

## **The Law and the Priesthood: A Glorious Development**

*And the LORD said to Aaron, "In their land you shall not take an inheritance, and there will be no portion for you among them. It is I who is your portion and your inheritance in the midst of the sons of Israel." Numbers 18:20*

*And it is this one who will build the temple of the LORD. It is he who shall bear the honor and shall sit and shall rule on his throne and will be a priest upon his throne and the counsel of peace shall be between the both of them. Zechariah 6:13*

*The central point in what is being said is that we have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the holy things and of the tent which the Lord set up, not man. Hebrews 8:1-2*

### INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

In this paper we will explore the seed, growth, fruit and some implications of God's intention as first stated at Exodus 19:5-6<sup>1</sup> and which culminates in the declarations of Revelation 1:5-6<sup>2</sup> and 5:10<sup>3</sup> & 20:6<sup>4</sup>.

In the Exodus reference God promised Israel, on condition of their obedience, that they would be his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The connection with the law of God – the subject of this year's conference - is that, though this promise immediately preceded the giving of the law at Sinai and was forfeited by Israel as a nation, God was not to be deterred from his holy and gracious purpose to have a kingdom of priests, whose portion would be God himself. So while God gave Moses at Sinai instruction for priestly service under Aaron and his male descendants, none of them would or could fulfill more than what was portrayed *in type* by their persons and service. This promise remained unfulfilled. Like that made to Abraham centuries before the law was given,<sup>5</sup> the promise of a kingdom of priests also came before the giving of the law and lay dormant for hundreds of years before the fullness of its time was to come.

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<sup>1</sup> "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..." (ESV and unless otherwise noted)

<sup>2</sup> "...Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

<sup>3</sup> "...you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

<sup>4</sup> "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years."

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3:17

The most godly person as to God's law – priest or other individual - could pray Psalm 119 with its exaltation of God's word and do so with sincerity, but he would also need to concur with its pathetic conclusion: *I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commandments.*<sup>6</sup> Psalm 73, written by a Levite, may reflect the closest approach of faith toward attaining the privilege and life God gave the priests under the administration of stone and shadows: *I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*<sup>7</sup> However true for the Levite, Asaph who wrote them and for others so enlightened, these words were far from expressing the heart of the Levites as a tribe or of all the descendants of Aaron.

Rather, the perfect priest and his work would be realized only by one on whose heart the law of God was completely inscribed and who delighted in and obeyed it without flaw throughout every moment of his short life on this earth. It is through our Lord Jesus Christ that the promise of Exodus 19 would begin to be fulfilled in his *kingdom of reigning priests*. Now on this side of Calvary, the empty tomb and Pentecost, a royal priesthood is the portion, privilege and responsibility of every Christian, as beneficiaries of Christ's work.

Our great high Priest did not leave his followers to wonder after his ascension what their service was and how it should be carried out, but he laid its foundation in his first sermon as recorded in Matthew 5 to 7. It is the particular thesis of this paper and to be explored in skeleton form that this sermon is primarily a guide for living as a follower of Jesus Christ, conceived of as a priest in the service of a great king.

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<sup>6</sup> Verse 176

<sup>7</sup> v.23-26

We shall first briefly review the subject of 'priest' in the Scriptures written before Christ and then focus on the sacerdotal nature of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Our Lord's work as priest - surely the most misunderstood of his offices during his lifetime - was uppermost in his mind if not his teaching. It is no coincidence that his followers are to imitate his priestly character as lovers and doers of the law of God, fueled by the love of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through the presence of the Spirit of Christ, God himself is now the portion of every believer. The privilege of the priesthood is no longer the province of a select few but belongs to all the people in Christ's kingdom, to each member of his church. In this way the original promise of God to have a holy nation, comprised of reigning priests, is now being fulfilled and will be brought to completion at Christ's return in glory. Then to all eternity priestly service will characterize every perfected believer to the glory of God and the supernal happiness of all the inhabitants of heaven.

#### THE PRIESTLY PORTION

The captioned verse from Numbers 18 presents a most remarkable promise. God was making it plain that Aaron, his male descendants and their families, would have no specifically assigned geographic area of land in Canaan. Rather their home would be at the place God would appoint for his own worship. He himself was to be their portion; he had promised it. The priests were to be his in a particularly intentional way while serving the people. They would be dressed *for glory and for beauty*<sup>8</sup> in garments that would seem more fitting for a king than a priest with their dazzling and carefully inscribed and mounted jewels. This outward display typified, as a whole and in all its parts, Israel's king, the Lord God of hosts himself, and his love for and care of his people. It was he, the only true and living God, who had promised that he would be the priests' portion.

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 28:2 & 40

The other two verses cited in the caption predict and then defend the realization of this promise as culminated in the one true Israelite, Jesus Christ, God incarnate. In him all the offices of the Hebrew Scriptures come together.

