

## Hebrews 3:1-6

1 Therefore<sup>1</sup>, holy brothers (and sisters), partners in a heavenly calling,<sup>2</sup> consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,<sup>3</sup> 2 who was

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<sup>1</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews is one of those letters that we are unfamiliar with for the most part. Yet, it stands within the New Testament as a passionate confession that the only way we have access to the God is through Jesus Christ, our Lord. It calls and urges the church to be faithful; to cast our eyes upon Jesus and pay attention to the glory made known to us in the Gospel.

Hebrews opens with a declaration that “God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, who he appointed heir of all things, through whom he created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (Hebrews 1:1-4).” From there the author begins to unpack what it means that God has spoken to us by a Son.

The author calls the church to pay attention to what he have heard so that we don’t drift away; that is to say the church is to pay attention to the author of salvation. For the Son of God is not a son in name only; rather the “pioneer of their salvation” has penetrated into the depths of humanity to take on human suffering into himself. Hebrews explicitly and unabashedly confesses that this Jesus, through whom the worlds are created, has taken on real flesh and blood, “becoming like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (2:17-18).” Because Jesus has so indentified himself with humanity as God in the flesh of humanity, the author suggests that not only is he to be trusted, but, as he asserts in chapter 3, we can place all of our confidence in him.

<sup>2</sup> The author of Hebrews invites wonderful reflection within the opening words of this chapter, calling those to whom he writes “holy brothers (and sisters), partners in a heavenly calling.” *What does it mean to think of ourselves as holy brothers and sisters? From where does holiness arise and how is this a given reality in our day-to-day lives?* In calling the church as he does, the author of Hebrews paints a picture of the church that reflects the glory of the one to whom they are united. The author isn’t attempting to “cozy up” to the reader; rather the author is reminding us all of our true and full identity in Christ. Moreover, the author reminds us that we are not called to do whatever we do or feel out of our own individual or selfish desires. We are called as partners in a heavenly calling, called to share in the holy life together in the community of faith. This heavenly calling not only directs our minds to the source of our call, but also the direction of our focus as we go through life.

<sup>3</sup> As partners in a heavenly calling, we are called to consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. By speaking of “consider” the author means that we should set our sights and our minds upon Jesus alone. John Calvin asserts, “the word consider, is important, for it intimates that singular attention is required, as he cannot be disregarded with impunity, and at the same time the true knowledge of Christ is sufficient to dissipate the darkness of all errors. And to encourage them the more to pursue this study, he (the author of Hebrews) reminds them of their calling; as though he had said, ‘God favored you with no common grace when he called you into his kingdom; it now remains that you have your eyes fixed on Christ as your leader in the way (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 77).” Given our constant tendency to drift and wander and be distracted, these are fitting words to remind us of our heavenly calling. This will become a recurring theme throughout the letter as believers are called to consider or look at Jesus. Yet what are we doing when we cast our eyes and our minds upon Jesus, who, according to Hebrews, is the apostle and high priest of our confession?

At this point in Hebrews, we have arrived at one of the most stunning and revolutionary understandings of who Jesus is as God-for-us. For the author of Hebrews, it's important to grasp that Jesus' mission and ministry should be viewed within this dual role integral to his person: "as the *apostolos* (apostle) is sent by God to deliver the summons of God to humans through the proclamation of the good news, so the *archiereus* (high priest) as preeminently the one who responds from the side of humans to God (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews* (Westminster/John Knox Press" Louisville, 2006), 107)." For the author of Hebrews, Jesus is the sole mediator between God and humanity; mediating the things of God to human beings (his apostolic role), and mediating the things of humanity to God (his high priestly role). This is not some function Jesus performs; it is an integral part of who he is as the Son of God and as our Savior.

