

## TABERNACLE & CHRISTIANITY II - PRIESTLY CALLING TO SERVE<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Why Aaron was Called

Put yourself in an Israelite's position as you contemplate coming before the Lord to worship. Would you be able to enter the Tabernacle, kill the animal you brought as a sacrifice, offer its blood on the altar, and then sit down and enjoy direct communion with God?

Definitely not! The Israelites never enjoyed that privilege. The Tabernacle, with all of its beautiful furnishings, was inaccessible and of no benefit to the Israelites apart from the priesthood. They were unable to serve in the Tabernacle, they needed a mediating priest, someone to represent them before God. It was for this purpose that God called Aaron and his sons.

### 2. The Concept of Priesthood

2.1 The origin of the concept of priesthood was not the Tabernacle. During the patriarchal period, the head of each household functions as a mediating priest on behalf of his family.

2.2 Examples of patriarchs who functions as mediating priests in the OT:

- Job continually offered burnt offerings for each of his children because he was afraid they might have cursed God in their hearts (Job 1:5).
- The first thing Noah did after leaving the ark was to build an altar and offer a burnt offering to the Lord (Gen. 8:20).
- Wherever Abraham travelled through the land of Canaan, he built an altar and offered sacrifice to the Lord (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:18; 22:9).
- Isaac and Jacob likewise erected altars and performed the ministry of a priest before God (Gen. 26:25; 33:20).

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#### <sup>1</sup> References:

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### 3. The Choice of Priesthood

3.1 God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt and brought them to Himself so that they would be a people for His own possession. It was God's plan that Israel be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation having direct access to Him (Ex. 19:4-6).

Before the Aaronic priesthood, the head of each family functioned as priests, offering sacrifices on behalf of the household (Ex. 24:4-5). In fact, all the firstborn of Israel were to be sanctified unto the Lord (Ex. 13:1-2). This separation was to be the means of selecting priests—with the firstborn of every tribe selected as a minister, Israel could then truly be a kingdom of priests.

Since Israel was to be “a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6), God gave them the responsibility to demonstrate His standard of holiness to a world that had sunken to the depths of sin.

3.2 But Israel sinned against God, breaking the covenant that He had made with them at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:5). They forfeited the privilege of being a kingdom of priests.

3.3 Therefore, it became necessary for God to institute a priesthood from among the people to represent the nation of Israel before Him. While Moses was on Mount Sinai, God said to him, “And take thou unto thee Aaron, thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons” (Ex. 28:1). Thus, God chose the tribe of Levi to function as priests (Num. 3:5-13), confining His choice by the miraculous budding of Aaron's rod (Num. 17:8). Aaron was a son of Amram, who was a son of Kohath, one of the sons of Levi (Ex. 6:16, 18, 20).

However, the task of taking down and setting up the tabernacle was not the work of the priests, but that of the three sons of Levi and their descendants—the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites (Num. 1:50-51). From this ancestry, we can say that while all Aaronic priests were Levites (i.e. from the tribe of Levi), not all Levites belonged to the Aaronic priesthood (as Aaron was one of two great grandsons of Levi; the other was Moses).

The term *priest* (*kohen*) means *one who officiates*. Like Aaron, the priests were not chosen by the people or self-appointed. They were divinely called by God, deriving their authority directly from Him (Heb. 5:4).

3.4 The priests had to be men who were able to show compassion to the ignorant and misguided, for they themselves were beset with weaknesses of the

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flesh (Heb. 5:2). But God graciously provided the office of the priest so that the people, cut off from Him because of their sin, could have access to Him through a mediating priesthood. The high priest interceded for the Israelites by offering gifts and sacrifices for his own sins and those of the people (Heb. 5:1, 3).

Implication: As believer-priests, we cultivate transparency between each other so that we can hold each other accountable and to mediate for each other before God. And to allow for greater transparency, we need to allow each other to make mistakes.

3.5 Those chosen to serve in the priesthood could not have any physical defects. Levites were rejected for service for any of the follow reasons: body blemishes, blindness, lameness, a flat nose, limbs were deformed, a broken foot or hand, a hunchback, dwarfism, defective eyes, eczema, scabs, or being a eunuch (Lev. 21:17-21).

