

October – December 2015

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE TABERNACLE OF GOD

## Part 17

*“And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof: foursquare shall it be: and two cubits shall be the height thereof: the horns thereof shall be of the same. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, the top thereof, and the sides thereof round about, and the horns thereof; and thou shalt make unto it a crown of gold round about. And two golden rings shalt thou make to it under the crown of it, by the two corners thereof, upon the two sides of it shalt thou make it; and they shall be for places for the staves to bear it withal. And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. And thou shalt put it before the vail that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with thee. And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon. And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it is most holy unto the Lord.” (Exodus 30:1-10)*

The Holy Place of the Tabernacle contained three items of furniture: the Golden Lampstand, the Table of Shewbread, and lastly, standing nearest to the veil into the Holy of Holies, the **Golden Altar**, also spoken of as the ‘**Altar of Incense**’. It is the subject of this article.

There were two altars belonging to the Tabernacle: the Brazen Altar which stood in the outer court, immediately within the gate, frequently

referred to as ‘the Altar of Burnt Offering’. Upon that altar, death was perpetually displayed, with sacrifices being made and blood constantly shed forth. But the Altar of Incense was very different, in that no beasts were offered upon it. This golden altar was in the Holy Place, and from it a fragrance of sweet spices constantly ascended.

The differences between the two altars are essential to note. The truth of atonement for sin, cleansing from defilement by means of blood, and acceptance through the death of a substitutionary victim is the main teaching of the Brazen Altar. Whereas the golden Altar of Incense sets forth the high calling of the believer, his preservation and privileged position as priest; being fitted to offer acceptable worship, and to commune with the Most High God.

Whilst these important differences stand, the two altars are also intimately and inseparably linked. The Altar of Incense would never have existed if it had not been for the Brazen Altar. The Golden Altar had reference to, and was a consequence of, sacrifice already made upon the Brazen Altar. The fire that caused the sweet perfume to arise from the Altar of Incense was kindled with live coals taken in a censer from the Brazen Altar, and carried to it. The same fire which had consumed a victim of the first altar, caused the fragrances to arise from the second (cf Leviticus 16:12-13).

Both of the altars are designated by God as ‘most holy’ (cf Exodus 29:37 and 30:10). Once every year on the great Day of Atonement, the four horns of both altars were smeared with the blood of the sin offering: “*And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it is most holy unto the Lord* ” (Exodus 30:10); by which it is further demonstrated that these two altars, though distinct, were bound together, with each being essential to the other.

As with all the holy vessels and fittings of the Tabernacle, Christ is prefigured again in the Altar of Incense. It was constructed – like the Ark – of acacia or shittim wood, speaking of Christ’s humanity, and overlaid with pure gold, portraying His deity.

The dimensions of this altar are also significant: *“A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits shall be the height thereof: the horns thereof shall be of the same”* (Exodus 30:2). In common with all the altars that belonged to the Tabernacle and later, the Temple, it was ‘foursquare’ (cf Exodus 27:1, 38:1, 2 Chronicles 4:1, Ezekiel 43:16). Being made to such a pattern, the altar would be equal, even, stable and firm; a robust construction capable of endurance – all of which is illustrative of Christ.

The height of the Altar of Incense is also given, namely: two cubits. The other items of Tabernacle furniture whose measurements are given (the Ark and the Table of Shewbread) were both one-and-a-half cubits high. The Altar of Incense was taller, because it signified something ‘higher’ – it points to the exclusive and holy service which Christ carries out in Heaven. He is ever before God in the glorious office of High Priest. He, once the **victim**, bound to the Brazen Altar of sacrifice, is now the risen **victor**; the mighty conqueror, who has returned triumphantly to Heaven, a priest forever after the Order of Melchizedek: *“For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens”; “For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us”* (Hebrews 7:26, 9:24).

The Altar of Incense is also described as having golden ornamental work around its upper perimeter, called a ‘crown’. The word itself is important, as it sets forth Christ’s office as ‘King-Priest’. The Great High Priest is not only compassionate and understanding of His people,

being touched with the feeling of their infirmities (cf Hebrews 4:15); but He is also the One into Whose hands has been committed all power and all authority! He is Head over all things to the Church; all power is given unto Him in Heaven and in earth (cf Ephesians 1:21-22). He is therefore able to save to the uttermost (cf Hebrews 7:25); no situation is impossible; no position or circumstance presents too large a problem; He openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth (cf Revelation 3:7); He has the keys of Hell and of Death (cf Revelation 1:18); He is sovereign; He is supreme (cf Colossians 1:18); He is crowned with glory and honour (cf Psalm 8:5).

