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P R I E S T H O O D

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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A sense of sin and of estrangement from God is a universal human experience. Every religion has some form or way of atoning for sin and of appeasing the gods and of winning their goodwill again. Almost all religions have a way of offering God a sacrifice or gift, perhaps a lotus flower, perhaps an animal, perhaps even a human being as in the religion of the Aztecs of Mexico, and in most of the religions of ancient civilizations.

This sense of sin and of estrangement from God also expresses itself in the institution of priests, that is to say, persons who are go betweens and mediators between the worshipper and his God. Thus sacrifice to atone for sin, and a priestly caste who stand between the sinner and God, is found in most religions. Not that these religions copied from each other. The truth is that the idea is natural to the human heart,

and although these religions are inadequate to take away sin, when we judge them by the standard of God's Word, yet the sense of sin they reflect is true enough, for it is true that we are disobedient sinners, estranged from God who is of infinite holiness. We cannot stand in His presence in our own right. Something must be done to atone for our sins and someone must be a Mediator between us and our Creator if we are to have any relationship with Him other than that of condemnation.

In the Old Testament we find that God Himself gave to His people a system of sacrifices by which they could express their sense of sin and find a way of forgiveness and a return to His fellowship. The Old Testament worshipper brought his sacrifice to the priest who took the blood of the sacrificial victim and poured it out at God's altar. In this way the sinner received the promise of reconciliation, and his sins were covered. Of

course, as the Bible itself points out, these Old Testament sacrifices could not in themselves take away sin, they were only the sign pointing to our Lord Jesus's death for sinners, when He identified Himself with sinful mankind and underwent Himself on our behalf the penalty and curse of sin.

In a similar way the Old Testament priesthood was a sign and foreshadowing of Jesus' Priesthood. The Old Testament priests were those who had the privilege of coming near to God, to quote the Old Testament. There was also a gradation in this privilege of approaching God's presence. Thus the High Priest alone was privileged to enter into the Holy of Holies, but only once a year. The priests might enter the Holy Place which was outside the Holy of Holies, while the Levites ministered around the outskirts of the temple. The Old Testament makes clear that this gradation in privilege of drawing near

to God's presence was to emphasise the holiness of God, and to teach that sinners cannot come lightly into God's holy presence. This truth was further symbolised by the way the children of Israel pitched their camp as they journeyed through the wilderness. The priests pitched their tents closest to the Tabernacle; next came the Levites; the rest of the people pitched their tents beyond the Levites and the Scripture is explicit that this arrangement was to prevent the wrath of God's holiness consuming sinners. These things were by way of signs, teaching that it was an awful privilege to have God's presence in their midst.

In the New Testament these Old Testament signs and symbols find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. As Hebrews 10:12 puts it "Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins for ever". He is our sacrifice; He is also our High Priest, the one who alone has the right to enter into God's

presence. This right is His because He was perfect, free from sin, and so Hebrews 4:14 calls Him our great High Priest. A very important truth follows from the fact that Jesus is the one true High Priest Who has offered the one true sacrifice for sins, and it is this, that all we who are Christians, we who are in Christ through faith, share His privilege of entering directly into God's presence; we need no other priest but Christ. This is emphasised frequently in the New Testament. For example, Hebrews 10:21 calls on us to draw near. This is a reflection of the Old Testament language, it was the privilege of the priest to draw near to God, but now every Christian may draw near. Similarly in Romans 5:2 St. Paul reminded his readers that we have our access by faith, that is to say we may enter into God's presence through our faith in Christ; and again in Ephesians 2:18 Paul says "Through Christ we have our access unto the Father", and

again in 3:12 "In Christ we have boldness and access in confidence through our faith in Him". Thus every Christian has the privilege of access to God and of standing in the presence of God. This is because our sins are blotted out from God's sight through faith in Christ's death. There is therefore no fear of wrath, the wrath of God's holiness, being visited on us, for although we are sinners, our sins have been forgiven; they are not accounted to us. What was in Old Testament times the privilege of a few by way of symbol, to approach God and draw near to Him, is the privilege by way of reality of every believing Christian under the New Testament. This is because of the believer's relationship to Christ, the one true High Priest. It is because we are in Christ through faith that we have free access and can boldly and confidently come into the presence of the Father and stand before Him as His sons; and Hebrews chapter 10 urges

us to do so. We need no other mediator or intermediary than our Lord Jesus Christ, and this St. Paul emphasised when he said "There is one .. mediator between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus (I Tim.2:5).

