

## *The Priesthood of Believers Compared to That of the Levites*

We could approach this in another way. How does the new covenant compare to the old? For, as with the two covenants, so with the priests of the two covenants. Like covenant, like priest.

Think for a moment about what we have seen of the old covenant. It was abolished by Christ, yes, but, make no mistake, the ceremony of the old economy, while it lasted, was glorious, jaw-dropping. Using the word in a ‘good’ sense, without any suggestion of the sexual, the old covenant was highly sensual; it appealed to the senses. As a physical (outward) covenant, it was resplendent to the n<sup>th</sup> degree, stunning in all its magnificence. Of course it was, for it represented indescribable spiritual glories in physical signs and symbols, so that fallen man could catch at least a glimpse of those eternal verities. ‘Resplendent’ is the word. So much so, the performance of old-covenant ritual must have presented a breathtaking spectacle to the senses; to the eye, dazzling; a reverberating chorus to the ear; and an evocative stimulus to the nostrils.

Picture the scene. See in your mind’s eye the temple buildings in all their glory. Take in the glint and gleam of gold. Stand open-mouthed at the size and magnificence of the courts of the Lord, their majestic splendour. Catch sight of the priests ministering in their multi-coloured robes; the riot of colour; the glittering apparatus of worship – the lampstand, the table with its consecrated bread, the curtains, the golden altar of incense, the gold jar, the carved cherubim, the bowls and basins. Much of it, of course, was hidden from the eyes of the majority, veiled in the Most Holy Place, seen only by the high priest once a year. But the splendour of the tabernacle and, even more, the temple, would have been ‘exceeding magnificent’ as David stipulated (1 Chron. 22:5, AV). (See, for instance, Ex. 25:1 – 31:11; 1 Kings 7:13 – 8:66). Listen to the wonderful music, both with voice and instrument, echoing round and round, swelling to the roof, wave

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upon wave. See and smell the billowing clouds of sweet incense ascending slowly but surely to God. Jaw-dropping is right!

Truly the old economy was glorious, impressive beyond words. The sight and sound and smell of it would have left us speechless if we had been there and seen it in all its glory, especially under Solomon.

In addition, of course, the milling crowd of attendants and priests, the bellowing beasts, the flowing blood, the stench of burning flesh, the incessant smoke – if not charming to western sensibilities – would have been, to say the least, indelibly impressive. I am sure that breathtaking old-covenant ritual and worship, once seen, heard and smelled in all its splendour, would not easily have been forgotten.

But what of the new covenant? How does it compare with the old? Why, there is no comparison between the two. Despite all I have just said, the old covenant had no glory at all when placed side by side with the new covenant with its priesthood of all believers. None at all! For all the outward glory of the old covenant, even under Solomon – especially under Solomon, for ‘a greater than Solomon is here’ (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31) – the new is even more splendid, and more splendid by far. Outward and symbolic had been the old; inward and real is the new. The new-covenant system, in which all believers are priests, has far more glory than the old ever had or could have, even at its peak.

Let this sink in. The old covenant was glorious, but the new excels in glory. The old was like a worn-out garment or a dried-up wineskin; the new is... well, new! (Luke 5:36-38). The shadow has given way to the reality; the sketch to the finished painting; the photograph to the person; the virtual world of the telephone and internet to the reality and actuality of life.

I say it again: Outward and symbolic had been the old; inward and real is the new. Although the actual second Jewish temple (built after return from exile) did not match the glory of Solomon’s original temple which had long since been destroyed, at the foundation of that second temple, God used the prophet to speak of its greater glory, by which, I am convinced, he meant the gospel, the new covenant (Ezra 3:10-13; Hag. 2:1-9). The glory of the second temple itself did not exceed the glory of Solomon’s temple.

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But the gospel does! “The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former”, says the LORD of hosts. “And in this place I will give peace”, says the LORD of hosts’ (Hag. 2:9).

Rome’s worship is based on the old covenant. But not all the so-called splendour and dazzle of Rome, besides being erroneous and wicked, can compare to new-covenant worship. Such is the crass folly – if nothing worse – of Rome. I am not saying that Rome has actually gone back to the old covenant. I am thinking of its priestcraft, its fascination with the external, its devotion to incense, altars, robes and candles, the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass, its love of hierarchy, and so on. From the time of Cyprian, it has gone back again and again to the old covenant for many of its practices – when not going to the pagans! And Rome is far from alone in this! I will have much more to say on it in my forthcoming *The Pastor: Does He Exist?*

The fact is, the more emphasis on the outward and physical, the less on the spiritual. The more candles upon an altar, the less light. The more robes, the less thought for the robe of Christ’s righteousness. The more altars, and the more ornate they are, the less room for the true altar (Heb. 13:10) and Christ’s sacrifice. The more Roman priests elevate ‘the host’, the more they denigrate Christ.

