

A Comparison of Priesthoods:
The Old Covenant and the New Covenant
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Introduction

The beginning of the 19th century in America constituted a time in history where change and advancement dominated the scene. One of the primary factors that were undergoing a sweeping transformation was that of the religious landscape. At the forefront of this movement was a man by the name of Alexander Campbell. Campbell was a man committed to the restoration of the New Testament Church founded solely on the Word of God. Of course as one would expect, change did not come easily. Battles of words were waged as mindsets, human tradition, and creeds were exposed. One of the initial hot spots on this battleground focused on the issue of the "level Bible." This understanding equated the covenants of the Old Testament and the New Testament as being equally binding. Campbell in response to this teaching brought forth a sermon which caused quite a stir: The Sermon on the Law. This exposition of Romans 8:3 discredited the teaching of the level Bible in a manner that was logical yet inflammatory to the residing theologians who held to the teaching of the level Bible. Henry E. Webb elaborates on this historic event:

The young preacher spoke directly to the issues that had been quietly discussed, and he preached one of his most famous sermons; the "Sermon on the Law" was an exposition of Romans 8:3, in which Paul says: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh (KJV)." Herein Campbell pointed out that Paul used the term law to represent the Mosaic Covenant, which was inadequate to save men and had thus been displaced by a New Covenant. This New Covenant was mediated by Jesus Christ and is the basis of the Christian religion. **Thus, a distinction was drawn between the Old and New Testaments** that the Baptists preachers of the day were not accustomed to making.¹

This very distinction is portrayed beautifully by the writer of Hebrews in the New Testament. Most, if not all of the book of Hebrews relates this truth. As was mentioned by Webb, Campbell related that Christ was the mediator of the New Covenant. Therefore, Jesus Christ became for man the High Priest that would supersede all those before Him. He would also be the once for all High Priest that would serve until the Church is brought before God on the Day of Judgment. In light of this teaching, it is the aspiration of this study to examine the nature of the Old Covenant Priesthood while contrasting it to the superior nature of the New Testament priesthood.

¹ Henry E. Webb, In Search of Christian Unity, (Abilene: ACU Press Publishing Company, 2003) 106-107.

History and Definition of the Old Testament Priesthood

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." 1 Peter 2:9 (NASB)

The priesthood established in the Old Testament is defined as "one who is duly authorized to minister in sacred things, particularly to offer sacrifices on the altar, and who acts as mediator between men and God."² Priest is translated from Kohen in the original Hebrew manuscripts. In the Hebrew Old Testament the word Kohen appears 741 times. More than one-third of the references to the "priests" are found in the Pentateuch. Leviticus, which has about 185 references, is called the manual of the priests. The office of priest in Israel was of supreme importance and of high rank. The high priest stood next to the monarch in influence and dignity. Aaron, the head of the priestly order, was closely associated with the great lawgiver, Moses, and shared with him in the government and guidance of the nation. Through the ministering of the priesthood the people of Israel were instructed in the doctrine of sin and its consequences, in forgiveness and worship. In short, the priest was the vital source of

² International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, BibleSoft PC Study Bible 1996, s.v. "priest."

religious knowledge for the people, and the channel through which spiritual life was imparted.

The principle nature of the priesthood was four-fold. The first of these was that it implies divine choice.³ Not only was the office of priest established by God, but the priest himself was appointed of God as well. Hebrews 5:1,4 "For every High Priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; and no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God even as Aaron was." (NASB) The priest was not elected by the people in a democratic fashion, and surely he did not appoint himself as a dictator would. Even Jesus Christ did not come to man as priest without the commission of the Father. Luke 4:18 reads "The spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to Preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release of the captives." (NASB)

The second principle nature of the priesthood is that it implies representation.⁴

The institution of the office was God's gracious provision for a people at a distance from Him, who needed one to appear in the divine presence in their behalf. The high priest was to act for men in things pertaining to God, "to make propitiation for the sins

³ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. s.v. "priest"

⁴ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. s.v. "priest"

of the people" (Heb 2:17). He was the mediator who ministered for the guilty. The high priest represented the whole people.⁵

The third principle nature of the priesthood is that it implies offering of sacrifice.⁶ Nothing is clearer in Scripture than this priestly function. It was the chief duty of a priest to reconcile men to God by making atonement for their sins; and this he effected by means of sacrifice; blood-shedding. Hebrews 8:3: "For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer." (NASB) The high priest was chiefly responsible for making atonement for the sins of the people by entering into the holy of holies once a year on the Day of Atonement.

It was the high priest who carried the blood of the sin offering into the Most Holy Place and who sprinkled it seven times on and before the mercy-seat, thus symbolically covering the sins of the people from the eyes of the Lord who dwelt between the cherubim (Ps 80:1). It was he also who marked the same blood on the horns of the altar of burnt offering in the Court of the Tabernacle, and on those of the golden altar, that the red sign of propitiation might thus be lifted up in the sight of Yahweh, the righteous Judge and Redeemer.⁷

⁵ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. s.v. "priest"

⁶ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. s.v. "priest"

⁷ Fausset's Bible Dictionary, Biblesoft, 1996, s.v. "priest"

The fourth and final principle nature of the priesthood was that it implies intercession.⁸ In the ministry of Aaron and his sons the function of intercession is not laid out in the same way as the aforementioned principles; however it is implied. The foundational standard of intercession is atonement. Mankind cannot be brought near to the Lord God until their sins are righteously atoned. The blood that was sprinkled on the mercy seat served this dual purpose. Firstly it atoned for the sins of people covering their guilt from the face of God. Secondly, it was a plea to God to pardon and restore fellowship with His people once again. This dynamic was beautifully recorded in Leviticus. After Aaron had sprinkled the blood upon the mercy seat he came out from the sanctuary and blessed Israel. Leviticus 9:22 reads "Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings." (NASB) We also can see the significance of intercession in that of the account of Moses interceding before God on behalf of the Israelite people. God appealed to Moses to completely wipe out the Israelite camp, and to begin anew with Moses. Moses, however, made an earnest plea to God to

⁸ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. s.v. "priest"

spare the people in Numbers 14:11-19. In the twentieth verse of this chapter we read the results of this intercession; "So the Lord said, 'I have pardoned them according to your word.'" (NASB)

The Superiority of the New Testament Priesthood.

Having examined the nature of the Old Testament priesthood, it is then beneficial to compare and contrast that of the New Testament "priesthood." The book of Hebrews thoroughly examines these contrasts. The authors purpose for the book of Hebrews was that of "better, better, better." The people of that time were undergoing a stinging persecution. Some were turning back to Judaism in light of this persecution. The book of Hebrews, undergirded by the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, concisely examines the superior nature of the New Testament "priesthood" in order to convince the early church to persevere in the faith. These contrasts manifest in four primary ways.

The Everlasting High Priest

The first way that the New Testament priesthood is superior is this fact: the Old Testament priesthood was a group of many men who passed responsibilities of the priesthood to the next in death, versus the perpetual nature of Christ as the everlasting high priest.

The first high priest anointed by God was Aaron the brother of Moses and Miriam. In Exodus 29 we read that Aaron and his line were to serve as the priests for the Israelite people. "Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water." Exodus 29:4 (NASB) This was the beginning of the first consecration of the priesthood. Most of the previous chapters of Exodus offer a very detailed account of the Tabernacle and the exact blueprints to build it.

The tribe of Levi was to administer the care of the tabernacle, but Aaron and his descendants were the only men who could serve as the priests. This was affirmed in the rebellion of Korah. Korah was a Levite who served in the tabernacle but was not content with this appointment. He and two hundred fifty-two other men rose up to attain the priesthood. This rebellion resulted in the death of all those who participated in this rebellion. Further still, God confirmed the line of Aaron. Soon after this rebellion God commanded that twelve rods from each tribe and one rod for Aaron be placed in the Tabernacle overnight. The next day they inspected the rods, and found Aaron's rod not only to have budded but also bearing almonds as well. This rod was kept as a memorial of this event. This event confirmed

that the descendants of Aaron were to fill the role of the priesthood for generations to come.

