

# Priests in the Church?

## Introduction

Much of Christendom—Roman Catholics, some churches of the Anglican Communion, some Lutherans, Orthodox churches (Eastern, Greek, Russian), and others—use the word “priest” for those who serve as ministers. Does Christianity have priests? This article will examine what the word means and how it is used in the Bible.

## Definition of “Priest”

The primary meaning of a priest is a mediator or representative between man and God. Most information about priests is from God’s establishment of the Levitical priesthood with Aaron, Moses’ brother as its head. Jewish priests had several responsibilities but their primary duty was to offer animal sacrifices to God as the means of mediation. These animal sacrifices “covered” [sin](#) (Exodus 29.36).

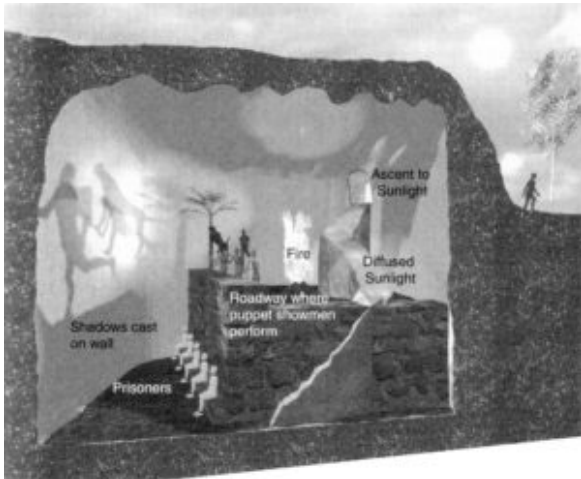
## The Need for Mediation

Man’s need for mediation resulted from Adam and Eve’s disobedience in eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2.16-17). Their disobedience broke their relationship with God and alienated them spiritually from Him. Their failure became our failure—a barrier of alienation from God was created.

Emotionally, the couple felt an immediate need to “cover” themselves: they felt shame about their nakedness. As a result, they sewed together fig leaves for clothing ([Genesis 3.7](#)) to cover themselves (Genesis 3.7). But before eating from the forbidden tree, the couple had enjoyed life unfettered by clothing. They had no shame. Sin produced shame. Through disobedience they came to know good and evil—but not as they



15.1-4). Salvation is by faith alone in the work of Christ.



Those in Plato's cave thought shadows were reality.

After God's prototypical sacrifice, men began to practice animal sacrifices. The Scriptures reveal Abel (Genesis 4.4; Hebrews 11.4), Noah (Genesis 8.20), and Abraham (Genesis 22.13), and Job (Job 1.5) offered animal sacrifices. When God gave the Jews the Mosaic Law, He instructed Israel's priests how to receive animals and perform the sacrifices, e.g., Leviticus 1.1-9. We know these sacrifices foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice for our sins (Hebrews 10). But the Jews had no understanding of this larger purpose. For them, the animal sacrifices *were* the reality. Like those in Plato's cave, they thought the shadows were the reality.

#### Usage of the Word "Priest" in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word for "priest" is קֹהֵן and occurs hundreds of times in the Old Testament. Jewish priests were the sons of Aaron. Jews with the name "Cohen" undoubtedly are of this tribe, descendants of Aaron. The word קֹהֵן is first found in the Bible in Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek, "priest of the Most High God" (Genesis 14.18). The second occurrence is Genesis 41.45. In that instance, Joseph married the daughter

of Potipherah, priest of On.<sup>4</sup> This is the first record of a pagan priest.

### Jewish Priests: The Levitical Priesthood

Moses fled Egypt after he killed an Egyptian abusing a fellow Jew (Exodus 2.11-15). Moses was grieved over their slavery and thought he could liberate them. He was highly educated, cultured, and sophisticated—a prince of Egypt. But he was unprepared to lead the Jews to freedom. When he discovered his murder had been witnessed, he fled. He settled in Midian, married Zipporah (Exodus 2.21), a daughter of Reuel, also known as Jethro, a priest of Midian (Exodus 3.1, 18.1) and became a shepherd. The Egyptians despised sheep (Genesis 46.31-34) and a shepherd was a detested occupation. The sophisticated Moses took on the lowliest of livelihoods in the eyes of the Egyptians. After forty years of shepherding, he was ready to fulfill God's destiny for him. When prepared, God revealed Himself at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Moses had lost all self-confidence. He did not think he could lead the Jews to freedom. But God knew otherwise (Exodus 3.7-12).

