

**THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS**

**INTRODUCTION**

- A. Our study this week focuses on one of the contributions, or rediscoveries, of the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century.
1. The Great Reformation (def.): the movement for reform of certain doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome, resulting in the establishment of the Reformed or Protestant Church.
    - a. Reform (def.): to make or become better by removal or abandonment of imperfection or faults.
    - b. Reformed churches (def.): those churches that accepted the principles of the Reformation, especially those that were more Calvinistic in doctrine.
  2. The Reformation generally had four streams:
    - a. Those that followed the teachings of Martin Luther (1483 - 1546), mainly found in Germany and Scandinavia.
    - b. The Reformed wing, largely in Switzerland, who in varying degrees followed:
      - (1) Ulrich Zwingli (1584 - 1531) of Zurich.
      - (2) John Calvin (1509 - 1564) of Geneva.
    - c. The English wing, influenced largely by:
      - (1) William Tyndale (d.1536).
      - (2) Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489 - 1556).
    - d. The 'Radical Reformers', usually called Anabaptists.
  3. The teachings of the Reformation can be summarised in this manner:
    - a. *Sola scriptura* (the scriptures alone), with the emphasis on the Bible being the only basis of faith and practice.
    - b. *Sola fidei* (faith alone), the emphasis being on justification by faith alone - not works.
    - c. *Sola gratia* (grace alone), the emphasis being largely on Christ's substitutionary work on the cross and predestination.
    - (1) Most of the Reformers were generally agreed on the above, although Calvin was more explicit on the doctrines of grace than Luther or the English Reformers were.
    - (2) However, the Anabaptists were sometimes anti-predestinarian in their soteriology (doctrine of salvation).

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4. Parallel with the above were these assumptions and practices by the Reformers and their followers:
  - a. The centrality of preaching (as opposed to the centrality of the eucharist - the Lord's Supper).
  - b. Opposition to the mass (especially the idea that Christ's body and blood were literally present in the bread and wine).
  - c. Opposition to the teaching of purgatory (a place or condition in which souls undergo purification by temporary punishment).
  - d. Opposition to praying to the virgin Mary and to saints.
  - e. The priesthood of the believer, as opposed to the need for an earthly person to serve as a mediator between us and God.
- B. Priesthood of the believer (def.): immediate and direct influence and communion with God without an earthly mediator.
  1. Immediate (def.): nearest, next, with nothing between.
  2. Direct (def.): with nothing or no-one in between, in an unbroken line.
  3. Mediator (def.): one who acts as go-between or peacemaker between opposing sides in a dispute.
  4. Influence (def.): the power to produce an effect.
  5. Communion (def.): fellowship, or two-way relationship with one another.
  6. God (def.): the Creator, the true God (the God of the Bible), who has been offended by sin and whose justice must be satisfied.
- C. Why is this study important and why is it relevant?
  1. It forces us to examine a bit of church history which is the laboratory of theology.
  2. It helps us to see why there was a need for the Great Reformation and why we should be happy that it came about.
  3. It requires that we look at the emergence of the priesthood in the Bible.
  4. It gives us a needed glimpse of the Old Testament, a part of the Bible sadly so unknown to so many today.
  5. It gives us a wonderful glimpse of Christ's priesthood.
  6. It shows us our privilege and responsibility as Christians.
  7. It should bring us closer to God.
  8. It affirms the importance of all Christians, regardless of age, sex or background.

## I THE RISE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

A. The priesthood has its origins in the Old Testament.

1. The word 'priest' occurs over 700 times in the Old Testament.
  - a. The Hebrew is *kohen*.
  - b. It is sometimes qualified by 'chief' or 'high'.
2. The priest was one who stood before God as his servant or minister.
  - a. The posture of standing, rather than sitting, is inherent in the Hebrew:
    - (1) *Kohen* is derived from *kahan*.
    - (2) The latter appears to have the same meaning as *kur*, 'to stand'.
  - b. The priest's function was to stand before God, not unlike being that of a bridge between God and the people.
3. There was moreover a threefold hierarchy of officials:
  - a. High priest, or chief priest.
  - b. Priest.
  - c. Levite.
    - (1) There were three distinct orders.
    - (2) Each had its own distinctive functions and privileges.
4. The priesthood was made up of men and that only from the tribe of Levi.
  - a. This seems to have been somewhat of a reward to the tribe for their response to Moses after the Israelites worshipped the golden calf. Ex. 32.
    - (1) 'So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.' Ex. 32:26.
    - (2) 'Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.'" Ex. 32:29.
    - (3) 'At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister and to pronounce blessings in his name, as they still do today.' Deut. 10:8.
    - (4) Moses never forgot this and they were given special recognition in Moses' final blessing. Deut. 33:8-11.

- b.** Although they received no inheritance in terms of land, they were the most prestigious of the tribes. Deut. 18:1-2.

**B.** The theological significance of the priesthood.

**1.** The priesthood represented Israel's union with God.

- a.** Under the Mosaic covenant (see the previous lesson on the Covenant) the whole nation was to be:
      - (1)** 'A kingdom of priests.' Ex. 19:6.
      - (2)** 'A holy nation.' Lev. 11:44ff; Num. 15:40.

