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# The Sacerdotal Office of Christ According to the Letter to the Hebrews

GEORGE STOECKHARDT \*

**T**he sacerdotal office of Christ reaches into the very heart and soul of our Christian faith. Christ's sacrifice, blood, and death alone provide for us true comfort in life and death. The doctrine of the sacerdotal sacrifice of Christ is the great truth with which Christian preachers are constantly operating. Luther once remarked that a Christian preacher plays constantly on this one string. From it he may, of course, elicit a great variety of tunes and sounds. It is not necessary always to say the same things in the same words. Looking into the Scriptures, we find one and the same truth expressed in a great variety of ways and presented from many points of view. We note this variety in the topic under consideration. The Epistle to the Hebrews presents the expiatory sacrifice of Christ not only in greater detail than any other book of the Bible, but also in a distinctive manner as well. Using the Levitical priesthood as a type, the author of Hebrews presents the sacrifice of Christ in language strikingly picturesque and especially clear and graphic.

## I

*The Service Which Christ as the God-ordained High Priest Renders Consists Essentially in This, That He Removes Sin and Perfects Sinners and That He Leads Mankind to God.*

"Christ, the High Priest," that is the chief theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and it recurs in a wide range of variations. We note first that this High Priest is ordained by God Himself, 5:4-6. God called Christ to the priesthood and Himself installed Him as our

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\* Dr. Stoeckhardt (1842—1913) originally prepared this study as a pastoral conference essay and subsequently published it fifty years ago in *Lehre und Webre*, Vol. XLVI (1900), 129—135; 257—270; 289—300; 321—329. The Rev. Walter H. Bouman of Duluth, Minn., translated this gem in the field of exegetical studies. The managing editor took the liberty to condense the material. The concluding three sections will appear in an early issue. — F. E. M.

Priest: "Thou art a Priest forever after the order of Melchisedec." God's earnestness of purpose in this matter is evident from the fact that He confirmed His appointment as our Priest with an oath, 7:21. Hence we may have complete confidence in this Priest.

"High-priestly office" is the title of an office of service rendered to sinful mankind. Wherein essentially does this service consist? Christ is also called "the Mediator of the new covenant," 12:24. According to 8:6-13 (cp. Jer. 31:31 ff.) the new covenant rests upon the forgiveness of sins. Therefore Christ is called "a merciful and faithful High-Priest, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." 2:17. It is the business and office of a priest to remove sins. 10:11-12. And in and with the deliverance from sin Christ has delivered us also from all the consequences of sin, has destroyed the power of death and him that had the power of death, the devil, 2:14-15. Moreover, Christ is called an High Priest of good things to come, 9:11. He mediates for us an eternal inheritance, 9:15. He is the Captain of our salvation, 2:10. He brings the world to come in subjection to men, 2:5. He brings many sons unto glory, 2:10. In a word, Christ also perfects the sinners, 7:11, 19. He leads sinful men into that perfect glory, honor, and majesty purposed for them from the beginning, leads them into perfect communion with God. In brief, we are indebted to Christ, our High Priest, for forgiveness of sin and final perfection.

## II

*Christ Is Capable of Rendering such Service Because He Is True God and Also True Man.*

Above all, this Epistle to the Hebrews places the person of the High Priest in the right light and emphasizes the twofold truth that Christ is true God and true Man, and therefore qualified for such service. Because He is both, He is able to free us from sin and to perfect us. Therefore we shall learn first how this Epistle proves the eternal Godhead of Christ and connects this doctrine with the work of redemption.

The Letter opens with the words: "God . . . hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom He hath appointed Heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds," 1:1-2. Throughout this Epistle the author presents the historic Christ, who walked upon

this earth in deep humility and is now exalted. Jesus is the brightness of God's glory and radiates the full glory of the divine attributes, 1:3. He lacks in none of the things which belong to God. The essence of God is expressed in Him. He is the Creator and Preserver of all things. And He it is who by Himself brought about our purification from sin. Because He is essentially, truly, and perfectly God, He is qualified for such service and can cleanse us from sin. Verily, sin is no trifle, but a violation of the commandments of the most high Lord, the King of Kings. Every sin is lese majesty. But if the most high Majesty Himself intervenes, then this crime, too, can be atoned. The Creator and Preserver of all things, who has created the creature, is able to do also the greater, namely, to restore the debased, to re-establish the fallen.

