, where one who is specifically called a priest, the startling and mysterious figure of Melchizedek, appears suddenly along with Abraham in Gen. 14:17:

¹⁷ After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley).

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.

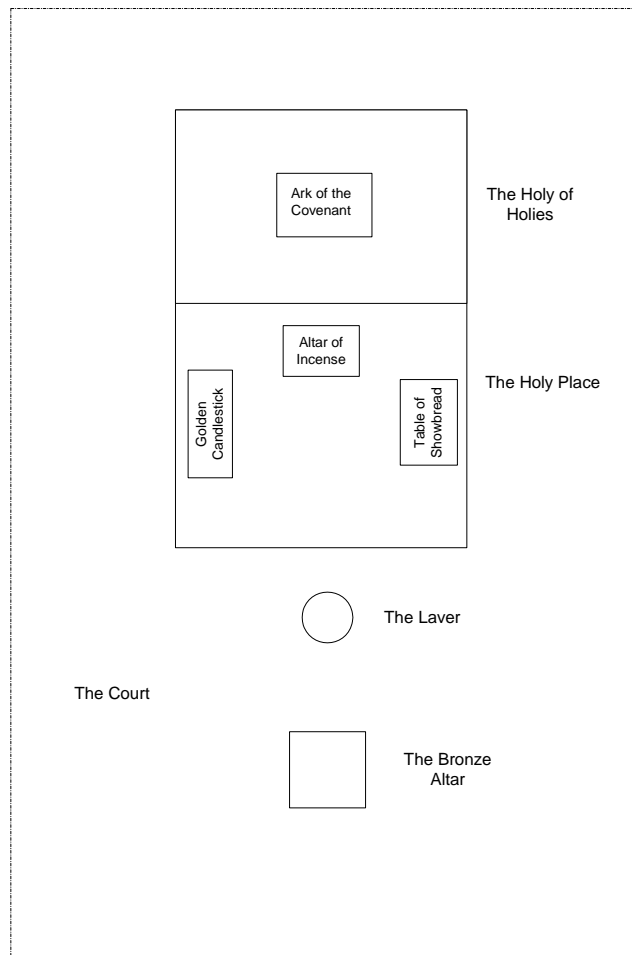
²⁰ And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Melchizedek acts in a role of spiritual superiority to Abraham—not that Abraham could not know God by himself, but that Melchizedek in some way possessed greater privilege in the matter of official access to God. He was the mediator of God’s blessing to Abraham (Gen. 14:19 and Heb. 7:1) and is said to be superior to Abraham (Heb. 7:7). Although this may seem opaque in Gen. 14, a comparison with the priesthood under the law shows that Melchizedek is parallel in function to the Levitical priests, in that they both in some way mediate access to God and spiritual blessing. In other words, with Melchizedek we begin to see that God works through intermediaries.

Up to the time of Melchizedek there is clearly a restriction on the function and office of priest. We are told nothing about how individuals became priests or what they were to do. How Melchizedek knew what his functions were, and how and when God appointed him, are details that God has not chosen to reveal. The same can be said of Noah.

c. Priesthood and the Tabernacle

With the Mosaic law we get for the first time a clear picture of how God appoints priests, at least in one priestly scheme. It is noteworthy that under the law there is still a limited priesthood. Only a few can approach God in certain ceremonies. In the case of the Levites, it is a group working together.



The details of the tabernacle constitute a long and detailed study. For our purposes here we want to emphasize that the tabernacle is a large and complex picture of approaching God. The tabernacle shows in physical form what it means to draw near to a holy God spiritually. This is seen most clearly in the steps that the High Priest followed as he entered the court and then the tabernacle proper and finally entered the Most Holy Place with blood that he sprinkled on the mercy seat, the place where God showed his presence in the midst of Israel.

The tabernacle emphasizes the steps for approaching God but at the same time shows restriction on approaching and the inability to secure a lasting entry to God's presence. The levitical priests performed detailed rituals that centered on sacrifices. Hebrews 10:11 describes this activity and asserts its failure.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

The most important thing to remember about the tabernacle is that it is a physical picture of movement into the presence of God, starting from the bronze altar and ending in the Most Holy Place.