#### PRIESTS PRIOR TO THE GIVING OF THE LAW

It is at Sinai that we first meet the word and concept of ‘priest’ among the Israelites as a people. The word appears initially in Scripture describing Melchizedek<sup>9</sup> who had a unique priesthood, as is made clear in the epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>10</sup> There were priests in Egypt<sup>11</sup> and in Midian<sup>12</sup> but none among the Israelites that we read of before Exodus 19, where the priests, *who come near to the Lord*, were to consecrate themselves<sup>13</sup> and were further cautioned along with all the other people not to approach or come up Mount Sinai lest they die.<sup>14</sup>

Who were these priests and how were they appointed? From the context we do not know. Probably the best that could be said of them is that like Job<sup>15</sup> they were heads of households who acted in some way as mediator between themselves, their families and perhaps others in approaching God or their idea of God. Since both shepherds<sup>16</sup> and blood sacrifice<sup>17</sup> were abominations to the Egyptians, it would seem that whatever their activities as priests, it differed considerably from what God ordained through Moses that Aaron and his sons should be and do. Also we do not read of any “priests” siding with the Levites against their brethren at the time of the golden calf, when according to the biblical record there were none who demurred from this idolatry, including Aaron himself, until confronted by Moses.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 14:18

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 7

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 41:45, 50; 46:20

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 3:1; 18:1

<sup>13</sup> Verse 22

<sup>14</sup> Verse 24

<sup>15</sup> Job 1:5

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 46:34

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 8:26

Admittedly these are arguments from silence but as that entire generation save Joshua and Caleb were faithless and died in the wilderness, it would seem that these “priests” were man-made and without divine appointment. Hebrews tells us that no one takes this office to himself but he who is called of God, as was Aaron.<sup>18</sup> These “priests” proved to be no different than the rest of the Israelites in drawing back from becoming what God promised in the pivotal Exodus 19:6 text, namely that Israel was to exist as his kingdom of priests and as a holy nation. Though asserting that *all the Lord had spoken they would do*,<sup>19</sup> Israel turned from the terrifying manifestation of God’s holiness and power at Sinai in abject fear and asked that Moses stand before God in their place. By so doing, they in effect declined to serve as priests with God as their portion and they as his treasured possession.

#### AARON AND THE PRIESTHOOD

Thus the question remained: how would God’s promise in Exodus 19:6 be fulfilled and there be a nation of reigning priests? For even while Moses and Joshua were on Sinai, the physically redeemed Israelites requested a ‘god’ to lead them in Moses’ absence. Aaron made a calf of their gold ornaments, which they then used to “worship” the Lord. They sat down to eat and rose up to play.<sup>20</sup> God revealed to Moses how the people had corrupted themselves and when he came down to them, he smashed the two tablets of the law, ground up their calf, put its powder in their water and had them drink it to show what God thought of their idol and its worship. When Moses called for those on the Lord’s side, only his fellow tribesmen from Levi joined him. At Moses’ orders the Levites went throughout the camp and executed three thousand of their fellow Israelites,<sup>21</sup> earning high commendation from Moses in his final blessing of the tribes.<sup>22</sup> All this demonstrated how far from being a nation of royal priests these redeemed Israelites were.

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<sup>18</sup> 5:4

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 19:8; 20:19; 24:3,7

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 32:5-6

<sup>21</sup> See Exodus 32.

<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 33:8-11

Aaron deserved death, so great was God's anger against him, but he was spared by his brother's prayers.<sup>23</sup> He became illustrious of the forgiving mercy and restoring grace of God. For it was Aaron whom God chose to be Israel's first high priest and only his sons were to succeed him.

#### THE PRIESTS AND LEVITES

Fulfilling Jacob's prophecy, no doubt in a way wholly unanticipated by him,<sup>24</sup> the Levites were not given one specific territory in which to live but were to be scattered among the forty-eight "Levitical" cities that God designated through Moses and were taken from the other tribes' territories.<sup>25</sup> So dispersed, they were to be Israel's teachers<sup>26</sup> and models of the righteousness of the law.

Priests were also to be or to function with any judge whom God might raise up for cases too difficult for local or tribal resolution.<sup>27</sup>

How they functioned and with what success can be easily seen from even a cursory review of Old Testament history. At times priests preserved the ways of the Lord, were persecuted or even killed for their faithfulness. At other times they were leaders in iniquity or indistinguishable from the idolatrous practices of the people they were to have been instructing and leading in the ways of God.

Two of Aaron's sons were peremptorily executed when they offered "strange" fire on the altar during their ordination.<sup>28</sup>

Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, distinguished himself in executing a couple it would seem *in flagrante delicto* when the leadership were pleading with God for mercy

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<sup>23</sup> Deuteronomy 9:20

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 49:7

<sup>25</sup> See Numbers 35 and Joshua 21.