The entire first chapter of this Letter contains a detailed proof of the true Godhead of Christ, and various Old Testament texts are quoted here in which Christ is not only called the Son of God, but even directly God. This exposition stands in relation to the purpose of the entire Epistle. This Person, Jesus Christ, God's Son, true God, is the true High Priest.

The great High Priest, Jesus, the Son of God, "is passed through the heavens," 4:14; is "made higher than the heavens," 7:26; now sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven; He is exalted above all heavens, 8:1. And such an High Priest became us. Everything, the whole world, sin, death, devil, lie at His feet, and He has laid these enemies also at our feet. Sin, death, devil, no longer have any power over us.

Christ's solemn installation into the priesthood is announced in the words: "The Lord hath sworn and will not repent, Thou art a Priest forever after the order of Melchisedek," Ps. 110:4. This passage is frequently quoted in Hebrews, especially in chapter 7, where the analogy between Christ and Melchisedec is fully developed, 7:1-3. Melchisedec, King of Salem, appears in the Scriptures as a unique, exalted, amazing person. He was king of Salem, Jerusalem, and at the same time priest of the living God. Scriptures say nothing of his birth, his origin, his family, even nothing of his end. Holy Writ mentions only the incident of his meeting with Abraham, 7:1-3. Thus he is a type of the Son of God, who in reality has neither beginning nor end of days. He is the eternal

God. This fact is now also applied to His priesthood. In the unfolding of his exposition the author of Hebrews points out how Melchisedec in this meeting with Abraham appears as the greater, 7:4. Melchisedec blessed Abraham, "and without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better," 7:7. And Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils to Melchisedec, 7:8 f. This points to the fact that Christ, the Melchisedec of the New Covenant, is far above the Levitical priesthood. This also identifies His priesthood. Of the Old Testament Melchisedec it is said that he "abideth a priest continually," 7:3b. So his priesthood stands before us in the Scriptures, and nowhere is mention made of its transfer to another. Thus Christ has an incorruptible priesthood in contrast to the Levitical priests, who were mortal human beings and at death transferred their service to their sons. But Christ is a Priest "after the power of an endless life," 7:16. His unending, eternal life lends power and efficacy to His priesthood. It perfects the sinners, 7:11, 19; brings a better hope "by the which we draw nigh unto God," 7:19, and enter into perfect communion with God and life everlasting. All this the Levitical priesthood and the Law were unable to do.

Moreover, the true Godhead of the Christ is emphasized further in 3:1-6. Here we shall stress those things only which directly serve our purpose. The author speaks of the house of God, in which first Moses and later Christ served. The house of God is the realm, the people who here upon earth are God's. Essentially the Church in the Old as well as in the New Testament is one Church. The Church of the New Testament, which is made up of us Christians, is served by Christ as the High Priest. For this purpose He was sent by God, namely, to be our Priest. Thus He is faithful to Him who has made Him to be High Priest, faithful to His God and Father. Moses, too, of course, was faithful in his service, in the things to which he had been appointed. However, there is a great difference between the Christ and Moses. Moses was only a servant in the house of God. Christ, too, was a servant, but at the same time the Son, to whom the Father had delivered the house, is the owner of the house. Yes, Christ was accorded greater glory than Moses, for he who builds the house hath much greater honor than the house. Moses was part of the house of God, was a member of God's people, hence a human being under God. Christ, however,

not only serves the house as High Priest, but as true God is also the Creator of all things, 3:4. Certainly, the builder, the lord and owner of the house, will most carefully provide for his house much better even than the most faithful servant, who is a servant only. We can therefore place unconditional confidence in Christ's priestly service. Trust in God's faithfulness, constancy, and truthfulness is far different from trust in the faithfulness of the most faithful and trustworthy man. What a comfort for us poor sinners that we have such an High Priest, who with divine faithfulness pays heed to us in all things!

