



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 132

Priest – A priest is someone who acts on behalf of people before God. Where a prophet was appointed by God to be His representative with men, a priest was appointed by God to be man’s representative before God. The word in the Old Testament which is almost without exception used for a priest is the word “kohen.” After the fall sinful man was barred from access into the presence of holy God. Therefore he needed someone to act on his behalf, representing him before God, mediating between God and himself, and interceding for him. God graciously provided for this by establishing the priestly office.

After the fall, in the early stages of human history, it seems that the head of each family served as a priest, representing their family and mediating between them and God (Job 1:5). Later on God established the priesthood, which was narrowed to the tribe of Levi, beginning with Aaron and his sons (Exodus 28:1; 29:29-30). And this Levitical priesthood continued throughout the Old Testament and until the time of Christ. Hebrews 5:1-4 provides the best summary of the duties of the priesthood.

Christ as priest – The Old Testament predicted the coming of a great priest. In Psalm 110:4 God the Father tells David’s Lord, the Messiah, “The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”” Also in Zechariah 6, God announced the coming of a man named the “Branch,” who would build the temple of God and be a priest (vv. 12-13). These are significant messianic prophecies, which Jesus fulfilled with His incarnation and ministry (Hebrews 5:6).

The author of Hebrews provides a wealth of information about the work of the Great High Priest, comparing and contrasting these with the Levitical priests. Like the other priests Jesus was a man, and was appointed by God (Hebrews 2:17; 5:5-6). Jesus was a mediator between sinful man and holy God (vv. 9:15; 12:24). He offered a sacrifice unto God for the atonement of His people (vv. 7:26; 9:15, 26-28; 10:12-13). By assuming a human nature, Jesus became capable of personally experiencing human struggles, temptations, pain and sufferings, and became a merciful High Priest able to sympathize with us in our sufferings (vv. 2:17-18; 4:15; 5:8). Thus He discharged all the functions of the priestly office.

However, unlike the priests who preceded Him, Jesus had no need of offering sacrifices for Himself, as He was in every respect sinless and holy (Hebrews 4:15; 7:26-27). He had no need of offering many and repeated sacrifices, as He offered one sacrifice and once (vv. 7:27; 9:25-28). Also His sacrifice was not the sacrifice of animals, which inherently could not take away sins, but Himself, the true sacrifice which was all-sufficient to take away sins (vv. 7:27; 9:12-14; 10:5-14). In doing so Jesus sat down at the right hand of God, having completed His sacrificial work (vv. 10:11-12). Also unlike the many priests, Jesus is the one true priest, and His priesthood is permanent and unchanging (vv. 7:23-24).

Unlike the Levitical priests, Jesus came from the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6; 6:20; 7:11), which was not from the Levites (v. 7:3), and to whom we read that Abraham offered a tithe, indicating Melchizedek’s superiority even over the patriarch (Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 7:4-7). Thus, the author of Hebrews describes the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus to that of the Levites, whose priesthood is not founded on the Mosaic law but on the divine oath (vv. 7:16, 20-21), and whose descent is not from the tribe of Levi but Judah (vv. 7:13-15), and whose priesthood is eternal (v. 7:16); and thus He is the mediator of a new and more excellent covenant (vv. 7:18-19, 22; 8:6-7; 9:15), who being faithful to God who called Him, fully and perfectly accomplished the work of redemption (vv. 3:1-2; 5:8-9; 9:12).

Through this Christ opened the way into the presence of God for His people, a great privilege and honor we enjoy over those under the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:1-7). Now there is no longer an earthly temple and priesthood hindering our access to God (Matthew 27:51). Therefore the author of Hebrews exhorts us believers to confidently “enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19-23).