<sup>26</sup> Deuteronomy 24:8; Malachi 2:4-7

<sup>27</sup> Deuteronomy 17:8-12

<sup>28</sup> Leviticus 10:1-7

during a plague sent to punish Israel's unfaithfulness with Moab's gods and for sexual immorality with foreign women.<sup>29</sup>

Under Joshua's godly leadership, as was true of that entire second generation after the exodus, the priests were faithful to their duties. There was as yet no resting place for the Tabernacle during the conquest until it was settled at Shiloh, and the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant – the footstool of their God<sup>30</sup> – faithfully wherever Joshua led them. They also oversaw the distribution of the land among the tribes.<sup>31</sup>

During the period of the judges we read nothing of priests save a passing reference to this same Phinehas when the eleven tribes had assembled to fight against offending Benjamin.<sup>32</sup> However, Judges 17 and 18 chronicle an incident that reveals the degradation of the Levites under the rampant idolatry that was practiced at the time when *there was no king in Israel*.<sup>33</sup>

As a lad, Samuel's first revelation from God came in a time when divine visions were rare.<sup>34</sup> It concerned the fierce anger of God against the abuses and wickedness of the high priest's sons. And in one day the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, Hophni and Phinehas were slain and Eli collapsed and died.<sup>35</sup>

Samuel was a descendant of Kohath, son of Levi,<sup>36</sup> and though not in the line of Aaron, he was a Levite and Israel's last judge, faithful in all his ways and a prophet whose *words never fell to the ground*.<sup>37</sup> He seems to have single-

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<sup>29</sup> Numbers 25:7-11; Psalm 106:30-31

<sup>30</sup> 1 Chronicles 28:2; Psalm 99:5

<sup>31</sup> Joshua 19:51

<sup>32</sup> Judges 20:28

<sup>33</sup> Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

<sup>34</sup> 1 Samuel 3:1

<sup>35</sup> 1 Samuel 4:18

<sup>36</sup> See 1 Chronicles 6:20-28.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Samuel 3:19-20

handedly sought to carry out the duty of Levitical instruction by his annual circuits within Israel.<sup>38</sup>

But Samuel was eventually rejected as was his Lord when Israel, wishing to be like all the surrounding nations, demanded a human king to fight their battles.<sup>39</sup>

That first king, far from any concern to realize the promise of Exodus 19:6 or anything remotely like it, was the commanding authority behind Doeg the Edomite, who slaughtered all but one of the Lord's priests at Nob.<sup>40</sup> The survivor fled to David, also now outlawed by Saul, and the true church was again back in the wilderness until Saul was removed. For as the prophet later reminds us, this king was given and was taken away in God's anger.<sup>41</sup>

Under David the priesthood flourished and the Levites were given additional responsibilities and privileges. Israel's sweet psalmist<sup>42</sup> put them in ranks and brought their musical gifts to the fore to enhance the worship of their God.<sup>43</sup>

After the kingdom was divided and Jeroboam established not one but two golden calves in the north as a deterrent to returning to Jerusalem to worship, he installed his own priests - whomever he pleased - and banished the Lord's faithful priests, who fled to the south.<sup>44</sup> Never again was there a righteous priestly witness in the northern kingdom until it was carried away into exile, thus eliminating any possibility of that realm moving toward a fulfillment of Exodus 19:6.

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<sup>38</sup> 1 Samuel 7:16-17

<sup>39</sup> 1 Samuel 8:4-7

<sup>40</sup> 1 Samuel 22:6ff

<sup>41</sup> Hosea 13:11

<sup>42</sup> 2 Samuel 23:1

<sup>43</sup> See First Chronicles 23-25.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Chronicles 11:13-17

In the south we read of the faithfulness of the high priest Jehoida before and during the reign of Jehoash<sup>45</sup> and of the treachery of his successor Urijah under king Ahaz.<sup>46</sup>

Good king Hezekiah took pains to reform the worship of God, including the priesthood,<sup>47</sup> but years after his death, when Nebuchadnezzar struck the fatal blow, all Jerusalem with her officers and priests had become corrupted, save Jeremiah and Ezekiel, both faithful priests and prophets of the Lord.

Isaiah recorded God's promise for the future faithful ones in Jerusalem: *...you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God...*<sup>48</sup> But there would be centuries of silence before even the commencement of the fulfillment of these words.

The post-exilic books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the work of Ezra and other priests and Levites who were among the relatively few who were willing to return to the rubble of Jerusalem and begin the rebuilding process of the city. This was critically necessary because Jerusalem was the prophetically designated place to receive the promised Servant of the Lord.

The last book in our Old Testament is largely devoted to rebuking the existing Levitical structure and priesthood, promising reformation and purification in accordance with the law of Moses.<sup>49</sup>

Thus when the four hundred or so years commenced with Malachi and until the birth of Christ, Jerusalem had neither king nor prophet and the small province of Judah had only Aaronic priests. They were far from forming a kingdom. Rather they suffered under the dominion of Persia, then Greece and at the time of our

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<sup>45</sup> 2 Kings 12:2ff

<sup>46</sup> 2 Kings 16:10ff

<sup>47</sup> See 1 Kings 23-25.

