

Do Christians Need Priests?

Bible Teaching About Church Organisation

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FOR many people the organisation and traditions of religion create large barriers to its acceptance. Believing that God can be worshipped acceptably by an individual in a forest or on a mountain-places which bring readily to mind His awesome creative power – they shy away from grand robes and imposing buildings. When it is suggested that somehow God cannot be properly worshipped other than through a human intermediary and according to set rites, their worst fears are confirmed. The hierarchy of priests (cardinals, archbishops, bishops, canons, etc.), is confusing to them and also suggests that there are two categories of worshipper – priests and lay people. Possibly, even that those who claim to be ordained by God are more favoured than everyone else.

Churchmen argue that priests and the church speak on God's behalf; they interpret God's commandments for men, and plead with God on man's behalf; only they are allowed to bless the sacraments of communion: the bread and wine shared by worshippers in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. They claim that today's priests are the rightful successors to the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles; that God speaks today through the church as He spoke in earlier centuries through prophets and apostles.

What can we make of these claims? Has God commanded that He should be worshipped only through the mediation of human priests? Do men today have the right to speak for God? Are there two categories of worshippers, the priests and the laity?

A Reliable Authority

To answer these questions we need to have a reliable source of authority, something that is totally trustworthy, having stood the test of time. Priests speak with the authority they believe they receive from their church. The churches claim their authority direct from God Himself. But we are not interested in *claims* alone. We need some reliable evidence.

If God has declared anything about how He should be worshipped, that would surely be the reliable authority we are looking for. And God *has* spoken! The Bible claims to be the written word of God. Nor is this only a claim. If it was, it would be no different from the churches' claim to speak on God's behalf. God's word contains various tests so that His claim can be proved.

God Does not Change

Primarily there is the evidence of fulfilled prophecy (for more information on this subject see the booklet in this series: Bible Prophecy). God revealed to His prophets certain events long before they happened. Their words also had a further importance:

"If a prophet arises among you... and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 13:1-3).

Look how crucial this passage is. In times past God revealed His mind to certain men and women. Their words could be tested. What they spoke about future events had to be fulfilled if they were truly speaking for God. More than that, if they contradicted previous messages from God, they were clearly false prophets – for God does not change. This establishes an important principle. God has revealed His purpose for mankind, and this is verified by the tests He provided. Anyone who speaks today and contradicts the teachings in His word cannot claim that His authority lies behind what they say. The Bible thus becomes an important source of authority on religious matters today – it is the *living* Word of God.

This question of authority is crucial to our consideration. True believers in Christ accept only one authority, the word of God. Christ was "*the word made flesh*" (John 1:14). He always upheld and never contradicted his Father's word. His followers must aim for nothing less in their own worship. Let us therefore approach God's Word reverently to see what is revealed about the priesthood, and about the organisation of believers in Christ. In this way the claims of churchmen for themselves and for their churches can be tested.

Priesthood in the Old Testament

In the beginning of the Bible record God spoke directly with some men and women by means of His angels. He did not command the establishment of a priesthood until after the descendants of Jacob were delivered from slavery in pagan Egypt and led by Moses to the land of Canaan. During their forty year journey, they were being welded into a nation and into a religious congregation. Stephen spoke to the Jewish leaders of his day about "*the church in the wilderness*" under the leadership of Moses, through whom God provided laws to govern their national life (Acts 7:38).

"The church" was not a special building for their worship, it is a term used to describe the whole group of people separated to God. As it is a word connected in modern use almost exclusively with a building, it may help to understand its true meaning to learn that the word in the New Testament's original language (Greek), was *ekklesia*. Our English word "congregation" is a good translation of it: a group of people gathered together for a special purpose. Because the "congregation in the wilderness" consisted of God's people, all their laws had a spiritual purpose, and were to be taught and maintained by His representatives. God chose the tribe of Levi out of their twelve tribes to fulfil this role.

The reason for choosing Levi was important. Moses had been called up into a mountain to receive the nation's laws. In his absence from their camp, the people called for a festival. During their revelry they gave golden jewellery to Moses' brother Aaron, and he made a golden calf, like the gods worshipped in Egypt. Returning from the mountain when the orgy was at its height, Moses was distressed by their behaviour, and immediately took charge. Calling out, "*Who is on the Lord's side?*", he determined to purge the camp of all the revellers who had turned away from worshipping God to worship the golden calf.

