

# Editorial: Reflecting on Priests, Priesthood, and the Glory of Christ

**STEPHEN J. WELLUM**

---

**Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author with Peter Gentry of *Kingdom through Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Crossway, 2012, 2018) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015); the co-editor of *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H, 2016); the author of *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Crossway, 2016) and *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Zondervan, 2017); and the co-author of *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Zondervan, 2018).

In this issue of *SBJT* and a forthcoming issue next year, we are going to think through a biblical and systematic theology of priest, priesthood, and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. The theme of “priests and priesthood” is a rich and important one in Scripture. In fact, the theme of “priests and priesthood” traverses the entire storyline of the Bible from creation to the new creation, and if traced through the biblical covenants, it leads us to a greater appreciation and grasp of Christ’s work for us *and* our calling as his people in relation to him.

First, the theme of priests and priesthood reminds us about *who* Jesus is and *what* he has done for us in his entire office of Mediator as our Lord and Savior. By thinking about how the priestly theme unfolds in Scripture, we discover how Jesus *alone* is our Redeemer by virtue of his incarnation, obedient life, and substitutionary, sacrificial death. In fact, by the development

of this theme across redemptive history and through the covenants, we learn how God-given types and patterns reach their fulfillment in Christ and grasp better the nature of his work for us as our new covenant head and great high priest.

It is hard to deny that our Lord's work is presented in Scripture as a priestly work. To make sense of this we must place Christ's priestly work in the context of the OT. Most people begin their reflection on what a priest is by going to the old covenant and comparing and contrasting Jesus' priestly work to the Levitical priest. No doubt this is correct as the entire book of Hebrews teaches us. As the author of Hebrews develops the priestly theme in his letter, he starts by giving a helpful summary of the Levitical high priest. He writes: "Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5:1).

In this summary of the identity and work of the Levitical priest, three crucial aspects of the person and work of the high priest are noted: a high priest is selected by God from among the people; the high priest represents a particular people before God as their mediator; and the high priest offers gifts and sacrifices to God on behalf of the people's sin. In all these ways, the author will demonstrate that Christ fulfills the Levitical role perfectly *and* that he also transcends it by inaugurating a new order outside of the Levitical by coming in a new order tied to the figure of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7; cf. Psalm 110).

So just as the Levitical priest came from among the people, so Jesus identified with us in taking on our humanity in order to become our merciful and faithful high priest (Heb 2:5-18). Just as the Levitical priest represented the people before God, so our Lord represents us before the Father, and in his giving of his own life, he offers himself as our penal substitute (Hebrews 9). Yet, in all of these ways, our Lord Jesus is not merely quantitatively greater but qualitatively; he *fulfills* the Levitical order as God the Son incarnate which results in our *eternal* salvation not merely a temporal cleansing (Heb 5:9). Under the old covenant, the Levitical priest provided a relatively efficacious mediation between God and Israel. The sacrifices had a real effect on the relationship between God and his old covenant people. But God never intended the sacrificial system to effect a complete and permanent atonement and thus our eternal salvation. The old covenant priests and

sacrifices functioned as types/shadows of a greater priest and a perfect sacrifice to come (Heb 10:1-18). The OT sacrificial system did provide a means of divine forgiveness, but that forgiveness anticipated the coming of Christ who would achieve a once-for-all-time atonement resulting in the permanent and full forgiveness of our sins.

In fact, this is precisely what the OT prophets anticipated in the announcement of the coming of a new covenant grounded in the work of a better priest (see Jer 31:31-34; Psalm 110). The prophets predicted that the new covenant would result in a number of glorious realities: the dawning of God's kingdom in terms of his saving rule and reign through the Davidic king (Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-16; Ezek 34:1-31; Psalm 2, 72); the outpouring of the Spirit on God's people so that the entire covenant community would be born and empowered by the Spirit (Ezek 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32); the breaking in of the new creation and the transformation of this fallen order (Isa 65:17-25), and so on.

But, as wonderful as those realities are, none of them can be effected until sin before God is dealt with in permanent way. That is why the central feature of the new covenant is the accomplishment of *the full forgiveness of our sin*. In the OT, forgiveness of sin is normally granted through the priest and the sacrificial system; however, the OT believer, if spiritually perceptive, knew that this was not enough, as evidenced by the repetitive nature of the system and the lack of proper representation and substitution in the sacrifice. But in the new covenant, sin will be "remembered no more" (Jer 31:34). The concept of remembering is not simple recall (see Gen 8:1; 1 Sam 1:19). In the context of Jeremiah 31:34, for God not to remember means that no action will need to be taken in the new age against sin. To be under the terms of the new covenant entails that each covenant member experiences a full and complete forgiveness of sin. Why? Because of the greater work of high priest of the new covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, what is often missed in thinking about Christ's priestly work is that our Lord not only fulfills the Levitical office but also Adam's role as the covenant head of creation. The Bible's storyline and the concept of priests does not begin with the Abrahamic or old covenant; instead it commences with the covenant of creation under Adam as Greg Beale so aptly demonstrates in his article. Thus to understand rightly the full dimensions of Christ's priestly work *and* how it is applied to us as his people, before we think of Levites

under the old covenant we must first think about Adam's role in creation as the first priest. After we do this, we must then trace this priestly role of Adam through the Patriarchs and to the nation of Israel as a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6) and then wrestle with the relationship between Israel as a corporate priesthood with an individual priesthood within it. David Schrock's helps us think through these relationships as he unpacks Israel as God's corporate "royal priesthood" and the role of the Levitical priest within this structure. All of this is necessary to gain a greater understanding of how priesthood works across the canon and how it reaches its fulfillment first in our Lord Jesus and then in application to his people.

So, second, the theme of priests and priesthood *through Christ* also has application to us, namely the church. We must exercise care not to move too quickly from priests in the OT to the church without seeing how priests and priesthood is first fulfilled in Christ. In his article, Nicholas Perrin gives further grounding to Jesus' priestly work in the Gospels and how priesthood must first be viewed in relation to him. But Scripture does not merely say that Christ is the fulfillment of the priesthood without any consequences for his people. In fact, as Byron Wheaton demonstrates, in Christ, the church is heir of Israel's vocation as a royal priesthood which is important to grasp if we are to understand our vocation as God's redeemed people. Paul Hoskins finishes our discussion of priests by going to end of Scripture and thinking through how priests and priesthood is presented in the book of Revelation which nicely rounds out our discussion from creation to the new creation.

It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will help us think more biblically and thus faithfully about priests and priesthood in Scripture so that we think more about the glory of Christ and come to understand the privileges we have as God's new covenant people.