<sup>48</sup> 61:6

<sup>49</sup> Malachi 4:4

Lord's birth, Rome, which by then had flung off all pretense at a republic and was governed by an emperor, Caesar Augustus. Judah's condition of de facto enslavement is well expressed in the chilling but true words as they rejected their only Messiah: *we have no king but Caesar*.<sup>50</sup>

The question remained unanswered: where and when would there come the fulfillment to Exodus 19:6 and the realization of a kingdom of priests unto God, who would himself be their sole and sufficient portion?

### THE DAWN OF FULFILLMENT

We observe that when an answer was about to come that would fulfill the word of the Lord, it was through a Levite who was himself a descendant of Aaron.

The word of the Lord was revealed by the angel Gabriel to the incredulous husband of yet another godly but childless and aged couple. Zachariah was told that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son, who would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. He would be a Nazirite and live in the spirit of Elijah by performing the ministry of turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and preparing the way of the Lord God, who was himself to appear on the earth.

Struck dumb upon receiving this message because of unbelief, his tongue was loosed at the naming of his child. Zachariah spoke eloquently of the promise of a deliverer, whom his son, John, would introduce to Israel, without even a hint of a priestly function. Rather John would prepare the people by giving them the knowledge of their sin and the need of repentance through his preaching, through, that is, his prophetic work. What was prominent in Zachariah's hymn was the work of a king and divine power, not what is ordinarily associated with a priest. But as John called all classes of the people to repentance, his words contained aspects of priestly ministry, such as the duty to distinguish the holy

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<sup>50</sup> John 19:15

from the profane and his reminding the people of Israel of the statutes and equity that the Lord had given them through Moses.<sup>51</sup>

Expectations in Israel were high. Was John the promised anointed one? Was he the prophet promised by Moses?<sup>52</sup> He was none of these and claimed to be only a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord.<sup>53</sup> We note that no one was asking if John was to be a priest, despite his parentage. His life as a Nazirite and desert recluse until his preaching began was far removed from following in his father's labors in the temple service. But in his person he combined the offices of prophet and priest. That is, in his life he demonstrated the spirit of Elijah and in his reverence for the law of God, the faithfulness of Moses. Little wonder, then, that Jesus praised John so highly! But even as this pinnacle of godliness under the law, John was less than the least of those who were to have the inestimable privilege of membership in Christ's royal priesthood.<sup>54</sup>

Our Lord was deemed to be a son of Nazareth, though he was predicted to be<sup>55</sup> and was born in Bethlehem to a virgin espoused to a descendant of Judah. No one could be a priest in Israel under the Mosaic appointment from that tribe.

It would seem, then, that it was never even imagined that this one whom John was born to introduce would be a priest, despite John's description of him, which spoke of repentance, of acts demonstrating it and particularly of cleansing, all related to priestly work. Penitents were to *bear fruit worthy of repentance...* understand that *the axe is laid at the root of the tree and every tree not bearing good fruit will be cut down and burned... One is coming who will baptize you – not with water as I, John, do but with fire... he will clear his threshing floor, gather*

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<sup>51</sup> Leviticus 10:10-11; see also chapters 21-22.

<sup>52</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15

<sup>53</sup> Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3

<sup>54</sup> Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28. See also the words that conclude the eleventh chapter of Hebrews: *And all these, though commended by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

<sup>55</sup> Micah 5:2

*his wheat into his barn and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.*<sup>56</sup> *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*<sup>57</sup> *...this is the Son of God.*<sup>58</sup>

John baptized Jesus, heard of his works but continued to languish in prison. He sent and asked if Jesus was *the one who was to come or should we look for another.*<sup>59</sup> After all, how else would John's prophetic words be fulfilled if not by the exercise of almighty power in the overthrow of all unrighteousness and in the reformation of worship as David, Hezekiah and Josiah had done? John and the rest were looking for a king.

### JESUS CHRIST AND THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

New Testament evidence of Jesus' priestly work is abundant in the epistles and implied in his own frequent statements regarding the necessity of his death. It was in and through the Lord Christ that the promise of Exodus 19:6 would be fulfilled in the kingdom of sinners that his Father had given him and for whose sins he must himself provide atonement as their great High Priest. By his once offering up of himself as a sacrifice, he would reconcile his subjects to God and procure for every one of them an indefectible righteousness, a wedding garment with out spot, blemish or any such thing.<sup>60</sup> For what the law could not do because of the weakness – the sinfulness – of the flesh, God did. In sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, God condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of God's law might be fulfilled in every believer.<sup>61</sup>

And so the kingdom of God is now a kingdom of priests by virtue of the union with Christ of each subject in this kingdom.<sup>62</sup> Jesus' work as priest, after another

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew 4:8-12

<sup>57</sup> John 1:29

<sup>58</sup> John 1:34

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 11:2-3

<sup>60</sup> Ephesians 5:27; 2 Peter 3:14

<sup>61</sup> Romans 8:3-4

<sup>62</sup> Revelation 1:6; 5:10

order than Aaron, is the center of the entire patient and magnificent exposition that we have in the epistle to the Hebrews.

