

Biblical Theology of Priesthood

Who Are We and What in the World Are We to Do?

Introduction

- Christians today are facing what I call a severe identity crisis
- We don't know what we are or what to do in this world as believers
- The answer lies in the past, future, and present grace of God
- Christians are to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:1-6; cf. 1 Pt 2:9-10)

The Role and Function of Biblical Priests

- Biblically, the primary role of a priest is to maintain holiness and to serve as a “go-between” God and ordinary humans
- Functionally, priests facilitated Israel’s service to and worship of the Lord in the context of its covenantal relationship with God

The Levitical Priesthood

- After freed from captivity in Egypt, God led his people to Sinai and identified them as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:4-6):
- ⁴‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

God's Past Grace of Salvation

- "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex 19:4)
- "And God spoke all these words: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me'" (Ex 20:1-3)

God's Future Grace of Mission

- “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6)
- Israel was called to show forth God's glory to the surrounding nations and facilitated access to his presence (Ex 20-24)
- Aaron and his sons were set apart as priests for the nation (Ex 28-29)
- Later, the Levites were also set apart to assist Aaron and his sons in their priestly duties (Num 3:5-9)

God's Present Grace

- “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6)
- “...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16)
- “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pt 2:9)

Jesus as the High Priest

- **As our high priest, Jesus is able to encourage us to persevere in spite of our weakness and brokenness (Heb 4:14-16):**
- ¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
- Two points:

Jesus as the High Priest

- One, we have a high priest who is able to empathize with (understand) us, who has been tempted in every way but did not sin
- Was Jesus capable of committing sin?
- How do you view Christ's temptation in the light of Jas 1:13-14?
- ¹³When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.
- If Jesus is "very God of very God," his impeccability is absolute
- "Therefore, if we are asking if it was actually possible for Jesus to have sinned, it seems that we must conclude that it was not possible" (Grudem 1994, 539)

Jesus as the High Priest

- Two, what does it mean that Jesus was tempted in every way like us?
- He tempted but did not succumb to and repeat sins like us
- The point of this passage is how thoroughly he could empathize with our weakness
- Because he is our high priest (v. 15), we could therefore “hold firmly to the faith we profess” (v. 14), and “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (v. 16)
- Jesus knows all our struggles and can empathize with our weaknesses

Jesus as the High Priest

- **Jesus as high priest is able to encourage us by being qualified to save us completely** (Heb 7:23-28):
- 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. ²⁶ Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Jesus as the High Priest

- Jesus is able to save us completely because of several things:
- One, unlike the priests of the OT who died, Jesus lives forever and is therefore a permanent priest. Therefore, he is able to always intercede for us (vv. 23-25)
- Two, he is holy and pure—the perfect God-man (v. 26). He is able to meet our needs because his sacrificial works are completed
- Three, unlike the daily sacrifices offered by Aaron and the Levites, Jesus does not have to constantly offer sacrifices
- Unlike the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), where the high priest offered two animals and released a third into the wilderness (Lev 16), Jesus' work is completed
- There is no need for the blood of the bull to cover the priest and the blood of the goat to cover the sins of the people

Believers as Priests

- God's intention for humanity is a restored relationship with him in his holy realm
- That purpose was accomplished by the finished work of Jesus as priest
- God's redemptive plan was entrusted to his people to carry out
- The identity of God's people as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" is applied to both Israel (Ex 19:6) and Christians (1 Pt 2:9)
- Israel was set apart by the blood of the Passover Lamb and Christians are made holy by the blood of the Lamb (1 Pt 1:18-19)
- Peter describes a "new temple" built upon Jesus, the cornerstone, with believers as "living stones" who offer spiritual sacrifices (1 Pt 2:4-5)

Believers as Priests

- As priests, we are to offer our lives (body or *soma*) as “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1)
- As priests, believers declare God’s praises and glory to the nations (Isa 66:19-21)
- Priestly service ultimately involves worshiping God now (Heb 9:4) and forever before his throne (Rev 7:9-17; 20:6)

Discussion Questions

- What does being part of “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” mean to you?
- What are some practical ways you can live out your Christian identity in God’s world?