

Chapter Eleven

“Church Members are Best Suited to Serve as Believer-Priests”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS PRIESTHOOD METAPHOR”

We have seen in previous chapters that the Church of Jesus Christ was established during the Savior’s earthly ministry.¹ *Additionally*, we have also seen the Church of Jesus Christ is a visible and assembled reality rather than something invisible and disassembled.² *Third*, we have seen that the Church of Jesus Christ is comprised of members of the assembly rather than being comprised of all Christians throughout the world.³ And *fourth*, we surmised that baptism, immersion in water by the authority of the congregation in obedience to Christ, is the means whereby a Christian becomes a member of a particular Church of Jesus Christ.⁴ We immerse new converts, so they become members.

Those basics to a Scriptural understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ properly in place, we then began to consider the Holy Spirit’s use of metaphors in the New Testament epistles as a means of imparting a greater understanding about the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another. The metaphor’s comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used of one thing is applied to another can be helpful to us, can expand our understanding of the Scriptural descriptions of the Church of Jesus Christ.⁵

¹ Chapter 3.

² Chapter 4.

³ Chapter 5.

⁴ Chapter 6.

⁵ *Webster’s*, page 1132.

We have observed the Church of Jesus Christ described using the body metaphor as the body of Christ.⁶ How very useful that metaphor was to the dysfunctional Corinthian congregation to show them the cooperation and interdependency so necessary to vibrant congregational life. We have observed the Church of Jesus Christ is described using the temple metaphor as the temple of God, remembering that the temple of the Holy Spirit refers to the individual believer's body and not to all Christians as the body of Christ.⁷ The temple of God metaphor was used to show the Corinthians that God was in their midst, that they as well as other congregations were therefore and thereby as a congregation holy, and that anyone who harms the temple of God, which is a particular Church of Jesus Christ, will certainly be dealt with by God.

This chapter will focus on yet another commonly misunderstood metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ: the priesthood of believers as particular congregations of Christians. For the sake of simplified understanding, recognize that more than 80 verses in the New Testament refer to a priest or the priesthood. The great majority of those verses in some way address the priesthood and priests belonging to the Aaronic order that was brought into existence when God gave the Law of Moses to the Israelites. However, some verses do deal with the priesthood of Jesus Christ and the priesthood of Christians. Those two collections of verses are the ones of interest to us in this chapter.

First, THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS CHRIST

Most readers are familiar with Matthew 16.13-16, where Simon Peter confessed to the Lord Jesus while He was with the eleven other apostles in Caesarea Philippi, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Of course, the word Christ transfers into English the Greek word that in turn translates the Hebrew word for Messiah, meaning anointed. However, did you also know that under the Law of Moses in the Old Testament there were three anointed offices?

⁶ Chapter 9.

⁷ Chapter 10.

Under the Law of Moses, the high priest Aaron and his qualified descendants who occupied the priesthood were anointed. Prophets were anointed.⁸ Kings of Judah, beginning with Saul and David, were also anointed.⁹ Some anointed men functioned in two offices. David was both a king and a prophet.¹⁰ Jeremiah was a prophet who was a priest.¹¹ Ezekiel was a prophet who was a priest.¹² John the Baptist was a prophet born to a priest.¹³ However, no one other than the Lord Jesus Christ was at the same time an anointed prophet, priest, and king.¹⁴

At present, we will confine our consideration to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel, as our great High Priest, so identified in the following verses:

Hebrews 2.17: “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto *his* brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.”

Hebrews 3.1: “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;”

Hebrews 4.14: “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* profession.”

⁸ As Psalm 105.15 is thought to teach.

⁹ Gerhard Friedrich, Editor, *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament, Vol IX*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), pages 493-580.

¹⁰ David was a prophet in the sense that he wrote inspired psalms that were prophetic.

¹¹ Jeremiah 1.1

¹² Ezekiel 1.3

¹³ Luke 1.5-13; 7.28

¹⁴ Christ’s “anointing” took place when the Holy Spirit came upon Him at the time of His baptism, Matthew 3.16.