Consider the use to which the Golden Altar was put. Every day, morning and evening, when Aaron came into the Holy Place to trim the lamps, he had first to pass the Brazen Altar in the court where the sin offering had been made. From it, he filled a censer with live coals and carried them into the Holy Place together with finely ground incense. This he burned, with the fire, upon the Golden Altar. The fragrance of the incense filled the Tabernacle, and wafted into the Holy of Holies, forming a cloud before Jehovah upon the Mercy Seat.

All these details connect with the teaching of the New Testament: “*Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us*” – this has reference to Christ being made a sin offering upon Calvary, the antitype of the Brazen Altar. The same verse goes on – “*an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour*” (Ephesians 5:2). This depicts the Golden Altar of Incense, with its aroma permeating the Most Holy Place: Heaven itself. The fragrance is of Christ in all the perfection of His person and work; all Heaven is filled with the savour of it.

There is a pertinent application to be made here. The Spirit of God, through the Holy Scriptures, brings the Lord’s people into conformity and likeness to their Saviour. They, as members of His body, are called to function in a priestly capacity in unison with the Great Head; He in

Heaven, they upon earth. Thus the Psalmist says: “*Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice*” (Psalm 141:2). David was fully aware of all that transpired in the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, every morning and evening. His desire was that his regular devotions and prayers might ascend like that incense. In other words, that his own worship and praise would be in absolute harmony and fellowship with the Lord. He wanted the assurance that his supplications were carried into the very presence of God. It is the shared desire of every true believer.

This is the wondrous teaching which is presented by the Golden Altar. The Lord Jesus, as Great High Priest, takes the weakest utterances of His people and incorporates them into the fragrance of His person and work. It is poetically expressed in a hymn:

“Much incense is ascending  
Before our Father’s throne;  
His gracious ear is bending  
To hear our feeblest groan;  
To all our prayers and praises  
Christ adds His sweet perfume;  
And love the altar raises,  
These odours to consume.” (Peters)

This is why God must always be approached through the Lord Jesus; for no praise or worship is acceptable to the Almighty apart from Christ. Thus prayers are often concluded with the expression: ‘in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ’. Coming through Him in true faith, by virtue of the blood of the Brazen Altar (which is the cross), the lowest of sinners is brought into all the blessedness of the Golden Altar, and is enveloped in the sweet-smelling savour of Christ.

The familiar words of the twenty-second Psalm provide one of the most graphic pictures of the sufferings of Christ in the whole of

Scripture. The 'Altar of Burnt Offering' can be seen there in very truth, as the Saviour says: "*I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and Thou hast brought me into the dust of death*" (Psalm 22:14-15). Then in verse 22, that Psalm takes a strange turn. The suffering victim suddenly says: "*I will declare Thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise Thee*". This is nothing less than a transition from the Brazen Altar to the Golden Altar; from victim to victor.

This is further confirmed in the New Testament, where these words occur again in quotation: "*But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man. For it became Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, 'I will declare Thy name unto My brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto Thee'*" (Hebrews 2:9-12).

This expression of Christ's office as High Priest is deeply moving. He endured the sufferings of death that He might bring His many sons and daughters to glory. He the Great Sanctifier and they, the Sanctified, are all of one. He, the incarnate Son of God is not ashamed to call them 'brethren', and to stand with them. Then follow the words from Psalm 22. The fragrance of the incense from the Golden Altar is not that of a lone man. Through His sufferings, He has made perfect those 'many' children. He is the Captain of their salvation, meaning, their Leader. He is in the midst of that great congregation, or to use New Testament language, 'in the midst of the church'. Christ the Great Head is ever in the centre of His people when they assemble. Thus from that company there ascends honour, thanksgiving, praise and

worship, rendered by those who through sovereign grace have been made Royal Priests (cf 1 Peter 2:9). They yield spiritual sacrifices unto God by Jesus Christ (cf 1 Peter 2:5). All that is offered unto God through Him has an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God.