But how, we may ask, could something made so plain after Christ's resurrection and the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost be so obscure before? Were there no hints in our Lord's ministry of his priestly work beyond his own predictions of rejection, suffering and death?

Indeed there were and to this we now turn.

#### NEW TESTAMENT PRIESTLY WORK

Of the Old Testament offices that Christ executed on earth - prophet, judge, priest and king - his priestly work was arguably the most prominent. He repeatedly stated that he came not to do his own will but the will of his Father who had sent him.<sup>63</sup> That will was consummated in his laying down his life as a ransom for many, an atoning sacrifice in behalf of his sheep.<sup>64</sup>

Jesus' teaching is encapsulated in his statement that it is enough that a disciple be like his teacher, not above him.<sup>65</sup> Teaching was the responsibility of the priests as overseers and of the Levites.<sup>66</sup> Their strategic position in the forty-eight Levitical cities was designed to facilitate this aspect of their duty.

In this sense, then, our Lord was the consummate teaching priest.<sup>67</sup> As subsequent New Testament passages demonstrate, the fulfillment of Exodus 19:6 was to be, has been and will continue to be realized in the church, the body of our Savior. For each member needs instruction and guidance to be presented

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<sup>63</sup> John 5:30; 6:38; 8:28

<sup>64</sup> Mark 10:45; John 10:15 & 17; 13:37

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 10:25

<sup>66</sup> Ezra and the Levites provided an excellent example of this. See Nehemiah 8.

<sup>67</sup> This in no way is to diminish his work in offering up himself as a sacrifice at the end of his life - his ultimate priestly work on earth, nor is it meant to detract from his priestly intercession in heaven at the present time for his own.

complete [teleion] in Christ.<sup>68</sup> The goal is that disciples become like their Master by continually presenting their bodies to him as living sacrifices, an offering fit for and acceptable by God, by doing Christ's will and by awaiting his return in glory.<sup>69</sup> The apostle who wrote this particular description of the goal once characterized his ministry this way: *But on some points I have written you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace that was given to me by God, namely for me to be a minister [leitourgos] of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, in the priestly service [hierougounta] of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*<sup>70</sup> Paul here describes his work as *priestly* service to God. His preaching and teaching the Gentiles was toward the goal of being able to present them to God as a pleasing sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise for this magnificent demonstration of God's mercy in saving them as he himself had been saved.

#### SERMON ON THE MOUNT AS PRIESTLY INSTRUCTION

The Sermon on the Mount is a priestly document. In it our Lord sets forth the kingdom standards in seed form for shaping the life of his disciples, each of whom was to be a priest and at the same time a subject of his eternal kingdom. This sermon performed the priestly function of instruction to disciples.<sup>71</sup> In what follows, we will outline with brief comments the structure and development of the sermon as it passes through various subjects, all reflecting the province and responsibility of a priest – to be taught and in turn to teach others to be like Christ. The pattern is of master and disciple.

Throughout the sermon runs a thread that at times is implied and at other times, overt: there are only two choices in every situation, one righteous, the other not; one with favorable consequences, the other brings misery or far worse. Failure

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<sup>68</sup> Colossians 1:28

<sup>69</sup> Romans 8:29; 12:1-2; 1Peter 1:13

<sup>70</sup> Romans 15:15-16

<sup>71</sup> Matthew 5:1

to hit the mark may occur in many forms and ways. In each category of the Sermon, these opposites will be noted.

The nature of the instruction as pertaining to the priestly sphere will also be noted. The foundation of this sermon is built on by Jesus in other places in the Gospel records and is developed much more extensively in the letters of the apostles.

### **Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes**

It was the duty of the Aaronic priests to bless the people.<sup>72</sup> We normally associate such today with the benediction, which implies the close of public worship, although the act itself need have no such connotation. The Psalter begins with the word “blessed.” One implication is that in the absence of God’s blessing on a person or a people, life is cursed and hopeless, but under divine benediction there is the privilege of living favorably in God’s presence. There is no third alternative: live as a priest with God as your portion or abide under the Adamic curse. These opening verses constitute the awesome reality of God’s blessing upon the elect that is the basis of their entire range and experience of temporal and eternal beatitude.

Thus our Lord begins his sermon with the goal: these who are blessed are, like the man in the first Psalm, people whose lives are characterized by these qualities. Each of them was perfected in our Lord Jesus as man. This becomes more vivid when he shifts from third person to second in verse 11, “Blessed are *you...*” And for the rest of the sermon, the penetrating second person voice prevails.