Jesus' role as Mediator is of principle importance for understanding not only the glorious good news of the gospel but also our way of faithful living within the world. What does it mean that Jesus as mediator is both the apostle, the one who brings to us the good news of the gospel of God's salvation, and the high priest, the one who takes our human response of faithfulness and obedience and presents it before Almighty God? To speak of Jesus as the apostle and high priest of our confession is to singularly affirm this:

"God loves you so utterly and completely that he has given himself for you in Jesus Christ his beloved Son, and has therefore pledged his very Being as God for your salvation. In Jesus Christ God has actualized his unconditional love for you in human nature in such a once for all way, that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the Incarnation and the Cross and thereby denying himself. Jesus Christ died for you precisely because you are sinful and utterly unworthy of him, and has thereby already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him. He has bound you to himself by his love in a way that he will never let you go, for even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell his love will never cease. Therefore, repent and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. From the beginning to end what Jesus Christ has done for you he has done not only as God but as man. He acted in your place in the whole range of human life and activity, including your personal decisions, and your responses to God's love, and even in your acts of faith. He has believed for you, fulfilled your human response to God, even made your personal decision for you, so that he acknowledges you before God as one who has already responded to God in him, who has already believed in God through him, and whose personal decision is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ you are already accepted by him (Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Helmets & Howard: Colorado Springs, 1992), 94)."

All of this is to say that according to the author of Hebrews, Jesus' role in salvation goes way beyond the idea that Jesus only does something to us by going to the cross; rather Jesus penetrates to the depths of who we are, coming as the apostle of God, bringing the very word of God to humanity as God and then from within our human situation, as high priest raises our faithful and obedient voices to God on our behalf, doing what we cannot even begin to do ourselves. We look to Jesus and consider him alone because he is the one who has bound us in union with himself through the power of the Holy Spirit, joining our "amen" to his high priestly "Amen." "Christ in the unity of his personhood, brings God to us and us to God in the saving work of grace that restores to us the gift of communion with God in which we discover the fullness of our humanity (Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Care* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, 2004), 48)." We can more fully see and grasp this through the practice of Christian worship.

We come to know the apostolic and high priestly ministry of Jesus principally through worship. Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" because he not only mediates the Word of God to us, but, in joining us in union with his saving and redeeming life, mediates our faithful human response to live into

faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all his (God's) house. 3 Yet he is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself.<sup>4</sup> 4 For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. 5 Now, Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later; 6 Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a Son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the boast that belong to hope.<sup>5</sup>

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the Word of God. In worship, as the community of faith gathers around word and sacrament, we hear the glorious good news of God's salvation, as we participate in the glorious sacrament of communion, we are continually sealed in our union with Christ, joined to his life as he presents us in himself before the throne of grace as holy and blameless. In the glorious words of Calvin, the community of faith "seated" at the table of the Lord "can gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours. As a consequence, we dare to assure ourselves that eternal life, of which he is the heir, is ours; and that the Kingdom of Heaven, into which he has already entered, can no more be cut off from us than from him; again, that we cannot be condemned for our sins, from whose guilt he has absolved us, since he willed to take them upon himself as if they were his own. This is the *wonderful exchange* which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us in his righteousness (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.17.2)."

This is what it means that Jesus is our mediator, the apostle and high priest of our confession: that nothing of who we are is foreign from God, that nothing of who we are is forsaken by God, and that everything in our life is taken into God in, through, and as Jesus Christ to be transformed so that in Christ we are really and truly new people here and now, even while we wait for the fullness of time when we will see God face to face. God in, through, and as the man Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit became what we are, that in him we might be what he is. As our living, reigning, active, and present Lord he continues in this ministry, to do for us what we cannot do on our own apart from him. He takes our feeble prayers and joins them to his own, he takes our tepid discipleship and enlivens it by joining it to his own, he takes our faith, couched within our limits and doubts, and joins it to his faith all so that in all things we might find ourselves so completely clothed and immersed in his life.

<sup>4</sup> After discussing Jesus' role as apostle and high priest of our confession, the author moves into a comparison between Jesus and Moses through the window of faithfulness. Why does he do this? Moses had long been considered the model prophet and priest throughout the history of Israel as well as noted for his faithfulness and intimacy with God. The contrast drawn in Hebrews is not for the purpose of tearing down Moses, but to highlight the superiority and glory of God's only-begotten Son.

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned above, the issue in this passage is not the denigration of Moses, but the highlighting of Jesus' unshakable faithfulness. A simple contrast between Moses, the servant, and Jesus, the Son, demonstrate this; a distinction raised primarily on the relationship that exists between the two and God. Moses related to God in a functional manner as both servant and as the one who serves in God's house, with the community of God's people. Jesus relates to God on a much more intimate level within the bonds of a filial relationship as well as the one who is over God's house; as the one who stands on an even level

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with God in Lordship. Yet after picking up on the relational bond that exists between the Father and Jesus, Hebrews speaks of us as Jesus house. What does this refer to?

