

Towards an Understanding of Priesthood in the Realistic Sense from the Perspective of New Testament Theology

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ABSTRACT

Protestantism has made a lot of emphases on priesthood of all Christian believers and this contributed immensely to the Second Vatican Council's reexamination of the Sacred Order and reemphasizing the ministerial priesthood which is realistic in essence of the term. The Council also made official declarations on the priestly identity of the laity. The official teaching on the priesthood of the laity has led to the emergence of vibrancy among catholic laity especially in Anglophone West African Countries. This religious phenomenon appears to put into question, the biblical foundation of the priesthood in the realistic sense. This article emphasizes on the biblical foundation of the priesthood in the realistic sense from the perspective of New Testament theology through the approach of a biblical survey. The term "priest" does not apply to a single person but the entire Christian community in the New Testament. The early Christian community accepted the Jewish priesthood until Christians realized their identity as the "new Israel" and accepted the Eucharist as a replacement of the Jewish bloody sacrifice leading to the emergence of Christian priesthood in the realistic sense, to which corresponds the ordained priesthood which differs in essence from that of the baptized.

Keywords: Eucharist, Presbyterian, Priest, Realistic, Sacrifice.

INTRODUCTION

Most Christian denominations have people who have been set apart by virtue of ordination to make the presence of God real in the communities of faith "through the performance of sacramental preaching, teaching and pastoral functions" (Ekem 2009:101). In most denominations such people are pastors or ministers of the Gospel and in any case when referred to as priests, it is in the metaphorical sense. In the Catholic tradition, such people are ordained into priesthood in the realistic sense. This article is to elucidate the foundation of the realistic priesthood through a New Testament theological perspective.

The problem is that many people do not comprehend the concept of the realistic priesthood, which is sacramental in its self. Some are even of the view that it is no longer necessary as the New Testament abolishes it and replaces it with the common priesthood of all believers. Is this assertion really true? Realistic priesthood is different from the royal priesthood or the common priesthood of all believers. Halligan (1986:133) affirms, the people of God consist of "universal priesthood" and "ministerial priesthood", with the latter finding

its root in the "Sacrament of Orders". Hence, this article would facilitate a comprehension of the realistic priesthood which corresponds to the Catholic ordained priesthood. In addition, it would help avoid misapplication of the term "priest" due to misunderstanding.

PRIESTHOOD FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT (NT) THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The term "Priest" has its etymology from the Greek word *presbyteros* which has been translated into English as "elder". It was mostly used in the late antiquity to refer to the elders of the Jewish and Christian communities. In the course of Christians application, "the semantics of the term shifted from the ordained person's place in ecclesiastical polity to his role as a cultic celebrant" (Eliade 1987:529). The Greek word for "cultic celebrant" is *hiereus*. It emphasizes religious connotation in the sense that the *hiereus* plays religious functions such as interpreting the meaning of events, performing the rituals of the religion and offering sacrifices. In the New Testament (NT), can there be such function for an individual?

Gleeson (2006:4) suggested that a thorough study of ministry from the NT shows the

impossibility of enumerating the exact ministries that existed. Here, the focus is on the presbyterate. However, since it cannot be discussed in isolation, the discussion shall commence with the ministries of the episcopate and diaconate, before narrowing it down to the focus of the article. Macquarrie (1977:431) has posited that “in the first few centuries, throughout the whole Church, the various ministries of which can be read in the New Testament had become consolidated into the familiar three orders of bishops, priests and deacons”. He further explained that “the bishops were thought of as the successors of the apostles, who were supposed to have founded [...] the principal sees of the ancient Church; the priests (or presbyters) corresponded to the pastors indifferently called ‘bishops’ or ‘presbyters’ in the New Testament; while the deacons represented those inferior orders of ministry which we can also see in the New Testament”. The idea of the bishops being the successors of the apostles is more of tradition than any New Testament biblical evidence.

“Bishop” is translated from the Greek *episkopos*, which means “overseer”, the bishop, therefore is an overseer of God’s flock. The bishop ought to be wholesome and exhibit if not all, most of the qualities that Paul enumerated in his letters (1 Tim 3:1-8; Titus 1:6-9). For Toon (2001:170), the title “bishop” was used to describe “the function of the presbyter (elder)” during the NT period. The implication of Toon’s opinion is a lack of clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter; the latter could be referred to as bishop due to his functions. The bishop is a presbyter who presides over gatherings of presbyters.

In his contribution to the issue of any distinction between presbyters and bishops, Ratzinger (1990) postulated that, Jewish Christian leaders were referred to as presbyters while the leaders of the Gentile churches were referred to as “bishops and deacons” for the first time in Philippians 1:1. This postulation assumes no clear distinction between the two. In affirmation with McKenzie (1968:97), there is no clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter as there is between the former and the deacon.

Some theologians such as Macquarrie (1977:432,433) have expressed the view that the diaconate is the least among the three clearly defined special ministries in the NT and recognize its prototype in the ministry of

Stephen and his companions (Acts 6:1-7). Burge (2001:320) also traced the beginning of the diaconate to the appointment of the seven whose primary duty was to help with the distribution of food in order for the apostles to continue effectively with preaching. However, they were not limited to these as Stephen was noted for performing great signs and wonders (Acts 6:8) which led to his martyrdom; Philip was also a missionary who preached to and baptized an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Although the seven were called to “service” (*diakonia* in Acts 6:1, 4), Luke does not refer to the seven as “deacons” although tradition ascribes the institution of the diaconate to the choice of the seven (Dunn 1990:50). The diaconate spread from the Jerusalem Church to the Gentile churches.