Getting back to Scripture, even though the old covenant was good, God has set up a better (Heb. 8:7). The new covenant exceeds the old in glory. Why? How? The new covenant is more glorious than the old because, principally, of the difference in the nature and the end of the covenant. The old covenant, ‘the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2), was a covenant of condemnation, ‘the ministry of death’ (2 Cor. 3:7); the new is a covenant of life and the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:8). The new is founded on better promises (Heb. 8:6) and has a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:23). With the death of Christ, the old became out-of-date and obsolete (Heb. 8:13). The old way was with ‘glory’, it is true, but ‘the ministry of the Spirit’ is even ‘more glorious’:

If the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made

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glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

In short, as covenant, so priesthood. The old – both covenant and priesthood – was good, but with the coming of Christ and his triumph at Calvary, it became out-of-date, was fulfilled and abolished. Like the veil, it has been torn down, finished. Now we have the priesthood of Christ. And in company with that, we have the priesthood of all believers. This new-covenant priesthood is far more glorious.

The question is: How, in detail, is the priesthood of believers more glorious than the levitical priesthood? In what ways is the new covenant so much better than the old? In eight ways. I do not pretend, of course, that these exist in eight watertight compartments. There is considerable overlap. But for ease of understanding, I will try to separate them in this way.

### ***1. The old covenant was a covenant of condemnation; the new is a covenant of life***

I will have far more to say on this in my book on the law, but for now let me just remind you, reader, of some of the salient, but stark, facts about the law; that is, the old covenant. Before I do, let me make a technical point. Though, strictly speaking, covenant and law are not identical, in practice, within the Bible and in theological discussions, the terms ‘covenant’ and ‘law’ are used virtually interchangeably (see the letter to the Hebrews; in particular, say, Heb. 9:15-22), and often references to covenant will include references to ordinances or commandments or regulations (Heb. 9:1, for instance). Strictly, ‘covenant’ refers to relationship, whereas ‘law’ speaks of requirements that influence the relationship. But I will use the terms as interchangeable.

To go on with the listing of the stark features of the law: One offence under the old covenant, under the law, brought guilt and condemnation to the sinner as though he had broken all the commandments (Jas. 2:10). In turn, this had dreadful consequences: ‘For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not

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continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them” (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26). The curses were severe (Deut. 28:15-68; 29:1-29). The law was inexorable. It always condemned every offender; it could do no other, since it was ‘the letter [which] kills... the ministry of death... the ministry of condemnation’ (2 Cor. 3:6-9; see also Gal. 3:13,19-25; 4:1-3,21,24-25; 5:16-21).

Indeed, God’s *purpose* in giving the law was all of a piece with this: ‘By the law is the knowledge of sin... The law entered that the offence might abound’ (Rom. 3:20; 5:20; see John 9:39-41; 15:22-25; Rom. 4:15), and by it God took away all excuse (Rom. 3:19); the law turned sin into transgression (Rom. 4:15; 5:13).

What is more, because of the weakness of the flesh, the law incited rebellion against itself, incited transgression:

When we were in the flesh, the sinful passions... were aroused by the law... Sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law, sin was dead... but when the commandment came, sin revived... Sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me... Sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good [that is, the law], so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful (Rom. 7:5-13).

In other words, ‘the law entered that the offence might abound’. Such is the old covenant. And its priesthood reflected it.

But what of the new? What a contrast! ‘The law entered that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more’ (Rom. 5:20). Note the ‘but’. How small a word – just a conjunction – yet what a wealth of meaning it holds within its three letters. ‘But’. God, through Moses, gave the law to make sin’s offence abound, but grace came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17), so that where sin abounded God might make his grace abound *much more*. I know the ‘but’ has been supplied in John 1:17, but how right the translators were to supply it. Note further how Paul piles on the hyperbole – ‘abound much more’.