2. The key requirements of successful priesthood

The writer to the Hebrews is the only New Testament writer who opens up the meaning of the tabernacle as it applies to the Lord Jesus Christ. To put it simply, he sees the tabernacle as a complex picture of what Jesus did in His life and death, culminating in the Father's acceptance of His sacrifice and Jesus' ongoing praying to keep believers secure. One of the writer's key points is that the tabernacle and the law associated with it could not open the way to God, so some successful access-provider is necessary. What would be needed to bring this success? The writer to the Hebrews provides six basic requirements for an effective access provider, an effective priest:

- a. He must be appointed by God. He cannot make himself a priest. God's priesthood has very strict order associated with it.

Heb. 5:1: Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

Heb. 5:4: No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.

- b. He must sympathize with sinners. Here is Heb. 5:2:

He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

- c. He must represent others before God. We saw this in Heb. 5:1 (point 2.a). We find in the case of the Lord Jesus Christ that this representation included praying (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34).
- d. He must know the requirements of both sides, as an arbitrator does in a human dispute. Hebrews 5:1 shows the need for a priest to know the needs of human beings and take these needs to God. In order to meet God's requirements there must be knowledge of what God is like and what he demands of human beings.
- e. He must actually open the channel, bridge the gap, between God and man. This is done through the instrument of the sacrifice, as described in Heb. 5:1, where the priest offers gifts and sacrifices for sin. The only effective sacrifice is one that turns away God's wrath against sin.
- f. He must be able to keep the channel open, nullifying any and all attempts to take away access to God for those for whom it has been provided.

Heb. 7:23-25: ²³ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

The levitical priests were appointed by God, sympathized with sinners, represented them before God and offered sacrifices, but they could not know God's side, could not turn away God's wrath and could not keep the channel open. Their sacrifices were those of sinful men. They failed to take people to God and keep them there.

3. Two alternative reactions to priesthood: spiritual alertness or spiritual lethargy

After finishing his presentation of the Melchizedekian priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ (which we will delve into in detail in the next study), the writer to the Hebrews turns to comment on the spiritual condition of his readers as revealed by his topic of priesthood:

¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

An examination of the whole book shows that the writer is concerned that some of his readers may not be genuine in the faith. They have said they are believers but may have stopped short of true faith in Christ. Their spiritual lethargy and their apparent interest in returning to the life under the law suggest to him that they may have not really come under the work of Christ. In this passage the writer says that for some of his readers their inability to take in teaching about priesthood reveals significant spiritual problems. They apparently had a lack of interest in Scripture. They were interested only in the basics of theology and had not advanced beyond the milk stage of the Christian life, were sluggish and lazy in hearing and, although exposed to the truth for a significant period of time, able to take in only shallow teaching. Priesthood is solid food that they choked on. They were spiritually immature (some may have been unsaved) and unaccustomed to and unable to make the right spiritual decisions (such as distinguishing right from wrong).

Many years ago I asked an adult student in an evening school class what she knew about priesthood. It seemed to me that this was a person who had been saved for some time and had embarked on a course of study to improve their knowledge of the Bible. Her response was that she knew only about the priests in Catholicism. I believe that this is indicative of a failure to understand and appreciate priesthood, a failure that is found everywhere in the Body of Christ. The widespread lack of ability to handle the Bible with strength, the lack of spiritual maturity, preoccupation with externals such as the size and architecture of church buildings, comfortable, fancy decorations and impressive architecture, an increasing friendship with the world that brings increasing spiritual weakness and disinterest—all of these things are remarkably similar to the problems that the writer to the Hebrews exposed. Priesthood is a key doctrine that glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ but also exposes lack of spiritual growth and even lack of being genuine in the faith. Use this doctrine to honor Christ and to expose your own spiritual weaknesses as God would have you to do.

Study questions

1. What did you learn about priesthood that you didn't know before?
2. What is the problem of access? What are the reasons for it? How and where does it show up in Scripture?
3. Try to identify some of the reasons that the levitical priests failed with regard to access.
4. Why is there directionality in the tabernacle?
5. Why do priests need to know the needs of God and human beings?
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Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.
47. Priesthood: The system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation between a holy God and sinful human beings.