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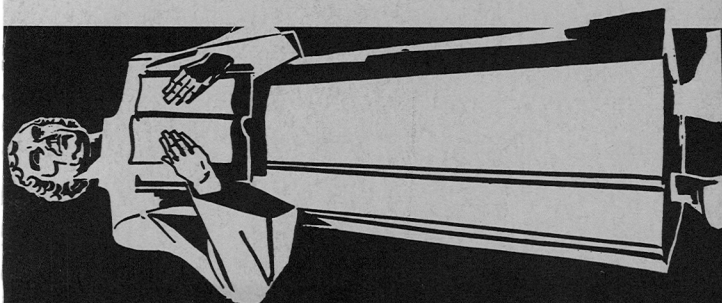
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Priest and Priesthood: Images of Christ and His Church

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ONE OF THE TITLES frequently applied to Jesus is "Priest" or "High Priest". This title appears in Sunday School materials, text books for confirmation classes, and even in some of our hymns. It appears in the trilogy, "prophet, priest, and king". John 17 is often called the "High Priestly Prayer". Is this title useful for our understanding of the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the Church? Is it useful for Christians—and in particular for pastors—to think of their ministry as "priesthood"? This paper attempts an answer to these questions.

The roles of priest and high priest during the Old Testament seem to have varied according to the needs of the time and the political situation. Although the best known functions of the priest were sacrifice and prayer, and that of the high priest to enter the Holy of Holies on the Great Day of Atonement on behalf of himself and the people, their roles were in fact far more complicated. In addition to caring for the vessels of the sanctuary and fulfilling the sacrificial duties of the altar, the priest, to a degree, was a medium of revelation by giving instruction (TORAH) to the people. In pre-exilic times, before this duty passed into the hands of the scribes, the priest was an ethical teacher as well as an instructor in the cultic sphere. He was custodian of medical lore, responsible for safeguarding the health of the community. He was in charge of the administration of justice and fiscal matters. His was the honor of blowing the trumpets in time of war or for the keeping of a feast. He alone was permitted to bless in the name of God.

If Christ was a priest, or we are, which of these functions are relevant to this priesthood? Let us consider the New Testament evidence. From the Gospels we find that

- a. Jesus was not, in fact, a priest—he was not of the priestly tribe of Levi, but of Judah;
- b. neither he, nor his disciples, nor the people ever referred to him as a "priest";
- c. and, although Jesus told the lepers to present themselves before the priests, he did not himself perform any priestly function in the generally accepted sense, but was generally an outspoken critic of the Jerusalem priesthood.

Although some biblical scholars such as Oscar Cullman believe that there are allusions to Jesus as "high priest" in the Johannine literature,¹ the only clear reference is found in Hebrews.

The writer to the Hebrews finds a strong resemblance between the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek and the ministry of Jesus

Christ. Melchizedek is mentioned in only two places in the Old Testament. In Genesis 14, Abram meets *King* Melchizedek, is blessed by him, and gives him a tenth of his newly-won booty—King Melchizedek, “priest of God Most High (El Elyon)” (vs. 18). The second passage in which this mysterious figure appears is Psalm 110:4: “The LORD (Yahweh) has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’” To the writer of Hebrews, though Jesus could not have been a priest in the ordinary sense because his lineage was not Levitical (Heb. 7:11-14), Jesus was chosen by God for a unique priestly role, a role in which he continues forever—after the order of Melchizedek.

As with Jesus, so with the disciples: neither the Gospels nor the Pauline literature apply the title “priest” to the disciples, nor are they ever shown performing a priestly function. Jesus did not mention a priesthood, nor did his disciples attempt to set up one. “Priest” is not mentioned in the catalog of “offices” in I Corinthians 12:28-30, nor in Ephesians 4:11-12.

There are, in fact, five references to God’s People as “priests”. All are clearly dependent upon Old Testament sources. Two are from I Peter:

“And like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (2:5)

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9)

Most scholars agree that, without the adjectives, these are clear references to Exodus 19:6, in which the Israelite nation is told “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”. The understanding of this passage is that the Israelites as a people (a nation) were now God’s People in view of Yahweh’s unilateral covenant, an act of God’s grace. The same understanding should be applied in the interpretation of these passages in I Peter. The thrust is upon the new community created by God through his unilateral and gracious act in Jesus Christ. The accent is on a God-created community rather than on individual privilege or function.