- b.** The priesthood became the mediator of the covenant.

- (1)** It therefore had a representative character.
    - (2)** Corporate responsibility was delegated to representative persons, who discharged it on behalf of the community as a whole.

- c.** The priests therefore acted as representatives of the people.

- (1)** Likeness to God in character was essential for those who would serve him.
    - (2)** This state of sanctity was symbolised in the Levitical priesthood.

- d.** The result was twofold:

- (1)** The true requirements of serving God were continually kept before the eyes of his covenant people.
    - (2)** This covenant relationship was vicariously maintained by the priesthood on behalf of the nation as a whole.

**2.** The three-fold hierarchy: high priest, priests, Levites.

- a.** Levi had three sons: Kohath, Gershon and Merari.

- (1)** The Kohathite clan was set apart for special service; this was the family of Aaron, the brother of Moses.

- (a)** He and his descendants were appointed priests.

- (b)** Only the priests could offer sacrifices; other Levite families did the more menial tasks.

- (c)** They were the most 'holy' group within Israel.

- (2)** The Gershonites carried the curtains and coverings in the desert.

- (3)** The Merarites carried and set up the tabernacle itself.

- b. The lowest grade were known as Levites, who were set apart for the service of the sanctuary.
    - c. Above them were the descendants of Aaron - priests.
    - d. The man in charge of the priests was the chief or 'high' priest.
      - (1) He had one privilege, allowed to no-one else.
      - (2) He alone could enter the 'holy of holies' once a year, on the Day of Atonement.
- 3. Duties of priests and Levites.
  - a. Although mostly connected with the tabernacle, temple sacrifice and worship, they had other duties.
    - (1) A group of men from each of the three Levite clans formed the temple chorus; they may have composed several of the psalms (e.g., Psalms 85 and 87).
    - (2) They also had to answer in God's name to questions that could not otherwise be decided (e.g., when to go out to battle); they used sacred stones called Urim and Thummim, which were kept in a pouch worn on the high priest's chest. Deut. 33:8-11.
      - (a) If the priest pulled out the Urim stone, the answer was 'no'.
      - (b) If the priest pulled out the Thummim stone, the answer was 'yes'.
  - b. More important: teaching the Law of God. Mal. 2:7.
    - (1) When Moses blessed the tribes of Israel he said that the Levites would first teach the 'precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel.' Deut. 33:10.
    - (2) Then they would present offerings. Deut. 33:10.
  - c. Sadly, the prophets often had to take the priests and Levites to task for failing in these duties. Ezek. 34.

## II THE PRIESTHOOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. In Judaism, priesthood was hereditary in the tribe of Levi.
  - 1. A priest was born, not made.
    - a. No matter how able a person:
      - (1) A Jew not of the tribe of Levi need not apply!
      - (2) A Gentile of course was also out of the question.

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- b. A priest was regarded as possessing special knowledge of God.
      - (1) He was the director, if not the performer, of sacrifices offered to God.
      - (2) He was the dispenser and interpreter of any claim to a message from God.
    - c. Often forgotten: John the Baptist was of priestly lineage. Luke 1:5-17.
  - 2. Jesus himself was not of priestly stock but a humbly born Galilean carpenter.
    - a. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah. Matt. 1:2.
    - b. 'Others said, "He is the Christ." Still others asked, "How can the Christ come from Galilee?"' John 7:41.
    - c. Jesus was hated by the Sadducean priesthood generally and the chief priests particularly. Matt. 22:23-33; 27:1.
  - 3. Some priests however were converted to the Christian faith. Acts 6:7.
- B. Christianity provided a radical development of the concept of priesthood.
  - 1. The transferral of the role of high priest to Jesus.
    - a. The doctrine of the priesthood of Christ is a major contribution of the Epistle to the Hebrews.
      - (1) 'Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.' Heb. 3:1.
      - (2) 'Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.' Heb. 4:14.
    - b. He is seen as the perfect fulfilment of the Old Testament emergence of the priesthood.
      - (1) He brought the priesthood to a definitive end in history.
      - (2) He established a once-for-all eternal mediatorship between God and man.
    - c. The writer of Hebrews knew he had his work cut out for him.
      - (1) 'For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.' Heb. 7:14.
      - (2) But it was the priesthood of Melchizedek which is fulfilled. Psa. 110; Heb. 7:1-25.
  - 2. The transfer of priesthood generally to that of believers.
    - a. A corollary of the priesthood of Christ is the New Testament application of the priesthood to the whole company of the faithful in the church.