### **Matthew 5:13-16 Salt and Light**

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<sup>72</sup> Numbers 6:22-27

No offering was to be presented by the priest without the salt of the covenant.<sup>73</sup> Christ is the light of the world and by implication the salt that keeps all from being insipid or rotting. Thus his disciples, in being made like him, are to be both as well. There are warnings against losing one's saltiness or hiding one's light or letting it be used for unworthy ends. These priests are to shine with the reflection of their Master. We recall the candlestick in the Tabernacle as that which would have provided light for early morning or late evening activities in the holy place for Aaron and his progeny.

### **Matthew 5:17-48 The Law**

Throughout this entire section Christ instructs by contrast with actual or possible objections to his teaching. One example is that underlying Jesus' method were insidious intentions that he had come to destroy the law, when in fact it was to fulfill it. His words, "You have heard it said; but I say to you..." are intended to meet head on superficial, self-protecting interpretations of the law that blunt its deeper, spiritual intent, which was to pierce through mere outward conformity and reach one's heart and motives.

### **The Law and Jesus 5:17-20**

Here are quintessential priestly dual realities from one who actually kept all the law perfectly and taught it – himself again the model of his teaching.<sup>74</sup> The affirmation that the law is good and holy<sup>75</sup> was manifested every moment of our Lord's earthly existence in his human nature. The bringer of the new covenant had the law written on his heart<sup>76</sup> and delighted to do God's will.<sup>77</sup> He expresses utmost confidence in every letter of the Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures, and with that authority, he insists on the heavenly requirement of a righteousness that exceeds what was then deemed insurmountable: the rectitude of the scribes and Pharisees.

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<sup>73</sup> Leviticus 2:13. See also Numbers 18:19 & 2 Chronicles 13:5.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 5:19

<sup>75</sup> Romans 7:12

<sup>76</sup> Jeremiah 31:33

<sup>77</sup> Psalm 40:8

### The Law and Sinners 5:21-48

Jesus singled out the Sixth and Seventh Commandments to illustrate that a changed heart was necessary to begin to keep the law as God intended. If every outward transgression was to receive a due recompense under Moses, how much more serious is it that the Searcher of hearts<sup>78</sup> speaks of anger and lust that do not even reach outward expression but are culpable before God! What Elihu could only claim-*one perfect in knowledge is with you*<sup>79</sup>- was meticulously true of our Lord. In preparing the way for new covenant life that would come with the abundance of the Spirit, he spoke with authority as a priest teaching God's holy law.

Resisting evil may no longer include taking *personal* vengeance or even imagining that it is the responsibility of the royal priests in Christ's kingdom to do so. Rather as the reality of his own life demonstrated, suffering for the sake of righteousness would be the lot of every believer in some measure. The fullness of the kingdom is not now but when Christ returns as Judge. Then he will right all wrongs, deal precisely with every infraction and reward every fruit that his Father's plants have produced.<sup>80</sup>

As Christ, the dying priest, forgave the repentant thief, so his royal brethren have the privilege of leaving judgment to God and praying for the conversion of their enemies. These are priestly acts under the new covenant. Jesus' standard for the subjects in the new covenant kingdom of priests is to be perfect [teleioi] as is their Father in heaven.

### **Matthew 6:1-18 Doing What is Righteous**

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<sup>78</sup> Revelation 2:23

<sup>79</sup> Job 36:4

<sup>80</sup> Matthew 15:13, by implication of the opposite.

Here we have guidelines for activities that Jesus “reforms” from their accretions over the years by power-hungry, self-serving teachers of the law. Three are chosen as examples: giving, prayer and fasting.

The wrong way for anything to be done is for show or ostentation. Every act has its reward: either from men now or from God. The primary and ultimate audience for every priestly act in Christ’s kingdom is our heavenly Father. For in this new covenant kingdom of priests, God truly is the portion of each one, and as would be made clear later, each is an adopted son with rights of inheriting all that belongs to the Father.<sup>81</sup>

#### Giving Money 6:1-4

Priests were recipients of the tithes and offerings in Israel. Later in the apostolic structuring of the priestly kingdom, there would be those laboring who also were worthy of their hire and so should be compensated.<sup>82</sup> Many other needs exist and compassionate priests do not cross the road to avoid such opportunities.<sup>83</sup>

#### Praying 6:5-15

Priests in this kingdom of Christ are living in the last days and know the future resolution of all things. Thus their prayers are much more to be directed to matters of his kingdom than earthly things. Five petitions of the six in the Lord’s Prayer are concerned with God or spiritual matters and one for what is terrestrial. And that one is focused on daily necessities. So while the whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer, the form of prayer that Christ gave is of particular importance to guide his faithful priests.<sup>84</sup> It too comes with a warning that being forgiven is evidenced by a willingness to forgive others from the heart. For the priests in Christ’s kingdom are still sinners.

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<sup>81</sup> Romans 8:14-17

<sup>82</sup> Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18

<sup>83</sup> Luke 10:32

<sup>84</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism #99

### Fasting 6:16-18

Though there is no New Testament command to fast, it was clearly a requirement one day a year under the Law of Moses.<sup>85</sup> However, a reward from our heavenly Father is promised to all who practice this righteousness in the manner prescribed by Christ.