Levi's sons responded immediately, and Moses was able to say to them, "*Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord*" (Exodus 32:29). The tribe of Levi thus became responsible for instructing the nation in the things to do with God and His ways. The nation had shown itself to be weak and with a tendency easily to turn away from God. The Levites had shown their faithfulness to Him in a time of trial and now had to show the same

judgement through their lives for the benefit of others. They were to act as intermediaries between a faithless people and a "*God of mercy, yet of holiness*".

Man Separated from God

God indicated His close involvement with the nation of Israel when the glory of His presence occupied part of the portable Tabernacle, and later the more permanent Temple – centres for the nation's worship. The Most Holy Place, as this part was called, could not be entered regularly by anyone. It was a room wholly set aside for God. Though He was among His people, the perfection of His character and the sinfulness of theirs did not allow free and open concourse between them. Just once each year the High Priest was allowed to enter, but only after rigorous and careful preparation.

By the sacrifices and offerings commanded under the law, and by the priests' involvement with them, the people were constantly to be reminded of God's holiness, and that He cannot be approached casually or insincerely. The chief priest wore on his forehead a small gold plate inscribed with the words, "Holiness to the Lord" (Exodus 28:36). Together with his clothing, it was meant to represent the attitude of mind necessary in priest and people if they were to be acceptable to God.

A close consideration of all the Old Testament teaching concerning the priesthood reveals the following important aspects:

1. God is pure and holy – He cannot be approached directly by sinful men and women.
2. Angels were employed by God to communicate with mankind.
3. The priesthood was commanded by God only when there was a group specially prepared to worship Him, and with laws controlling that worship. These people formed a "church".
4. The priest was a man from a family chosen by God and separated from the people.
5. Men and women who wanted to repent of their sins and receive forgiveness had to employ the services of a priest who would assist them to offer a sacrifice.
6. The presence of God was located in the inner portion of the tabernacle and temple. Only the High Priest could enter once a year, after special preparation.
7. The priest had to be washed clean before he could mediate for the people, and he had to offer for his own sins first.

This last aspect is specially important. Though the Levites had shown great promise in the matter of the golden calf, they were really as sinful as the rest of the people. When Israel's history unfolds in the Bible record, the priests become as involved in the nation's transgression as those they were meant to be teaching, and often can be found leading the nation in false worship. What was needed was a representative for man, sharing all his propensities to sin, but perfectly obedient to the commands of God. A man like that could fulfil all the requirements for priesthood: chosen by God and separated from the people.

Priesthood in the New Testament

The apostle Paul, commenting upon the law given through Moses in his letter to the Galatians, described it as a "*schoolmaster to bring us to Christ*" (13:24). In every aspect, the law declared its inability to bring salvation to sinful mankind. A sacrifice had to be offered *every time* someone sinned. All this did was constantly to remind man that sin separates him from God. There was no provision in the law for finally removing sin from the earth. Anyone carefully meditating upon the law's significance would realise the urgent need for a Saviour from sin.

This need was met when Jesus was born. He was given that name, as an angel declared to Mary's husband Joseph, because "*he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus fulfilled all the requirements that the priests under the law were unable to achieve. Where they were weak, he was strong. He was subject to the same things that caused their weakness: he knew the temptations they had to grapple with. But they often gave in to temptation. Jesus never did. He shared his physical nature with them: an ageing body, susceptible to tiredness, injury, disease and, ultimately, death. But, instead of focusing his mind on himself and his needs, as this weak nature has for the rest of mankind, Jesus' mind was devoted completely to the things of his heavenly Father. Where sin has ensnared all the rest of humankind, Jesus never succumbed. Men have constantly failed; Jesus was supremely victorious.

"*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*", is how Paul described the state of mankind (Romans 3:23). But Jesus "*committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips*" (1 Peter 2:22). His victory over sin and death was complete when God raised him from the dead – to die no more. He is "*a priest for ever*" (Hebrews 7:17).

The Perfect Priest

Here is someone ideally fitted to be a priest:

1. Jesus came into the world as a human being and lived amongst men and women.
2. He learned real obedience to the Father through the suffering he endured.
3. He overcame every temptation, lived an utterly sinless life, and offered himself completely when he submitted to death on the cross.
4. Since Jesus was undeserving of death, God raised him from the grave and gave him a nature that cannot perish or die; he is now immortal, and lives and reigns with God.
5. Because he shared our humanity, he can sympathise with our trials and problems.
6. Having himself overcome similar trials, he can offer a share in his victory to those willing to associate themselves with him.