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- (1) Corollary (def.): a natural consequence or result, something that follows logically after something else is proved.
  - (2) The believer is made one with his or her Saviour (see the previous study on 'The believer's position in Christ') and so shares in the dignity of Christ.
  - b. This does not mean we do not need a mediator.
    - (1) 'Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.' John 14:6.
    - (2) 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.' 1 Tim. 2:5.
  - c. It means we don't need an *earthly* mediator!
    - (1) 'You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' 1 Pet. 2:5.
    - (2) 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.' 1 Pet. 2:9.
    - (3) 'And has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.' Rev. 1:6.
    - (4) 'You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.' Rev. 5:10.
  - d. This is a fulfilment of Ex. 19:6: 'You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'
    - (1) 'And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.' Is. 61:6.
    - (2) 'We heard it in Ephrathah, we came upon it in the fields of Jaar: "Let us go to his dwelling-place; let us worship at his footstool - arise, O LORD, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. May your priests be clothed with righteousness; may your saints sing for joy." . . . . I will clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints shall ever sing for joy.' Ps. 132:6-9,16.
  - e. In no instance does any New Testament writer ascribe the title of priest to any individual member or order of ministry in the church.
3. The transfer of the status of Jewish believers to Gentiles.
- a. This was prophesied eight hundred years in advance. 'I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, "Here am I, here am I."' Is. 65:1.
  - b. Jesus also prophesied this. 'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.' Matt. 21:43.

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- c. Peter was among the first to grasp this. 'Then Peter began to speak: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'" Acts 10:34-35.
    - (1) 'After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.'" Acts 15:7.
    - (2) 'He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.' Acts 15:9-11.
  - d. Paul became the Apostle to the Gentiles. Gal. 2:7. 'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household.' Eph. 2:19.
4. The transfer of an exclusively male priesthood to either sex. 'You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Gal. 3:26-28.
- a. This however was implicit in the ministry of Deborah. Judges 4:1-10.
  - b. A New Testament token was Anna, of the tribe of Asher. Luke 2:36.
  - c. Joel prophesied that 'sons and daughters will prophecy.' Joel 2:28-32.
  - d. Philip had four daughters who had the gift of prophecy. Acts 21:9.

### III THE RISE OF A VICARIOUS PRIESTHOOD IN CHURCH HISTORY

- A. An aberration (a deviation from the New Testament norm) developed from toward the end of the first century.
- 1. Clement (c. 95 AD) employed the three-fold hierarchy of high priest, priests and Levites as an analogous (similar) type of the Christian ministry.
  - 2. The *Didache* (150 AD) called prophets 'your high priests', and spoke of the eucharist as a 'sacrifice'.
  - 3. Tertullian (c. 200 AD) used the term 'priest' and 'high priest' of the church's ministers.
  - 4. Jerome (345 - 419 AD) translated the Greek *mysterion* by *sacramentum* in the Vulgate (Latin translation of the Bible).
  - 5. St Augustine (354 - 430 AD) defined a sacrament as 'a visible sign of a divine thing.'

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- B.** The 'sacramental system' was fully developed in the Middle Ages by theologians known as 'Scholastics', as Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274 AD).
1. The sacraments were seven in number:
    - a. Baptism.
    - b. Eucharist.
    - c. Confirmation.
    - d. Extreme unction (prayer for the dying).
    - e. Penance (confession, absolution and act of imposed penitence).
    - f. Ordination.
    - g. Marriage.
  2. Only a priest could administer the sacraments.
- C.** Confession of sins.
1. An outgrowth of the above development, especially penance, in church history was confessing sins to a priest. The biblical support was:
    - a. 'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' John 20:23.
    - b. 'Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.' James 5:16a.
  2. The Latvian Council of 1215 made regular confession an absolute law of the Church.
    - a. The form of absolution (the priest's formal declaration of the forgiveness of the penitent's sins) was: 'I absolve thee.'
    - b. The penitent (the one who is sorry for sins) was assured of the secrecy of the priest.
  3. Martin Luther wrote in 1519, 'There is nothing in the Church which needs reform so much as confession and penance.'

**IV THE RELEVANCE OF ALL THE ABOVE FOR US TODAY**

- A.** We have one Great High Priest. Heb. 4:14.
1. This function is carried out by Jesus at God's right hand. Heb. 3:1-4; 7:25.
  2. The nature of his prayer is seen partly in John 17.

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- a. We confess our sins only to God. I Tim. 2:5.
  - b. He absolves those who confess to him. I John 1:9; 2:1-2.
- B. We are all priests. I Pet. 2:5,9.
- 1. All that is said of the Levite's relationship with God may be generally transferred to us.
    - a. We do not let another live a holy life vicariously; we must do it ourselves. I Pet. 1:16.
    - b. We do not let another perform worship for us; we must do it ourselves. Heb. 13:15.
    - c. We do not let a priesthood of men sing for us; all - male and female - sing for ourselves. Eph. 5:19; Gal. 3:28.
    - d. We do not require that another answer questions pertaining to God; we are required to do it ourselves. I Pet. 3:15.
    - e. We do not ask another to get God's will for guidance; we must seek God's guidance for ourselves. Eph. 5:17.
  - 2. This does not mean there are not special functions that are largely required of those called for particular ministry. Eph. 4:11ff; I Cor. 12:28.
    - a. There is some overlap between the ancient priesthood and New Testament ministry. Cf. I Tim. 5:17-18.
    - b. But they do not have a 'head start' in fellowship with God because of their special calling.

**CONCLUSION**

- A. We are all priests.
- B. We can all have equal intimacy with God - if we want it.
- C. You can have as much of God as you want.' A W Tozer.