In closing this sub-section, I cannot resist re-quoting the extract above:

If the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of

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righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

The old covenant was, beyond all question, a covenant, a ministry, of death and condemnation. Every time the priests sacrificed, they repeatedly reminded Israel of it.

The new, however, is a covenant of life and righteousness. It is the covenant of the Spirit.

### ***2. The old covenant was temporary; the new is eternal***

The old covenant, for all its glory, was only temporary; it was abolished with the coming of the Seed, Christ (Gal. 3:15-25; Heb. 7:11-28; 8:6-13). The new is eternal. It is not just for this age. No! It will last for ever (Gen. 17:7,13,19; 2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 55:3; Jer. 32:40; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Heb. 13:20, for instance). Even for ever. As a consequence, just as the old covenant itself was temporary – lasting only until the establishment of the new covenant under Christ – so its priesthood was temporary. But, in the new covenant, there is nothing temporary.

In particular, God's people will always be his priests. The priesthood of all believers will never be abolished. Never! Believers will always serve him as priests. Always, I stress, even throughout eternity. They are priests now, and they will be priests for ever. In glory, they will continue to be priests for ever engaged in the service of God (Rev. 7:13-15; 22:3). Christ is a priest for ever. 'He has a permanent priesthood' (Heb. 7:24, NIV), 'he... holds his priesthood permanently' (NASB). His priesthood is 'unchangeable' (Heb. 7:24). And so, in Christ, and through Christ, his saints are, and always will be, God's own priests, for ever.

### ***3. The old covenant was material; the new is spiritual***

The old-covenant priests offered material sacrifices upon a physical altar. And those offerings and that altar were magnificent – in a material way, that is, but only in a material way. The new covenant, however, is a spiritual ministry. As such, its great high

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priest, Christ, infinitely exceeds Aaron in all his high-priestly splendour. Aaron, for all his glory, had none in comparison to Christ, none at all. Similarly, the offerings of the levitical priests (bulls and lambs, and so on) cannot be compared to Christ's one great and effectual sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:11-14). Water, and the blood of a bull? The blood of Christ! The writer to the Hebrews:

Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come [footnote], with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands; that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood he entered the Most Holy Place once for all [time], having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh [under the old covenant], how much more [under the new covenant] shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb. 9:11-14).

There is no comparison between the offerings under the two covenants. None whatsoever.

And as Christ, so Christ's people – his priests. They exercise a ministry in the new covenant, a spiritual ministry, which exceeds by far the glory of that of the old, which was an outward ministry. Believers have more glory than the levitical priests, and their offerings have more glory than levitical sacrifices. The glory of the old ministry – and it had glory – was outward, and had no glory in comparison with the inward, spiritual glory of the new-covenant priesthood and ministry (2 Cor. 3:7-11). God demands, he seeks, true spiritual worship from true spiritual worshippers: 'The true worshippers... worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:23-24). The old covenant, for all its glory, could never meet and satisfy this desire in God.

Just in case anyone doubts this – or, because of covenant theology (which I challenge – see my *Infant Baptism Tested* and my forthcoming book on the law), disputes it – I am not saying that no one in the Old Testament was saved and worshipped God

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spiritually. Of course not! Let me remind you of what I said earlier, in the Preamble:

The fact is, although the likes of David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel... were living under the old covenant, they were, in truth, spiritual men and women of the new covenant by anticipation. Of course they spoke in old-covenant terms – they could do nothing else – but, reading their words in the light of the New Testament, we can see the spiritual meaning of what they were saying. They, too, in a measure, saw that spiritual meaning, and felt it.

In that place, I gave some reasons for my assertion, leaving my full arguments, as I say, to my forthcoming book on the law.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the glory of the old covenant was, at best, dim, and – now that Christ has established the new covenant – the old has faded away (see 2 Cor. 3:11, NIV). It is in the new covenant that God through Christ has formed his people into a priesthood for the very purpose of satisfying his demand and desire for true spiritual worship from true spiritual worshippers (John 4:23-24). In Christ, he has established a body of priests who truly worship him in spirit, and offer true spiritual sacrifices. Addressing the Philippian believers, who were being mauled by Judaizers (‘those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh’, NIV), men who wanted to drag the saints back to the old covenant, and lock them into spiritual bondage, the apostle thundered: ‘We are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh’ (Phil. 3:2-3). It is *we* – believers under the new covenant – it is *we* who are the true people of God, the true Israel, who truly and spiritually worship God!