*“Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon”* (Exodus 30:9). God will have no strange fire, neither will He endure strange incense. All that is done in the church must be in harmony with the Lord and His revealed will. Anything which is not found in Scripture is ‘strange’ to God – it means ‘foreign’, ‘alien’, ‘incongruous’. This the Almighty will not tolerate. Anything which is unknown to the Bible – the innovations and inventions of man; the notions and fashions of the present age – is strange, and prohibited by the divine ‘thou shalt not’. It will never mingle with the fragrance of the Golden Altar.

The prophet warns against such behaviour: *“And it shall come to pass, that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink”* (Isaiah 3:24); as soon as strange practices are introduced into a church, the sweet perfume that should be ascending unto God is destroyed. There is a rift between the Sanctifier and the sanctified; the Captain’s word has been set aside; the harmony of the praises led by Him have developed into discord. Unbiblical practices arising from the sinful imagination of fallen man are as polluting to the right worship of God as: *“Dead flies [that] cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour”* (Ecclesiastes 10:1). This a tragic state of affairs, yet all-too-common amongst churches today.

This gives a little insight into the meaning and significance of the golden Altar of Incense. May its truth be registered by all, and its holy precepts ever be manifested in the church on earth.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)



## HEAVENLY INTERCESSION

*“Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”* (Romans 8:34)

*“It is Christ that died”*... This event formed the first of all the subsequent steps in the working out of the great plan of the Church’s redemption. To this, as its centre, every line of truth converged. It was as a suffering Messiah, as an atoning High Priest, as a crucified Saviour, as a Conqueror, returning from the battle-field with garments rolled in blood, that the Son of God was revealed to the eye of the Old Testament saints. They were taught by every type, and by every prophecy, to look to ‘the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world’. Christ must die! Death had entered our world, and death – the death of the Prince of Life – only could expel it. This event formed the deepest valley of our Lord’s humiliation. It was the dark background – the sombre shading of the picture of His life, around which gathered the light and glory of all the subsequent parts of His history.

But in what character did Christ die? Not as a Martyr, nor as a Model, but as a Substitute. His death was substitutionary. *“For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us”* (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). This great truth, the Apostle, we find in another place, appropriating to himself: *“The Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20). Here was the personal application of a general truth. And this is the privilege of faith. There breathes not a babe in Christ, who may not lay his hand upon this glorious truth: ‘Christ gave Himself for me’. Contemplate now, the conclusiveness of this reasoning for the non-condemnation of the believer. Since Christ bore our sins, and was condemned in our

place; since by His expiatory death the claims of Divine justice are answered, and the holiness of the Divine law is maintained, who can condemn those for whom He died? Oh, what security is this for the believer in Jesus! Standing beneath the shadow of the cross, the weakest saint can confront his deadliest foe; and every accusation alleged, and every sentence of condemnation uttered, he can meet, by pointing to Him who died. In that one fact he sees the great debt cancelled, the entire curse removed, the grand indictment quashed – and ‘No condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus’, are words written as in letters of living light upon the cross.

“*Yea rather, that is risen again*” This is the second part of the mediation of Christ, which the Apostle assigns as a reason why none can condemn the believer. It would seem by the word ‘rather’ that we are taught to look upon this fact of our Lord’s life as supplying a still stronger affirmation of the great truth he was establishing. A few observations may make this appear. The atoning work of Christ was in itself a finished work. It supplied all that the case demanded. Nothing could possibly add to its perfection. “*I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do*” (John 17:4). But we lacked the proof. We required that evidence of the reality and acceptance of the Atonement which would render our faith in it a rational and intelligent act. The proof lay with Him who was ‘pleased to bruise Him and put Him to grief’. If God were satisfied, then the guilty, trembling sinner may confidently and safely repose on the work of the Saviour.

The fact of the resurrection was therefore essential to give reality to the Atonement, and hope to man. Had He not returned in triumph from the grave, the sanctity of His precepts, the sublimity of His teachings, the lustre of His example, and the sympathies awakened by the story of His death, might have attracted, charmed, and subdued us; but all expectation of redemption by His blood would have been a mockery and a delusion. But, “*this Jesus hath God raised up*” (Acts 2:32). And

grounded on this fact the believer's acquittal is complete. When He bowed His head and gave up the spirit, the sentence of condemnation was reversed; but when He burst the bonds of death, and appeared in the character of a Victor, the believer's justification was forever sealed. "*For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life*" (Romans 5:10). Here, then, lies the great security of the believer: "...*delivered for our offences, [He] was raised again for our justification*" (Romans 4:25). Planting his foot of faith upon the vacant tomb of his living Redeemer, the Christian can exclaim, "*Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again*". Oh, to feel the power of His resurrection in our souls! Oh, to rise with Him in all the reality and glory of this His new-born life; our minds, our affections, our aspirations, our hopes all quickened, and ascending with our living Lord. "*Because I live, ye shall live also*" (John 14:19).

