

# DOCTRINE OF PRIESTHOOD

## I. Preliminary considerations and terminology.

- A. Definition: a priest is one who is authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion, whether heathen (Gen.41:45; Acts.14:13) or Biblical (Mt.8:4; 1Pet.2:5,9).
- B. The basic Hebrew word is **כֹּהֵן**, cohen; the Greek term is **ἱερεύς**, hiererus; also **ἀρχιερεὺς**, archiereus: high priest.
- C. Essential features of a Biblical priesthood include:
  1. Membership in the human race (Heb.5:1 "*For every high priest taken from men*"; Heb.2:17 "*Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things*").
  2. Divine appointment (Heb.5:4 "*And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when He is called by God, even as Aaron was*").
  3. Representation (Heb.5:1 "*appointed on behalf of men*"). The stones on Aaron's shoulders were inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes.
  4. Sacrifice (Heb.5:1; 8:3).
  5. Compassion for those he represents (Heb.5:2; cp. 2:18; 4:15).
- D. Categories of priesthood authorized by God include:
  1. Individual priesthood - the only recorded example is that of one Melchizedek, King of ancient Salem (Heb.7:1-3; Gen.14:18-20).
  2. Levitical priesthood, which involved a regular priestly succession within the tribe of Levi and was authorized by the Mosaic Covenant (Ex.28:1; 32:25-29; Num.8:5-22).
  3. The High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, which superseded the Levitical priesthood and is patterned after the order of Melchizedek (Ps.110:4; Heb.5:10).
  4. Royal and universal priesthood of believers of the Church Age, which partakes of the priesthood of Christ (1Pet.2:9; Rev.1:6).
  5. The nation of Israel as a whole, which acted as the representative of God to the Gentile nations until temporarily replaced by the Church (Ex.19:6; Mt.21:33-46).

## II. The Levitical priesthood.

- A. Some essential features of the Levitical priesthood include:
  1. They administered the ceremonial code of the Mosaic Covenant (Heb.8:4,5; 9:1-6).
  2. They taught the people the Law (Heb.7:11; Neh.8:7-9; 2Chr.17:8,9; 19:8).
  3. They had to be without physical defect to serve (Lev.21:17-21), and their office ended with death (Heb.7:16,23).
  4. The family of Aaron supplied the nation with the high priest based on hereditary succession (Ex.28:1; 40:15).
  5. They had no allotted territory, but were given 48 cities within Israel (Num.35:1-8).
    - a. This fulfilled Jacob's dying prophecy that Levi would be "scattered" (Gen.49:7).
    - b. Thus "scattered", they could carry out their teaching ministry more effectively (Deut.33:10).
    - c. Included were 6 cities of refuge, accessible to those seeking legal protection (Num.35:6).
- B. Some factors in the selection of Levi's descendants for their special role in Israel.
  1. The selection of Moses and Aaron, who were descendants of Kohath, one of Levi's 3 sons (Ex.2:1-10; 6:14-27; Num.26:59), conferred on Levi an honor that was recognized by the other tribes.
  2. An event of transcending importance at Mt. Sinai (Ex.32:25-29) gave to the Levites as a tribe their place of privilege and responsibility in God's plan. This event transmuted the curse of Jacob's prophecy (Gen.49:5-7) into the blessing of Moses' prophecy (Deut.33:8-11).

3. This choice was confirmed by a very similar event when an individual Levite, one Phinehas, stayed the plague of Num.25:1-13 that was about to decimate the nation.

C. Some of the purposes which served the divine plan in their selection.

1. Their selection was a reward for their faithfulness and zeal during operation "golden calf" (Ex.32:25-29).
2. The doctrine of substitution was illustrated, for although God claimed the firstborn males of all the tribes on the basis of the law of the firstborn, God graciously allowed the Levites to be substitutes for their brethren (Num.3:9,11-14,40-51; 8:14-19).
3. Israel's separation and selection from all the nations was further intensified and illustrated by the separation of one tribe from the rest (Num.8:5-22).
4. Life without an inheritance for Levi, making the Lord their inheritance, illustrates that no matter what our condition in the cosmos, the Lord is our inheritance (Num.18:20-24; 26:62; Deut.10:9; 12:12; 14:27).

D. A three-fold organization is discernible.

1. Aaron and his sons occupied the top echelon; these alone were priests in the restricted sense. These priests belonged to the family of Kohath.
2. The middle echelon included all other Kohathites who were not of Aaron's family; to them were given certain privileges in bearing the most sacred parts of the Tabernacle (Num.3:27-32; 4:4-15; 7:9).
3. The bottom echelon comprised all members of the families of Gershon and Merari; to them lesser duties were prescribed (Num.3:21-26,33-37).

