

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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CHRIST OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

The priestly office of Christ, writes Vos, “stands side by side with His revealing function. In one passage the author connects all three offices of Christ, referring to them in order (1:1-3). But especially the revealing function and the priesthood are conjoined in 3:1, *Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession Christ Jesus*. Note that the single definite article is used for both nouns, binding the two closely together. Also note that the author says consider the Apostle, etc. Christ is worthy of attention in both of these capacities, as is indicated by the added words of our confession (profession). This, then, is what we must confess of Christ. Further, the goal is stated: Partakers of the heavenly calling, consider . . . To reach this heavenly calling, we must consider Christ.”¹ Chapter seven is of paramount importance for the understanding of Hebrews, since the relationship of Christ to Melchizedek is his (the author’s) unique and characteristic thought. Regarding this, Milligan wrote, “he (the writer) has one aim before him – not merely to establish the superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over that of Aaron, but to bring out its different and independent character, that character which belonged first and essentially to the High Priest of the Christian dispensation, although it had been shadowed forth, as in preparatory copy, in His Melchizedekian forerunner. In order, therefore, to understand the priesthood of our Lord, we have to pass beyond the Old Testament arrangement for the Levitical priesthood and think of a still more ancient and famous *order*.”² The author conceives of spirituality as access to God. This is possible by:

- a. Covenant, or divine promises.
- b. Sacrifice, or divine redemption.
- c. Priesthood, or divine mediation.

I. **THE SIMILARITY OF MELCHIZEDEK’S PRIESTHOOD TO CHRIST’S (vv. 1-3).**

- (1) In this introduction there is one major point: Christ and Melchizedek have similar offices.
- (2) S. Lewis Johnson proposes we interpret Genesis 14 as Hebrews 7. What do we find?

- A. **Similar in Length of Priesthood (vv. 3, 8).** Bruce comments, “nothing is said of his parentage, nothing is said of his ancestry (something essential for the Aaronic priest) or progeny, nothing is said of his birth, nothing is said of his death. He appears as a living man, king of Salem and priest of God Most High; and as such he disappears. In all this – in the silences as well as in the statements – he is a fitting type of Christ; in fact, the record by the things it says of him and by the things it does not say has assimilated him to the Son of God.”³ Jesus has in reality, what Melchizedek had only typically, *neither beginning of days nor end of life and abides a priest perpetually*. “Jesus,” continues Bruce, “is not portrayed after the pattern of Melchizedek, but Melchizedek is *made like unto the Son of God*.”⁴
- B. **Similar in Name (vv. 1-2) cf. Jer. 23:7; Isa. 32:17; Ps. 85:104.** Hughes points out the significance of the Hebrew names Melchizedek and Salem, “the former,” says Hughes,

“of which means *King of Righteousness* and the latter, *peace*. Accordingly, as *King of Righteousness* and *King of Peace* Melchizedek is presented as the type of the messianic priest-king, and the marks of whose kingdom are righteousness and peace. In Christ we see the appearances of the expected everlasting king promised to David’s line under whom righteousness flourishes and peace abounds (Ps. 72:7; cf. Ps. 97:2; 98:3, 9); he is *The Prince of Peace* of the increase of whose government and peace there shall be no end (Isa. 9:6f); he is the long-awaited king who will speak peace to the nations (Zech. 9:9f), and *the righteous Branch*, whose name is *The Lord our Righteousness* and who administers justice in his glorious reign (Jer. 23:5f; 33:15f). As king he is just, and as priest he justifies all who trust in his atoning sacrifice (Rom. 3:26; 5:8f).”⁵

- C. ***Similar in Basis (v. 3)***. Their priesthoods are not genealogical; they rest in what they are. “Thus,” remarks Milligan, “the priesthood of Melchizedek, dissociated from the thought of an earthly parentage, and from the beginning and ending of earthly life, belongs to the real and the true which lie behind all we see. It springs out of eternity; to eternity it returns; when it rises before us we have no thought of the boundaries of either space or time.”⁶

II. ***THE SUPERIORITY OF MELCHIZEDEK’S PRIESTHOOD TO AARON’S (vv. 4-10)***. **Note:**

Four points indicate the superiority.

- A. ***He Tithed Abraham (vv. 4-5a)***. Calvin aptly puts it, “Abraham who excels all others is himself inferior to Melchizedek. Therefore, Melchizedek has the highest place of honour and has precedence over all the Levites. This is proved by the fact that what Abraham owed to God he paid into the hand of Melchizedek; thus by the payment of tithes he admitted his inferiority.”⁷
- B. ***He Blessed Abraham (vv. 6b-7)***. This blessing is found in Gen. 14:18. Regarding this Alford writes, “It is obvious that the axiom here laid down only holds good where the blessing is a solemn and an official one, as of a father, or a priest; as was the case here. In such cases the blesser standing in the place of God, and as so standing is of superior dignity.”⁸
- C. ***His Priesthood is Typically Permanent (v. 8)***. The Levitical priests were all characterized by one thing: They all died and had to be replaced. The point the writer is making is not that Melchizedek never died, but rather the silence of Scripture on the matter is meant here to tell us that the Melchizedek Priesthood is a living Priesthood.
- D. ***He Tithed Levi (vv. 9, 10)***. When Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek, he did so not only in his own name but also in the name of his posterity. This would therefore prove again the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood to that of the Levitical. *For he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him*. The argument, as Hughes points out, is a parallel to Rom. 5:12, where Paul’s reasoning is of the same kind when he teaches, on the basis of the solidarity of the human race in Adam, that when Adam sinned, all sinned, and that the death of Adam was the death of all (1 Cor. 15:22). “It may be affirmed, therefore,” concludes Hughes, “that Levi, *who receives tithes* – actually *paid tithes through Abraham*. In this historic encounter, then, what was established was not simply a precedent, but a whole relationship, the significance of which is permanent; namely, that the order of Melchizedek, fulfilled in Christ, is superior to the order of Levi, which with the advent of Christ is surpassed and superseded.”⁹

III. ***ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK: THE PERFECTION OF CHRIST’S PRIESTHOOD (vv. 11-19)***. **NOTE:**

(1) Expounds Psalm 110:4 phrase by phrase.

(2) Not every type is a type in every respect.

- A. ***The Aaronic Priesthood provides an Inferior Access (vv. 11-14).*** Aaron's ministry was provisional, not permanent; ineffectual, not effectual (cf. 9:9; 10:2).
- B. ***The Melchizedek Priesthood Provides a Superior Priest (vv. 15-17).*** A priest whose ministry is rooted in the life and strength of God. He has *indestructible* (Gk. *akatalutou*, indissoluble, perpetual, unconquerable) *life*. "We see," says Calvin, "how the eternity of the priesthood is shown in Christ."¹⁰
- C. ***The Melchizedek Priesthood Provides a Superior Access (vv. 18, 19).*** The Old Testament access was provisional and incomplete: Ours is permanent and complete, or, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, **Better!** "The one priesthood," wrote H. C. G. Moule, "is greater than the other in respect of the finality, the permanence, the everlastingness, of the greater Priest and of His office. He is what He is (His *indestructible life*). As such, He is the Priest not of an introductory and transient *commandment*, but of that *better hope* which (v. 19) has at last *made perfect* the purpose and the promise, fulfilled the intention of eternal mercy, and brought us, the people of this great covenant, absolutely nigh to God."¹¹

IV. ***THE LORD HATH SWORN: THE PLEDGE OF CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD (vv. 20-22).*** Christ's priesthood is grounded in the oath, the purpose of love. God has vowed with an unalterable oath. The Levitical priesthood could never have laid claim to such a solemn affirmation as this. This is another indication of the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood.

NOTE: Bruce points out that this is the first occurrence of the term *covenant* in this epistle, but the term is about to play such a central part in the argument to follow that the whole epistle has been described as "The Epistle of the *Diatheke*," i.e., settlement.¹²

V. ***A PRIEST FOREVER: THE PERMANENCE OF CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD (vv. 23-25).***

NOTE:

- (1) There is here, in the words of S. Lewis Johnson, a golden chain with three beautiful links: endless life, priesthood, and salvation.
- (2) Contrast Israel's priests in the past, the present, and that of Roman Catholicism. (Luther, referring to Rome's priesthood, wrote in a way that only he could, "If tonsures, consecrations, ointments, vestments made priests and bishops, then Christ and His apostles were never priests or bishops!"¹³)

NOTE: Mormonism boasts of having both an Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthood – which is impossible. V. 24 states that only Christ has the Melchizedek priesthood, and that He holds *His priesthood permanently* (Gk. *aparabatos*, lit. untransferable). "The same idea in v. 3," says Robertson, "God placed Christ in this priesthood and no one else can step into it."¹⁴