"*Who is even at the right hand of God*". The exaltation of Christ was a necessary part of His mediatorial work. It entered essentially into the further continuance of that work in heaven – the scene of the intercessory part of the High Priest's office. 'The right hand of God' is a phrase expressive of power and dignity. "...*when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (Hebrews 1:3); "*Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him*" (1 Peter 3:22). What stronger assurance has the believer that no impeachment against him can be successful, than this? His Saviour, his Advocate, his best Friend, is at the right hand of the Father, advanced to the highest post of honour and power in heaven.

"There sits our Saviour crowned with light,  
Clothed in a body like our own." (Watts)

All power and dominion are His. The revolutions of the planets, and the destinies of empires, His hand guides. The government is upon His shoulders; and for the well being, security, and triumph of His Church, power over all flesh, and dominion over all worlds, is placed in His hands. Who, then, can condemn? Jesus is at the right hand of God, and the principalities and powers of all worlds are subject to His authority. Fear not, therefore, O, believer! Your Head and Redeemer is alive to frustrate every purpose, to resist every plot, and to silence every tongue that would condemn you.

*“Who also maketh intercession for us”*. To what a beautiful climax does the Apostle conduct his argument! The exaltation of Jesus in heaven is associated with the dearest interests of his people on earth. Joseph was forgotten when Pharaoh lifted up the head of the chief butler. But our Lord, amid the honours and splendours to which God has highly exalted Him, still remembers His brethren in bonds, and makes intercession for them.

How expressive is the type of our Lord’s present engagement on behalf of his people! *“And he [Aaron] shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the vail: And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony”* (Leviticus 16:12-13). The passing of Aaron into the holy of holies, was the shadowing forth of our Lord’s entrance into heaven. The blood sprinkled at the mercy seat was the presentation of the great Atonement within the veil. And the incense overshadowing with its fragrant cloud the mercy seat, thus touched with blood, was the figure of the ceaseless intercession of our Great High Priest in the Holiest. *“For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true: but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us”* (Hebrews 9:24).

It is an individual, an anticipative, and a present intercession. It embraces all the personal needs of each believer, it precedes each temptation and each trial, and at the moment that the sympathy and the prayers of the Saviour are the most called for, and are felt to be the most soothing, it bears the saint and his sorrow on its bosom before the throne. Just at a crisis of his history, at a juncture, perhaps, the most critical in his life; and when the heart, oppressed with its emotions, cannot breathe a prayer, Jesus is remembering him, sympathizing with him, and interceding for him.

Oh, who can fully describe the blessings that flow through the intercession of the Son of God? The love, the sympathy, the forethought, the carefulness, the minute interest in all our concerns, are blessings beyond description. Tried, tempted believer! Jesus makes intercession for you. Your case is not unknown to Him. Your sorrow is not hidden from Him. Your name is on His heart. Your burden is on His shoulder; and because He not only has prayed for you, but prays for you now, your faith shall not fail. Your great accuser may stand at your right hand to condemn you, but your great Advocate stands at the right hand of God to plead for you. And greater is He that is for you, than all that are against you.

Behold the ground of the believer's triumph! What has he to fear? "*Who is he that condemneth?*" The mediatorial work of Christ shuts every mouth, meets every accusation, and ignores every indictment that can be brought against those for whom He died, rose again, ascended up on high, and makes intercession. Oh, what a glorious triumph does Christ secure to the weakest saint who stands in faith upon this rock! "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1).

Octavius Winslow (1808 – 1878)

# THE EXCELLENCY OF CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD

*“But now hath He obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also He is the Mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).*

A greater part of the Epistle to the Hebrews may be comprehended under the title ‘The Excellency of Christ’s Priesthood’, for it is upon this glorious theme that the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle to write. The first chapter presents Christ the Son of God in all the wondrous majesty of His eternal deity, whilst the second presents Christ the Son of Man in the condescension of incarnation and the outworking of salvation. However, these great truths are stated as a prelude to the larger discourse that follows; for it is by virtue of deity and humanity in combination that Christ holds the office of ‘Great High Priest’.