In short, the newest believer approaches God with greater glory than Aaron himself ever did, even Aaron dressed in all his robes, bearing all his sacrifices. Indeed, he does. And he comes to God adorned with greater glory than Solomon in all his royal vestments. If I may be permitted to accommodate Scripture: Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these (see Matt. 6:29). Believers truly are *royal* priests – a phenomenon which, as we have seen, could never have arisen under the Mosaic covenant (see 2 Chron. 26:16-21, for instance).

And that leads me on to the next point.

#### **4. Believers are royal priests – an impossibility under the old covenant**

Let me repeat what I have just said: Believers truly are *royal* priests – a phenomenon which could never have arisen under the Mosaic covenant. What does ‘being kings’ mean?

For the believer, being a king is entirely a spiritual matter. Let me stress this by putting it in the negative. New Testament talk of the believer’s kingship has no physical connotation whatsoever. What appalling harm *that* notion has wrought! But in a spiritual sense, believers – being in Christ, in union with Christ – are, with him, *spiritual* priests. Equally, in Christ, they are *spiritual* lords, rulers and kings, and are so now, in this age.

For Christ *is* king – now. Judging by outward circumstances, it does not appear so. But he is. The prophets repeatedly foretold his kingship over an increasing and endless kingdom (Ps. 89:35-37; Isa. 9:7; 16:5; Dan. 2:44; 7:14,18,27; Zech. 9:9-10, and so on). Just before Christ’s birth, the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that her ‘son... Jesus... will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end’ (Luke 1:31-33, NIV). Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on the donkey we know ‘took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet [Zech. 9:9]: “Say to the daughter of Zion, see, your king comes to you...”’ (Matt. 21:1-11). ‘The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices... “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord”’ (Luke 19:37-40). In commissioning his people for their work – spreading the gospel, baptising converts, teaching them, and so on – Christ could claim: ‘All authority (power, AV) has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (Matt. 28:18-20). Power! Authority! Lordship! Christ is king, now, in this age! As Christ claimed (Luke 23:2-3) and the early church preached (Acts 17:7).

I have already commented on the fact that Christ is now *seated* in heaven, drawing attention to what this tells us about his *finished* sacrificial work (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). But there is another aspect to it. Rulers, kings, sit on their thrones. Commoners stand in their presence. To remain seated, to be seated, speaks of power and

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authority, governance (1 Kings 22:19; Is. 6:1; Jer. 17:25; 22:4,30). Well, Christ is now seated at God's right hand as king, with authority, in power (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 26:64; Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33-36; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 3:21).

In Christ, believers, too, have power; they, too, are kings. How? God their Father ensures that all things are made to serve them for their good. They triumph over all circumstances, over all things – including trials, sufferings, afflictions, troubles and weakness. In all these things, they are more than conquerors. Even death itself is made to work for the good and glory of God's people. Oh, the grave will swallow them, but it will not be able to hold its prey. Death itself will be swallowed up! When Christ comes, then the triumphant chorus of all the elect shall resound: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 15:52-57).

That, of course, is yet to come. We sing of it now – by faith – but at that great day, faith will give way to experience. But even now, believers are conquerors and kings:

For if [since] by the one man's offence death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17).

We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he predestined, these he also called; whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified... In all these things [tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword] we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:28-39).

All things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

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Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14).

[The Lord] said to [Paul]: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness’. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

[God] raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6).

You... have redeemed us to God by your blood... and have made us kings [or a kingdom] and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years (Rev. 20:6).

As I have noted already, some would regard those last two extracts from Revelation as prophecy concerning a coming age. While I am not blind to the *eternal* aspect of such passages, I am convinced they also apply to believers now, during this present age. Leaving that to one side, I do not for a moment deny that the complete working-out and fulfilment of the believer’s kingship will be in eternity. Of course it will:

If we endure, we shall also reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12).

There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him (Jas. 1:12).

There shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him. They shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads... And they shall reign for ever and ever (Rev. 22:3-5; see also, for instance, Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Thess. 2:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:5; Rev. 2:10).