E. Priests and Levites.

1. The priests must come from Aaron's family; the Levites came from the larger family of Levi. A priest was a Levite, but a Levite was not necessarily a priest.
2. Priests were consecrated (Ex.29:1-37); Levites were purified (Num.8:5-22).
3. Levites were considered a gift to Aaron and his sons (Num.3:5-13; 8:19; 18:1-7).
4. A fundamental difference was that only a priest had the right to minister at the altar and to enter the Most Holy Place (Ex.28:1; 29:9; Num.3:10,38; 4:15,19ff; 18:1-7; 25:10-13).

F. The rebellion of Korah, a Kohathite (Num.16:1), against the uniqueness of Aaron's priesthood illustrated, in the manner in which it was subdued, the heinous nature of attempting to enter the priesthood without the necessary prerequisites (Num.16). The choice of Aaron was further confirmed by the budding of his rod (Num.17:1-11; Heb.9:4). Other attempted intrusions included King Saul (1Sam.13:9,13,14) and King Uzziah (2Chr.26:16-21).

1. The settlement in Canaan necessarily curtailed some of the Levites' duties, as the Tabernacle no longer needed transportation.
2. David introduced innovations in the service of the Levites (1Chr.23-26). Certain Levites became musicians and, like Asaph, wrote some of the Psalms (1Chr.6:39,43; 15:16ff; 16:4ff; 25:1-9; Ps.50,73-83).
3. In the disruption of the United Kingdom, many Levites from the North sought refuge in Judah (2Chr.11:13-16; 13:9-12; 15:9), but some were involved in the apostasy of the Northern Kingdom (Ezek.44:10-15).
4. In the post-exilic period, Levites did not return from Babylon in the same proportion as the priests (Ezra.2:36-42; Neh.7:39-45). Later a special effort was required to get the Levites to return (Ezra.8:15-19). They were still considered teachers and musicians (Ezra.8:15ff; 2:40ff; 3:10ff; Neh.7:43ff).
5. Only a few Levites are mentioned in the New Testament (Lk.10:32; Jn.1:19; Acts.4:36).

G. Since the Levitical priesthood could not bring in perfection, it was required that another priest arise, from a different tribe and in a different order (Heb.7:11-17; Ps.110:4).

### III. The High Priesthood of Jesus Christ.

A. It is the subject of Messianic prophecy, establishing Christ's priesthood in the divine decrees

(Ps.110:4; Zech.6:13).

B. It is the principal theme of the book of Hebrews, especially chapters 5-10.

C. It is after the order of Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (Ps.110:4; Heb.5:5,6,10; 6:20; 7:11,15,17,21).

D. It is superior to the order of Aaron, as the patriarch Levi was seminally in Abraham when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek (Heb.7:4-10).

E. It is superior to Aaronic and Levitical orders for these reasons:

1. It is based on a divine oath, whereas Aaron's was based on law (Heb.7:20-22,28).

2. It is permanent because it is centered in the eternal resurrected Son of God, whereas Old Testament priests' offices ended with their death (Heb.7:23-25).

3. It partakes of the perfection of Christ who had no need to be purged of sin, as did the sons of Aaron (Heb.7:26-28).

4. It continues in heaven where God Himself has erected the true sanctuary, of which Moses' tent was but "*a copy and a shadow*" (Heb.8:1-7).

5. It is the fulfillment of a superior and New Covenant (Heb.8:8-13).

6. Its sacrifice needs no repeating, but was rendered "*once for all*" (Heb.7:29; 9:12).

7. Its offering was not "*the blood of bulls and goats*", unable to take away sins, but "*the body of Jesus Christ*", through which believers are sanctified (Heb.10:4,10).

8. Its result is full and regular access to God for all Christians, not just a priestly order (Heb.10:11-22).

F. It is the source of the highest motivation to hold fast to Bible Doctrine, produce divine good, and to have faithfulness under face-to-face teaching in light of the return of Christ (Heb.9:28; 10:23-25).

G. Its effectiveness in our lives is guaranteed by Christ's constant intercession for us (Heb.7:25).

IV. The universal priesthood of believers.

A. The Scriptures documenting it are 1Pet.2:9 and Rev.1:6.

B. The extent of it is that every believer in the Church Age is a priest, so it is wrong to designate only certain persons as "priest".

C. Its nature is that it is a royal priesthood partaking of Christ's high priesthood, which is patterned after Melchizedek's (Ps.110:4).

D. The offerings of our priesthood are those things we are commanded to offer up to God (1Pet.2:5; cp. Rom.12:1; Heb.13:15,16).

E. The duration of our priesthood is forever, as we partake of Christ (Heb.3:14), who exists as high priest forever (Heb.7:17).

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