

The Priesthood of the Believer

by Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *What exactly is a priest?*
- *What is different about a priest in the church and an Old Testament priest?*
- *What is my responsibility as a believer priest today?*

A Historical Overview

From Adam until Moses, individual patriarchs were priests to God. From Moses (1500 B.C.) until Christ, God instituted for Israel the Levitical priesthood through the descendants of Aaron. From the First until the Second Coming of Christ, God called for each believer to be his or her own priest. From the Second Coming of Christ until the Great White Throne Judgment (the Millennial Kingdom), the saints and Aaron Levites will be priests. There is no mention of a priesthood in the future New Jerusalem. So it's:

Priesthood of the Patriarchs 2500+ years	Priesthood of the Levites 1500 years	Priesthood of the Believers 2000+ years	Priesthood of the Saints and Levites 1000 years
Mosaic Law	Christ's First Coming	Christ's Second Coming	Great White Throne

A Biblical Description

Now let's study some passages which describe the priesthood through these various ages.

From Adam to Moses—2500+ Years

And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard ... (Genesis 4:3-5).

Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar (Genesis 8:20).

Job would ... consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all (Job 1:5).

Abraham built an altar to the Lord ... (Genesis 12:8; see also Genesis 13:4, 18; 14:18; 22:9; 26:25; 31:54; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7).

From Moses to Christ—1500 Years

And he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. And he shall slay the young bull before the LORD; and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting (Leviticus 1:4-5; see also Leviticus 4:1-6; 5:5-6, 13; 10:1-3; Numbers 16:10; 1 Samuel 1:4; 2 Samuel 20:26; and Nehemiah 13:28-29).

From the First to the Second Coming of Christ (Our Age)—2000+ Years

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices accept-

able to God through Jesus Christ ... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for {God's} own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:5, 9; see also 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; Hebrews 13:15-16; and Revelation 1:6).

From the Second Coming of Christ until the Great White Throne Judgment (the Millennial Kingdom)—1000 Years

“... you shall give to the Levitical priests who are from the offspring of Zadok, who draw near to Me to minister to Me,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘a young bull for a sin offering” (Ezekiel 43:18-19).

Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years (Revelation 20:6; see also Revelation 5:10).

The Difference Between a Priest and a Minister

Ministry is possibly best described in Ephesians 4:11-13. **We could define biblical ministry as serving people, with eternal values in mind.**

But the priesthood is different. It is not about ministering to people, it's about approaching God. The method for ministry (at least for our age) is discipleship. But the priesthood is not about discipling one another, it's about facing God.

Whereas ministry is horizontal, the priesthood is vertical

Ministry focuses on evangelizing, shepherding, and teaching people. The priesthood focuses only on pleasing God. So our priesthood must precede and govern our relationship with people. Ministry must flow out of the priesthood (Romans 15:16). The mistake of the liberals, secularists, culturalists, and humanists is to ignore or reverse that order. **Ministering to people without a priestly connection to God is just social work.**

The Priesthood Today

The priesthood for our (church/grace) age is best described in 1 Peter 2:5 and 9. [I quoted it earlier. Please take a moment to read it.] Peter said the priesthood had two parts:

(1) ... *to offer up spiritual sacrifices* (v. 5). So the first function of the priesthood is **presentation**. But notice these are not just any sacrifices or what we determine to be a good sacrifice (like Cain did in Genesis 4:3-5), but ...*sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*. So the sacrifice is prescribed by God not conjured up by man. No matter how traditional our liturgies are or how sincere our songs, prayers, and creeds are, they are not part of the priesthood unless specifically prescribed by God in His Word. For example, Hebrews 13:15-16 says, *Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

(2) Peter said priests were to *proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light* (v. 9). So the second function of the priesthood is **proclamation**. But notice, this has a vertical, not a horizontal, focus. It looks at Him who has called you, not at those we disciple. The priesthood emphasis is proclaiming His excellencies. Helping people understand and apply those excellencies is ministry but not priestly. So we can conclude:

The priesthood is about the presentation of an acceptable sacrifice to God and the proclamation of the excellencies of God to the world

Presenting an Acceptable Sacrifice to God Today

Before Moses, an acceptable sacrifice was the blood of a “clean” animal. (“Clean” strictly defined by God.) Between Moses and Christ's First Coming, sacrifice might be a “clean” animal or a specific grain offering. After the Second Coming of Christ (during the Millennial Kingdom), the sacrifice will be animals, for the Levitical priesthood (Ezekiel 43:18-19) and reigning under Christ, for the saints (Revelation 5:10; 20:6). But for our (church/grace) age, the presentation is best described by Paul

in Romans 12:1-2. *Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.* Here Paul said our presentation is two things: (1) a holy body and (2) a transformed mind. A holy body is defined as one acceptable to God, and a transformed mind is defined as one not *...conformed to this world*. So presentation is not about liturgy, be it formal or casual. The work of the believer-priest is to present to God a holy body and a transformed mind.

Proclaiming the Excellencies of God

Peter's second priestly function said a believer-priest works for God, not people. He or she is a God-rep. All horizontal ministry flows out of the excellencies of God. So, for example, a true believer-priest sees evangelism as being a witness for Christ (Acts 1:8; 2:39), not reaching the world. Prayer is in obedience to God (1 Thessalonians 5:17), not using God like a genie-in-a-bottle to get what you want. In counseling, a true believer-priest understands God has our best interests in mind. But God gets to decide what's in our best interests (Matthew 6:25-34). God is good, but God gets to define what is good. Submission is not agreement. Submission is conforming to God's Word when I do not understand how it would (in some particular case) be in my best interest. And love is based in obedience to God. For example, suppose my daughter wants to marry an unbeliever. Ministry which does not flow from a priesthood might say, "Okay" because a relationship with my daughter comes first. But a true believer-priest would say "No" because God says "No" (2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 7:39).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What exactly is a priest?*

A: A priest is one who presents an acceptable sacrifice to God and proclaims the excellencies of God to the world.

Q: *What is different about a priest in the church and an Old Testament priest?*

A: The Old Testament priest presented an animal sacrifice. We, priests in the church age, are to present a holy body and a transformed mind.

Q: *What is my responsibility as a believer priest today?*

A:

