THE GENERAL PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS
IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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Introduction:

Where the Kingdom of God breaks through there comes about a renewal of the individual and of society. The great question today is whether this thesis can be reversed or not, namely where renewal comes about there is the Kingdom of God. We can find the answer in the Epistle to the Hebrews, especially if we consider the question of the general priesthood of believers in this Epistle.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews himself describes his Epistle as a word of encouragement or exhortation (13.22). In The Acts of the Apostles 13,15 a sermon of Paul in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch is referred to in the same terms. Therefore we can consider the Epistle to the Hebrews as a sermon. This epistle is called by O. Michel „die erste vollständige urchristliche Predigt”1, while C. Spicq described it as a “traité d’apologetique”, which has the “eloquence d’un discours et la forme d’une homélie”2. In connection with the personal data at the end of chapter 13 F. W. Grosheide calls this epistle a “homile met een begeleidend schrijven”3.

The character of a sermon is evident also from the structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In contrast to the epistles of Paul where the exhortations are often found in the second half of the epistle, we find that the exhortative parts in this epistle are spread throughout the whole.

In this epistle practical application plays even a dominant role. The dogmatic parts are meant each time to support the application. In this connection O. Michel remarks that the peak of theological reflection in this epistle is to be found in the sections of exhortation4.

This sermon put into writing and described by the author himself as “short” (13,22), was probably meant for a group of Christians with a background similar to that of the members of Qumran5. According to C. Spicq the Epistle to the Hebrews was written by Apollos, a follower of Philo converted to Christianity, and the letter is addressed to a group of Jewish priests who were expelled from Jerusalem and who moved to Antioch and were in danger of falling back to Judaism6. If the first readers did somehow have a ‘priestly’ background, this would then explain the fact that the Epistle to the Hebrews does not speak in particular about the general priesthood of believers as does 1 Peter and the Revelation of St. John. Probably the readers of this epistle themselves had priestly rights as is supposed by A. Moe7.
The high-priesthood of Jesus Christ is the kernel of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is not only a dogmatic fact but also has practical consequences. The fitting explanation with which the sermon ends (10,19-13,19) is there exactly to lead the readers to draw the consequences of Jesus' high-priesthood for their own self judgment and activity. Christ is not the only priest of the new covenant. Perhaps we should find here the explanation of the fact that the author in 10,21 does not indicate Jesus as noted by A. Moe.

The believers are exhorted themselves to come forward to the throne of grace (4,16) like Jesus did, and enter the sanctuary with boldness (10,19). Further, the readers are called as priests of the new covenant to continually bring to God a sacrifice of praise (13,15).

The general priesthood of believers is rooted in the priesthood of Christ. Whenever the author touches upon the vocation of the believer as priest, he introduces his exhortation by means of the word oux, then, therefore (4: 14; 10,19; 13,15) 9).

In his contribution to the “Festschrift” in honour of J. Jeremias, W. Nauck has given a structural analysis of Hebrews and clearly indicated thereby how to the very point of formulation the exhortation with regards to the priesthood of the believer is connected with the priesthood of Christ10. Nauck indicates especially the grammatical parallel between 4,14-16 and 10,19 ff. in which the congregation is called to apply the high-priestly function of Christ to her own life11.

In connection with the general priesthood of believers the Epistle to the Hebrews points out two things:

(a) a sanctuary in which the priest of the new covenant is supposed to perform his duty;
(b) a specific priestly service which has to be performed.

If we are to formulate this in more homiletical terms, the Epistle to the Hebrews concerns the place and the pattern, the “locus” and the “modus” of the priesthood of believers.

The sanctuary.

The first aspect of the general priesthood of believers in the Epistle to the Hebrews is entrance into the sanctuary (10,19 ff.). The place where the priestly service has to be performed has already been indicated in chapter 4,16 only there we find another formulation, in that the believers are exhorted “to go to the throne of grace.”

