

THE COVENANTS COMPARED

⇒OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD⇐

The general theme of this book has been the covenants in the Bible. We started with a general discussion of what these covenants are, then moved on to look at the covenants with Noah, Abraham, the Tribe of Israel and finally the New Covenant. At that point we diverged from the main theme to consider various aspects of the New Covenant in more detail, with chapters on the Holy Spirit, the Gifts of the Spirit and the Leadership of the Church. We shall now return to consider a number of issues which relate to both the Old and New Covenants. The first of these is priesthood.

The first priest mentioned in the Bible is Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17-20). He was both a king and a priest of Salem (probably Jerusalem) in the time of Abraham. When Abraham returned from rescuing his nephew Lot and various neighbours captured in a tribal raid, Melchizedek came from Salem to meet him. Melchizedek brought bread and wine (or food and drink) to Abraham, and Abraham on his part gave Melchizedek a tithe. This incident becomes very important in the New Testament for explaining the priesthood of Christ to the Jewish Christians. In its place in Genesis it shows that there were priests in early times in Canaan and that some at least worshipped the “God Most High” who Abraham accepted as his God also.

Though Melchizedek was the first priest mentioned in the Bible, he was not the first person to offer sacrifices to God. Abel was perhaps the first (Genesis 4:4). Noah offered sacrifices (Genesis 8:20). Abraham built altars, presumably for that purpose (Genesis 12:7,8), and made sacrifices (Genesis 15:6-21; 22:13). These people were not priests.

Other priests mentioned prior to the covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai are the priests of Egypt at the time of Joseph (Genesis 41:45, etc), and Moses’ father-in-law Jethro or Reuel (Exodus 2:16-22, etc). The two greatest sacrifices in the whole history of the people of Israel were the original Passover in Egypt on the night they fled (Exodus 12), and the sacrifices relating to the institution of the covenant (Exodus 24:3-8). In the first case the sheep were slaughtered by the families concerned, and in the second the slaughtering was done by the young men of Israel, even though there were at that time some priests (Exodus 19:22-24).

It was only after this that the official priests of the covenant with Israel were appointed. (Exodus chapters 28-40). They were the descendants of Aaron who was of the clan of Levi. They were to wear special garments for certain official services. Their primary role was to implement a whole system of sacrifices which is described in detail in Leviticus. Only they could perform the regular daily sacrifices to be performed at the religious tent (later in the temple in Jerusalem). Only their chief, the high priest, originally Aaron himself, was to enter the inner sanctuary once a year to offer the blood of the sacrifice on the day of atonement.

In addition to this sacrificial role, the priests were involved in what we might call official public duties. They were involved in the diagnosis of disease, and what we would today call public health. (Leviticus 13). They addressed the army before battle, and blew the sacred trumpet as a battle signal. (Deuteronomy 20:2, Numbers 31:6). Eleazar the son of Aaron worked with Joshua on the once only distribution of the land of Canaan among the clans of Israel. (Numbers 34:17 & Joshua 14:1). Eleazar had a special role in the appointment of Joshua to succeed Moses as leader of Israel. (Numbers 27:15-23). Much more can be said about the priesthood of the Old Covenant but we will note only that the priesthood, like the covenant, was to be for ever (Exodus 29:9; 40:15). But this was, as we have seen, a covenant with the nation of Israel.

What do we find when we come to the New Covenant, which is a covenant for anyone of any nation who wishes to accept it? First and foremost we see that there are no priests at all in the Christian covenant with the exception of Christ himself, who is described as a high priest like Melchizedek. In what way was Christ a high priest?

This is explained in great detail in the letter to the Hebrews, chapters five to ten, which was undoubtedly written for Christians of a Jewish background. The priesthood of Christ is related to the New Covenant. The holy place is not a tent or temple made by man, as was the case with the Old Covenant, but is heavenly. The sacrificial blood is not the blood of animals, but Christ's own blood. The sacrifice is not repeated year after year, but is once for all time. The effect of the sacrifice is not external to man, but purifies the conscience. And there are many more areas of comparison and contrast.

What about Christian leaders? We saw in the last chapter that they are called "elders" for which the Greek word is "presbyters", or they are called "bishops" meaning "overseers". They are never called priests in the Bible. Why? Because Christ is the only priest in the Christian covenant. Furthermore, there is no sacrifice in the New Covenant except the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The only exception is that all Christians are, in a metaphorical sense, called a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and the Christian giving of himself to God in service is called a sacrifice. Specifically, the holy communion is never described as a sacrifice. It is the sign of the New Covenant, as we have seen in a previous chapter, and a reminder of Christ's sacrifice which began the covenant.

So why do some Christian leaders call themselves priests? First of all there has been, within the churches, a great failure to understand the matter of the covenants - that is why this book is being written. Many confuse the Old and New Covenants and think that parts of the Old Testament can be automatically transferred to the New Covenant and that they refer to them. A tradition has grown up over the centuries in which some Christian leaders are taught to see themselves as the Christian equivalent of the priests of Israel. This is one reason why some of them like to dress up in elaborate robes for church services, like the priests of Israel. They have also at times assumed the public roles in relation to war and the appointment of national leaders which were performed by the Old Covenant priests. Their confusion is increased when they are taught that communion is a sacrifice presented to God by them. They then draw the conclusion that they alone may "offer" it, to use their language.

They have now drifted far from New Covenant ideas as laid out in the Bible. To justify this situation, the church has sometimes claimed the right to teach things which are contrary to, or "additional" to, the teachings of Christ and the apostles he appointed. This is the cause of much division in the church, because the various denominations do not agree on that extra teaching, while they are generally much more able to agree on the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Such leaders also lay themselves open to the charge which Christ made against the scribes and Pharisees that: "they nullify God's law by their traditions" and "they teach as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:6, 9). That would be a very serious charge indeed.