God dramatically revealed His power through the famous plagues of Egypt and broke the might of Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. Moses liberated the Jews and led them to Mt. Sinai where God gave them the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Covenant is known primarily for the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) but contained many civil and ceremonial laws (Maimonides cataloged 613). These included laws which governed the Levitical priesthood headed by Aaron, Moses' brother. Aaron was of the tribe of Levi and his sons became Israel's priests (Exodus 28.1). All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.<sup>5</sup> The priests served as "ministers of the altar" (Joel 1.13), offered morning and evening animal sacrifices, attended the tabernacle, ensured cleanliness, taught the Law, blessed the people in the name of God (Deuteronomy 10.8, 21.5), and carried the ark of the covenant (Deuteronomy 31.9, 25). The

“high priest” אהרן הכהן (Leviticus 21.10) was responsible for overall rule and administration of the priesthood. He also had the exclusive responsibility and privilege of entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

God commissioned the Levites to Aaron and his sons to assist them in the administration of the tabernacle and its services (Numbers 8.19). They helped prepare sacrifices, transported the tabernacle, and served as musicians, singers, and doorkeepers. (Numbers 1.50-53, 3.6-9, 4.1-33; 1 Chronicles 23). Service began at age 30 (Numbers 4.3), later changed to 25 (Numbers 8.24), and still later, to 20 (under King David), and continued until age 50 (1 Chronicles 23.24-32). Levites also served as teachers (Deuteronomy 24.8, 33.10; 2 Chronicles 35.3; Nehemiah 8.7), scribes (2 Chronicles 34.13), judges (Deuteronomy 17.8-9, 21.5; 1 Chronicles 23.4; 2 Chronicles 19.8; Ezekiel 44.15, 24), and regulators, e.g., responsible for accurate weights and measures (1 Chronicles 23.29; Leviticus 19.35-36).

While God created the Aaronic priesthood to administer the Mosaic Law, He had a larger purpose regarding the nation. Before giving the Law, God spoke these words to Moses:

<sup>4</sup> *‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself.*

<sup>5</sup> *Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel” (Exodus 19.4-6).*

God’s purpose for His people was that every Jew would be a priest. They were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

## Pagan Priests

A study of ancient religions reveals all offered animal sacrifices to their gods. Pagan religions perverted the true meaning of animal sacrifices and extended these perversions to include human sacrifice. Intrinsic to their worship were rituals of immorality, perversions, and cruelty. Women and children were the chief victims.

Nations of the ancient near east believed the power of their gods determined their military and economic strength. The nations surrounding Israel had robust religious cultures served by dedicated and established priesthoods. Some of their gods, represented by idols, included [Baal](#), [Dagon](#), [Asherah](#), [Ashtoreth](#), [Molech](#), and [Tammuz](#). Israel should have learned from their Exodus experience that their God was the one true God, vastly superior to pretender gods. They did not. They incorporated these pagan gods into Judaism and practiced idolatry (Exodus 20.2-6). Such behavior became an ongoing controversy between God and His people.

Whenever the Jews assimilated and followed these false religions, their society degraded. They became corrupt spiritually and morally. As a result of their disobedience, God judged the nation with military defeats. These conquests culminated with the capture of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 605 B.C. Through these defeats, Israel became subject to Gentile powers.

The Bible defines our age as “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21.24). It will continue until the Lord returns and establishes His kingdom (Matthew 6.10), ruling as David’s Greater Son (Psalm 110; Matthew 9.27, 12.23, 15.22, 22.42; Luke 1.32). In this kingdom, this Messianic Age, God will fulfill His covenant promises to Israel. Israel will be the greatest nation on earth as God promised (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13). The nation will become a kingdom of priests (Exodus

19.4-6) and serve as a source of blessing to Gentiles (Zechariah 8.18-23).

### Evidence of God's Superiority

A great, largely invisible war exists in our universe. The warfare is between the one true God, ☩☩☩☩☩☩ and those faithful to Him (angels and believers) against Satan and those who follow him (fallen angels and unbelievers). Satan and the angelic beings who rebelled against God created religion as a counterfeit of true worship of God. Religion is part of Satan's strategy to deceive and blind men from the true God.<sup>6</sup> Fallen angels are pretender gods and were revealed in the Old Testament. They are revealed in any study of comparative religion for they have existed in all societies and cultures. In today's world, false religions consist of belief systems outside of Christianity.