In Christ every Christian is a priest in the sense that every Christian has access into God's presence and may offer to God his sacrifice. This access is not ours by right of ourselves but is derived from our relationship to Christ. Our sacrifices are no longer material things, but are spiritual, the sacrifice or worship of a thankful heart, and of an obedient life, and of acts of kindness towards others for God's sake. The believer needs no intermediary or priest to offer these sacrifices for him or to stand between him and God, for he has the complete and perfect priest in Jesus Christ to Whom he is joined through faith. That is why the New Testament speaks of Christians as being a kingdom of priests in

Revelation 1:16 or a royal priesthood in I Peter 2:9. This is what is meant when we speak of access to God, of drawing near to Him. We need no priest but Christ. Consequently in the Christian church there is no such officer corresponding to the priest of the Old Testament or the priests of the religions of the world. The New Testament speaks only of Jesus Christ as priest, and never uses the term of Christian ministers. This is not accidental; for it would be a contradiction of the New Testament doctrine of every Christian having full access into God's presence through Christ, to speak also of a class of Christians who had a special privilege of appearing before God on behalf of their brethren. That is why the word priest in the New Testament is confined exclusively to Jesus, He appears before God on our behalf. In the New Testament Christian ministers are never called priests, but are called elders and overseers, for their work

is to help their fellow Christians grow in the knowledge of God; their office is not to stand between the believer and God; and in fact the English word priest is simply a shortened word for 'presbyter' which means 'elder'. The Old Testament concept of someone standing in the place of God was so foreign to Christianity that even the word itself was lost from the language. However, in the Roman Catholic church the concept of a priesthood is again to be found. In times of ignorance the New Testament teaching that Jesus Christ is our only Priest was lost sight of and the concept of a human priesthood, so natural to the heart and found everywhere in non-Christian religions grew up again in the Christian church and is now a fundamental concept of Roman Catholicism. The New Testament concept that every Christian through his relationship to Christ is a priest, and has the right of coming into God's presence is explicitly denied by the Council of Trent

(Section 23 chapter 4). Roman Catholicism places between the believer and his Heavenly Father the organised church as intermediary. For example, the Roman Catholic is not allowed to read God's Word without the permission of the church, and even then he is not allowed to read the plain text of the Bible as God gave it to us, but he must read it with the comments that the church adds to it. Similarly the Roman Catholic church does not allow the Christian access to God's presence to ask for forgiveness of sins directly at the throne of God through prayer, but he is taught that he can only obtain forgiveness through a priest in the sacrament of penance. The Roman Catechism states that this sacrament is so essential that "it is impossible to obtain or even to hope for remission of sins by any other means". In this way the church's institutions and sacraments and the church's office bearers, the priests, are interposed as absolutely essential mediators between the

Christian and his Heavenly Father. Indeed the priest in his ministry is regarded as on an equality with Christ. For example, a pamphlet circulated in Roman Catholic churches in Sydney to encourage young men to offer for the priesthood entitled "Why not be a Priest?" states on page 9 "The priest is another Christ" and on the same page "If our Lord were to come upon earth in person to administer the sacrament of penance ... His sacred words would be no more effective than those of the priest in the neighbouring confessional", and again "The Catholic priest is not merely a good man who is engaged in the preaching of the divine Word, he is more than that ... to us Catholics there is always divinity hedging him round" and on page 20 describing the effects of ordination of a young man it states "He is a priest for ever. No matter what calamity he may meet with in after life it will not affect the spiritual character of the priesthood stamped for ever on his soul".

This concept of a separate class of Christians who have special privileges with regard to the things of God is unknown to the New Testament and contradicted by the New Testament concept of our relationship to God in Christ.

Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and man. Apart from Jesus, New Testament Christianity knows of no other special class of priests. But through our relationship with Christ by faith, every believer is a priest, with the privilege of coming into God's presence and of offering to God the sacrifice and offering of his life. Let us then exercise this privilege and obey the injunction of Hebrews chapter 4 which reads "Having then a great high priest, Jesus the Son of God let us draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need".

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