Thus Christ is fully equipped for the office of High Priest because He is the Son of God and true God. As does this Epistle, so do the Scriptures generally place the doctrine of the Christ's Godhead in relation to the work of redemption wrought by Christ Jesus. The doctrines of Christ's deity and of the Trinity are certainly not mere metaphysical abstractions without relevance for the Christian faith. Christ's work as our Savior and Redeemer is, of course, the very heart of our Christian faith. But if this Redeemer is not true God, then we cannot trust in His redemptive work. Therefore Christian preachers will always set forth the intimate relation between Christ's deity and His redemptive work.

On the other hand, Christ is qualified for the service of High Priest because He is true Man. The Son of God became Man, flesh and blood as other men. He took not on Him the nature of angels, but the seed of mankind, so "that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death," 2:14-18. He took upon Himself human nature in order to redeem mankind through death. For as God, Christ has indissoluble life, but human life is subject to dissolution. And in all things Christ became like unto His brethren, partook of all the frailties and weaknesses of human nature. And because He was so completely like unto us in His suffering and temptation, He is qualified for the office of High Priest. He is a merciful and faithful High Priest. He commiserates with us in all our needs, because He Himself in the highest degree experienced the exigencies of life. He is and remains faithful to us: He cannot deny His own flesh and blood. Therefore, He has mercy on us also in our greatest need and extremity, our sinfulness, atones for sin, and is able to help those who are tempted.

This thought is more fully expounded in 4:15-16; 5:1-3, 7-8. Every high priest is taken from among men, since he is ordained to mediate before God in behalf of his fellow men. This is basic. As weak human beings, the priests were capable of συμπάθησαι, 4:15, and could be touched by the infirmities of their brethren. This rule also applies to our High Priest Jesus Christ, who assumed our flesh and blood, felt our infirmities, Himself tasted of all the woe of earthly life. Christ offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death. When death approached Him, He felt as did any other dying person who, in the face of death, twists and turns, calls, sighs, and cries, and does not know what to do with Himself. Therefore He can place Himself fully into our position and by virtue of His συμπάθεια is qualified to help us in our dire extremities. The compassion of our High Priest goes still farther. A high priest taken from among men is a sinner and must sacrifice also for his own sins. Therefore he has a compassionate understanding for the sins and weaknesses of his brethren. This is true of every Christian pastor, who from his own experience knows how a sinner feels and is therefore able to help him. The word μετροπαθεῖν (to be affected moderately), 5:2, indicates that while a righteous pastor is indeed grieved, even justly enraged, by the sins of his brethren, he will show moderation in his indignation, since he knows that he himself is a sinner. And this applies also to Christ, our High Priest, though in a different manner. He was tempted like as we are. He was without sin; yet He truly felt temptation, experienced something of the power of evil in Himself, especially in the desert and later in Gethsemane. Though Christ was in no way deceived by any of Satan's schemes, He was nevertheless inwardly affected. Therefore He is capable of μετροπαθεῖν, of compassion with the sins of His brethren. He knows how easily a poor, weak human being is overpowered by sin. He is the holy, majestic God, and man's sin not only grieves Him; it also provokes Him, calls forth His holy wrath. But in view of the fact that He was tempted like as we are, His anger, as it were, is moderate, and He suppresses His wrath and displeasure. What a glorious comfort that in our constant encounter with sin we can turn to a High Priest who has heartfelt compassion on poor sinners!

But Christ felt such compassion with the sufferings, frailties, and

sins of His brethren not only in the days of His flesh, for "Jesus Christ [is] the same yesterday . . . and forever," 13:8. Christ did not lay aside His human nature when He entered the state of exaltation. Even in His glorification He cannot forget what He experienced in the days of His weakness. Today He can still place Himself into our position whenever we fully experience the impotence and frailty of our human nature. Thus He can help those who are tempted.