In 4,16 as well as in 10,19 προσερχομαι is used. This is a purely ceremonial term which is used only once by Paul in 1 Tim. 6:3 and with quite a different meaning, viz. direct to or agree with. Here it has the meaning of: to approach the altar12. Thus by means of this verb the priestly character of the service is expressed.
It may seem strange that here in 4,16, where by means of the verb προσερχεσθαι the priestly character of the approach is expressed, the word throne is used, while this throne is more precisely mentioned as a throne of grace. However, there are two things we should remember. In the first place there is in the priesthood of Christ also a regal aspect as pointed out in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is apparent for example in the different christological references to Psalm 110 in chapter 7 vss. 3, 11, 17, 21, 24, 28. Christ is set down at the right hand of God (1,3; 8,1; 12,2). Christ is the priestly King. The inner sanctuary into which Christ has entered is at the same the throne room.

Secondly Christ is called in the Epistle to the Hebrews the Mediator of a new διαθήκη (9,15). Now there is as J. Behm puts it a mutual relation between βασιλεία and διαθήκη. This new covenant is called by him “ein Korrelatbegriff zur βασιλεία”.

The priests of the new covenant are exhorted to enter as well the inner sanctuary or throne room following Christ. This brings us to the important question of the place of this sanctuary. Where should we localize this sanctuary?

In chapter 9 the heavenly sanctuary is placed opposite the earthly sanctuary. Where the earthly tabernacle is described in detail several problems arise which are, however, not of relevance here. The important thing here is that the earthly sanctuary is an example of the heavenly sanctuary. How do these two sanctuaries harmonize? As the earthly so the heavenly sanctuary is divided into two parts. As there was a καταπέτασμα, a veil in the earthly tent, so there is a veil in the heavenly sanctuary. On the one hand the heavenly tent is considered as an unity with the expression τα σαγγα as we can read in 8,2 and 9,8 but in 9,11 we again get the idea of two parts. The point of comparison between the earthly and the heavenly sanctuary is the separation between the Holy place and the Holiest of Holies.

Ulrich Luck, one of the later co-authors of “Kittel’s Theologisches-Wörterbuch”, has in my opinion made a good attempt to reconstruct the heavenly sanctuary in which Christ has entered and in which the believers also can enter as priests.

In his study of the relation of the earthly to the heavenly things in the Epistle to the Hebrews he comes to the conclusion that the inner sanctuary in heaven forms together with the event on Golgotha the heavenly, true sanctuary. The decisive event in the priestly service of Jesus is his entering of the Holiest of Holies through the veil and the Epistle to the Hebrews describes the veil as the σαρκ of Jesus (10,20). The flesh of Christ is therefore the veil of the heavenly sanctuary which just as in the tabernacle on earth separates the holy place from the Holiest of Holies. Just as in 5,7 where in connection with Jesus the days of his flesh are spoken of, so we ought to under-
stand αὐτὸς here as his earthly existence. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews the Passion of Christ service in the sanctuary. So this sanctuary forms together with the heavenly the inner sanctuary, the true tabernacle or tent.

The true tabernacle (8,2) is not opposed to the earthly tabernacle as 'upper' is to 'under' is to 'old'. So the true tabernacle or tent is according to U. Luck a sanctuary which spans heaven and earth and in such a way that world and history are open to God.

From this conception we can give furthermore a definite shape to the sanctuary into which the believers have to enter as priests as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews has done. The "locus" in which the priests of the new covenant have to perform the service is indicated by three symbols viz. a house (10,21) a meeting (10,25) and a city (12,22).

In chapter 10,21 Christ is called the great Priest of the house of God. The idea οἶκος τοῦ θεοῦ is an indication of the church or the congregation of Christ on earth. The conception of the congregation as a 'house' rests upon a broad Old Testament foundation. In the New Testament the idea of the church as 'house of God' comes to the fore in place of the Old Testament temple and then not as a "familia Dei" but as a house, a pneumatic heavenly building.

To this idea of the church or congregation as building or house of God is connected the idea of indwelling and in the New Testament the indwelling of the Spirit of God who is at the same time the Spirit of Christ.

The entry into the sanctuary is directly connected to the house of God viz. the congregation of Christ on earth.

In the new covenant entry into the heavenly sanctuary can be realised by practising mutual fellowship which should therefore not be given up. This brings us to the second image whereby the author provides for his readers a more definite form of the heavenly sanctuary, of the tent which spans heaven and earth (10,25). It is remarkable that the word used here is ἐπισυναγωγή and not συναγωγή.