### **Matthew 6:19-34 Defining and Using Treasure and Riches**

The orientation is heavenly. Though priests on earth, our residence and actual position are now in heaven.<sup>86</sup> This is to be our perspective regarding all terrestrial things. For all things and activities here perish with the using, though the proper use of any and all – even the most mundane - has eternal consequences.

### Accumulating 6:19-21

Priests in Christ's kingdom are not to accumulate treasure on earth but in heaven because our affections reside close beside our treasure. How this is done and what constitutes treasure are left for future explanation, but clearly new covenant priests are to have and serve no other God than the one true and living God.

### The Eye and Light 6:22-23

It is as if light proceeds from rather than to the eye, so that vision is the emission of light from the priest's heart through the instrument of the eye for the purpose of seeing where he is going. Whatever is seen should be treated with sincerity and simplicity. The eye and its light are the antonym of hypocrisy. Old Testament priests had to examine individuals for disease and pronounce the verdict in accord with the Mosaic standards.<sup>87</sup> New covenant priests, with the law written on the heart, must do the same regarding all things.

### Service to a Master 6:24

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<sup>85</sup> Leviticus 16:29

<sup>86</sup> Ephesians 2:6

<sup>87</sup> See Leviticus 13-15.

This is an either/or statement in regard to motive: anything or anyone other than God himself as the supreme object of our priestly service means some form of idolatry has crept in.

#### Anxiety and Faith 6:25-34

Here is arguably the heart of the sermon. The priest in Christ's kingdom is to serve God and his fellow royal subjects with perfect trust in his Creator, who has so endowed with beauty and has so cared for the least of animal and botanical life that no anxiety is warranted for the well being of all creatures. The resolution to worry comes by an active seeking of the furtherance of the heavenly kingdom. Such a course will result in receiving all that is necessary and more, though for the priests in this kingdom every day will have its trials. Our great high Priest does not want his disciples to forget that this world is not their home but the temporary residence of each subject of his kingdom to accomplish in and through them his eternal purpose. And all the while, he is their portion.

#### **Matthew 7:1-12 Judging, Petitioning & the Golden Rule**

These are three actions in which every Israelite did or could participate, but they were particularly the province of the Old Testament priest or Levite in matters too difficult to be adjudicated by individuals, families or tribal leadership.<sup>88</sup> This was especially true of prayer, for it was the priests' duty and privilege to represent the people and their needs to God.

#### Judging 7:1-5

It is not the responsibility of subjects in the kingdom, priests though they are, to make final judgments. That is God's purview, particularly for individual disputes involving themselves. The penalty will be judgment by the same, no doubt, overly strict standard. Priestly work requires clean eyes, freed of logs and specks. Here is no bar to making interim judgments required of everyone, but to

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<sup>88</sup> See footnote #27.

be impartial the royal priest must have eyes clear of debris to be able to see fairly and address the problems and needs of others.

#### Holy Things and Dogs 7:6

Priests must discern between the holy and the profane. Pearls are not for dogs: promises of love from God and his tender care are for the repentant and broken-hearted. This very process is an exercise in judging the appropriateness of the tools and materials to be used, proof that Christ was not imposing an absolute ban on making judgments in the previous section.

Pigs were unclean animals under Old Testament law and apart from this passage, the history of the Prodigal Son<sup>89</sup> and the two thousand swine that perished among the Gadarenes,<sup>90</sup> there is no other New Testament reference to them. However, later words of warning are relevant: *How much worse punishment do you think is merited by one who has trampled<sup>91</sup> under foot the Son of God and treated the blood of the covenant, by which he was sanctified, as something common, and outraged the Spirit of Grace. For we know the one who has said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*<sup>92</sup> Priests in the new covenant kingdom of Christ need clear discernment.

#### Petitioning 7:7-11

Here is an expansion on the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, but even so it comes with the implied admonition that priestly intercession does not imply assured knowledge of what is best. That should be left in the hands of our great high Priest's heavenly Father, who only gives what is good to his children.

#### The Golden Rule 7:12

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<sup>89</sup> Luke 15:15

<sup>90</sup> Mark 5:13

<sup>91</sup> This is the same Greek verb as in Matthew 7:6.

<sup>92</sup> Hebrews 10:29-31

This is nothing more than a fruit of the Second Great Commandment,<sup>93</sup> here to be evidenced by doing to others what we would wish done to us. Directly after Christ's teaching on importunity in prayer, this rule assumes we are desiring what is good, just and holy,<sup>94</sup> i.e. what is in conformity with the law. Watchful care over one another in the priestly community is a thing of beauty and is pleasing to our Lord. There are no chief priests in this kingdom; rather all are brothers.