These factors set Jesus aside from every other person who has ever lived. As these are the qualities of true priesthood, there can only be one priest. The Jewish priests of Jesus' day should have seen that he fulfilled the requirements for priesthood where they had manifestly failed. With a blinding pride, however, they saw none of this, and were among the leaders of the group intent on putting him to death. Because they should have known better, and should have taken the responsibility of priesthood under the law more seriously, Jesus called them "*blind guides*" and "*whitewashed tombs*" (Matthew 15:14; 23:27).

He scathingly denounced them for their hypocrisy. He warned the people against them, because they *"like to go about in long robes, and love salutations in the market places and the best seats at synagogues and in the places of honour at feasts"* (Luke 20:46). Jesus' attitude to their pride is part of the answer to our question about the justification for two 'levels' of worshipper; humility, not pride, must be the characteristic of the true follower of Christ: *"For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Luke 14:11).

The true church, based on Biblical principles, is a congregation of men and women with no hierarchy, devoted to the worship of God, and honouring the sacrifice made on their behalf by the Lord Jesus Christ. *Through him only* can they acceptably approach God in prayer.

In Jesus the Jewish law was both fulfilled and replaced. His work had also been anticipated by the provisions in the law, but its complete objective could not be achieved by any of the Levite priests.

Christ in Contrast to the Law

1. Jesus was chosen by God to be High Priest. After Aaron had first been appointed High Priest under the Law of Moses, all subsequent holders of that position were eldest sons, taking over on the death of their fathers. They were thus chosen *"by the will of man"*, not by the will of God. They could only approach into God's presence once each year. Jesus now lives for evermore, and always sits in the presence of God:

"The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:23-25).

2. Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice, once and for all. Under the law sacrifices had to be offered again and again. The Jewish priests had to recognise their own sins by offering first for themselves before they could officiate on behalf of the people:

"He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:27).

3. Jesus was able to replace the law by perfectly fulfilling it, and by being totally obedient to his Father's will:

"Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second... In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete" (Hebrews 8:6,7,13).

4. Jesus conquered sin, and true believers can receive forgiveness of sins because of his victory:

"Christ has entered, not.. to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly... for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:24-26).

One Mediator

His priesthood is unique, and no human being can achieve what he did. He said himself, speaking first of all to his disciples who could have greater claim to represent him than anyone else: *"No man cometh unto the Father, but by me"* (John 14:6). In unmistakable terms, the apostle Paul confirms this true position:

"There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:5,6).

Furthermore, Paul wrote these words in a section of his letter to Timothy dealing with the organisation of the believers in Ephesus. Had he wished there to be a category of believers with special duties to represent God to man, here was the opportunity to say so. Instead, he clearly states that Jesus alone fulfils this function.

Many churches today claim that only an ordained priest can bless and distribute the bread and wine, and that only bishops can ordain priests. The New Testament certainly records the first occasion bread and wine were shared by the disciples in Jesus' presence, and later how the apostles described the believers' duty to meet regularly for this purpose. But it never suggests that the person presiding over this memorial service has to be specially ordained – in fact there is no mention of such a person, only of the command to believers: *"As often as you eat this bread and drink this wine you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"* (1 Corinthians 11:26).

It must be noted that this command specifically places a responsibility on individual believers, whether meeting on their own or in company with others, to take bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice. The practice of some churches to restrict the sharing of wine to the priests only, finds no place in the Bible record.

The Organisation of the Early Church

Having seen that the Jewish priesthood was replaced by the work of Christ, we must now turn to consider how the early believers organised themselves. Did the Lord's apostles command the establishment of a human priesthood modelled on that of Christ's? Did they instruct that special buildings, intricately decorated, should be erected; that there should be special robes, or special phraseology to make worship acceptable? Were there to be special functions for certain believers?

The New Testament account of the early Christian church reveals an active, lively, and rapidly growing community. Although believers performed many different functions, there were no distinctions in terms of status:

"For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:4-5).

Through all that was written during this exciting period, and while the gospel message was scorching through the Mediterranean world assisted by the communication systems provided by the Roman Empire, there was clearly great concern that no one person, or group of people should dominate the fellowship of believers. To suggest otherwise would effectively dethrone their Lord, for:

"Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour" (Ephesians 5:23).