- Hebrews 4.15: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as *we are*, yet without sin.”
- Hebrews 5.5: “So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.”
- Hebrews 5.6: “As he saith also in another *place*, Thou *art* a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.”
- Hebrews 5.10: “Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.”
- Hebrews 6.20: “Whither the forerunner is for us entered, *even* Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.”
- Hebrews 7.17: “For he testifieth, Thou *art* a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.”
- Hebrews 7.20: “And inasmuch as not without an oath *he was made priest*.”
- Hebrews 7.21: “(For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou *art* a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:)”
- Hebrews 7.24: “But this *man*, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.”
- Hebrews 7.26: “For such an high priest became us, *who is* holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens;”
- Hebrews 8.1: “Now of the things which we have spoken *this is* the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens;”
- Hebrews 8.3: “For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore *it is* of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer.”

Hebrews 8.4: “For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law:”

Hebrews 9.11: “But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;”

Hebrews 10.21: “And *having* an high priest over the house of God;”

Of course, the priest is that man who stands with his back to the people while facing God as he represents the people to God, while the prophet is that man who stands with his back to God as he represents God to the people. The Lord Jesus Christ, being the one mediator between God and men, perfectly performs both functions.

Reflect with me on the completeness of our Lord Jesus Christ in effecting the salvation of those who are given to Him by God the Father before we turn to a consideration of the priesthood metaphor.¹⁵ We recognize that the Lord Jesus Christ is our great High Priest. And what is the primary function of the high priest but to offer up the sacrifice to God that is pleasing to Him, making possible the forgiveness of sins by the death of the innocent sin-bearer on behalf of the guilty sinner and the appropriate offering of the sin-bearer’s blood.

However, the Lord Jesus Christ is not only the priest who offered up the sacrifice that was pleasing to God, but He is also the Sacrifice that was slain for the remission of our sins.¹⁶ He was so identified by John the Baptist when he declared concerning Him, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” and “Behold the Lamb of God!”¹⁷ As if that was not enough to be thankful for, the Lord Jesus Christ is even more than our great High Priest and the Lamb of God who shed His blood for the remission of our sins. Notice also Romans 3.25:

¹⁵ John 17.9, 11, 24

¹⁶ Matthew 26.28; Acts 2.38; 10.43; Romans 3.25; Hebrews 9.22; 10.18

¹⁷ John 1.29, 36

“Whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”

The word translated propitiation is a Greek word found in one other place in the New Testament, Hebrews 9.5, there translated mercy seat:

“And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly.”

Mercy seat equals propitiation, ἰλαστήριον. But Romans 3.25 declares God set the Lord Jesus Christ forth to be the mercy seat, the propitiation, both the means of expiation and the place for propitiation.¹⁸

Thus, the Savior is *everything* related to satisfying God’s righteous demands for our sins. Excuse me for being so excited about the Savior, but the fact that He is the One who offers the sacrifice for our sins, the fact that He is the sacrifice for our sins, and the fact that He is the *place* of sacrifice for our sins is too stupendous a set of truths to pass by without comment.

Now, THE METAPHOR OF OUR PRIESTHOOD

If the epistle to the Hebrews is all about the priesthood of Jesus Christ, showing Him to be in all ways superior to the Aaronic priesthood of the Mosaic Law, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, then Peter’s first epistle establishes the metaphor of Christian priesthood.

Consider the context in which Peter’s letter was written, beginning with First Peter 1.1-2:

- ¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,
- ² Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.

Verse 7 brings up the matter of the trial of the believer’s faith. In verse 14 he describes his readers as obedient children. In verse 22 he indicates they are

¹⁸ Bauer, page 474.

obeying the truth through the Spirit. In light of these comments, can you imagine these to whom Peter is writing as being Christians who are not Scripturally baptized and who are not in an ongoing relationship with other Christians as members of some particular Church of Jesus Christ? I cannot, since it would be disobedience that would have been reflected in Peter's comments about them.

