

Christ's Melchizedekian Priesthood (1)

read of the persecution of the church in Acts. The New Testament epistles also speak of this struggle. Of all the 27 New Testament books, Hebrews especially addresses the biblical and theological objections of unbelieving Jews to the Christian faith.

The background to Hebrews 7 involves a Jewish attack, specifically on Christ's office as priest: "You Christians say that Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for sin and that forgiveness comes only through His shed blood. But I don't see that the Messiah spoken of in the law and the prophets is to be a priest. Find me a passage in Moses or the prophets which speaks of the coming deliverer as a priest!"

The Jews argued that their sacrifices were offered by priests who descended from the house of Aaron and the tribe of Levi. All this was according to God's Word, from Exodus to Deuteronomy and throughout the Scriptures. Their priesthood was hoary with antiquity, and God preserved it for some 1,500 years before Jesus came along. The Jews boasted in their glorious temple in which God dwelt, an imposing edifice with huge stones, an impressive courtyard and a divinely appointed altar. The priests and high priests were clothed with beautiful garments and they officiated at wonderful feasts and religious ceremonies. You can hear the siren call to Jewish Christians from their unbelieving kinsmen: "Return to the old paths, God's ancient ways, revealed to our fathers! Leave this newfangled cult of Jesus with its plain and barren worship!" Many did just that and others were tempted to apostatize, including those to whom Hebrews was first written.

The Jews had another argument, based on God's words to Aaron in Numbers 18:7: "Therefore thou and thy sons with thee shall keep your priest's office for every thing of the altar, and within the veil; and ye shall serve: I have given your priest's office unto you as a service of gift: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death." "Don't you Christians claim that Jesus descended from David, so He is of the tribe of Judah (cf. Heb. 7:14)? But one of the line of Judah cannot be a priest according to God's law, and he who attempts it 'shall be put to death' (Num. 18:7)!"

How would you respond? Remember that I Peter 3:15 states that we must "be ready always to give an answer" for our hope, including to unbelieving Jews. In Christian history, from the *Dialogue With Trypho* by Justin Martyr in the second century and through two millennia, Jews and Christians have been debating such issues. This is difficult work since, "when Moses is read," the Jews have a veil "upon their heart" (II Cor. 3:15). But by His grace, the Triune God has converted Jews, such as Alfred Edersheim, throughout the New Testament era. Jehovah brings them to trust in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our "priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4)! *Rev. Stewart*

For more on Melchizedek and the Lord Jesus, listen to "Christ's Priestly Office" (Belgic Confession Class, vol. X: Articles 20-21a), 6 Christian doctrine classes on 6 CDs in an attractive box set: (1) God Hath Manifested His Justice and Mercy in Christ, (2) Christ's Threefold Office, (3) Introducing Christ's Melchizedekian Priesthood, (4) Christ's Melchizedekian Priesthood, (5) Christ's Melchizedekian Priesthood and Time, and (6) Christ's Priesthood Outside Hebrews. Cost £8 (inc. P&P, plus 1 class handout).

Melchizedek is a mysterious figure in the Old Testament. He pops up in the life of Abraham and then he is not mentioned until one of the Psalms some 1,000 years later. Moses gives him three verses (Gen. 14:18-20) and David only one verse (Ps. 110:4). This makes just four verses in two passages in all the 39 books of the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Melchizedek is mentioned frequently in the book of Hebrews. There are three references to him in Hebrews 5-6 (5:6, 10-11; 6:20). Hebrews 7 explains the significance of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, giving us, perhaps, the fullest exposition of any two Old Testament passages anywhere in the New Testament. Some identify Hebrews 7 on Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood as the heart of the epistle. We may compare Hebrews 7 with other chapters in this inspired letter. If Hebrews 5 treats the nature of Christ's priesthood and Hebrews 9 explains the use of Christ's priesthood, then Hebrews 7 extols the excellency of Christ's priesthood. He is not just any mere priest: He is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 7 touches upon contemporary issues for both Gentile and Jewish Christians. First, Roman Catholicism uses the bread and wine which Melchizedek brought to Abraham (Gen. 14:18) as a proof for its mass, the chief work of its own priesthood. Second, Christian Reconstructionism seeks to reintroduce the Old Testament civil law into nations today. Third, premillennialism teaches the return of Aaronic priests and bloody sacrifices during a future, literal, thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. None of these views are supported by Hebrews 7 on Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood.