F. W. Grosheide supposes that the word συναγωγή has been avoided because this word was obviously used for the Jewish meetings in distinction from ἐκκλησία. The word "episynagogue" points to the divine service of the gathered congregation. According to Calvin this word contains a missionary element. In 2 Thess. 2,1 the word "episynagogue" has indeed been used in connection with our being gathered together to be with Christ at the day of His parousia.

By practising communion with God entry into the heavenly sanctuary can already now be realised although the believers are still on
earth. According to F. W. Grosheide worship should here especially be kept in mind. With respect to the entering of the heavenly sanctuary we will have to keep in mind both personal and communal divine service.

There is finally a third image which is used by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews to explain the entry into the heavenly sanctuary. This is the image of the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (12,22). In the Old Testament Zion and Jerusalem were indications of the place where Jahweh had chosen a dwelling-place for Himself (Jes. 24,23). On Mount Zion stands the temple and the people of Israel live round about Zion in the city of Jerusalem. With the word *πόλις* the heavenly character of the dwelling of God is indicated. It is a question here not of a special city on earth but of a heavenly reality. The church of the New Testament is described here according to its heavenly character by means of an exalted idea. The heavenly character of this city as a dwelling-place of God is further expressed by the presence of angels (vs. 22) and of believers of earlier days who are described by means of a well-known expression from rabbinical theology: the spirits of good men made perfect righteous men (vs. 23).

Especially Hebrews 12,22 ff. strengthens the opinion of Ulrich Luck that we should consider the heavenly sanctuary as a sanctuary which spans heaven and earth. The church on earth forms together with the 'throne of grace', or the inner sanctuary, the true tent into which the believers can enter because of Christ's having consecrated the way to it by His Passion and Death (10,20). So the church of Jesus Christ on earth is, in its direct connection to heaven through the work of redemption, the place where the believers have to perform service as priests of a new covenant. The Holiest of Holies is there where the cross of Christ stood and where the cross of Christ is proclaimed.

The Priestly service.

We now come to our second great idea found in this early Christian sermon, viz. the "modus" of the priesthood of believers. What is the pattern of priestly service in the sanctuary?

To put it in as general terms as possible to start with the priestly service is described in the Epistle to the Hebrews as a Λατρεία and a Λειτουργία. These two words are used together in Hebrew for the priestly service, while the verb Λειτουργία is used to indicate only the priestly service of Jesus. There is a ceremonial service that is indicated by the idea of Λειτουργία but we are not allowed to limit the priestly service of the believers to this. With the word
The author would indicate to his readers that there is also a priestly service in a wider, ethical-religious sense. In 9,14 and 12,28 λατρευεῖν is used in this all inclusive sense.

Already in this life the believers can approach God in the sanctuary to perform their priestly service. The priestly function has different aspects.

First of all the believers should enter (10,19) or approach (10,22) as priests. In this connection two conditions should be fulfilled which are indicated in 10,22 by means of two participles: 

περαντημενοι and λελοφυμενοι, purified by sprinkling and being washed. This twofold purification indicates the ceremonial purification of the priests in the O.T. which took place with blood and water (cf. Ex. 29,21; Lev. 8,30). Here the point is the purification of the καρδία and the σώμα, the heart and the body. This is difficult to say why heart is used in the plural and body in the singular. Perhaps a well-known formulation has been used, as is supposed by F. W. Grosheide. In this twofold purification of the approaching priest F. F. Bruce sees a strong resemblance to several Qumran texts in which there is likewise question of an external and an internal purification. H. van Oyen supposes the author to be thinking here of the two Sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion.

The sprinkling indicates the blood of Christ and pure water indicates the purifying work of the Holy Spirit. In any case it is certain that there is indicated here the way in which the total human being as body and soul is purified, sanctified and made perfect, because “the καρδία and the σώμα are a full, plastic expression for the entire personality, as an ancient conceived it”, according to James Moffat. This first priestly action, viz. to enter or to approach, is an activity of faith.

