

THE WORK OF CHRIST AND THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN (6)

The Story of the Priest

A. Introduction

1. The work of Christ is the term that is used to describe all Christ did when He came to earth to save us by dying on the cross, all that He is doing now that He has risen from the dead and ascended to God's right hand, and all that He will do when He returns.

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have spoken of Christ's work in His roles as a Prophet, as a Priest, and as a King.

The reason the church has spoken of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King is because that sums up well what God's Word teaches.

2. However, the roles of prophet, priest and king, not only are a helpful way of understanding the work of Christ, they are also a helpful way of understanding the life of a Christian.

Christians imitate Christ in each of these roles, albeit in a lesser way.

"Remember this: The work of Christ and the life of a Christian can be summed up in three words – "prophet", "priest", and "king." (Kevin DeYoung)

3. To help us understand what the Bible teaches about the work of Christ and the life of the Christian as prophet, priest, and king, we're going to use some of the different theological tools which are at our disposal.

Exegetical Theology Tool: we use this tool when we study and seek to understand individual texts of the Bible.

Biblical Theology Tool: we use this tool when we trace how a theme develops and progresses through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Systematic Theology Tool: we use this tool when we sum up what the whole Bible teaches on a specific doctrine.

Pastoral (or Practical) Theology Tool: we use this tool when we apply what we learn to the life of the church and individual Christians.

4. A priest is someone who mediates between God and people.

Within the people of Israel, the role of priest was occupied by specific individuals.

They needed to come from the tribe of Levi and be a descendant of Aaron.

"Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so that they may serve me as priests." (Exodus 28:1)

They needed to be cleansed through washing and sacrifice of the polluting effects of sin so they can serve in this way.

They needed to wear the right clothes, which communicated to the people that they were representing God and were representing them.

They needed to be set apart for this task.

"After you put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests." (Exodus 28:41)

5. As mediators, the priests interceded for the people of Israel.

They represented God's people by offering sacrifices and praying prayers for them.

"Aaron then brought the offering that was for the people. He took the goat for the people's sin offering and slaughtered it and offered it for a sin offering as he did with the first one. He brought the burnt offering and offered it in the prescribed way. He also brought the grain offering, took a handful of it and burned it on the altar in addition to the morning's burnt offering." (Leviticus 9:15-17)

Then having represented God's people by offering their sacrifices and prayers, they then represented God to the people by ministering to them.

They ministered to God's people by teaching God's Word to them and pronouncing God's blessing on them.

"Then the LORD said to Aaron... "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses." (Leviticus 10:10-11)

"Then Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them." (Leviticus 9:22)

B. The Story of the Priest

1. Who was the first priest?

It was Adam.

How do we know that Adam was a priest?

Firstly, the Garden of Eden was a temple.

"Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed." (Genesis 2:8)

"You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl,. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God, you walked among the fiery stones... By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries." (Ezekiel 28:13-14, 18)

"Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day..." (Genesis 3:8)

"I will put my dwelling-place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people." (Leviticus 26:11-12)

Secondly, if the Garden of Eden was a temple, then Adam was a priest who offered up his work to God.

"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2:15)

Adam is being portrayed as a priest who worked (serve or worship) in the garden-temple, and who takes care of it by protecting it (that is, by keeping Satan out of the Garden).

"The LORD said to Moses, "Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest to assist him. They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the Tent of Meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle." (Numbers 3:5-8)

"They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites." (Numbers 8:26)

We can observe from this, that part of the role God created human beings to have was to be priests – to serve God in His presence and to keep out sin.

2. After sin entered the world, the relationship between God and humanity changed.

God needs to clothe Adam and Eve with animal skins, pointing to the need for blood to be shed to cover their sin and shame.

“The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21)

Adam and Eve, as sinners, are kicked out of God’s presence.

“So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:23-24)

Altars must now be built and sacrifices offered by priests to bring people into a state of holiness, if God and humankind are to have any relationship.

“In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.” (Genesis 4:3-5)

“In the process of time, when they had made some improvement in their respective callings (“at the end of days,” either at the end of the year, when they kept their feast of ingathering or perhaps an annual fast in remembrance of the Fall, or at the end of the days of the week, the seventh day, which was the Sabbath) at some set time, Cain and Abel brought to Adam, as the priest of the family, each of them an offering to the Lord. We have reason to think there was a divine appointment given to Adam that this should be undertaken, as a sign of God’s favour to him and his thoughts of love toward him and his family, despite their apostasy. In this way God tested Adam’s faith in the promise and his obedience to the law that was intended to provide a remedy for sin. He would also establish harmony again between heaven and earth, and give a shadow of good things to come.” (Matthew Henry)

“Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.” (Genesis 8:20)

“Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.” (Genesis 12:6-9)

“When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, “Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.” This was Job’s regular custom.” (Job 1:5)

3. With the establishment of Israel, the role of priest became an official office.

Individuals were set apart to serve as mediators between God and the people.

Aaron and his sons were the first priests, with Aaron as the High Priest.

“Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so that they may serve me as priests.” (Exodus 28:1)

However, this did not mean that there was no priestly role for all of God’s covenant people – those whom He was in relationship with.

The people of Israel as a kingdom of priests were to intercede between God and the nations.

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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." (Exodus 19:4-6)

As a kingdom of priests, Israel were to extend the worship of God by showing to the nations how wonderful it is to be in relationship with God under His rule and enjoying His blessing.

"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God." (Deuteronomy 28:1-2)

4. Israel however, failed to live as a priestly people, and a major reason for this was the failure of Israel's priests.

Though many of the priests did faithfully served God in this role, there were lots who did not.

"Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be: Like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds." (Hosea 4:6-9)

"For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law." (Malachi 2:7-9)

C. The Shortcomings of the Priest

1. They were sinners – they had to be cleansed.

"Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people." (Hebrews 5:1-3)

2. They were standing – their sacrifices could not take away sins.

"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." (Hebrews 10:11)

3. They were succeeded – their work was temporary because they died.

"Now there have been many of those priest, since death prevented them from continuing in office." (Hebrews 7:23)

4. None of these priests could perform their work perfectly and none of them could restore God's people to what they were meant to be.

What was needed was a greater priest and a greater priesthood!

"The LORD says to my Lord... The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." (Psalm 110:1, 4)

"If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come – one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?" (Hebrews 7:11)