The exposition of Christ’s Priesthood commences in chapter 2 verse 17, where it is stated: *“in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people”*, and continues through to its conclusion at Hebrews 10:25. There are two brief departures from the main subject: firstly in Hebrews 3:7 – 4:13 where the Apostle, reflecting upon the Old Testament history of God’s people, makes an evangelistic application concerning the necessity and duty of faith. The second (Hebrews 5:11 – 6:12) is more censorious in its tone, condemning that sinful ignorance and immaturity which is ever an impediment to the reception of truth.

## **Christ’s Priesthood Established**

The Apostle establishes the veracity of Christ’s role as priest by giving a working definition of the office: *“For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both*

*gifts and sacrifices for sins*: (Hebrews 5:1). Priests of the Old Covenant era were characterised by these features: they were taken from men, ordained for men, rendered service to God, and offered up sacrifices and gifts. The Lord Jesus fulfilled every one of these criteria. By means of the incarnation He became truly man, and in that sense was made ‘lower than the angels’. “*Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same*” (Hebrews 2:14). He is thus rightly described as one ‘raised up from among His brethren’ (cf Acts 3:22, 7:37).

“*God [sent] His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin*” (Romans 8:3); for sin-afflicted man! Even as the priests of old were provided principally for the benefit, not of God, but the children of Israel, so Christ was delivered up, was made to be sin, died, and maketh intercession – for us.

Those priests were appointed to yield service to God in the stead, and on behalf of the people whom they represented. The tribes of Israel collectively could not hope to offer all the sacrifices and gifts which the Law required of them, and so the tribe of Levi was chosen to be a ‘tithes’ of the people (cf Numbers 8) to serve the Lord. In a more full and perfect way, Christ wrought a vicarious righteousness as Substitute and Representative of His people. The verse specifically mentions ‘sacrifices and gifts’ (cf Hebrews 5:1, 8:3) – which is to say, burnt offerings on account of sin, symbolic of punishment, together with offerings of a positive nature, as the meat, drink and wave offerings. The Lord Jesus perfectly fulfils this aspect too, as He addressed and supplied all the demands of God’s Law, both preceptive and penal. He, the Pascal Lamb, was sacrificed for us (cf 1 Corinthians 5:7); and He, by His life of peerless righteousness has also “*given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour*” (Ephesians 5:2); thereby meeting all the requirements of Divine justice.

## Christ's Priesthood Compared to Aaron

*“Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity”* (Hebrews 5:2). The priesthood of the Old Testament era is exemplified by Aaron, the first High Priest ever appointed. He is referenced several times in the narrative of the Hebrew Epistle, as a type and illustration of the priestly office of Christ. Aaron was well acquainted with the trials and tribulations of the children of Israel in the wilderness, because he shared their common experience, from the days of bondage in Egypt until his death in Mount Hor. He was daily beset by precisely the same difficulties and needs as the whole congregation knew, and felt with them and for them. On account of the earthly life which He endured, Christ also fulfils this detail. *“Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted ”* (Hebrews 2:17-18); in consequence of which, *“we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4:15).

The Lord Jesus is beautifully depicted as the One who has compassion. On the **ignorant** – loving from a past eternity persons who had neither knowledge nor regard of themselves or Him; on those that are **‘out of the way’** – individuals yet in their unbelief and sin, far removed from the way that leads to life everlasting; and on those who are in the way, but still **compassed with infirmity** – His saints upon earth, journeying through this vale of tears.

By way of a further comparison, it is stated concerning the office which Aaron held: *“no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not Himself to be made an high priest; but He that said unto Him, Thou art my Son, today have I*



*begotten Thee*" (Hebrews 5:4-5). If the Levitical priesthood had been the invention of Aaron, or a mere notion of Moses', not only would it have availed and achieved nothing, it would have been an act of blasphemous presumption. But the office of High Priest was divinely decreed by God, and He sovereignly appointed the individual who occupied it. If this was true of Aaron, it is even more so in the case of the Lord Jesus, whose very name 'Christ' means the one 'anointed', as unto a task: He is the choice of Almighty God. The second person of the Godhead condescended to become the one appointed of the Father, joyfully declaring: "*Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of Me) to do Thy will, O God*" (Hebrews 10:7).