The second function of the believer as priest brings us to the Christian hope. The confession of hope should be firmly upheld (10,24). G. Bornkamm has pointed out that in connection with the confession which is indicated here the Epistle to the Hebrews is actually nothing but an interpretation and application of this confession which was already delivered to the congregation, viz. a confession of baptism and ceremonial worship. The confession of baptism calls Jesus νικὴν τοῦ θεοῦ (cf. 4,14 and 6,6) and we find the ceremonial worship of Jesus as Son of God formulated in chapter 1,3 ff. where the humiliation and the exaltation of Christ are sung. Structurally this hymn shows a resemblance to similar parts of the “corpus Paulinum” (Phil 2,6; Col. 1,15; 1 Tim. 3,16).

Taken together this confession of baptism and the homology are seen to be a confession of hope. In the Christianity of the first cen-
turies the idea of hope had three components: future expectations, confidence and patience. Here the accent falls especially on the last component.

Because Jesus is the Son of God who is seated at the right hand of the Father there is hope for the believer in his struggle and temptation. He should hold on to this patiently.  has the meaning of retain with the heart that which is spiritually at hand.

The third function of the believer as priest is to practise love (10,24 ff.). The priestly service of love has different aspects. In the first place there is the priestly service which is directed to God. A sacrifice of praise should be brought to God continuously, and this is the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His Name (13,15). This reminds us of the O.T. According to the law of Moses the sacrifice of praise consists in material things such as vituals (cf. Lev. 7,11 ff.). However, already in the O.T. we find a spiritualization of the sacrifice of praise (Ps. 50, 14, 23).

Using an expression of the prophet Hosea, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains the sacrifice of praise as: the fruit of lips confessing his Name. According to H. Strathmann we should think in the first place of worship, but according to H. van Oyen also of preaching and Christian witness. The priestly act of charity in worshipping, preaching and giving witness is a continuous task which is made possible by communion of faith with Jesus Christ (is at the beginning of the sentence and refers to Jesus in vs. 12).

The second object of the priestly act of charity is the fellow-man, the believer as well as the unbeliever. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews it is obvious that the service to God should not be separated from the service to one’s fellow-man. If there is one thing this letter would strongly stress it is the idea of humanity, but always a humanity arising from Christ. Because the true tabernacle, the heavenly sanctuary into which Christ has entered and into which the believers may follow Him, is a sanctuary which spans heaven and earth, the common life of every day falls within the scope of priestly service too. As well as service to God the priestly service is also a service to the fellow-creature. Therefore the general priesthood of the believer in the N.T. brings about true humanity.

In 10,24 the priest of the new covenant is called also to serve his fellow-man. This should be done by considering one another so to provoke to love and to good works. Two unsympathetic words are used, viz. and which we might translate as: spy upon each other to provoke each other, to urge to priestly service of one’s fellow-man (here is meant the believing fellow-man).
There were probably situations in that congregation which gave rise to the use of these words. The believers were to see to each other and stimulate each other continuously by demonstrating love and doing good works. Love and good works are probably an inclusive expression intending to imply that works as the fruit of charity are the point at issue.

By means of a sentence beginning with a participle viz. ἐκαταλείποντες (10,25) the author demonstrates that service to one’s fellow-man has its roots in common public worship, in the congregation, which is another name for the heavenly sanctuary as we have already noted. Therefore mutual fellowship, the ἐπισυναγωγή, should not be neglected. The great significance of the sanctuary in the new covenant is indicated here, as the place, from where the service of mercy is to be carried out.

According to A. Moe one of the functions of the believer as priest of the new covenant is education. As the priest in the O.T. had a didactic task (cf. Deut. 17, 9 ff.; 33, 10; Mal. 2, 6 ff.) so A. Moe sees in the word παρακαλέω in 10,25 a commission for the priest of the N.T. to teach. Perhaps it is for this reason that in 5,12 the author reproaches his readers for their indolence. They should already have advanced far enough to be able to teach others. They should already be teachers because of having received teaching for so long, but they are still merely pupils at the first stage of their education.

Finally the author provides his readers with a whole series of activities whereby priestly service should be expressed, viz. brotherly love (13,1), hospitality (13,2), the care of prisoners and those who are illtreated (13,3), priestly service towards the marriage-partner (13,4), the handling of money and the attitude towards property (13,5). The author portrays the priesthood here very clearly. There is a priestly task in every domain of life. There is no indication that priestly service should and can be limited to the fellow-believer only. According to F. W. Grosheide we can understand it as widely as possible. Charity should be shown to the brother but also to the stranger. The association with one’s fellow-man, whoever he may be, should be marked by the two great qualities mentioned in 13,16: charity and helping one another. These are sacrifices with which God is well pleased. In Judaism such evidence of charity towards one’s fellow-man is already characterized as a sacrifice pleasing to God, as we can read in Hosea and Jesus Sirach.