### The Example of Egypt

God revealed His power over the gods of Egypt by plagues upon the nation. The plagues were God's warfare against the Egyptian pantheon. God had told Moses:

*"The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst" (Exodus 7.5).*

At first, Egyptian priests could replicate God's miracles. Satan has real power and these magicians were empowered by Satan. But by the third plague, the plague of gnats, the Egyptian sorcerers recognized they were licked. The text reads:

<sup>18</sup> *The magicians tried with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; so there were gnats on man and beast.* <sup>19</sup> *Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the*

*finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said (Exodus 8.18-19).*

## The Example of Elijah and the Prophets of Baal

Elijah the prophet, 650 years later, confronted the prophets of Baal and other false prophets. They outnumbered Elijah 850 to 1 (1 Kings 18.17-19). With steadfast courage, Elijah stood alone and put the matter of the One true God squarely to the Jews. The text reads:

*<sup>20</sup> So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people did not answer him a word (1 Kings 18.20-21).*



Elijah prayed to God to light the sacrifice.

The prophet-priests of Baal attempted to summon Baal to meet Elijah’s challenge of lighting an animal sacrifice (1 Kings



18.23-24). Baal proved unresponsive. Failing to arouse him after hours of shouting, Elijah mocked them (1 Kings 18.27). Finally, Elijah had enough and prayed to God to demonstrate His power. God immediately answered Elijah's prayer and sent fire from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. The text recorded the people's response:

*When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; LORD, He is God" (1 Kings 18.39).*

These two examples reveal the ubiquity of pagan deities among the nations surrounding Israel. Because these gods were so pervasive and had a such a dedicated priesthood and established theology, God constantly warned Israel against serving them (Exodus 20.1-6). While the idols of wood and stone had no power in themselves, the hideous reality was that behind the images were demonic powers (Deuteronomy 32.17; Psalm 106.37; 1 Corinthians 10.20-21).

### Israel's Theology of Priesthood

As noted above, God's ultimate destiny for Israel was for every Jew to serve as a priest. This destiny was temporarily thwarted when the Jews rejected Jesus the Messiah. But one day, Israel will fulfill its divine destiny and become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Zechariah 8.20-23 reads:

<sup>20</sup> *"Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities. <sup>21</sup> The inhabitants of one will go to another, saying, "Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I will also go." <sup>22</sup> So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.'* <sup>23</sup> *Thus says LORD of hosts,*

*'In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."'"*

In the Messianic kingdom, Jews will be a kingdom of priests and reveal the Lord to Gentiles. Zechariah recorded (future history) what Gentiles will say to Jews in that day: "Let us go with you for we have heard that God is with you." The statement, "God is with you" expresses the meaning of the word "Emmanuel," "God is with us." God will be with Israel as their King in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and will fulfill the Davidic Covenant as David's Greater Son.<sup>7</sup>

*When* will this prophecy be fulfilled? It will occur when national Israel repents. Throughout the Gospels, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Twelve proclaimed the kingdom of God was near (Matthew 3.2, 4.17, 10.7, 12.28; Mark 1.15; Luke 10.9, 11, 17.21). But the kingdom did not come. It could not come because Israel refused to repent. The nation rejected her Messiah. After His rejection, He rose from the dead. His resurrection gave renewed hope He would return and establish His kingdom. But again, the nation refused to repent. Despite these failures, a future generation will repent (Matthew 23.37-39, Matthew 21.43; John 10.16) and the Lord will return and establish His kingdom on earth (Matthew 6.10). Israel's great commission will be fulfilled (Matthew 28.16-20). This ministry (having lain fallow for almost 2,000 years) will restart in the Tribulation with the 144,000 sealed Jews (Revelation 7) and will be completed in the kingdom. During His reign on earth, God will fulfill all His covenants. At long last, they will become an obedient people, a kingdom of priests.