And yet, for all its helpful parallels, the illustration of Christ provided by Aaron is insufficient and inadequate. Indeed, there are perhaps more contrasts to be noted, than there are points of comparison. For example, Aaron had no claims to royalty, and so could never combine the functions of priest and king as Christ ultimately did (cf Hebrews 7:13-14). His natural successors served after him simply on the strength of the original 'carnal commandment' given at Sinai, and did not each receive a direct revelation or 'oath' from God when commencing their term of office (cf Hebrews 7:16, 21). There were many High Priests in the course of history – a testimony to the fact of their sinfulness, mortality and death (cf Hebrews 7:23). All were impaired by sin, and the family included in its number such notorious characters as Nadab and Abihu, Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. These all served in a temporal earthly tabernacle or temple, the doors and veils of which spoke of restriction and prohibition; the majority of priests went no further than the outer courts and Holy Place; even the High Priest was permitted into the Holiest of all but once a year (Hebrews 9:6-8). In short, the Levitical priesthood was full of imperfections and faults (cf Hebrews 7:11, 8:7-8), for which reason the Holy Spirit directs the reader to a more fitting type than Aaron and his progeny, namely: Melchizedek.

## **Christ's Priesthood Compared to Melchizedek**

The enigmatic character called Melchizedek appears only once and briefly in the pages of Scripture, during the lifetime of Abraham (cf Genesis 14:18-20). The question of this man's identity, and whether he was human or a manifestation of Christ, is immaterial in the context of Hebrews. The primary feature of interest concerning this individual is the conspicuous lack of information about him. His name is known: Melchizedek, meaning 'King of Righteousness'; and his dual offices are described as King of Salem (or 'Peace'), and priest of the Most High God (cf Hebrews 7:1-2) – all of which titles are highly suggestive of Christ.

Beyond this, the records are silent upon his genealogy, parentage or line of descent. Nothing is known concerning his early years or later life, and there is no word of his death. He simply appears, and almost as quickly vanishes, from the stage of Biblical history. It is as though, to all intents and purposes, he was: "*Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually*" (Hebrews 7:3). Appointed to his office by a supernatural directive from God, Melchizedek belonged to a priestly order of one; his was a one-man dynasty, superior to and more ancient than Aaron's by some 500 years.

It is in these ways that Melchizedek can be described as a 'likeness of the Son of God', and that Christ is said to come in the 'similitude of Melchizedek' (cf Hebrews 7:3, 15). For Christ is the true Prince of Peace (cf Isaiah 9:6) and King of Righteousness. He has the power of an endless life. Quoting Psalms 45 and 102, the Apostle has already stated concerning Him: "*Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness...*", and, "*Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of Thine hands: They shall perish; but Thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a*

*garment; And as a vesture shalt Thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail ”* (Hebrews 1:8-12). *“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty”* (Revelation 1:8). He alone can ever aspire or claim to be a priest ‘forever’ – because He only hath immortality.

### **Christ’s Priesthood More Excellent**

The Old Testament types supplied by Aaron and Melchizedek set forth Christ in order of increasing accuracy and glory. But by the time Hebrews chapter 8 is reached, these ‘shadows’ are left behind and the Holy Spirit speaks directly of the Lord Jesus. For in summary, the saints have such a surpassingly wonderful High Priest that He has in fact entered into heaven, and is set at the right hand of the Majesty on high (cf Hebrews 8:1). No human priest or earthly symbol could sufficiently demonstrate this. Christ who held His office here below continues to discharge it at the throne of grace above; He has *“passed into the heavens”*, He *“entereth into that within the veil ”*; *“For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us”* (Hebrews 4:14, 6:19, 9:24).

Aaron was a high priest, and Melchizedek a priest-king, but Christ is simultaneously called: High Priest and King, Apostle and Forerunner, Surety and Mediator, the Captain and Author of Salvation (cf Hebrews 2:17, 1:8, 3:1, 6:20, 7:22, 8:6, 2:10, 5:9). He is also, *“holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens”* (Hebrews 7:26). The superiority of Christ’s priesthood is further emphasised, as He is described as having: *“a more excellent ministry”*, in *“a greater and more perfect tabernacle”*, founded upon a *“better testament”*, *“better covenant”*, and *“better promises”*; offering *“better sacrifices”* and thereby bringing in a *“better hope”* (Hebrews 8:6, 9:11, 7:22, 9:23, 7:19). Everything about Him is indescribably ‘better’.

