

THE COMPASSIONATE HIGH PRIEST

“For we do not have a high priest who is not able to be sensitive to our weaknesses, having been tested in every way like ourselves—without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

In the variables of language, the title of “priests” is universally recognized. Whatever the religious persuasion, it is assumed that the priest is the mediator or connecting link between human beings and the Deity. The priesthood as such in the Bible was first established at the time of Moses, with his brother Aaron, who was of the tribe of Levi. Thereafter, all the activities of the priesthood, were limited to that tribe.

The priesthood, as God established it, was ordained specifically to offer gifts and sacrifices that would eliminate the barriers that had existed between God and man since the tragic event in the Garden of Eden. However, as Hebrews 9 points out, while the sacrifices would satisfy the need of forgiveness and reconciliation, they would not do anything to alter the internal ravaging of the spirit that had taken place at that time.

Christ came to restore the spirit—to bring about, once again, the oneness that had existed between God and man before the fall. In order to accomplish this, He must first identify Himself with human beings, which He did in assuming the person of Jesus. He must identify with the condition of weakness that had plagued humanity since Eden. He must then offer Himself as the ultimate sacrifice, to end all sacrifices, that would insure the eternal abolishing of sin, for all who would identify with Him. To this end, He must assume the role of priest, which He did forever, and become at once the sacrifice as well as the offerer of the sacrifice. Finally, he must manifest the power of God in rising from the dead, and becoming the giver of eternal life and oneness with God forever. Thus the redemptive process through which Jesus became our High Priest, forever identifying Himself with the human race and at the same time retaining the Deity of the Eternal Godhead.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He retained His human body, but it then became a glorified body, confined by the limits of time and space. It is such a body that all who identify with Him will occupy throughout eternity. Meanwhile, all that we have and know of God is mediated to us through the glorified Christ.

When we finally come to our eternal state, what will we see of God? Will there be three Gods on three thrones—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? The answer is very clear in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, where He first identifies Christ with all of the works of God in Creation, and then says in 2:9—*“In Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.”* Thus, in our eternal state, we will interact with the One Person—whom we shall be like—who will embody all the fullness of the Godhead. The Godhead in its ultimate form, is pure spirit. Christ, manifesting the Godhead, and expressing that Godhead in human terms is filled with all the fullness of God.

Now the important question is—can such a personage really, understand and

relate to the weaknesses of human flesh? Are not all of us too unworthy of Him and too far beneath Him even to receive His attention, much less His benevolence? The answer is clearly given in this section of Hebrews “*We do not have a high priest who cannot be sensitive to our weaknesses.*” (Hebrews 4:15)– (Auth. Trans.) But what does it mean–“To be sensitive to (or touched by the feeling of) our weaknesses? The Greek word is *sumpathesai* and comes over directly to the English language in the word “sympathy.” “Sympathy” means simply “to feel together with.” The word is also translated by “compassion” which is the Latin equivalent. Sometimes the word is translated “to suffer together with.” The suffering of Christ was not confined to the cross. That was a relatively brief episode in His life. It might be said that the greater suffering was in His being confined to the limitations of a space/time body. A limited but helpful analogy might be to consider how it would be if one, as a human being were required to assume the form of a dog. While the dog is admittedly a noble beast, still, to be relegated to the world of barking and wagging the tail and tipping over garbage cans (especially if one were all the while aware of one’s humanity), would certainly be painful indeed. Even then, we should more appropriately use the analogy of the grasshopper. Such was the suffering of Christ that gives to Him forever a deep sensitivity to the frustrations and sorrows and tragedies of the human condition.

And yet, it is clearly stated that in His sojourn on the earth, He was without sin. How can that be? Was He an example to us of strength in overcoming temptation? The answer is that He took on Him the form of man before the fall, void of the corruption of the flesh. As God, He could not possibly sin for then He would cease to be God.

So how then can He be an example to us of overcoming sin?

