

DP2.04 Ministry and the Relationship Between the Testaments

By Phillip Jensen

The subject of Christian ministry has been a matter of enormous conflict and debate over many centuries. The Reformation saw conflict not only between the Protestants and Roman Catholics, but also between different Protestant groups such as the Church of England and the Presbyterian systems of church government. Very often the fights that have been conducted and are still being waged are fights about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament there are a variety of ministries that people conduct. The prophet, the priest and the king are all servants of the people of God. However, in the corporate activity of the religion of Israel it is the role of priest which is predominate. Basically, the priest was a mediator, standing between God and man, through whom men could draw near to God. Fundamental to bringing men to God was, of course, the sacrifice for sins. A quick glance at the article on 'priesthood' in The New Bible Dictionary will demonstrate to you the complexity of the Old Testament's teaching on this subject. The whole people of Israel (Exodus 19) were a kingdom of priests for they mediated between God and the Gentile world. But within Israel there was the tribe of Levi, which was the tribe of priests mediating for the rest of Israel to God. Yet within the Levites, who all had priestly function and role, there were those who had special priestly functions. Over the course of history different details of the ways in which this priestly function operated came into effect. It is not until late in the history of Israel that we can see the prominence of the high priest. The establishment of the Levitical practice goes with the Mosaic covenant. The place of priestly mediation and service is particularly that of the tabernacle. Considerable detail is given in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy to the establishment of the tabernacle and its practices. These are all later transferred to the temple built in Solomon's day and rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Herod. The temple was the place where people drew near to God and yet it was also the place where barriers were set up to keep people from God. At the centre of the temple worship was the holy of holies where God, who lives everywhere, particularly manifested himself. Such a place could only be approached by the high priest once a year after elaborate sacrificial precautions. The priestly functions were not only limited therefore to sacrifice – they included teaching, for example - but even here the central idea was mediation.

Now if we set aside the New Testament it would seem that we should be following the pattern of the Levitical priesthood in our association with God. Thus in our buildings and our church services we should seek somehow to represent the holiness of God and the need for sacrificial mediation to enable us to approach him in worship. The body of appointed priests could act as mediators between God and us, teaching us his word and declaring to us his forgiveness, while hearing our confessions and offering up sacrifices on our behalf.

However, when we look at the New Testament, we find that the Old Testament system of temple, priest, sacrifices, that is, the Old Testament method of mediation, has found a fulfilment in the person of Jesus. Jesus comes, he says, not only to fulfil the prophets, but also the law. This is because the law is not an end in itself, but a shadow of the reality that is to come. It is a pointer to the real mediation between God and man, that is, the gospel of Jesus. Without the law we

would not have the categories of thought, the models and illustrations that enable us to understand the gospel itself. In the New Testament Jesus is the temple of God where God meets man and man can approach God. Jesus' body is the temple where the Holy Spirit dwells and he promises the restoration of the temple in the three days of his death and resurrection. When we come to Revelation 21 and 22 to see the heavenly city of Jerusalem, John notices that there is no temple as in the earthly city, for God is now dwelling with his people. Furthermore, the epistle to the Hebrews is very clear about the sufficiency of Jesus both as sacrifice and as a high priest: making the work of mediation now already complete in Christ and unable to be repeated. This means that we no longer need human priests to stand between us and God, for Jesus is our great high priest. But, it also means that we now, ourselves, all have the status of being priests. Just as Jesus is the temple and being in him we have become the temple of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the priest of God and in him we all have become the priests of God. Our sacrifices cannot be, of course, for the forgiveness of our sins, seeing they have already been given, but our sacrifices are those of praise and thanksgiving, presenting our whole bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to him.

Having paid attention to how the New Testament uses the Old Testament we do not lose confidence in the authority of the Old Testament, but we do not jump immediately from the Old Testament to the twenty-first century without reading it through New Testament eyes. To supply the Old Testament Levitical system and temple practices to the twenty-first century Christian church without perceiving that Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament law is to make a serious error in Christian understanding, so serious as to effectively deny the gospel message. It is the very error that the epistle to the Hebrews is written against. However, it has been widely practised in Christendom down through the centuries even to this day.

When, where and how does Christian ministry fit in? What is the purpose of church? Why do we have ministers, let alone why does the Church of England call them 'priests'? There is, within the Old Testament, another gathering of people called 'the church'. The church gathers around Mt Sinai in Exodus 20. It was the time when God spoke to his people, and in Deuteronomy 10:4 it was called 'the day of the church' (translated in the NIV as 'the day of the assembly'). This gathering together, of all God's people, to hear his word is what Jesus has established in his gospel (see Hebrews 12:18-24). It is this heavenly gathering that can be now seen in many places all around the world as Christians in their twos and threes gather together in the name of Christ. Each of these gatherings in the name of Christ is the church of God.

When the New Testament talks about their activities within the church the key word used is that of edification. The church itself is to be edified. Thus whatever ministries are exercised they are to be used for edification. The ministries that could be edifying are great and varied. God has given gifts to his church in order that the Christian and the congregation may be edified. These gifts are to be used and to be withheld from use in accordance with that which is edifying. Within churches, elders and deacons who will uphold the word of God are appointed to have some leadership. The fundamental gifts of ministries for edifying the church of God are those ministries associated with the word of God: apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher, evangelist and the like.

The New Testament does not use the Old Testament words and concepts of temple, sacrifice and

priest to describe the activities and practices of the ministry within the church. A whole new vocabulary of overseers, elders and ministers is used. The vocabulary of priest is used for the local Jewish priests in the temple, or of Jesus in his priestly ministry, or of Christians in their universal priesthood, but not of ministries within the church.

The controversy therefore between the patterns of Christian ministry exercised in churches today is a controversy of how to relate the Old and New Testaments.

Discussion Starter

Where today do we see the misunderstanding of the relationship between Old and New Testament affecting the patterns of Christian ministry?