So the author exhorts his readers to a total priestly service, a radical sanctification of life stemming from communion with God in Christ Jesus in the inner sanctuary, thus from communion of faith with the exalted Christ.
However, with this the author does not bring the exhortation to good works, the service of mercy, the growth of true humanity onto a level with everything that is considered in society as humanity and humanitarian actions. Humanity as such, however praiseworthy and worthy of imitation it may be, is for this reason not always service to God and service stemming from the sanctuary, inspired by the new convenant, by the Kingdom of God.

It is undoubtedly true that wherever the Kingdom of God makes its way in the world humanity, social action, humanitarian work become visible, as the history of early Christianity clearly indicates. But we cannot reverse the thesis that the Kingdom brings humanity. We cannot say: wherever humanity flourishes, wherever aid to development is employed there is the new covenant, there is the Kingdom of God.

For the Epistle to the Hebrews shows us in connection with this priestly service of mercy a distinction which we should not lose sight of. In this epistle a clear difference is made between good works (6,1; 10,24) and dead works (9,14). \( \text{νεκρά \ εργα} \) means works which are done before and outside of communion with Christ. We are not allowed to limit dead works to the Jewish work of righteousness or the Pharisaical practice of life. According to R. Bultmann dead works are the works which are done “in der vorchristlichen Zeit”\(^49\). F. W. Grosheide speaks of them as works “voor de bekeering gedaan, de werken der ongeloovigen”\(^50\). Dead works are called by E. Riggenbach “solche Handlungen welche in der Abkehr von Gott vollbracht werden und darum des göttlichen Lebens erlangeln”\(^51\), while F. C. Fensham says: “Dooie werke is die tipiese woord wat deur die skrywer gebruik word vir werke buite Christus om”\(^52\).

It may be concluded finally that the Epistle to the Hebrews in accentuating the general priesthood of believers lays strong emphasis on the totality of the Christian religion. The priestly service to which every believer is called is not something which concerns only the personal relation to God or communal worship. From communion with God in Christ Jesus in the inner sanctuary the priesthood of the believer covers the whole of life in all its branches.

A Christian church or a believer who cannot yet penetrate society in this way or reach his fellow-man, has not yet attained the height of priestly service to which the Epistle to the Hebrews calls Church and Christian.

From the Epistle to the Hebrews may be derived this most important thesis: the deeper we enter the inner sanctuary the further we will penetrate into the world.
REFERENCES (FOOTNOTES)

1. O. Michel, Der Brief an die Hebräer, 1957, p. 4.
3. F. W. Grosheide, De brief aan de Hbreëns, 1927, 45.
4. O. Michel, op. cit., p. 5.
8. A. Moe, art. cit., p. 163.
9. Liddel-Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, p. 505: "ovv, denoting the sequence of one clause upon another".
11. W. Nauck, art. cit., p. 203, 204.
15. Vgl. F. W. Grosheide, a.w., p. 236-238; H. Strathmann, op. cit., p. 121.
23. F. W. Grosheide, op. cit., p. 293.
29. O. Michel, Die Lehre von der christlichen Vollkommenheit, 1935, p. 341; compare also F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 1964, p. 378; Calvin, op. cit., p. 514: "Significat nos Angelis associari, cooptari in Patriarcharum ordinem, et collocari in coelo inter omnes beatos spiritus, quum per Evangelium nos ad se Christus vocat".
32. H. Strathmann, art. cit., p. 64.
41. R. Bultmann, art. cit., p. 528.
43. H. Strathmann, Die Brief an die Hebräer, 1965, p. 156.
44. H. van Oyen, op. cit., p. 250.
46. A. Moe, art. cit., p. 164.
47. F. W. Grosheide, op. cit., p. 374.
48. Hos. 6,6; Sir. 35 (32), 1-4.
50. F. W. Grosheide, op. cit., p. 166.
51. E. Riggenbach, Der Brief an der Hebräer, 1922, p. 150.