Service is the Keynote

Jesus' own words to his followers should be the guide in these matters. He taught *all* of his disciples to be servants, and there was to be no differentiation in terms of rank. He set the example himself when he washed the feet of his disciples – in his day the most menial task of the most insignificant slave: *"I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you"* (John 13:15). He also warned his followers about the dangers of treating some men or women differently from others. They had seen, as he had, the corruption of the Jewish leaders in their day. Jesus warned his own followers not to fall into the same trap:

"You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ" (Matthew 23:8-10).

Elsewhere in his teaching, Jesus upheld the family unit, and spoke about the need for children to respect their parents. He was therefore clearly talking on this occasion about their religious organisation needing to be founded as a *brotherhood*. His words here concerning fathers relate to the practice of calling religious leaders "father", showing how alien it is to Christ's ideal of the relationship between believers. To do so in the face of Jesus' own teaching is an affront to the majesty of God Himself.

The Family of Believers

The idea of a family is a very useful way of understanding how the early believers organised themselves in accordance with the advice of Jesus and his apostles. God was their Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ their Saviour, the head of their community. But like a normal, human family with older and younger members, where those who are more experienced take a greater share in the daily responsibilities, so in the early Christian congregations there were elder and younger members. Certain responsibilities were given to the elders, but they were not to lord it over the rest of the congregation. They were to *"treat younger men like brothers... younger women like sisters, in all purity"* (1 Timothy 5:1,2).

Yes, there were different tasks, and different responsibilities according to circumstance, but the first century congregations knew nothing of the distinction between priests and laymen,

so common in today's churches. The selection of elders to look after each congregation was the responsibility of the members in that place. Paul wrote to Titus, in Crete, and told him to: "*appoint elders in every town*" (Titus 1:5). It would presumably have been possible for Paul to have given a list of appropriate names. But this would not have helped believers elsewhere, or in a later age. So that the task could subsequently be done by the members of any congregation, Paul set down the qualities that fit a man to be an elder:

"Men who are blameless, the husband of one wife, whose children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate" (verse 6).

Elders, Bishops and Deacons

These elders, sometimes called "bishops" (meaning shepherds or overseers had, as we have seen, responsibilities towards their fellow believers. The bishop's role was that of a shepherd. He was not in Jesus' place in the community, but had to display the same concern for the "flock" – of which he was also a part.

Other tasks, also of service, were entrusted to men and women qualified to fulfil them. Whereas elders' responsibilities were directed more to the spiritual needs of believers, "deacons" were involved with their physical needs. In the New Testament only the Lord Jesus Christ is recognised as a priest. Nor do any of the descriptions of the work of elders, bishops or deacons suggest that these had any priestly function. None of the other church "offices" are Bible terms either: they have all been invented by men.

Nowhere do the Apostles mention the sort of building believers should meet in. On one occasion the apostle Paul joined a group of worshippers who met by the riverside. Everything he had to say about this group, and others like them, commends their practices. Nor are special clothes mentioned. The only time there are references to what worshippers should wear, there are strong indications that clothes in flamboyant colours or costly materials should be carefully avoided (1 Peter 3:3-4, for example).

Another distinction between clergy and laymen in many churches today is that the clergy receive payment for their work. In the first century, those involved in the spiritual welfare of the community were entitled in principle to material or financial support. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about this. He said: "*Do we not have the right to our food and drink? The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel*" (1 Corinthians 9:4-14). Nevertheless, Paul recognised the possibility of corruption entering into the community through this provision, and declared about himself: "*I have made no use of any of these rights in my preaching I make the gospel free of charge... I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings*" (verses 15-23).

The history of churches where payment has been made to its clergy unfortunately bears out the apostle's concerns. In the Middle Ages the churches were extremely corrupt, and many priests became infinitely more wealthy and powerful than the members of their congregations. The problem still exists today. Scandals involving church finances occur only too regularly. A return to the New Testament principle of "*the right to food and drink*" for those "*who proclaim the gospel*" would help to prevent many of these crimes.

The Work of the Apostles

It is important to recognise that these arrangements for each congregation to elect ministers (i.e., servants) from within its own membership were being made when the apostles of Jesus were still active among the infant church. In the absence of a reliable written account of the work and teachings of Christ (for the gospels were not widely available in their present form until towards the end of the first century A.D.), the apostles were inspired witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. On them rested the power of God, His Holy Spirit. It gave them ready recall of all that Jesus did and said; and by it they were able to work miracles to reinforce the truth of their teachings, as Jesus had.