As the generations passed the number of the priesthood grew exponentially. This very fact serves as the basis for the contrast referred to by the author of Hebrews; "And the former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing." Hebrews 7:23 (NASB) The author of Hebrews goes on to state the beautiful everlasting nature of the priesthood of Christ: "But He (Christ), on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently" Heb 7:24 (NASB). The Greek word for "permanently" is aparabaton. The root definition is "unchangeable and therefore not liable to pass to a successor."⁹ Consequently, this clearly demonstrates that Jesus serves as the final and most highly exalted high priest. None shall succeed Him for His priesthood is everlasting.

Christ's Once for All Sacrifice

The next way that the New Testament Priesthood is superior is this fact: The Old Testament priests continually, whether day by day or year to year, made sacrifices for the people for a myriad of purposes, versus

⁹ Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. Copyright(C) 2000, BibleSoft

the once for all perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross of Calvary. After careful study of the book of Leviticus we see priestly duties involving sacrifice and offering were many. Through the burnt, meal, peace, sin, and trespass offerings the priests were able to bring the people into nearness to God. These rituals were designed to make a way for the fellowship of men to their God. This constituted the shedding of blood accounted for in Leviticus 16:3,27:

Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Verse 27: But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire."
(NASB)

Barnes in his commentary details that which was occurring in these passages:

(1) The blood of a young bullock (Lev 16:3,11), which is here called the blood of a "calf," which he offered for his own sin; and
(2) The blood of a goat, as a sin-offering for others; Lev 16:9,15. It was "by," or "by means of"-dia (NT:1223)-blood thus sprinkled on the mercyseat, that the high priest sought the forgiveness of his own sins and the sins of the people.¹⁰

This explanation details the ongoing process the Israelite people had to undergo to have fellowship with

¹⁰ Barnes' Notes, Electronic Database. Copyright(c) 1997, Biblesoft.

God. The writer of Hebrews shows us the once for all splendor of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. "Who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered Himself up." Hebrews 7:27 (NASB)

Adam Clarke in his commentary elaborates further:

[For this he did once] For himself he offered no sacrifice; and the author gives the reason—he needed none, because he was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners: and for the people he offered himself once for all, when he expired upon the cross. It has been very properly remarked, that the sacrifice offered by Christ differed in four essential respects from those offered by the Jewish priests:

1. He offered no sacrifice for himself, but only for the people.
2. He did not offer that sacrifice annually, but once for all.
3. The sacrifice which he offered was not of calves and goats, but of himself.
4. This sacrifice he offered, not for one people, but for the whole human race; for he tasted death for every man.¹¹

Hence, the pre-eminence of the once for all and perfect sacrifice of Christ: man's high priest versus that of the continual and imperfect sacrifice of the Old Testament priesthood is clearly evident.

¹¹ Adam Clarke Commentary, Electronic Database, Copyright (c) 1996, BibleSoft.

The Presence of God

As mentioned previously the tabernacle which Exodus greatly details serves as the dwelling place of the Lord God:

The Tabernacle Proper: The tabernacle proper is that of which the account is given in Ex 25-27; 30:1-31:18; 35:1-40:38, with additional details in Num 3:25 ff; 4:4 ff; 7:1 ff. The central idea of the structure is given in the words, "Make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:8). It was the dwelling-place of the holy Yahweh in the midst of His people; also the place of His "meeting" with them (verse 22).¹²

Dr. James E. Smith elaborates further:

The tabernacle perpetuated the Sinai experience. The glory of the Lord settled on Mt. Sinai and later in the tabernacle. In one sense the glory of God was more intense in the tabernacle than it had been on the mount, but he could not enter the cloud when it filled the tabernacle.¹³

Hence, the glory of God resided among the people.