The Lord revealed to the Jews how all this would occur through His prophets. Jeremiah wrote:

<sup>31</sup> *"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will*

*make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,* <sup>32</sup> *not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.* <sup>33</sup> *"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.* <sup>34</sup> *They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31.31.34).*

God promised He would place His law in their hearts and all would know Him. This was the promise of the New Covenant. The New Covenant is essentially the Old Covenant empowered by the Holy Spirit. Every Jew that enters the kingdom after the Lord's return will be a believer. Peter understood this and addressed "all the house of Israel" (Acts 2.36) at Pentecost. He commanded them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.38). Peter recognized Jeremiah and Ezekiel's prophecies could be fulfilled and quoted Joel 2. He understood every Jew had to repent. The Lord had told the nation in His earthly ministry that He would not return until they repented (Matthew 23.37-39). Paul taught the certainty of this prophecy in his dissertation upon Israel (Romans 11.26). Ezekiel attested to it with these words:

<sup>22</sup> *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the LORD GOD, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have*

*profaned among the nations where you went. <sup>23</sup> I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD," declares the LORD GOD, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. <sup>24</sup> For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. <sup>28</sup> You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God (Ezekiel 36.22-28).*

God's promise to the nation, which He gave Moses in 1,500 B.C., will be fulfilled when every Jew repents at the end of the Tribulation. The words of their repentance will be, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 23.37-39). When the Lord hears these words, He will return in power to set up His kingdom. Every Jew will serve as a priest and fulfill Exodus 19.5-6. During that time, Gentiles will be evangelized and the Jewish people will fulfill the Lord's command given to the Twelve of "the great commission."

### The Melchizedek Priesthood

Abraham met Melchizedek after he defeated the kings who had kidnapped Lot (Genesis 14). Melchizedek means "king of righteousness" (מֶלְכִּי־צֶדֶק) and Moses wrote He was "priest of the Most High God" (Genesis 14.18). Melchizedek came out of nowhere. Hebrews describes him as "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days

nor end of life" (Hebrew 7.3). Only one person fits this description. Melchizedek is the Lord Jesus Christ. His priesthood is unique for He is its only member (Hebrews 5.6, 10, 6.20, 7.17). Hebrews contrasts and declares the Melchizedek priesthood as better and greater than the Aaronic priesthood (Hebrews 7-8). Melchizedek is mentioned 1,000 years later after Abraham's encounter (Psalm 110.4) and 1,000 years after this (Hebrews 5.6, 10, 6.20, 7.1, 10, 11, 15, 17).<sup>8</sup> His mention and appearances fit a timeline composed of 1,000 year periods.

The Melchizedek priesthood is described thus:

*<sup>11</sup> But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; <sup>12</sup> and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. <sup>13</sup> For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, <sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Hebrews 9.11-14)?*

Christ fulfilled the "shadow" of animal sacrifices through His sacrificial death. He was the reality of all that had gone before. He was the sacrifice and the High Priest who sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice. Every object in the Tabernacle and all the services performed by the Jewish priests foretold Christ and His work. Thus, He is Great High Priest who obtained our eternal redemption. He is the Mediator between man and God who conquered sin and death with His death and resurrection. His work satisfied the justice of God (Romans

6.23).

## Use of the Word "Priest" in the New Testament

Several words are used in the New Testament for "priest" and "priesthood." The word "priest" is [ἱερεύς](#) and occurs 31x. The word "high priest" is [ἀρχιερεύς](#) and occurs 123x and as ἱερέα μέγαν in Hebrews 10.2. The word ἱερεύς was first used by Jesus in the Gospels when He told the leper He healed to show himself to the priest to confirm his cleanliness according to the Law (Matthew 8.4). In Acts 14.13, Luke used the word for the pagan priest of Zeus. The words [ἱερατεία](#), "office of a priest," [ἱερωσύνη](#), "priestly office," and [ἱεράτευμα](#), "order of priests" occur 7x. Lastly, Paul used the word [ἱερουργέω](#) "serve as a priest" once in reference to himself.

New Testament Words Associated with Priests and Priesthood						
Book	<a href="#">ἱερεύς</a>	<a href="#">ἀρχιερεύς</a>	<a href="#">ἱερατεία</a>	<a href="#">ἱερωσύνη</a>	<a href="#">ἱεράτευμα</a>	<a href="#">ἱερουργέω</a>
Matthew	3x	25x				
Mark	3x	22x				
Luke	5x	16x				
John	1x	21x				
Acts	4x	22x				
Romans						1x
Hebrews	13x	17x	1x	4x		
1 Peter					2x	
Revelation	3x					

The meaning of the words "priest" and "priesthood" in the New Testament is the same as in the Old. The words always refer to Jewish or pagan priests. For Israel, the priests performed animal sacrifices. Pagan priests served in the temples of their gods (demons) and sacrificed animals (and humans) to them (Deuteronomy 32.17; Psalm 106.37; 1 Corinthians 10.20-21; Revelation 9.20).