He isn’t. People who strive “to be like Jesus” have missed that point. Humans are born with a propensity toward sin. If we could follow Jesus’ example and overcome temptation and therefore be sinless, then we would not need the atonement. There is no provision whatsoever for sinless human to enter the kingdom of God except in the sinlessness of Christ. And, as Jesus well pointed out, to break one law is to be guilty of all. It is this very attitude of the Pharisees that Jesus countered. They did not think they needed a physician, because they thought that they were perfectly observing the law, Jesus pointed out that even though they might be pure white outwardly, inwardly they were full of death.

But doesn’t receiving Christ give us the strength to overcome temptation?

Yes, but only to the point of functioning in an acceptable manner on the earth. Being good for a day does not make us perfect. And being good is itself a relative term. How good? And what is good? Jesus said, “*There is none good but God only.*” And Paul said, “*The good that I would I do not and the evil [unsoundness] that I would not I do*” (Romans 7:19). And further, “*In me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing*” (18). Possessing the Spirit of Christ within, we possess His attributes within our spirits–love, joy, peace, etc. But, while our spirits are perfectly restored in Christ, our flesh does not always respond (or rather rarely responds) consistently with that inner grace. That is

what Paul means when He says that he doesn't do the good that he intends to do. In the flesh, we humans have our moments of nobility and kindness and honor and even some Christ-likeness, but it is never continuous. There is always with us as with Paul, the struggle in the flesh to keep up with our attitudes in our spirit. The fact that we even want to be like Christ is the evidence of our salvation.

So Christ was sinless, in ways that we will not be on this earth.

What then is the meaning of I John 3:9—"Everyone who is born of God...is not able to sin?" The answer is in the context. John defines sin in verse 4 as "lawlessness"—*anomia*. There is a difference between breaking the law and being lawless. Any citizen may break the law on occasion and still have respect for it. The criminal not only breaks the law, but has no regard for it. Once Christ has come into our spirits, we can no longer be indifferent to His law. We may offend Him many times, and still cherish His will in the world. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Christ felt all the pressures of the human condition on the earth, but would not and did not yield to disobedience. It would be much like the launching of a seaworthy vessel. The ship is sound; it will withstand the sea; but it will still receive the pounding of the waves upon its hull. There was not the slightest possibility that Jesus—the God-man—would sin and cease to become God. But, He would know the forces of life faced by His human creatures on the earth. Satan will press you to feel that God does not understand or care. How many times you have been tempted to say, "I am too weak to be His family." How many times the evangelist has heard the statement—"I would like to be a Christian, but I don't think I can honestly live a Christian life." The appropriate answer to that question is not—"God will help you live the Christian life. The appropriate answer is "Your salvation is dependent on the sacrifice of Christ and not on how well you live the Christian life." There are many reasons why one ought to behave oneself, but not because behaving oneself will gain salvation. Behaving oneself will keep one from spoiling one's life on the earth and possibly interfering with services to Christ that one might perform, but it does not of itself keep one from participating in the sacrifice of Christ.

Jesus said to His disciples that they must "Deny themselves and take up their cross daily, and follow Him." But there is a difference between self-denial and denying self. Self-denial is asceticism—denying pleasures and comforts. Denying self means recognizing that the self is not able to accomplish its own salvation and therefore must identify with the cross, recognizing daily that it is one's only hope. If self-denial would be effective, the Pharisees would have been the greatest examples of salvation. But so also would be the adherents to a large number of religious sects, today. Many religionists have utterly abandoned fleshly comfort, and even suffered severely to the point of setting fire to themselves. Paul said to the Corinthians—"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and give my body to be burned and have not love [the love of Christ] it profits me nothing" (I Corinthians 13:3).

In the light of all of this—the overwhelming struggle of the believer on earth—Paul quotes God's Word to him—"My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength

is made perfect in weakness" (I Corinthians 12). So, in the midst of the struggle; in the floodtide of your own weakness, stay with Christ. He came, not for the righteous, but for the sinner. If He were not with you, you would not care.

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