Hebrews 7 also helps the believer better to understand the Old Testament, the larger of the two testaments which constitute God's written Word to us. This chapter also reveals to us the glory of Christ's priesthood: a unique, untransferable, everlasting priesthood, a priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. Understanding and believing in Christ's glorious Melchizedekian priesthood serves the edification and comfort of the child of God. "For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God" (19).

Unbelieving first-century Judaism had a host of objections to Jesus Christ. You see this time and time again in the four gospel accounts. The Jews (wrongly) criticized the Lord for fellowshiping with sinners, breaking the Sabbath, blaspheming by claiming to be the Son of God, etc. In the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we read of Christ's battles with the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes who tried to trip Him up.

Attacks on Christ and His kingdom continued after His ascension into heaven. Just

(continued on p. 4)

Complete Sanctification

“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

A reader asks, “We are taught in the *Heidelberg Catechism* that we as believers have ‘only a small beginning’ of the new obedience. If this is so and continues throughout our lives, why does Paul speak of us reaching the ‘measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ in Ephesians 4:13?”

Before I answer the question, I urge our readers, if it is at all possible, to attend the British Reformed Fellowship Family Conference to be held this summer (26 July - 2 August) in Scotland (<http://brfconference.weebly.com>). It will be on the subject of sanctification and many such questions as the above will be answered.

The quote from the *Heidelberg Catechism* reads:

Q. 113. What doth the tenth commandment require of us?

A. That even the smallest inclination or thought contrary to any of God’s commandments never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness.

Q. 114. But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?

A. No; but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live not only according to some, but all the commandments of God.

It is interesting to note that, although the *Catechism* is discussing the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” the answer says nothing about covetousness, but rather concentrates on the incompleteness of sanctification in this life.

There is, however, good reason for this. The tenth commandment is the only one of all the commandments that specifically speaks of the inner requirements of the law. The other commandments, at first reading, address themselves to our outward conformity to Jehovah’s will. The tenth commandment tells us that outward conformity to the law of God is not enough; we must be without sin in our hearts and minds and souls. This is an extremely important truth, forgotten or ignored by those who speak so glibly about an entirely sanctified life and who are satisfied with only external observance of the law, whereas Jesus tells us that love is the keeping of the whole law.

The fact of the matter is that in this life we do not attain the perfection we shall have in heaven in the life to come. And Paul is speaking of that final perfection in Ephesians 4:13. Only in heaven will we possess the full unity of the faith, the knowledge of the Son of God, the perfect man, the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

We have only a small beginning of the new obedience. In another place, discussing our justification, the *Catechism* gives as a reason why our good works cannot be the

ground of our justification: “Our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin” (A. 62). It is the towering arrogance of proud man who boasts of his good works as the ground of justification—as does Rome and as do those who teach the views of the Federal Vision.

Our hearts are regenerated. By regeneration, we are born again. The new man is created by the work of the Spirit of Christ. To help us understand this, we could call the heart of man the entire nature of man (body and soul) in microcosm, something like an oak tree is, in its entirety, in an acorn. Our natures, including our bodies and our souls (minds and wills), remain depraved, totally so. But our regenerated hearts exert great and powerful influences, through the work of the Holy Spirit, on our entire natures. We know God with our minds (while we also know sin); we desire to serve the Lord according to His holy law (although we also desire sin); we pray, sing Psalms, confess Christ’s name, submit to God’s will, etc. (although very imperfectly).

This is the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:17), the struggle that Paul describes so eloquently in Romans 7:13-25.

Yet we must remember:

1) We are justified, that is, we are completely without sin in the mind and heart of God on the basis of Christ’s perfect work.

2) Though the struggle within us is long and bitter, we are always victorious over sin when we confess our sins, find forgiveness and walk in a new and holy life.

3) We do keep God’s law. We keep it so well that we can even command God to examine us, knowing He will find righteousness there. Read Psalm 139:23, although we pray at the same time, the prayer of verse 24. Read Psalm 26. In fact, this truth is almost a major theme in the Psalms. The Psalmist repeatedly pleads his righteousness as a reason why God should bless him. He is not boasting like the Pharisee; he is conscious of Christ’s righteousness imputed to him. But he is also confessing how he has walked and does walk according to God’s will by the Holy Spirit’s saving power.

4) Every moment, we come nearer the full sanctification that is ours when we come to glory. Our sanctification is like the painting of a picture. Gradually it nears its completing and perfection. Each brush stroke brings it closer. The artist may be using inferior paints and poor brushes; he may be working on a dirty canvas. But he overcomes by his great skill every obstacle until the painting is so good that it hangs in a special place in the Louvre.

The Triune God is the skilled artist who, we are told by Scripture, will complete the good work He has begun in us.

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