Yes, the full realisation of the believer’s kingship must await the eternal day. Nevertheless, even at this present time, believers are royal priests. They are kings, ‘princes of the blood’, now! Although Paul’s general tone is ironical in the following passage, nevertheless the fundamental truth still stands: ‘You have become kings’, he told the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:8, NIV). Of every believer

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it may be said, like Jacob who struggled and overcame, that he has ‘power with God’ (Gen. 32:28; Hos. 12:3-4; both AV). Ah! Power! What a word! Surprising as it may seem to many, the New Testament (covenant) makes ‘power’, the power of Christ by the Spirit of God, one of the leading characteristics of the experience of believers (see Acts 1:8; 4:7,33; 6:8; Rom. 15:13,19; 1 Cor. 2:4; 4:20; 5:4; 15:43; 2 Cor. 4:7; 12:9; 13:10 (AV); Eph. 1:19; 3:7,20; 6:10; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:11; 2:10; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:7-8; 1 Pet. 1:5; Rev. 2:26; 20:6). As one example of the believer’s ‘power with God’, take the promise of power in prayer (John 14:13-14; 15:7,16; 16:23-24,26-28; 1 John 3:21-22; 5:14-15).

Nor must the corporate aspect of this be lost. Take Christ’s promise of the power of the keys (Matt. 16:19). Rome limits this to Peter and thence to the Popes. Luther and Calvin, the latter citing Cyprian and Augustine, ascribed this power to the church. And this is certainly borne out by such passages as Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5, especially verses 4 and 5: ‘When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over...’ (NIV). Note, in the question of spiritual discipline, the power of an apostle, in concert with the assembly, is nothing less than the power of the Lord Christ himself who is gathered with the believers, presiding over them. (See also John 20:21-23; 2 Cor. 2:10; 13:3,10).

The point can be broadened beyond ‘power’. Notice how the New Testament links the believer to words like ‘boast, glory, confidence, triumph, joy inexpressible’, and so on. Listen to the promise of Christ to his people, which promise he started to fulfil when, after he had ascended, he poured out his Holy Spirit:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to my Father (John 14:12).

Hence, the believer’s regal, noble – *royal* – status. Now! Although I have to confess it does not seem so in day-to-day terms, this is how Scripture speaks. *This* is the reality!

Thus we may justly say that, while the old covenant was glorious, it had no glory at all in this respect. No levitical priest could be royal. But now that Christ has established the new

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covenant, all believers are kings, all of them are all royal priests. Consequently, as Luther put it:

Who then can comprehend the lofty dignity of the Christian? By virtue of his royal power he rules over all things, death, life and sin, and through his priestly glory is omnipotent with God because he does the things God asks and desires; as it is written: 'He will fulfil the desire of those who fear him; he also will hear their cry and save them' [compare Phil. 4:13]. To this glory a man attains, certainly not by any works of his, but by faith alone.<sup>1</sup>

### ***5. The old covenant was outward; the new is inward***

The old covenant was an outward ministry. And it had a glory, a great glory – but only in that outward way. Yes, but, great as it was, it was still only outward. The new-covenant priesthood has a glory greater by far since it is a ministry of the heart, and inward.

Of course, even under the old covenant, God always desired the worship of the heart – 'behold, you desire truth in the inward parts' – and not the mere outward worship of form or ceremony (Deut. 13:3; 30:1-20; 1 Sam. 12:20,24; Ps. 15:2; 24:4; 51:6,10; Isa. 29:13; Jer. 4:4,14; Ezek. 11:19,21; 36:26, for instance). Aaron bore the names of the sons of Israel over his heart as he entered the holy place (Ex. 28:29-30). But he could only do it in a physical, outward and symbolic way. And that was when the old covenant was performed at its best. Too often, however, it was not at its best. As God had to complain through Isaiah, the Israelites 'draw near with their mouths, and honour me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from me' (Isa. 29:13). Christ took up these words, saying they applied to the Jews in his day (Matt. 15:7-9).

What of believers in the new covenant? We have just read John 4:23-24 and Philippians 3:3. In the new covenant, God has entered into a spiritual relationship with spiritual men and women, as a consequence of which they offer, and he is pleased to receive, spiritual worship to him from the heart. Whereas the old was external, the new covenant is inward and spiritual.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther: *Freedom*, St Matthias Press, London, 1997, p21; R.Paul Stevens: *The Other Six Days...*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2000, p189.

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I am not saying that Christ's rebuke, drawn from Isaiah, does not apply to believers, or have relevance to us under the new covenant. Of course it does! Sadly, we, too, can carry out our worship and service of God in a carnal, outward or formal way. And if and when we do, then the cap fits and we must wear it. Do we not have to confess that our best efforts are tainted, and we need to repent? The point I am making, however, is that the old-covenant, *at its best*, was an outward covenant, whereas the new covenant is spiritual and inward. The spiritual worship, therefore, which God took so many pains to set up in the new covenant through Christ, far exceeds the glory of the old covenant with its priesthood and all its sacrifices.

### ***6. The old-covenant priesthood was for the few; the new is for all believers***

The old was a ministry carried out by the few for the many. Out of all Israel, only a relative few were priests. And they were all male, and restricted by age (Num. 8:24-25). But under the new covenant, every believer is a priest, with no starting age, and no retirement. And that includes females. Every believer, man or woman, young or old, is a priest. Every believer! In saying this, of course, I am not denying the biblical restriction of eldership and the public teaching and preaching ministry to brothers set apart by God (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-12; 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9). Even so, women have a speaking and teaching role, within these New Testament confines (Acts 18:26; 1 Cor. 11:3-16, for instance). The point here, however, is that in the new covenant every believer, man or woman, is a priest. What a glorious change. Change? What a tremendous *advance*.

What is more, under the old covenant, the few ministered for the many. Now, under the new covenant, nobody performs religious exercises for the rest. Or should do! That is, they should *not* do! As I have already observed, there is not a trace of sacerdotalism about the priesthood of all believers. All God's people, as priests of the new covenant, all believers make their own sacrifices, and all offer their own worship and prayers. There is no dependence on any other creature; there is no delegation of

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these tasks to another. No man can do it for me. No man can do it better for me than I can myself. The believer comes directly to God through Christ, and he comes for himself.

I am not saying that believers cannot pray for one another. Of course not. But that is very different to one believer praying as a surrogate for another. I have read Lloyd-Jones to the effect that he never used books of devotion. 'I'd rather do my own devotions'. Quite right, too!

Thus, new-covenant priests exceed the glory of the priests of the old covenant. Alas, by adopting (albeit, in the overwhelming majority of cases, unknowingly) principles brought in by the Fathers, and accepting what has become known as 'the ministry', and resigning most of their spiritual activity to such a designated class of men, many believers are letting slip one of the greatest glories of the new covenant. And when they do, they are on the high road to sacerdotalism. This is of such importance, I will come back to it.

### ***7. The old covenant restricted entrance into the presence of God; the new opened the way to all believers***

As I have said, the old covenant must have presented a breathtaking spectacle. But there was a serious fly in its ointment. In that covenant, men could not come directly into the presence of God. The truth is, it was worse than that. Out of the select company of the priests, only one could be high priest at any one time, and he alone could enter the Most Holy Place, and that but once a year. And that, it must not be forgotten, was only a symbolic representation of the presence of God. He could not come to God himself. The way to God himself was not yet open to men; no, not even to the high priest!<sup>2</sup> The writer to the Hebrews:

Into the second part, the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way

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<sup>2</sup> In saying this, I am not denying that, at times in the Old Testament, God appeared directly to men. Nor am I going back on what I have said about 'new-covenant men' in the old covenant. But the general point still stands.

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into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle [or temple] was still standing (Heb. 9:7-8).

Under the old covenant, the way to God was barred. Not only so. This was a vital part of the instruction that God was giving Israel under that covenant, the covenant of condemnation. Sin keeps men from God. Sin puts a barrier between men and God. And the sacrifices of the old covenant could never remove that barrier. Indeed, their continuous, repetitive nature constantly reinforced the sense of the barrier. An effective sacrifice was needed. Even so, although the old covenant did not provide it, its ceremonies illustrated, and pointed to, the way in which God would, at his appointed time, remove the barrier, break down the veil and throw open the way into his presence through the sacrifice of his Son.

So much for the old covenant. Its ceremonies and sacrifices spoke of the barrier between men and God. It reminded men of the way God addressed Israel at the giving of the law. Keep away! Curse! *That* was the message of Sinai, right from the start, even as the children of Israel were on the plain beneath the mount (Ex. 19:12-24; Heb. 12:18-21).

Now for the contrast! And what a contrast it is. Under Christ in the new covenant, the way is open for all believers to come unto God directly, not in any shadowy or symbolic manner, but really, and to be welcomed into his presence (Heb. 12:22-24). ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law’ (Gal. 3:13). The veil has been torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). What a powerful symbol. Torn! Not only is the way now open for sinners to come to God, the barrier having been removed. No! that barrier to God has been ‘torn’ away, and the gate thrown open, wide open. The curtain was not calmly removed, folded up and stowed away. No, it was ripped apart, and pulled down. And it was torn from top to bottom, from heaven to earth, from God to men. Man couldn’t do it. Man didn’t do it. God himself tore it down. God took the initiative. God displayed the power. The way is open!