- A. ***The Extent of His Salvation (v 25).***
- B. ***The Objects of His Salvation (v. 25).***
- C. ***The Cause of His Salvation (v. 25).*** His death (implied) and His intercession. He gives His life then forever for us. In the last phrase of the verse, the readers receive further assurance. Their salvation is complete and final because Jesus "always lives to intercede for them." The contrast with the Levitical priests continues, for their ministry on behalf of the readers can't continue after they die. The benefits of Jesus' priestly work endure, for he intercedes as the ever-living one, as the one who has triumphed over death forever, as the risen one. It is probable that Jesus' intercession is based on his sacrifice, for Jesus' priestly ministry is the theme here, and the subsequent verses (vv. 26-28) focus on his offering as a priest. His intercession, then, is linked with and based on what he accomplished in his death. Indeed, the drawing near to God (cf. 10:22) is only made possible through Jesus' blood and sacrifice. As Koester says, "The strongest reasons for assuming that intercession in Hebrews involves petitions for forgiveness are that Heb. 7:26-27 mentions human sin, that Christ's priestly work involves making atonement (2:17), and that the new covenant brings

forgiveness (Heb. 8:12; 10:17).” The parallel text in Rom. 8:33-34 also plays a confirmatory role, for Jesus’ intercession, as is the case in Hebrews, is joined with his death and resurrection. At the same time, there is no reason intercession could not also involve the notion of help and assistance so that Jesus intercedes to help those being tempted (2:17-18; 4:14-16). Jesus’ intercession includes his help for those in need and a plea for forgiveness. The language of intercession is analogous language, and thus there is no idea of the Son literally interceding before the Father forever and ever.¹⁵

VI. ***THE CONCLUDING SUMMARY: A SON PERFECTED FOREVER (vv. 26-28).***

NOTE: He has gloriously effective ministry *for* (Gk, *gar*, conjunction). He is an exalted priest, faithful to His covenant obligations.

A. *His Person* (v. 26).

B. *His Performance* (v. 27).

C. *His Perfection* (v. 28).

Dr. Saphir calls attention to two things in this chapter: How much saving we need, and how well Christ can do it. His mediation must go low enough to reach the cross, high enough to reach heaven and deep enough to enter into and abide in our hearts.¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS:

- (1) First, there are three great *ables* in the book, but we have the greatest (v. 25) cf. 2:18; 4:15.
- (2) Second, our response should be clear: Know Him as a perfected priest, believe He is there for us, and trust His working.

Finally, heed the words of Richard Phillips: “You may ask, How can Christ speak for me in the filthiness of my sins, with my record of failure and infidelity? The answer is that Jesus need not speak at all. He needs only to identify you as one of his own. He needs only to direct his pierced hand toward you and, if he speaks at all, to say, *Father, this is one of my own, who comes to you through my shed blood for his salvation.* Your sins are dealt with completely, to the uttermost, because Jesus intercedes for you with the remedy of his cross. The spiritual value of this teaching is enormous. We try to deal with guilt by doing things on our level, by confessing or fasting or praying or doing good works. Of course we are to confess our sins. First John 1:9 says, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* We are in relationship with Christ, and he wants us to come to him with our sins, hating and mourning our iniquity. But our confession cannot actually remove our sin. What removes our sin is not something we do but what he did once for all on the cross, an all-sufficient redemption that now is on display in heaven and will be forever.”¹⁷

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Gerrhardus, Vos, *The Teaching of The Epistle to The Hebrews* (P&R, 1977), p. 91.
- ² William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* (rpt. The Attic Press, 1977), p. 62.
- ³ F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 140.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Philip Hughes, *Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 247.
- ⁶ Milligan, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
- ⁷ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries XII* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 91.
- ⁸ Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament IV* (rpt. Baker, 1971), p. 137.
- ⁹ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- ¹⁰ Calvin, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
- ¹¹ H. C. G. Moule, *Messages From the Epistle to The Hebrews* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), p. 85.
- ¹² Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- ¹³ S. Lewis Johnson, *Class Notes*, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984.
- ¹⁴ A. T. Robertson, *World Pictures In The New Testament V* (Broadman, 1936), p. 386.
- ¹⁵ T. R. Schreiner, *Hebrews: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Lexham Press, 2020), p. 134.
- ¹⁶ Adolph Saphir, *Expository Lectures on The Epistles to The Hebrews* (C. C. Cook, 1921), p. 92.
- ¹⁷ R. D. Phillips, *Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P&R, 2006), p. 250.