Not only are Christ's office and attributes immeasurably greater than any earthly priesthood – so too is His work as priest, and the offering which He makes: “*For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer*” (Hebrews 8:3). The Old Testament priests sacrificed upon their altars sheep, goats, cattle and pigeons, of an incalculable quantity, together with offerings of wheat, oil, wine, incense and firstfruits over a period of nearly 1,500 years. Likewise Melchizedek is described as receiving tithes by way of an offering from Abraham. But that which Christ offered is of so much higher and nobler an order, that it was only ever needed once.

He made **one sacrifice**. In striking contrast with those priests who made sacrifices repeatedly, year by year, week by week, day by day, ‘offering oftentimes’ the same things, “*this man, [namely, Christ] after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God*”, “*For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified*” (Hebrews 10:12, 14). The excellency of His offering may be gauged by the rarity and uniqueness of its occurrence. For His was a terrible and wonderful **self sacrifice**. It was never possible for the blood of mere bulls and goats to take away sin – sacrifices and offerings of this kind were never sufficient or satisfactory to God. Thus the Lord Jesus was made flesh, and given a body, in order that we might be sanctified, “*through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*”. “*So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many*”; He hath “*appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*” (Hebrews 10:10, 9:28, 26).

He did not offer in vain, for this was an **effectual sacrifice**. The repeated offerings of the Old Testament accomplished nothing in relation to sin, but by their constant repetition proved the inadequacy of all that had gone before. As for Christ: “*by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified*”, and their sins and iniquities God remembers no more (Hebrews 10:14, 17). Therefore, this was

also the **final sacrifice**. For since the remission of sins has been triumphantly accomplished, “*there is **no more offering for sin***” (Hebrews 10:18); no need, no place, no purpose, no reason. Let this forever silence the Popish blasphemies of the ‘mass’, and similarly the foolish notions of a future restoration of Jewish temple-worship. The Lord Jesus has categorically stated: ‘It is finished!’ He has forever completed the sacrifice which He came to offer.

### **Christ’s Priesthood: Consequences**

The closely reasoned arguments of Hebrews 3 – 10 set forth in glorious clarity the excellency of Christ’s priesthood. But this is a truth of great import and consequence; so in two parallel statements, at the commencement, and the conclusion, the Apostle declares the implications for the people of God: “*Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession... Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need*” (Hebrews 4:14-16, cf 10:19-23). If the sacrifice which Aaron made on Atonement Day was acceptable, he would survive the experience of entering the Holy of Holies and not die, and the people might hope for the clemency of God for another year. The priesthood and offering of Christ is so much greater, that it has propitiated the wrath of God in perpetuity, wrought reconciliation with man, and brought endless blessings down. The way into the Holiest is opened and secured by blood, that His people may boldly enter in, and forever hold fast.

R. J. Steward

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The sacrifice is o’er,  
The veil is rent in twain,  
The mercy-seat is red  
With blood of Victim slain.  
Why stand we then without, in fear?  
The blood of Christ invites us near.

The gate is open wide;  
The new and living way  
Is clear, and free, and bright,  
With love, and peace, and day.  
Into the holiest now we come,  
Our present and our endless home.

(Bonar)

## EDITORIAL

The Altar of Incense was situated inside the Holy Place – an enclosed space surrounded by gold-plated walls, and with four thicknesses of fabric above. Consequently, the incense burned upon it would hardly ever have dissipated, but being renewed morning and evening, formed a permanent feature, filling the confines of the Tabernacle: *“And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony”* (Leviticus 16:3). The Scriptures draw the connection between this Old Testament practice, and prayer: *“And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand ”* (Revelation 8:3-4).

The prayers of the Lord’s people have a permanence to them, greater and more enduring than the lingering aroma of incense in the Tabernacle. A prayer when offered, however brief or simple, rises from man to God, from earth to heaven, and passes from time into eternity. In the realm where prayer is heard and answered, there is no ‘past’ or ‘future’, only a continual present. Every supplication made by the saints upon earth, every God-ward cry which they utter, adds to that glorious cloud of intercession which is before Him in perpetuity. Here is a thought to cheer the hearts and inspire the prayers of every believer. They can pray in the assurance that their words will never expire from the heavenly courts, nor fade from the mind and memory of omniscient God. That which is asked or desired now, may be answered at any time, or indeed many times, in the future; even long after the saint who originally prayed is entered into rest. For all their prayers ascend and reside upon the throne of an eternal God; the seat from which mercy is dispensed for evermore.