Now for First Peter 2.1-9:

- 1 Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings,
- 2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:
- 3 If so be ye have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious.
- 4 To whom coming, *as unto* a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, *and* precious,
- 5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.
- 6 Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.
- 7 Unto you therefore which believe *he is* precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,
- 8 And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, *even to them* which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.
- 9 But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

You might have noticed Peter's metaphor of Christian Church members as newborn babes. Would his audience not have been baptized believers in membership in particular but unidentified congregations? It would be strange to imagine it otherwise. Likening the Word of God to milk, he reinforces the connection between the believer's growth and the Word of God he feeds on

regularly. However, it is in verse 5 that Peter used a metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ, individual Christians being lively stones but when brought together forming a spiritual house.

Can this be an allusion to what Paul wrote in First Corinthians chapter 3? The important point in verse 5, however, is the apposition of “a spiritual house” and “an holy priesthood,” showing they are the same. Thus, the same people who comprise “a spiritual house” are also “an holy priesthood.” Who can they be but baptized Christians who are members of particular Churches of Jesus Christ?

Carrying the double metaphor of “a spiritual house” and “an holy priesthood” through the rest of the passage, most of what Peter wrote focuses on the Lord Jesus Christ being the “chief corner stone” as central to the proper building of the spiritual house. However, he once again used the priesthood metaphor in First Peter 2.9:

“But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

A serious error is introduced into the proper interpretation of this verse by anyone who misunderstands the Church of Jesus Christ as consisting of all Christians, rather than as being particular congregations of Christians who are baptized in obedience to Christ’s Great Commission. On the one hand, some see this verse as supporting their belief that the universal invisible church has supplanted the priestly calling of the nation Israel.¹⁹ Others with a wrong view of the Church suppose that Peter is directing his comments to Jewish Christians apart from any involvement in particular congregations.²⁰ Both views are incorrect.

A right understanding of the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ leads to a correct understanding of the Church congregation using this priesthood metaphor. A Church is a particular congregation of immersed believers, who seek to fulfill the Great Commission and are authorized to administer the ordinances of baptism and the communion of the Lord’s Supper. Remember,

¹⁹ See comment about George Eldon Ladd in Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link In Systematic Theology*, (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Press, 1994), page 274.

²⁰ Ibid., page 820.

the use of metaphors in connection with the Church is assumed to be the Holy Spirit's means of teaching us so that we might more fully understand both the nature and function of the Church.

The body metaphor shows how a particular Church of Jesus Christ functions. As a human body functions when it is healthy, and its various limbs serve to complement the actions and the functions of other members, the combined congregation functions like the human being's body being directed by our Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, to accomplish the tasks assigned to us.

The temple metaphor emphasizes another reality about the Church. A particular Church of Jesus Christ is a temple. The temple is comprised of baptized believers who engage in the construction of the temple building in the metaphor. The various types of materials used in construction represent the quality and spirituality of our service, with appropriate rewards awaiting us, and with a serious warning issued to anyone who would do any congregation harm, because the congregation is holy by it being a temple of God.

Now that we come to the priesthood metaphor, we see even more clearly how our lives and ministries serve the Savior's purpose as we serve as priests with our great High Priest. What does not only our great High Priest but also any priest do? Priests represent people to God. And as the Lord Jesus Christ as our great High Priest represents people to God, especially in His role of offering Himself a sacrifice for sins, so do believer-priests represent people to God except for offering sacrifices for sins.

Compare and contrast the priesthood of Church members with the priesthood of professing Christians who are not Church members. I am not suggesting that someone who is not a member of a particular Church of Jesus Christ is not a priest, but that a Christian, who is not a member of a particular Church of Jesus Christ, cannot properly function in the priestly role that fits the metaphor used by the Apostle Peter. Can a priest effectively serve our great High Priest Jesus Christ so long as he is not obedient to what he knows to be God's will for his life?

