

The Priority of the Priesthood for Human Identity



by EDWARD T. WELCH

Personal identity is a perennial human concern. Embedded in it are important questions about meaning, purpose, morality, and destiny. We all care about such things.

Who am I?

What's the point of my life?

How do I engage in relationships and work?

Where am I going?

Scripture describes our identity in many different ways, and each has implications for these questions. We are saints, sufferers, and sinners.¹ We are servants, prophets, royalty, ambassadors, warriors, and sons and daughters. We are also priests. With so many from which to choose, Scripture suggests priorities among these images. Some deserve more attention than others. The believer's identity as a *priest* is among those images of humanity that Scripture gives special prominence. It is also an identity that is neglected.

This neglect has its reasons. First, Jesus didn't identify himself specifically as the true priest. In the Gospels, he identified with all aspects of temple worship—such as the lamb slain, the light of the world, the bread of life—but

¹ See Mike Emlet's article in this issue. Priests can be viewed as saints, sufferers, and sinners.

he did not identify himself as the true High Priest. He alluded to his priestly mission when he identified himself as the good shepherd, in contrast to priests who cared more for themselves (John 10:11). But the specific identity as priest was left for the book of Hebrews to develop. Second, today's priests are an exclusive group. They are set apart from the rest of us, so it seems inappropriate for us to lay claim to that identity. Third, all of us have stories of priests who have used their authority for selfish gain or abusive behaviors. Many have poisoned our associations with the role.

My purpose in this article is to help us understand more deeply the reality that we are priests of our God. At the center of this identity is that we live before the God who comes near and who invites us to come near to him. The priestly task is about fellowship, relationship, closeness, and intimacy, and these are at the very heart of our humanity. Scripture's tour of this identity begins at creation, moves to the wilderness tabernacle and the later temple. It becomes concentrated in Jesus and then is distributed to all who believe in him. It consummates when heaven comes to earth. I will trace elements of this theme and suggest a few of the many applications from that identity.

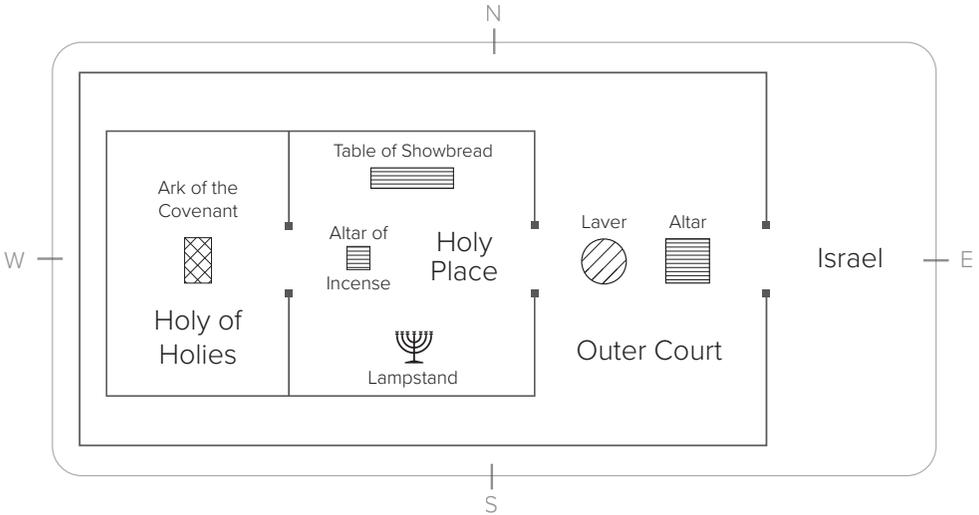
The Role of Priest in the Old Testament

We start in the Old Testament. The most obvious biblical material on the formal priesthood comes after Israel's exodus from Egypt. The priests described there wore their unique vestments and presided over the sacrificial system. They were permitted to come near to the Lord, with some being able to come closer than others.

Figure 1 is a schematic of the original tabernacle. The actual tent consisted of two parts, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, and was surrounded by an outer court. The people lived just beyond. The pagan world lived farther out. The priests all worked in the outer court, some went into the Holy Place, and the High Priest was given access once a year to the Holy of Holies.

The priestly role is obvious here. But if the priestly identity is foundational for all believers, then it should appear even before we are introduced to Moses, Aaron, the Levitical priesthood, and the tabernacle. And it does. The critical themes of Scripture are introduced in the Garden of Eden. Our priestly identity begins in paradise.

Figure 1. The Wilderness Tabernacle (Exodus 25–30)



Priests in Genesis 1–3. There is evidence that the garden in Eden was the first tabernacle (a place where God dwells on earth) and that Adam and Eve were God’s first priests (those who come into the presence of the Lord). Here are some features of tabernacle worship that are present first in Eden.

An inner garden. In Eden was a garden. The word *garden* itself describes an enclosed and protected space. It was set apart from everything else. There was an expansive, created world out there—God’s footstool (Ps 99:5). But the garden was no footstool. As the place of his presence, it was his throne room. Genesis hints that the layout of Eden loosely distinguished between the larger expanse of Eden and the protected garden planted within Eden (Gen 2:8; Figure 2).

Notice how this introduces a blueprint for God’s later house on earth.

Walks. In the garden, God walked with his people. “They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen 3:8). For those who first heard this recounted by Moses, it immediately evoked a tabernacle. When God instituted tabernacle worship he said, “I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev 26:12). His home was established at the center of the Israelite camp and he walked among them. Before that, he walked along with his people in a cloud and a pillar of fire, and before that he walked with his people in Eden. His presence

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