Hebrews is referring to the life of the church, the community of faith, as the house of God over which Jesus is Lord. Because of the hope laid up in him, we have confidence in our day-to-day lives and can boast in Jesus alone.

## Some further thoughts on what it means that Jesus is the apostle and high priest of our confession:

To understand the Letter to the Hebrews it's important to be aware of the Old Testament background that permeates every word. One of those areas that we need to be aware of is the role of the high priest in worship and specifically his role in the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur.

Within ancient Israel and in Israel today, the central day of worship is Yom Kippur. "That was the day in the year which gathered up the worship of every other day. On that day, an offering was made to God which gathered up all the other offerings made daily in the sanctuary. On that day, the worship and intercessions of all Israel were led by one man, the high priest (James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1996), 47)." There were many symbolic and liturgical actions taken by the high priest that were a part of Israel's worship and offered up to God through the high priest.

First, the high priest would stand before the people, acting as their intermediary between God and them, standing in for them as their representative. "Second, he consecrated himself for this ministry by certain liturgical acts of washing and sacrifice, the blood sprinkled on his right ear, right thumb, and right toe. Thirdly, there comes the great moment when he takes an animal, lays his hands on the victim and vicariously confesses the sins of all Israel in an act of penitence, acknowledging the just judgments of God. Fourthly, when the victim is immolated as a symbol of the just judgments of God (and the scapegoat sent into the wilderness to symbolize the removal of guilt) the high priest takes the blood in a vessel, ascends into the Holy of Holies, and there vicariously intercedes for all Israel—that God will remember his covenant promises and graciously forgive them (Torrance, 47-48)." Returning from the Holy of Holies, the high priest would bless the gathered crowds using Numbers 6:24-26. In this way, the high priest functioned as a mediator between God and his people, and between the people and God. The early church confessed that the high priest's role in atonement and mediation foreshadowed the person and work of Jesus.

In looking upon the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, the author of Hebrews equates him with the high priests of Israel, but views Jesus to be the true high priest; fulfilling the purpose of the high priest in his life and ministry. In looking to Jesus' incarnation in 2:17 the author Hebrews writes, "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people." This full identity with humanity, the taking on of real flesh and blood, was connected with the role of the high priest. Early Christian tradition viewed Jesus as the mediator between God and his people, and between the people and God. Jesus not only lived out this task as one in whom God was working, as one through whom God was working, but also lived it out as God in the flesh of our humanity. For the author of Hebrews, since Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God he is the quintessential high priest. Jesus doesn't make atonement for sins; he is the living atonement who opens up a new relationship with Almighty God through his life. By virtue of his incarnation, crucifixion and death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus is enthroned in glory for us and our salvation and serves as high priest.

The author of Hebrews reminds us how far God is willing to go to redeem humanity and restore us to a right relationship with God. Hebrews reminds us that God has condescended to us in, through, and as Jesus; becoming flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. Hebrews presents a real incarnation; one where Jesus himself takes on real flesh and blood without ceasing to be God; entering into the depths of our human weaknesses and our failures. That is to say, in his incarnation Jesus himself penetrates to the depths of human sin, being able to sympathize or suffer-along-with us in the depths of our sin, but he does so without participating within it. Now that being said, in what ways are Jesus' mission and ministry as high priest equated with yet surpasses that of the ancient high priests?

