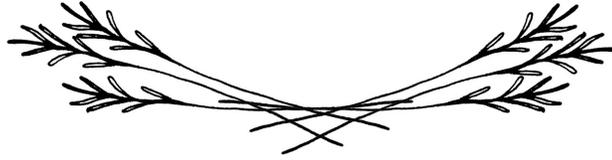


WEEK 7

THE CHRISTIAN AS A ROYAL PRIEST



WAYNE KILPATRICK

“But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9; KJV)

Just as God distinguished the nation Israel from all other nations, he distinguishes true Christians from the unbelievers. In this passage, Peter describes Christians as a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, borrowing language from Exodus 19:5–6 where God used similar terms in his description of Israel: “Now, therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.” Peter was distinguishing the Christian from the disobedient, whether Jew or Gentile. He revealed that Christians, the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), enjoy some of the same privileges as physical Israel did under the Old Covenant.

When Peter wrote that Christians are a “royal priesthood,” his parallel is to God’s statement to Moses concerning Israel after He had brought them out of Egypt. It seems that God may have originally intended that the entire nation would serve Him as

“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:1–6). The Levitical priesthood was only instituted because the sin of the people had not yet been atoned; therefore, the sin of Israel as a nation necessitated the intermediary between Israel and God. This was necessary, lest God’s holiness “break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and *there be none to quench it* in Bethel” (Amos 5:6). Therefore, God temporarily placed his plan for a “kingdom of priests” on hold.

In Exodus 19:6, the Hebrew expression *mamleketh kohanim* is translated in the KJV as “kingdom of priests.” According to Walter Kaiser, there are four correct ways to translate the Hebrew expression into English: “kingdom of priests,” “kings that are priests,” “priestly kingdom,” and “royal priesthood” as Peter wrote.¹

The promise that Israel would be made a “kingdom of priests” was given to Moses before the Law was given at Mount Sinai. Under the Law of Moses, only descendants of Aaron—from the tribe of Levi—could serve as priests (Ex. 28:1), while the perpetual kingship granted to David (2 Sam. 7) by necessity elevated to the monarchy only those from Judah’s tribe. Therefore, an Israelite could not be both a king and a priest. But before the giving of the Law we have an instance of someone who was both king and priest: “And Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought forth bread and wine; and he was the priest of the most high God” (Gen. 14:18). After the establishment of the Law and, with it, the Levitical priesthood, there are some examples of Israelite kings doing the work of priests, such as Saul’s offering a sacrifice at Gilgal (1 Sam. 13:8–14) or

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 417.

Uzziah's offering incense in the temple (2 Chron. 26:16–21). In both instances God shows his displeasure with the kingly usurping of the priestly role.

Just as the nation of Israel was described as a kingdom of priests, so also following the dreaded deed at Calvary, the church has now received this description, having received sanctification through the blood of Jesus. But whereas in reality only descendants of Aaron could serve as priests, all Christians enjoy priestly privileges. Under the Law the high priest alone had access to God, but Christians generally are granted this same access. Even the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies no more than once in a year on penalty of death (Heb. 9:7), but Christians may approach boldly at all times through the blood of Christ, without any danger of dying. "Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). The throne of grace is likely the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant, located within the Holy of Holies, to which we have constant access through the blood of our High Priest. The writer of Hebrews says:

"Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having a high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."
(Heb. 10:19–22)

Access into the holiest (the Holy of Holies) is allowed to all Christians under the gospel, at any time. The tearing of the temple veil at the death of Christ (Matt. 27:50–51) symbolized the abolition of the wall separating God from his people.

Now we that are in the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27), are a “royal priesthood,” and have been chosen by God himself, we are God’s spiritual Israel and a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). Christ, our High Priest, made one sacrifice for sin for all time (Heb. 10:12), so that no other sacrifice is needed (Heb. 10:26). The priests under the Law of Moses were chosen to serve God with their lives by offering up sacrifices, and we are chosen for the same purpose.

Old Testament sacrifices included a variety of types of offerings, whether burnt offerings (Lev. 1), grain offerings (Lev. 2), peace offerings (Lev. 3), sin offerings (Lev. 4), etc. The New Testament spiritual priesthood likewise has a variety of offerings to make. First, there is the sacrifice of praise: “By him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:15). Even in the Old Testament, Hosea admonishes Israel: “Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously; so will we render the calves of our lips” (Hos. 14:2). The praise offered by our mouths Hosea describes as similar to calves offered in sacrifice. Only they of the “royal priesthood” can make this kind of true sacrifice to God. By anyone else the act would be as though Saul himself had offered the sacrifice. Under the New Covenant, we can make the sacrifice of praise at any time.

Another sacrifice Christians make is our obedience, which even in the Old Testament is valued far above animal sacrifices. “And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). When we render obedience to God with our lives and conversation, we offer our bodies to be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, as our reasonable service

(Rom. 12:1). How do we offer our bodies? We dedicate our lives to the service of God. We become instruments of righteousness unto holiness, by sacrificing ourselves to God. Under the Old Law, only priests could offer sacrifices; but here, we offer our own sacrifices—as the “royal priesthood” of the New Covenant.

Another sacrifice which is offered by the New Covenant priesthood is charity, an expression of Christian love in gifts to others. Jesus says, “And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42). Or, again, in Hebrews: “But to do good [deeds] and to communicate, forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:16). Our kind, Christian actions are acceptable sacrifices to God.

By these actions, one can see why Peter referred to Christians as a “royal priesthood.” We function much like the priest of old in that we offer many kinds of sacrifices to God. The difference is that we can access God through our high priest Jesus Christ at any time—not just once a year in the temple. No matter how insignificant our service may seem, it will be accepted if it is done through faith and obedience and in the name of Jesus Christ. As Paul says, “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:17). Christians are truly a “royal priesthood.”

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did God describe Israel as a kingdom of priests? What would that description have meant to an Israelite?
2. Does Peter's description of the church as a royal priesthood draw a connection between Christians and Israel? What might be the significance of such a connection?
3. In what ways do Christians offer sacrifices to God?
4. How does Peter's phrase "royal priesthood" help you to understand the purpose of the Christian life?