Implication: We dignify the call to believer-priesthood by giving the best from us, in us, and among us. The best qualified are to serve in church, not just work in the world. Each believer-priest must see his service as a calling if he is to give his best. This giving of one's best is not so much an ambition, but a response to God's calling.

3.6 A tithe system was enacted to provide for the priests and their families. The first fruit reaped by the people was given to the priests in the form of grain, fruit, wine, oil, flour, and a sheep's fleece (Deut. 18:4). A special tithe was taken every three years and given to the Levites because they had no inheritance in the land of Canaan (Deut. 14:28-29). Forty-eight cities were provided within the territories of the other tribes for the priests' habitation (Josh. 21).

The firstborn from each family had to be redeemed back by paying five shekels to the priests (Num. 18:16). An unclean beast was redeemed with a set sum which the priesthood determined, with a fifth part added to it (Lev. 27:27).

The wave breast and right shoulder of a clean beast offered in sacrifice were given to the priests (Num. 18:17-18). A portion of the showbread and sacrifices was given to them for food (Num. 18:8-14). The priests received redemption money for people or things dedicated to the Lord at specific occasions (Lev. 27). A certain percentage of the spoils of war were divided among the Levites (Num. 31:25-47).

Implication: Believer-priests are to trust in God's provision by exercising contentment with holiness, not with laziness. Also, God used His people (the Israelites) to provide for His priests. As believer-priests, God's provision is demonstrated not only in our receiving, but also in our giving.

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## 4. The Church as Priesthood

4.1 There are a number of parallels between the Aaronic priesthood and the priesthood of believers:

- Aaron was called into the priesthood. God said to Moses, “take ... Aaron ... that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Ex. 28:1). The church has been called to be a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:9).
- Under the law, a man had to be born into the priesthood. Christians become priests on the basis of their spiritual birth. By putting their trusting faith in Christ, our High Priest, we are born into the family of God, assuring us of all the rights and privileges that Christ has secured for us (Jn. 1:11-13; Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 3:26; 1 Jn. 3:1-2).
- Aaron's sons were secure in their priesthood, not because of their own merit, but on the basis of their father’s appointment of them as high priests. As believer-priests we are secure in Christ, who promises that we will never be separated from our priesthood (Jn. 10:27-28; 17:2; Rom. 8:35-39).

4.2 The Old Testament description of God’s desire for the nation of Israel as a kingdom of priests is applied to the church (1 Peter 2:9):

- The priesthood of believers is a “chosen generation” (lit., an elect race). We are a body of believers with a common descent. Our natural background of race and nationality is overshadowed by our new spiritual identity. The church is a race of people called out to show forth God’s praise and bring glory to His name.
- The priesthood of believers is a “royal priesthood”. Our position as believer-priests is far above that of the Aaronic priests, who never functioned in a kingly role because Aaronic priesthood was formed long before Israel had a king.
- The priesthood of believers is a “holy nation”. As a nation of believers, we are a mixed multitude from every country of the world formed into a distinct people with the same identity. This distinct body of believers is a *holy* or *set apart* people—pilgrims and sojourners in the countries where they live (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11).
- The priesthood of believers is a “peculiar people” (KJV). In today’s society, *peculiar* means *odd* or *strange*. But the Greek word denotes that each believer is a *unique possession of God*. Scripture clearly states that we are not our own but have been “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 7:23). Believer-priests today are like the nation of Israel, which was a unique possession of God.

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Implication: We have not been brought into this high position as believer-priests just to enjoy the blessings of our status, but to do the ministry befitting of our calling. 1 Peter 2:9 states that “ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”. We who are believer-priests are made lights of His grace and glory, and to dispel the darkness by the light of our lives and testimonies.

Our good competence must not be used as a substitute for bad character. As a holy and distinct people, we are called out to serve the Lord. Thus, we should not desire to be like others around us in our attitudes and actions. To be not of this world does not mean that we are to stay away from it, but we are to be better than the world in all that we do in the name of God—quality, productivity, integrity, ability, etc.

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