### **Matthew 7:13-27 Only Two, No More**

The closing section of our Lord's rudimentary manual for the priests in his kingdom treats four areas that with increasing intensity, point to the great assize, its unalterable standards and sobering finality. Here the priests in Christ's kingdom are warned – in regard to themselves as to the reality of their own priestly qualifications and as to the administration of their responsibilities in Christ's kingdom, wherever God has placed them. There will be difficulty and inevitable sadness in the work as some will seem to fail one or more of these tests. For the only alternative to the bliss of being subjects in this realm is the awful reality of all who refuse our priestly invitations and admonitions to come to the feast that has been prepared by the king himself.

#### Two Doors, Two Roads, Two Ends 7:13-14

The first of these four portraits is a contrast in the entryway, ease versus struggle. And so it continues afterward: living on the broad versus the narrow way; the ends: destruction or life.

#### Prophets and Trees – Genuine and False 7:15-20

The lives of Christ's royal priests are mingled with hypocrites. There were false prophets among the Old Testament people of God and there have been and will continue to be false teachers among the physical people of God today.<sup>95</sup> Each claimant is a fruit tree. Time will tell of what quality. The priestly duty of

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<sup>93</sup> Matthew 22:39

<sup>94</sup> See footnote #75.

<sup>95</sup> 2 Peter 2:1

examining carefully is dependent on the knowledge to be acquired of the standards for making true judgments. Such judgments are necessary for the protection of ourselves and any under our care – spouses, children, fellow believers. The end of the false tree is the fire.<sup>96</sup> The seriousness of this evaluation is furthered by the next picture.

#### Those Known and Those Never Known 7:21-23

Before the great high Priest himself upon his throne<sup>97</sup> no number or manner of works done in Christ's name will earn a place in his kingdom for those he "never knew." This includes preaching and working miracles by those possibly used of God to advance his kingdom, despite their condition.<sup>98</sup> The all-important reality is that the great high Priest knows his true subjects, not even that they know him.<sup>99</sup> The true priest does what he does because he loves his Master. His ear has been pierced.<sup>100</sup>

#### Two Houses, Two Foundations 7:24-27

In this fourth and final contrast of opposites, our Lord pictures genuine priests, who are doers of his word, with professing priests who are hearers only. He will return to this message using five wise and five foolish virgins near the end of his earthly ministry.<sup>101</sup> How terrifying is the prospect of a completed house, in all particulars identical to another, but whose foundation will not stand the storm of final judgment! Its fall is great because irreparable and because built with such confidence of eternal stability. Gospel priests are to be warned and are to pass on the warnings, knowing the fear of God.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. John 15:6

<sup>97</sup> Zechariah 6:13; Hebrews 8:1 – both captioned above.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Balaam's true prophecies and yet the example made of him in Scripture thereafter: Numbers 31:8 & 16; Joshua 13:22; 24:9-10; Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14.

<sup>99</sup> Galatians 4:9 *Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...1 Corinthians 8:3 But if anyone loves God, he is known by him.*

<sup>100</sup> Exodus 21:5-6

<sup>101</sup> Matthew 25:1-13

<sup>102</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:11

### The Final Contrast 7:28-29

To us, perhaps so familiar with this passage of Scripture, the astonishment of the crowds at Jesus' teaching may seem odd; but this was not the speech they were looking for from this miracle worker.<sup>103</sup> Their minds were on earthly things. They expected a deliverer from physical ills and the yokes of Herod and Rome. They wished for restoration of the outward glory of Israel as they had been taught or imagined it. But this man had come in meek boldness<sup>104</sup> to announce a different kind of kingdom where every subject was a priest unto his God and Father.

Atonement had to be made for them by the perfect life and infinite merits of one who could bear the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it.<sup>105</sup> This reality was ever before him in his teaching and life.

### CONCLUSION

Our Great High Priest had the utmost confidence in the written word of God such that no letter would fail until all was fulfilled, no passage be broken<sup>106</sup> but each would accomplish God's intended purpose. This included Exodus 19:6. And so in the church of Christ that exists on earth and in heaven today, every human subject is a priest, fully equipped to carry out his eternally preordained service to God on behalf of himself and others. And their portion is indeed God himself. They are united to Christ by faith and have all the gifts and benefits that he has earned at their disposal by which to render to God service that befits their high calling and office. The law of God is written on their hearts and from a love of the Lawgiver, they can say with their Creator, Redeemer, Judge, High Priest and King, *"Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."*<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Matthew 4:23-25

<sup>104</sup> Cf. the character of Moses – Numbers 12:3.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Heidelberg Catechism #14.

<sup>106</sup> John 10:35

<sup>107</sup> Psalm 40:6b-8

What better summary in our consideration of such an exalted station than the following words, descriptive of our present priestly privileges:

*We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.<sup>108</sup>*

May God the Spirit continue to shape us into the royal priests that Christ has purchased us to be, laboring with all our might, filled with love for Christ, for our fellow priests and for the lost around us, and may we do all for the glory of God the Father and the advancement of his heavenly kingdom!

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<sup>108</sup> Hebrews 13:10-16 ESV – alt.