Once the New Testament account was complete, man had in his possession, together with the books of the Old Testament, a book that contains all that is necessary to teach him about God's offer of salvation:

the holy scriptures... *"are able to instruct you to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"* (2 Timothy 3:15).

Each believer becomes individually responsible to God for the answer he makes to the call of the gospel. As the Psalmist wrote: *"None can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him"* (49:7) Through the word of God man learns of His offer of salvation. Others may assist him to grow in his understanding. But once he comes to an appreciation of the saving work of Christ and the faithful response he should make, he stands on his own before God. His only mediator is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Apostolic Succession

But, it has been argued, the apostles were leaders of the Church; they acted in Christ's place. To the extent that they witnessed to him, and preached the same gospel message, this is true. But the apostles, even though they had the power of the Holy Spirit, did not act as mediators on behalf of other men and women, as priests today claim for themselves. We have seen that the purpose of the Holy Spirit in the apostles' lives was to guarantee the truth of their witness. As this was no longer necessary once the scriptures were complete, there was also no need to provide for a succession of men to take on the role of apostles. Nowhere in the Bible record can we find apostleship being passed on to a new generation.

It is sometimes claimed that the practice of "laying on hands" provided divinely appointed successors to the apostles. But the term has a variety of meanings, many of them unrelated to the idea of succession, such as identification with an offering, or the award of a blessing.

When Moses was specifically commanded to appoint Joshua to succeed him, God said: *"Lay your hand upon him... you shall invest him with some of your authority"* (Numbers 27:18,19). The history of the nation soon shows that the people were to look upon Joshua as they had once viewed Moses. If the laying on of hands in the New Testament has only this special meaning, we should expect to find apostles being replaced as they died, if not before. But they were not. The apostle James died quite soon after the ascension of Jesus (Acts 12:2), and

there is no mention of a replacement for him. We have already seen that the election and appointment of elders was made specifically with the consent and approval of each individual congregation, and not directly by the apostles.

After the Apostles

Evidence from early church history indicates that it was not until the middle of the second century A.D. that the practice developed of separating bishops from elders. Bishops were elevated to a position where their role was that of master or lord rather than servant. At about the same time there were signs of the emergence of a separate priesthood which began to assume certain features of the Jewish priesthood. Elaborate rituals developed connected with religious services and in the ordination of church officials. Soon there were the special buildings, clothing and language that so mark out much of religious activity today. Though contrary to Bible teaching, this was not a wholly unexpected development. Even during the period when the apostles were active there was a constant struggle to prevent the intrusion of both Jewish and pagan practices into the infant Christian community.

Jesus and his apostles warned about the emergence of "*false teachers*", "*false prophets*", and even of "*false Christs*", who would deceive many and turn away disciples after them (Matthew 24:4,5,11,24). Paul showed that false teachers would arise from within the church itself: "*From among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them*" (Acts 20:28-30). Towards the end of the first century, the apostle John wrote: "*As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come*" (1 John 2:18). The term "antichrist" refers not only to those who openly oppose Christ's teaching, but also to those who claim to represent him, yet who, by their teachings and practices, actually oppose him.

These warnings are just as important today. Any survey of the history of Christianity shows how the simple faith and practices of the apostles and their fellow believers have been corrupted. The only way to ensure compliance with them is to examine modern beliefs and behaviour in the light of Bible teaching.

Living Sacrifices

Learning that present believers do not act as priests, interceding or offering on behalf of others, we can recognise only the Lord Jesus Christ as priest for his church. However, there are aspects that formerly were part of the priesthood that believers now have to fulfil on their own behalf. As the Levites were "taken out" of Israel to serve God under the law of Moses, so the believers in Christ are "taken out" of the world to be a selected company to offer praise unto God:

"Through him [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Hebrews 13:15).

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

These passages teach that so far as the believer is concerned, there is to be no separation into that which is "holy" and that which is "profane", for the whole of a true Christian's life is dedicated to being "holy". What is specially significant is that the believers themselves are instructed to do the "presenting". No priest can do this for them. Prior to their conversion, whether they were pagans or Jews, this act of offering a sacrifice would have been the privilege and responsibility of a priest. But Christ's disciples are to make sacrifices now in acts of self-denial to demonstrate their allegiance to Jesus and his future rule over God's kingdom on earth. They forsake the things of the present world because of their commitment to the world to come. Jesus' sacrifice, offered once for the benefit of all who will avail themselves of it, is the guarantee that a life of service now will be rewarded when he comes back to the earth.

-- MICHAEL ASHTON

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