Whenever in our sermonizing and instruction we come to the words of the Creed "Jesus is also true Man, born of the Virgin Mary," we dare not be satisfied to say that He became man in order to die for us, but we must move forward and stress the compassion which Christ as our Brother has for His brethren after the flesh and which qualifies Him to be our High Priest.

### III

*By His One Sacrifice, Christ, the God-Man, has Obtained an Eternal Redemption.*

To remove sin and to atone for it, is the foremost service a priest renders to sinful mankind. This atonement Christ has rendered in that He, the God-Man, sacrificed Himself for us. In 9:11-15 the writer of the Epistle speaks of the death and blood of Christ, whereby He established the New Testament, which rests upon the forgiveness of sins, 9:16-22; cp. Jer., chapter 31. The word *διαθήκη* designates both "bequest" and "covenant." The death of the testator is necessary to make both the bequest and the covenant binding, 9:17. The precious Testament which God meant for His children on earth, namely, that He would forgive them their sins, has become valid only through the death of its Testator, Jesus Christ. However, *διαθήκη* also means covenant. The Old Covenant had been established and dedicated through the blood of calves and goats, the New Covenant with the blood of Christ, 9:18-22. By the shedding of His blood Christ has become the Mediator of a New Covenant.

The Old Covenant was established with sacrificial blood, Ex. 24:5 ff. Thus Christ also, as the Mediator of a New Covenant, brought a sacrifice, His sacrificial blood and death, whereby He established a New Covenant. In fact, the primary function of the Old Testament high priest was to sacrifice, 8:3. The Old Testa-



ment sacrifices are prototypes of the true New Testament sacrifice, offered by our High Priest, Christ, 10:1. To understand Christ's sacrifice correctly, we must study the nature and significance of the Old Testament sacrifices, as described in 9:6-10. If an Israelite had transgressed any one of the Commandments, he brought an animal without blemish into the courts of the sanctuary, laid his hands upon it, confessed his sins, and slaughtered the animal in the court. Then the priest took the blood of the slain animal, approached the altar of God, and either painted the horns of the altar with this blood or poured it upon the ground before the altar. Finally, the best parts of the meat were burned upon the altar.

The significance of the various symbolical acts in the propitiatory sacrifices is best illustrated in the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement. On this day the high priest entered the sanctuary three times, each time going by way of the Tabernacle, also known as the Holy, and the veil, which separated the Holy from the Holy of Holies. At his first entry the high priest advanced with a censer and burned incense upon the fire, "that the cloud of the incense covered the Mercy Seat." On his second entry he brought the blood of a young heifer for his own sins, sprinkling the lid of the Ark of the Covenant seven times with her blood. The third time he came with the blood of expiation for the sins of the people. When the reconciliation was accomplished, the high priest laid his hands upon the live goat and confessed the sins of the people which they had committed in the past year. This live goat was then sent into the wilderness. It symbolized the complete removal of the past sins. (Cp. Leviticus 16.)

The propitiatory sacrifices of the Old Testament were types and figures of Christ's one great sacrifice, 9:14. Christ is both Priest and Sacrifice in one Person. As the sacrifice of old, He stepped into man's place. He was slain upon the tree of the Cross, for the soul that sinneth, it shall die. The chastisement of our peace is upon Him. He shed His blood upon the Cross in order to atone for our sins before God. Thus Christ offered up Himself to God for a sweet-smelling savor. Once more "God showeth His good will to men, And peace shall reign on earth again" (*Lutheran Hymnal*, 237:1).

On Good Friday, the great Day of Atonement of the New Testa-

ment, Christ took upon Himself the sins of the whole world, Is. 53:6. As the prototypes, so Christ offered, as it were, His own blood to God and entered the sanctuary, like the high priests of old, "by a greater and more perfect tabernacle," 9:11, and the veil, 10:20. The tabernacle and the veil through which Christ passed are undoubtedly His flesh. Christ entered by the tabernacle of His own body through the veil into the presence of God, giving His flesh into death, offering up His own flesh. By His death and the shedding of His blood the Christ, the High Priest of the New Testament, has atoned for the sins of the whole world, has again turned God's good will toward men. Thus there was fulfilled in Him the significance of that other goat which was led into the wilderness. By His own death, Christ has atoned for the sins of the world and put them completely outside the camp.