And it is all in and through Christ: ‘Through [Christ] we... have access by one Spirit to the Father... In Christ Jesus our Lord... we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in him’ (Eph. 2:18; 3:11-12).

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Moreover, because under the new covenant we now have a high priest who can ‘sympathise with our weaknesses’, we may at all times, at any time, pass through the torn veil – actually, pass through the open door – and come ‘boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Heb. 4:15-16). As the writer to the Hebrews later said:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, 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).<sup>3</sup>

Watts certainly understood the contrast between the old and the new covenants in this regard:

*Curs'd be the man, for ever curs'd,  
That does one wilful sin commit;  
Death and damnation for the first,  
Without relief, and infinite.*

*Thus Sinai roars, and round the earth  
Thunder, and fire, and vengeance flings;  
But Jesus, thy dear gasping breath  
And Calvary, say gentler things:*

*'Pardon and grace, and boundless love,  
Streaming along a Saviour's blood;  
And life, and joy, and crowns above,  
Obtained by a dear bleeding God'.*

*Hark! How he prays (the charming sound  
Dwells on his dying lips): 'Forgive!'  
And every groan and gaping wound  
Cries: 'Father, let the rebels live!'*

*Go, ye that rest upon the law,  
And toil and seek salvation there,  
Look to the flame that Moses saw,  
And shrink, and tremble, and despair.*

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Infant Baptism Tested* and my *Baptist Sacramentalism* for more on Heb. 10:22.

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*But I'll retire beneath the cross;  
Saviour, at thy dear feet I'll lie!  
And the keen sword that justice draws,  
Flaming and red, shall pass me by.*

This, then, is yet another way – and what a way it is! – in which, although the old covenant was glorious, it has no glory now by reason of the glory of the new which exceeds it.

***8. In the old covenant, the priestly work was done at special times and in special places; in the new, believers are (or should be) always exercising their ministry, and in all places***

The old-covenant ministry had to be performed at stated times and in special places. In the new, there are no stated times, there are no special places. Believers can carry out their ministry anywhere and at all times. They do. Or should do! ‘In every place’, God will receive pure worship that is offered to him; not just at Jerusalem (Mal. 1:11; John 4:21). The priesthood of believers is performed ‘continually’ (Heb. 13:15); in modern parlance, 24/7.

I do not for a moment deny that Christ has instituted the Lord’s day, and that churches meet at stated times. But the fact remains that under the new covenant, believers may approach God as priests at any and every time, and in any and every place.

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So, to answer the question: ‘How do the two systems compare?’ They don’t. The two covenants, the old and the new, cannot be *compared*. The New Testament *contrasts* them; it does not merely *compare* them. The old is finished and gone, torn away, obsolete. The new has come, and it is superior in every way. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews ‘put pen to paper’ in order to prove it, and he marshalled overwhelming evidence in making his case. I will expand on this vital point in my forthcoming book on the law.

‘Glory’ is a word which belongs to, and describes, both covenants. But the glory of the old covenant has faded away to nothing in the light of the glory of the new, and it now has no glory at all in comparison with that which Christ has established. And

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the same goes for the priests of the two covenants. The glory of the priesthood which belongs to all believers under the Lord Christ exceeds by far the aaronic priesthood, even in all its glory under King Solomon. The new covenant, with its priesthood and its service, is a covenant of life, not condemnation. It is eternal, spiritual, inward, for all believers. It allows them, guarantees them, unrestricted access at all times to Almighty God himself. Indeed, God encourages and commands them to come to him at all times and in all places, assuring them of an unchangeable and undoubted welcome. I have already quoted the following verse, but it bears repeating:

*My name is graven on his hands,  
My name is written on his heart.  
I know that while in heaven he stands  
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

In all these ways, the new covenant exceeds by far the glory of the old. In the same manner, and to the same extent, the glory of the new-covenant priesthood exceeds that of the old. And all believers – all believers – from the moment of their conversion and union with Christ, are fully-fledged priests of the Lord in the new covenant. This is one of the greatest glories of the new covenant that God has established in and through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.