Remember, the priests Peter wrote to were described by him as "obedient children" who "have purified your souls in obeying the truth

through the Spirit.”²¹ However, when the child of God is obedient to the Word of God, has followed the Savior in believer baptism, and is a member of a particular Church of Jesus Christ congregation, he is very properly “an holy priesthood” and quite well-positioned “to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ,” First Peter 2.5. He can serve God without grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit by his willful disobedience. As well, rather than seeing Jewish believers as distinct from Gentile believers, Peter recognizes, as did the Apostle Paul,²² that both ethnic groups are brought together in Christ and are by baptism joined in particular congregations where the body of Christ can begin to accomplish what God had wanted the nation of Israel to do:

“But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

Who is the chosen generation? Both Jewish and Gentile Christians who are baptized and members of the various Churches make up the chosen generation. Who is a royal priesthood? Both Jewish and Gentile Christians comprise a royal priesthood. All Church members pray for and seek to reach the lost when we approach the throne of grace in prayer. Who are a peculiar people? Jewish and Gentile Christians who are members of particular Churches. As well, have we not been called out of darkness into His marvelous light, both Jewish and Gentile Christians who have submitted to believer baptism and are now members of particular congregations?

We should ask, what do priests do? Allow me to point out six verses from the Old and New Testaments to summarize for you what priests do, showing what Church congregations of priests ought to do in service to God:

Psalms 141.2: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee *as* incense; *and* the lifting up of my hands *as* the evening sacrifice.”

Proverbs 15.8: “The sacrifice of the wicked *is* an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright *is* his delight.”

²¹ I Peter 1.14, 22

²² Ephesians 2.13-22

Romans 12.1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service.”

Philippians 4.18: “But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things *which were sent* from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.”

Hebrews 7.27: “Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.”

Hebrews 13.15: “By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of *our* lips giving thanks to his name.”

Psalms 141.2 shows us the imagery of prayer being like incense and the lifting up of hands as a sacrifice. That incense was burned, and that sacrifice was offered only by priests. Proverbs 15.8 shows that the prayer of the upright is God’s delight, while the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. Romans 12.1 instructs God’s people to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice that is both acceptable to Him and reasonable. Philippians 4.18 describes the Philippians’ giving to benefit Paul as a wonderful offering to God. Hebrews 7.27 rehearses the Savior’s offering of Himself for sins. And Hebrews 13.15 describes praise to God as a sacrifice that believers can offer to God, the giving of thanks to His name.

Therefore, recognize how a congregation functions as a priesthood: #1, they present their bodies as living sacrifices; #2, they offer up prayer to God on behalf of others; #3, they give money as the Philippians were so well known for doing; and #4, they express their praise and thanksgiving to God in the company of others. Thus, the only priestly function believer priests do not perform is that already accomplished by our great High Priest, the offering of Himself for our sins.

The metaphor of the Church of Jesus Christ as priesthood is tragically misunderstood by Protestantism. Is not the Lord Jesus Christ declared to be our great High Priest, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek? As

well, what high priest does not have cohorts of priests who do his bidding? Are we to suppose that all professing Christians are capable of functioning as priests serving our great High Priest without the necessary qualifications of obedience to the truth through the Spirit? As well, why would there be a cohort of priests outside the particular Churches of Jesus Christ?

Let us not make the mistake of thinking the Church of Jesus Christ is optional, an afterthought, or that meaningful ministry can be accomplished while ignoring that which the Savior brought into existence for the express purpose of effective service to Him, the particular congregation that assembles to fulfill His Great Commission, that is authorized to administer the two ordinances, that is His body, His temple, and His priesthood.

I am so thankful I need no frocked priest to represent me to God. I am so thankful that not only do I have immediate and direct access to my great High Priest, who is the one Mediator between God and man but that I serve Him as a believer-priest as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ.