

SACERDOTALISM – AND GOD’S ANSWER TO IT

Background

‘Sacerdotalism’ is not a word we use every day! This is an area of controversy of which the diligent Bible student needs to be aware. At its most basic, it has to do with the imposition of ‘priest’ between God and people. It is a key understanding of Christianity that, at exactly the same time as Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the Jerusalem Temple was torn from top to bottom. Hitherto only the High Priest could pass through it in order to enter the Holy of Holies. So in the sight of all the world God had opened up the way, removing the barrier. God has now raised up a priesthood of all believers (see 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 5:10). All believers can enter into the Holy of Holies as children of God.

The Priesthood of All Believers

The first century church had no priests, and the New Testament nowhere uses this word to describe those in church leadership, but the idea of a ‘priesthood’ began to emerge forcefully again in the third century AD. The biblical concept of God’s priesthood being all believers is revealed in different ways throughout the Bible. (See Exodus 19:6; Psalm 50:23; Psalm 51:17-19; Psalm 141:2; Hebrews 13:10–16; 1 Peter 2:5–9).

Aspects of Sacerdotalism

The list below is not exhaustive, but indicates the key dimensions of sacerdotalism.

1. *Denial of grace*

- (a) Salvation by works (Galatians 1:8–9; 2:16; Titus 3:5).
- (b) Self-mortifications, penances, etc. (Colossians 2:16–23; 1 Timothy 4:3).
- (c) Celibacy as a *requirement* for ministry or a supposedly higher ‘religious’ life (1 Timothy 3:2; 12; 4:3–4). All the apostles except Paul were married men, Peter being especially mentioned. (See 1 Corinthians 9:5). The celibacy of Paul indicates that it can be an appropriate condition for some people.
- (d) Monastic communities have sometimes been founded to reform the church, providing help to the needy, but historically they have sometimes departed from principles of gospel living. (See Galatians 5:1).
- (e) The doctrine of purgatory (Luke 23:42–43; 1 John 1:7–9; the blood cleanses, not further work or punishment).

Sacerdotalism tends to promote the false (and proud) view that we can ‘earn’ some aspect of our salvation. Man’s pride constantly resists the idea that only Jesus has achieved the conditions for our forgiveness and acceptance. He alone lived the absolutely sinless life. (To point this out is not to deny that we are to co-operate with him as the Spirit changes us; throughout our lives as Christians we *are* to live holy lives and grow in obedience to the Lord. How easy it is, though, to begin to credit ourselves for supposedly meritorious acts or privations which are not even part of the ‘law of Christ’, and congratulating ourselves rather than giving all the glory to God!)

2. *Love of splendour and the praise of men*

Too much in what is pleased to call itself ‘church’ is bound up with outward show – and apparent inward barrenness. (See Matthew 23:5–12; Luke 22:25–26; 1 Timothy 6:3–10; 1 Peter 5:1–3.)

3. *Ignorance*

Fear of, and blind obedience to ‘priests’ or even to church ‘elders’. Such deference tends to keep us in ignorance, and sadly that is where some desire to remain! (See Matthew 15:13–14; Romans 8:15; Jude 12–13.)

4. *False worship*

Some worship the bread and wine in the communion or eucharist. (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 9:25–28). Some worship crucifixes, saints, relics, and Mary the mother of Jesus (Exodus 20:3–5; 32:4; Psalm 115:4–8; Isaiah 44:14–20; Revelation 19:10; 22:8–9).

5. *Hindering of the realisation of salvation being available to all who repent, believe in and trust Jesus*

Some teach that salvation is found only within their own sect. Others teach apostolic succession only through their own priesthood. Yet others use language not understood by the ordinary people or make access to the Holy Scriptures difficult. All these things hinder the understanding that salvation is freely available to those who repent before God, put their trust and faith in Jesus and are baptised. (Matthew 11:28; 23:13; 28:19–20; Acts 2:38–41.)

6. The practice of the use of intermediaries

The imposition of 'priests' can open the door to apostasy in individual believers as well as whole communities of believers: there is the so-called infallibility of popes, even where their teaching contradicts Scripture, for example, (Mark 7:9–13); priestly or ritualistic 'pardons' (Romans 5:1–2; Hebrews 10:19; 1 John 1:7–9); and invocation of 'saints' as intermediaries. (Matthew 11:28; John 6:37; Acts 4:12 – note that Peter is the speaker; Ephesians 3:12.) We are to approach God the Father through Jesus his Son – not through anyone else.

7. False prayers

The encouragement of long-winded repetitions; ostentatious prayer in public; prayers for the dead. Matthew 6:5–7; Mark 12:40.

8. False ritual

The beautiful simplicity of the gospel can be obscured by rites, ceremonial and observances. Ritualism can be all about outward performances rather than faith in Jesus Christ and true, personal worship of God. (Matthew 15:9; Colossians 2:16.)

9. Sin – and how Sacerdotalism can mislead

To understand what can go wrong in a 'sacerdotal' approach, we first have to recap and summarise some key points about sin and forgiveness. The Bible does make some distinctions between different kinds of sin. Under the Mosaic covenant, punishments varied (cf. Deuteronomy chapter 17 and chapter 22). However, it is made clear that *all* sin separates man from God, and that man's fallen condition (or 'original sin') is at the root of particular sins. When we repent of our sin and believe in Jesus and are baptised into him in water and Spirit, we have been saved from the penalty of sins committed up to that point, and we have begun a new life in him. The New Testament makes it perfectly clear that believers need to *continue* believing in Jesus and to repent of sins committed *after* conversion (see 1 John 1:8–10, addressed to believers). The believer has been saved from the penalty of death for past sin, but is still *being saved* from the *power* of sin – but now with the help and presence of the Holy Spirit.

There are distinctions to be made at this point: there is sin that leads to death and that which does not (see 1 John 5:16). Moreover, the New Testament does indeed establish ethical and disciplinary procedures within the body of Christ. However, man's tendency to want to create religious rules has gone far beyond the principles established in Scripture, elaborating the minutiae of regulations and hence leading people to think that outward adherence to complex ethical systems is the heart of the matter. In fact the law of Christ often goes well beyond the requirements of the law of Moses (consider Jesus' extension of the meaning of 'adultery', for one example) and we are never to water down his teaching or become 'antinomian' (wrongly believing that we can be lawless or immoral in our behaviour; see the brief but extremely important Epistle of Jude, again written to Christians). But when the focus is *merely* on outward observance and performance, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of imagining that *by our own efforts* we have made ourselves holy and acceptable or are continuing to do so. In fact we are to give God the glory all the time. That applies in relation to our initial salvation from the penalty of sin (death) won for us by the sacrifice of the only one who was without sin, Jesus; and it applies too as we continue to repent of and receive forgiveness for many subsequent sins of thought, word and deed, action and neglect, in the course of our 'sanctification' throughout our Christian life – as we go on repenting and go on believing and seeking to obey his commands (see John 15:10) and go on abiding in him (as, again, he taught disciples to do; see John 15:1–8).

The Bible student does well to read the epistles again, looking at the dynamic way in which the apostolic writers characterised this ongoing Christian life in terms of a fight and a race. The main focus should be on what Jesus himself taught about the eternal consequences of sin. Then, whenever we are forgiven, we will have a right understanding of what he has won for us. Sacerdotalism, however, tends to put the focus on *us* and our imagined achievements in terms of detailed observances of ecclesiastical rules, lists and elaborations, rather than on Jesus and an inward heart of faithfulness and obedience to him. (See Matthew 5:20–23; 23:16–22; James 2:10.)

Conclusion

Sacerdotalism, or reliance upon 'priests' (howsoever they identify themselves), is controversial and this is a controversy that cannot be avoided by the diligent seeker after truth. Anyone who seeks to put themselves between man and God (by becoming a spiritual 'father figure') seeks to take away some of the glory of Jesus – it is as serious as that. This is not to say that a maturer Christian cannot offer wise counsel and be a prayer partner, helping a younger Christian to grow. But sacerdotalism goes far beyond that useful and godly help. It creates barriers for seekers after truth. We need to heed Jesus' warning in Matthew 23:9.