"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." Exodus 40:34 (NASB)

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown furnish explanation of this verse:

The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle i.e., light and fire, a created splendor, which was the special symbol of God (1 John 1:5). Whether this light was inherent in the cloud or not, it emanated from it on this occasion, and making its entry, not with the speed of a lightning flash, as if it were merely an electric spark, but in majestic splendor, it

¹² International Standard Encyclopedia, s.v. "Tabernacle"

¹³ Dr. James E. Smith, The Pentateuch, (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1992) 338.

passed through the outer porch into the interior of the most holy place (1 Kings 8:10; John 1:14).¹⁴

What is perceptible in this text is that the Glory of God is not God Himself. This is under-girded by a New Testament scripture: "Who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see." 1 Timothy 6:16 (NASB) This truth helps us to see that the tabernacle here on earth was a silhouette or type of God's true dwelling which is in heaven. The author of Hebrews again superbly details the razor-sharp superiority of the priesthood of the New Testament. "For Christ did not enter into a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true, but into a heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." Hebrews 9:24 (NASB) The Greek word antitupon translated "copy" in this verse is defined: "a thing formed after some pattern."¹⁵ This demonstrates that the tabernacle here upon this earth was formed after the true which is in heaven. Christ upon his sacrifice entered into heaven to make atonement where He intercedes on our behalf before the Father.

Therefore, the Holy of Holies which was entered into once a year by the high priest merely represented the presence of God. Christ, our High Priest, did not enter

¹⁴ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1997, BibleSoft

¹⁵ Thayer's Greek Lexicon, NT:499

into the facsimile; He entered into the true dwelling of God. He was and is in God's very presence.

The Completed Work of Christ

Having discussed some of the toils of the Old Testament priests, it is easy to discern that their work was infinite and of critical importance to the continued existence of the Israelite nation. Most of the book of Leviticus details all the many responsibilities of these individuals. The magnitude of these detailed rituals was exemplified by the account of Nadab and Abihu. These two sons of Aaron performed a ritual where they offered "strange fire" to the Lord. This disobedience or error led to their instantaneous death. So we can easily see the great ramifications of the priestly responsibilities. The writer of Hebrews makes reference to the work of these priests as continual, incomplete, redundant, and inadequate: "And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." Hebrews 10:11 (NASB) The Greek word for "daily" is Heemeran meaning "without intermission."¹⁶ This Greek word appears in 2 Thessalonians 3:8. Paul gives us a portrait of what the priests had to undertake daily. "Nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but

¹⁶ Thayer's Greek Lexicon, NT:2250

with labor and hardship, we kept working night and day (heemeran) so that we may not be a burden to you." (NASB) To adjoin support to this concept, the Holy of Holies did not contain a chair because the work of the High Priest was never done. In sharp contrast to this priesthood, Hebrews 10:12 says, "but He, having offered one sacrifice for all sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God." (NASB) Christ sat down at the right hand of the Father signifying the sacrifice and work which he was ordained to bring about had been completed.

Therefore, the incomplete work of the Old Testament priesthood pales in comparison to that of the completed work of Jesus Christ as our high priest. As Christ declared upon the cross, "It is finished." Through the conclusion of this sacrifice mankind is able to be reconciled to God the Father.

Conclusions and Summations

Having considered these particulars it is clear that the proposition and purpose of Alexander Campbell and the writer Hebrews stands to be exact. Even though today's American Church does not suffer the equivalent persecution that the Christians of that day and age were enduring, today's church too must also remain faithful to what is clearly a "better, better, better" state of affairs. The

church today, in the same way, can ere in turning to antiquated ways or systems which may be easier, but undoubtedly will only pale in comparison to that of the one true High Priest and His Kingdom: Jesus Christ!