But the core of 9:11-15 is the tremendous difference between type and prototype. We have something far more exalted than had Israel in the Old Testament, a sacrifice of incomparable sublimity and worth. In the Old Covenant irrational animals, bulls, goats, heifers, lambs, were sacrificed, 9:13. In the New Testament it was an extraordinary Man who sacrificed Himself. To appreciate the true greatness of this sacrifice, we note in the first place that Christ entered the Holy of Holies "by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building," that is, Christ's flesh, His human nature. This "tabernacle" ἔστιν οὐ ταύτης τῆς κτίσεως (does not belong to the present creation), for the body, the human nature of the Christ, is a new creation, a new miracle by the Creator. It is an incomparable work of creation, of which we confess: "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." Christ did not come forth out of sinful flesh and blood of sinful mankind, but in Him the Holy Ghost created something new, a sinless Child of men, without spot or blemish. The tender Root, the Branch of righteousness of David, the sweet Root of Jesse, the Flower and Crown of mankind, the very Best and Noblest that the earth has produced, that is the sacrifice of the New Testament. This lies in the balance as payment for our sins.

Furthermore, the value of this sacrifice is still greater. It is not only a man who dies, for Christ "through the eternal spirit offered Himself . . . to God." "Eternal spirit" here means the divine nature

of Christ. In Rom. 1:3-4  $\sigma\acute{o}\rho\acute{\xi}$  obviously designates the human and  $\pi\nu\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\mu\alpha$  the divine nature of Christ. So also here. Through the eternal spirit, through His eternal Godhead, Christ offered Himself. True, Christ died according to His human nature. Man suffers and dies. But when Christ died, He set, as it were, His divine nature in action. The Son of God appropriated this suffering and dying to Himself, made of suffering and death a divine work. He brought, as it were, also His eternal Godhead into His death. Thus this sacrifice is of inestimable value. It is a sacrifice the like of which could not have been humanly conceived. In His sacrifice Christ offered both His pure, tender human nature, the noblest and best ever produced by the earth, and the Son of God, the most sublime and noblest in heaven and on earth.

This offering is of incomparable value, and therefore its efficacy is also far different from that of the Old Testament offerings. The blood and ashes of beasts were physical, external things and served for an external cleansing only. Israel had many ceremonial, external statutes, prescribing the people's entire conduct, their eating and drinking, labor and rest. By observing these Israel was to present itself externally an holy nation, separate and distinct from the heathen nations. Whoever observed these external statutes was considered clean, a legal member of the community, and a participant in all the rights and privileges of the chosen people. But whoever sinned against the Law lost his ceremonial purity and was not permitted to mingle with the people. The sacrifice re-established the lost purity and re-instated the sinner into the congregation of Israel.

The offering of Christ, however, cleanses the sinner not in a merely external, bodily manner, but "purges our conscience," 9:14. Christ's sacrifice reaches deep into the innermost life of man. Our legal status or men's evaluation of us is in the final analysis not the decisive factor. The important thing is that we are in the right relation with God. And only the blood of Christ reaches into this innermost life. It purges our conscience "from dead works," that is, from our sins. Man's sin is certainly no trifling thing. It is not as easily undone as it is done. Not only gross vices, but all kinds of other sins worm their way into the conscience, lodge there, besmirch and wound it. Conscience accuses sinful man before God.

Thus the peace between God and man is broken. However, the New Testament offering steps into the breach. It purges the conscience from transgressions. Christ's blood cancels the guilt of men. This singularly Righteous One, this unique human life, the eternal God, has sacrificed Himself, and this offering is a perfect reparation for all the sins of mankind. As the blood of Christ wipes away all sins before God, even so it also erases the guilt consciousness. The holy blood of Christ, the Son of God, purges our conscience from dead works, binds up and heals the wounded conscience. Whenever our heart and conscience accuse us before God, we are able to quiet and appease our conscience with the blood of Christ. The unique effect of the offering of Christ is to purge our conscience from dead works.