The other three references are from Revelation:

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

“And hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on earth.” (5:10)

“Blessed is he who shares in the first resurrection. Over such the second death shall have no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.” (20:6)

In addition to Exodus 19:6 there is a second source for these state-

ments, “. . . but you shall be called priests of the LORD, men shall speak of you as ministers of God” (Isaiah 61:6). Besides the repeated accent upon community, these passages stress that the position of God’s People is not limited to the present but continues forever. Paul Minear summarizes the passages from I Peter and from Revelation in this manner:

In dealing with the picture of this Royal Priesthood, we must observe at the outset that the New Testament did not use the term to refer to a special form of ministry within the church. The community as a whole was a priesthood, and even this explicit terminology appears to be limited to five verses in two books. Furthermore, it should be noted that these passages did not develop at length the distinctively priestly work of this community. Their function is described rather generally: to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, to declare the wonderful deeds of Him who had called them, to be priests of God, and to reign with Christ on earth.²

Although the Letter to the Hebrews is permeated with priestly imagery, the author does not use “priesthood” as an analogy for the Church. All references to “priest,” “high priest,” “priesthood” refer either to the Jewish order, past or present, or to Jesus Christ. If we wish to call ourselves “priests,” it cannot be on the basis of Hebrews. Paul Minear explains why.

. . . where the image of the priesthood was the central figure for expounding the work of Jesus, other images were adopted for describing the position of those on whose behalf Christ entered the presence of God. If we enter the sanctuary through him, it is not as priests but as worshipers rejoicing in a hope and confidence, which he as a forerunner has made possible. The church is not the temple, but it is those who enter the sanctuary. The church is not the priesthood, but those for whom the high priest intercedes. . . . thus the way seems barred for them to think of themselves as priests as analogous of his priesthood, although their way to God is forever open to them through his ministry on their behalf.³

The “priesthood of all believers” understood as an extension of Jesus’ “priesthood,” implying direct communication to God through prayer, the right of the layman to baptize, the option of worshiping at home on a Sunday morning, and the personal privilege to forgive or not to forgive sins, a defense for the absolute autonomy of the local congregation, has been considered a fundamental principle of the Reformation, hence inviolate. It arises most frequently when a group or an individual wishes to assert independence of thought, action, or inaction. In fact, according to T. W. Manson,⁴ the Reformers were agreed only in their opposition to the Roman view of the priesthood, and the practices based on this view. When it came to a positive contribution, namely what this priesthood was all about, there was a wide divergence of opinion among them. Reflecting his background, Luther felt that our primary role as priests was to inter-

cede for the brother. Zwingli believed that the Christian priest offers himself to God. As for Calvin, the concept of priesthood was without substance—"an honorable status without a defined function."⁵

If we are to use the images of "high priest" and "priesthood" for Christ and his Church, we should be very careful not to confuse this priesthood with the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. Christ's high priesthood, as described in Scripture, consists in being chosen by God for a unique priestly role, a role in which he continues forever. Though our priesthood is not dependent upon the "priesthood" of Jesus, it has points of similarity. It is an act of God's grace through the act of his unilateral covenant. It implies community and mutual dependence rather than individuality and independence. To be a priest is to be a member of the covenant community established by God in these last days through Jesus Christ. Any "priesthood of all believers" which sees a Christian atomistically, independent of this community, any "priesthood of all believers" which is a matter of individual rights and privileges, is not the priesthood envisioned by Scripture as an image of Christ's Church.

Are these titles, these images, useful to an understanding of Christ and his Church? Christ as cultic high priest can be a very misleading image. Church as "priesthood of all believers" can be a positively dangerous one. If "priest" and "priesthood" are to be used at all, they should be used as Scripture uses them. This might be a good thing. A scriptural image of Christ as high priest and his Church as priesthood might cause us to think through that notion of the autonomy of the Christian congregation which is based on the idea that what one Christian "priest" could do, a congregation of "priests" could do. Such an image might cause us better to perceive the mission of the church. Such an image might lead us more clearly to perceive Christ and his Church as the Elect Servant of God, Chosen in suffering, chosen for the service of the Living God. Such an image might lead us better to be this Royal Priesthood, this People of God.

FOOTNOTES

1. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 104-107. For example Cullmann suggests that in Revelation 1:13, in which the Son of Man is described looking as a priest might look (i.e., the long robe and golden girdle), evidence is given to show that in John's mind, Jesus was the "high priest." He further states that because John knew the Jewish High Priest and was therefore able to have Peter enter the courtyard (John 18:15), he was conscious of Jesus' fulfillment of this office. Cullman spends much time with Jesus' prayer recorded in John 17, which was not called the "High Priestly Prayer" until the 16th century.
2. Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 98
3. *ibid.*, p. 99
4. T. W. Manson, *Ministry and Priesthood: Christ's and Ours*, (Richmond: John Know Press, 1957), p37n.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 37n.