First, “he comes from the Father to be the true priest, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, in solidarity with all humanity, all races, all colors, bearing upon his divine-human heart the names, the needs, the sorrows, the injustices of all nations. He offers to the Father that worship, that obedience, that life of love in unbroken intimate communion, which we cannot offer. Secondly, he consecrates himself for this ministry of leading us into the presence of the Father...Jesus’ whole life of prayer and obedience and love, his whole life of communion in the Spirit, is his total self-consecration for us. Thirdly, he offers not an animal, but himself in death that he might be the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, saying amen in our humanity to the just judgments of God. He does not appease an angry God to condition him into being gracious, but in perfect acknowledgement of the holy love of the Father for a sinful world, seals God’s covenant purposes for all humanity by his blood (Torrance, 48-49).” Jesus is able to truly suffer-alongside of us, sympathize with us because he not only participates in our humanity, but vicariously stands in for us as high priest and lamb; offering himself up to the Father on our behalf in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because of what Jesus does vicariously for us on our behalf, as mediator and high priest, we are called to approach his throne with boldness and confidence. Yet this is difficult for us. Too often we feel as if we need to petition God to make him respond to us; that only after jumping through the logistical hoops and checking off the right boxes can we be assured that we can approach God with confidence. Even then, we still fear that we’ll fall out of favor and have to repeat the process over again. In short, we are cast back upon ourselves to find confidence and assurance, but this isn’t the picture painted by Hebrews. As some of the early church fathers referred to him, Jesus is “the great physician of our humanity,” healing the broken relationship between us and God giving us the boldness and confidence to approach him. But the metaphorical image our ancient brothers and sisters used is bigger than we often give it credit. Jesus didn’t just “do something” to us that suddenly heals the relationship between humanity and God, making it possible to act in confidence. “Christ does not heal us as an ordinary doctor might, by standing over against us, diagnosing our sickness, prescribing medicine for us to take and then going away, leaving us to get better as we follow his instructions (Torrance, 53).” Jesus doesn’t cast the efforts of healing back upon ourselves as if we could someone follow his instructions and make everything better again. His mission and ministry is bigger than that. “He becomes the patient! He assumes the very humanity which is in need of redemption, and by being anointed by the Spirit in our humanity, by a life of perfect obedience, by dying and rising again, for us, our humanity is healed in him, in his person (Torrance, 53).” We aren’t able to approach the throne of grace with confidence solely because of the work of Christ. Rather, because Jesus stands in for us from within our human situation as our mediator, we can approach the throne of grace confidently because we do so in and through him.

The author of Hebrews refers to Jesus in 8:1 as the *leitourgos* (where we derive the word liturgist), or minister, in the sacred places and the true tabernacle. In other words, the author of Hebrews is concerned about Jesus’ continuing role as worship leader for the community of faith. All worship derives from Jesus before it originates in us. Moreover, worship is not something we do; rather worship is what we participate within.

We might assume that Jesus’ ministry and mission as high priest comes to a conclusion following his resurrection and ascension, but we would be sorely mistaken. “Here again we see the significance of a biblical understanding of priesthood, and especially the significance of the priesthood of Christ, the mediator of worship. He twofold ministry of representing God to humanity and at the same time of representing humanity to God brings God’s word of grace and forgiveness to the world, because he vicariously submitted for us, once and for all, to the divine judgment on our sins, accepting the verdict of guilty on the cross, not for himself but for us (Torrance, 56).” Jesus, the high priest, is the leader of our worship, the one who forgives our sins and leads us to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit; in the midst of our Lord’s Day worship it is Jesus himself who leads us in all we say and do. Thus worship is less about what we do and our religious practices and more about participating in what Jesus is doing. Take your eyes off of Jesus and you get the whole thing wrong. Worship is our obedient response to God’s

grace as we participate in what Jesus is doing on our behalf. He perfectly and vicariously fulfills on our behalf what we so often fail at; that's why we cast our eyes upon Jesus, that's why we rely on our union with him in the power of the Holy Spirit, that's why we participate in what he's doing. We participate in worship through Jesus and in the name of Jesus; receiving his grace and responding to it because he has offered it first on our behalf. That's what makes Christian worship Christian.

For hundreds of years, the church forgot who she was by downplaying the priesthood of Christ; inserting in his place the ordained priesthood of the church. In this way, the church began to play the vicarious role of priest over-against Jesus. Soon the church's worship became legalized liturgy that became mechanical; attempting to manipulate God and go through the motions. John Calvin really called the church back to this primary emphasis that she had forgotten; reminding her that worship isn't some religious obligation that we do but is bigger than we think. "He called the church back to the sole priesthood of Christ as both object of our worship and the leader of our worship. He reinterpreted the church as the royal priesthood that shares by grace in the priesthood of Christ. Only in this way can we understand our Christian worship as an ordinance of grace, where Christ is the only mediator (Torrance, 65)." We participate in worship in the fullest sense when we look to Jesus as our leader of worship; as we turn our eyes upon him and let go of the reins. "Before we worship, whether as leader or member of the congregation, Jesus is already in place as the one who ever lives to join our worship to his praise of the Father within the unity of the Godhead. As he is the Word of God who speaks himself forth, likewise he is the worshipping human respondent, hearing that Word and ministering the human response in faith and love to God (Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry* (Intervarsity Press: Downer's, 2007), 89)." Thus worship isn't a duty we're called to perform; worship is hitching a ride on the back of Jesus' worship, praising God along the way.