Its effect goes still further. The Old Testament offering served as bodily cleansing. This is, however, only one phase of its significance and effect. It was also truly a sacrament to assure an Israelite of the forgiveness of his sins and the grace of God, for the blood of the offerings served also to cover sin before God. But this atonement was rather imperfect, inasmuch as it was confirmed by the sacrificial blood of animals only. The Old Testament sacrifice did indeed in a measure atone for sin and 'appease the conscience; but it "could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience," 9:9. Hence these offerings had to be repeated again and again. The situation was this: Whenever an Israelite had been overtaken in a fault, he brought an offering. It served as an atonement. Now he knew and believed: "God is again gracious toward me." However, this expiation and comfort lasted only until another sin had been committed. Then another sacrificial animal had to be purchased and offered. Thus a conscientious Israelite, though he had to offer many sacrifices, still could not perfectly quiet his conscience. Even the sacrifice of the great Day of Atonement was valid only for a year and covered the public guilt of only a year. When the year had passed, absolution and comfort were also spent. A new sacrifice had to be brought. It was all a very temporary work, an "external childish absolution," as Luther calls it. The daily and annual repetition of the offerings constantly reminded Israel of its sinfulness and could quiet the conscience for a short time only, 9:25—10:4, 11.

What a vastly different offering is that of the Christ! We read that Christ has "obtained eternal redemption," 9:12; 10:12-14. Christ sacrificed Himself once and once and for always atoned for our sins and the sins of the whole world. Thus He obtained an eternal redemption. That sacrifice which Christ brought is the eternal Spirit, the blood of the eternal God, which washes away at once all sins of the present time, so that they are really put away from the sight of God. Indeed, we too are reminded of our sinfulness, as were the Israelites, not by offerings, but by our flesh and blood. Old sins become alive, new sins are added. But as often as old and new sins disquiet our conscience, we think of that offering by which Christ has wiped out all sins for all times, we think of this eternal redemption. Indeed, we comfort ourselves with the thought that God richly and daily forgives us our sins. However, such daily forgiveness is nothing else than that God showers upon us the treasure of forgiveness which He once and for all prepared on that great Good Friday.

The final comfort which again and again quiets us is the knowledge that not only individual sins have been forgiven, but even everything in us that is sinful. All the sins of our whole life have been erased once and for all and no longer disturb our relation to God. Even though our sin vexes us at times, it no longer reaches into the innermost depths of our heart. There is the firm, immovable foundation, Christ and His blood. Thus the New Testament offering not only cleanses our conscience, but also quiets it perfectly. Because of Christ's offering we have not only a clear conscience, but also a comforted, joyous, and courageous heart. Even though sins again burden us and the waves of temptation rise high, we nevertheless continue to fasten our anchor of hope on this firm foundation, namely, God's Passion, blood, and death.

In 10:7-10 the author of Hebrews emphasizes especially the ethical value of Christ's offering by stressing the willingness of the New Testament High Priest as He undergoes His suffering. In Ps. 40:7-8 the Messiah testifies of His willingness to fulfill the will of God with respect to the reconciliation of the world. Not by external coercion, but of His own free will He gladly brought His offering. God's Law was in His heart. It was the concern of His heart to do this will of God. It is and remains eternally true that

only freewill offerings please God. Christ's offering was a willing sacrifice in the truest sense of the word. Of His own free will He went into His suffering, Luke 18:31; met His enemies at the gate of the Garden of Gethsemane; heartily desired to become the Pass-over Lamb and to abolish the Old Testament Passover, Luke 15:22. As Moses once desired that God might erase his name from the Book of Life for the sake of the people, as Paul desired to be banished from Christ for the sake of his brethren according to the flesh, even so Christ burned with a strong desire to become a curse in our stead. What was impossible for these men actually happened with Christ. From heartfelt willingness He became a curse for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. And by the power of His will we are sanctified, 10:10. The willingness of Christ's offering serves to cleanse us from sin and gives to the sacrificial blood of Christ its worth. Christ's willingness to bear our sins is our comfort and refuge against sin and the accusations of our conscience.