According to authors such as Wallace (2001:369), the presbyterate ought to be traced to the beginning of the church where they took “their place along with the apostles, prophets, and teachers”. He identified the presbyterate at Jerusalem with James in “the government of the local church after the manner of the synagogue (Acts 11:3; 21:18)”. Gleeson (2006:8) affirmed that the presbyterate was “a form of leadership in Jewish synagogues (Acts 15:22) and practiced by the first Christians, who were themselves Jews”. The presbyters functioned as overseers in the absence of apostles and essentially as teachers and preachers (1 Tim 5:17). The kind of presbyterate practiced by the first Christians should not be thought of as priests in the realistic sense even though the Second Vatican Council referred to the latter as presbyterate. The presbyterate in the mind of the Second Vatican Council is associated with sacerdotalism and for that matter priesthood in essence of the term, although the NT does not apply the term “priest” to any single person. With the exception of the priest of Zeus (Acts 14:13); any reference to priests and high priest in the Gospels and Acts “assume an historical and religious continuity with the Old Testament” (Wood 1996:960).

The Christian community is commissioned as “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6) by virtue of baptism, making them participants in the priesthood of Christ. The concept of a “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” is not peculiar to Christians, because in the Old Testament, God referred to the Jews as “a priestly kingdom and holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) and it did not conflict or prevent in

anyway the emergence of the Jewish priesthood. Therefore, in the same line of thought, the royal priesthood or common priesthood of all believers did not stop the emergence of realistic priesthood among the early Christians.

The early Christians recognized the Jewish priesthood as valid and therefore did not conceive of theirs. According to Brown (1970:17) the Christian community thought of herself as “a movement within Judaism differing only in some features (especially in the belief that Jesus was the Messiah, that with him God had inaugurated the eschatological times, and [...] Gentiles could now participate fully in the blessings of Israel without formally adopting all the precepts of the Law of Moses)”. The Christians identified themselves as the “renewed Israel” and were in anticipation that all Israel would soon join the “renewal movement”. Luke accounts that Jerusalem Christians continued their daily attendance to the Temple although they were also gathering to break bread in their homes (Acts 2:46). Paul also continued to go to the Temple and in some cases participated in offerings (Acts 21:26).

The early Christians who were mostly Jews, according to Martos (1982:464) and others accepted the validity of the Jewish priesthood, and showed this by continuous worship at the temple until its destruction in AD 70 by Roman soldiers. These prove that the early Christians did not reject the Jewish priesthood from the initial stages so they did not see the need for the development of their own form of priesthood in the realistic sense.

Some Christians began to identify themselves not just as a movement, but a new religion different from Judaism and a replacement of the Jews as “God’s covenanted people”. Others also interpreted the destruction of the Jewish Temple as God’s rejection of the Jews due to their failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. As a result, the concept of “special Christian priesthood” in place of the Jewish priesthood gradually emerged due partly to the above reasons. Such a development of priesthood is assigned in the letter to the Hebrews.

The most striking theme in the letter to the Hebrews is the prominent presentation of Jesus as an eternal *archiereus* (high priest). This may be surprising because the historical Jesus was not a priest and appears to have been a critic of the temple practices and was at odds with the Jerusalem priesthood (Mk 11:15-18). The author

defends his presentation of Jesus as *hiereus* (priest) by appealing to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20), who is identified as a priest long before the institution of the Levitical priesthood. Jesus’ priesthood is presented in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17). Powell (2009:438) observed “that neither the genealogy nor the death of Melchizedek reported in the Bible indicates [...] the superior priesthood that he represents [...], having neither beginning nor end”.

The priesthood of Jesus Christ is an element of the new and better covenant of which he is the mediator by virtue of embracing death by the cross. He is the only mediator because his sacrifice is the means of reconciliation between God and human beings. It has taken away sin, which is the obstacle to the relationship between God and humanity and restored the relationship. Bourke (1995) affirmed that the superiority of the new covenant to the old is based on the eternity of its priesthood that is in Jesus Christ. The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasized that Jesus is a royal priest, whose death has been the ultimate sacrifice that had rendered continuation of animal sacrifice ineffective. He also presented Christianity as a perfect replacement of the old Israel. Christians then took on the identity of the new Israel. As the new Israel, Christians needed to replace the Jewish bloody sacrifice.

It is in this context that Brown (1970:19) opined that “the Eucharist was seen as unbloody sacrifice replacing the bloody sacrifices no longer offered in the now-destroyed Temple”. He posited that, as early as the end of the first century, Christians had identified the Eucharist as a sacrifice. He affirmed his position with *Didache* 14: “Assemble on the Lord’s Day, breaking bread and celebrating the Eucharist; but first confess your sins that your sacrifice [*thysia*] may be a pure one... for it was of this that the Lord spoke”. Acknowledging the Eucharist as sacrifice meant that whoever presided over it then functioned as priest and it contributed to the emergence of a ministerial priesthood. The realistic priesthood therefore became associated with the celebration of the Eucharist which is the unbloody sacrifice that has replaced the bloody sacrifice, offered once and for all by Jesus Christ the eternal high priest. Whenever the Eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated, it is the re-enactments of the actual sacrifice that Jesus offered in which he was both the victim and the priest.

CONCLUSION

The discussion has been on biblical foundations of ministerial priesthood which is realistic in essence. From the New Testament theological perspective the term “priest” did not apply to a single person but the entire Christian community. The early Christian community also accepted the Jewish priesthood until Christians realized their identity as the “new Israel” and accepted the Eucharist as a replacement of the Jewish bloody sacrifice leading to the emergence of a ministerial priesthood to which corresponds priesthood in the realistic sense and this kind can be found in the Catholic tradition.

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