## Pauline Vocabulary for Believers

Paul described believers by four categories of language:

1. Saints
2. Offices
3. Gifts
4. Ministries

### Paul's Vocabulary of Sainthood

The word translated "saint" in the Old Testament is [קֹדֶשׁ](#) and means "holy," i.e., "set apart." For example, utensils of the Tabernacle were "holy" or "consecrated" since they were designated for special service to the Lord. A priest did not take the shovel used to clean ashes from the brazen altar to clean his home fireplace. The New Testament word for "saint" is [ἅγιος](#) carries the same sense as [קֹדֶשׁ](#). Paul used ἅγιος for all believers, Jews or Gentiles. He used it for Jewish believers, those who had believed the gospel of the kingdom as well as for those who had believed his gospel i.e., members of the Church, the body of Christ. Therefore, "saints" includes believers of every age and program of God.

Paul's Use of <a href="#">ἅγιος</a> for Saints in His Letters (40x)	
Romans 1.7, 8.27, 12.13, 15.25, 26, 31, 16.2, 15	Colossians 1.2, 4, 12, 26
1 Corinthians 1.2, 6.1, 2, 14.33, 16.1, 15	1 Thessalonians 3.13
2 Corinthians 1.1, 8.4, 9.1, 12, 13.13	2 Thessalonians 1.10
Ephesians 1.1, 15, 18, 2.19, 3.8, 18, 4.12, 5.3, 6.18	1 Timothy 5.10
Philippians 1.1, 4.21, 22	Philemon 1.5, 7

### Paul's Vocabulary of Church Offices

Paul's vocabulary for Church ministers included the following: [ἐπισκοπή](#), "office of overseer" or "office of bishop," [ἐπίσκοπος](#), "overseer" or "bishop," [πρεσβύτερος](#),

“elder,” [διάκονος](#), “deacon,” and [διακονέω](#) for “service in the position of deacon.” The words [διάκονος](#) and [διακονέω](#) are also used many times to mean “ministering” or “ministry” (e.g., Romans 15.8; 1 Corinthians 3.5; 2 Corinthians 3.6) as opposed to the formal office. The positions of “overseer” or “bishop” and “elder” are the same. Therefore, two offices exist in the Church, “elders” or “bishops” and “deacons.”

Pauline Vocabulary for Church Offices					
Book	<a href="#">ἐπισκοπή</a>	<a href="#">ἐπίσκοπος</a>	<a href="#">πρεσβύτερος</a>	<a href="#">διάκονος</a>	<a href="#">διακονέω</a>
Romans				1x	
Philippians		1x			
1 Timothy	1x	1x	3x	2x	2x
Titus			1x		

Notably absent are the words “priest” and “priesthood.” Paul did not use these words in his letters (excluding Hebrews) except for one passage, Romans 15.16, discussed below.

Beyond these offices, Paul, in his last communication with Timothy, wrote the following:

*<sup>1</sup> You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2.1-2).*

Paul instructed Timothy to commit his doctrines to “faithful men” (πιστοῖς ἀνθρώποις). The word “commit” is παράθου, aorist middle imperative, from παρατίθημι, and means “entrust” from one to another. What Timothy was to entrust were “things you heard from me among many witnesses” (ἃ ἤκουσας παρ’ ἐμοῦ διὰ πολλῶν μαρτύρων). These teachings Paul had taught publically and heard by many. Thus, the validity of those who hold Church office is based *solely* upon faithfulness to Paul’s doctrines. The chief doctrine is salvation by faith alone in the death



and resurrection of Christ for our sins. Any who do not teach this are false ministers. No validity exists of one who holds Church office based on ordinance or succession. Such teaching is a human invention and lacks Scriptural authority.

## Paul's Vocabulary of Church Gifts

Paul taught the Church is the Lord's body and that every believer is a part of this organism (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). As such, God has given every believer a ministry and gift to serve the Church for its edification and maturation.

Pauline Vocabulary of Gifts			
Ministry/Gift	Word	Definition	Passage
*Prophecy	<a href="#">προφητεία</a>	Foretelling events or declaring God's purposes by divine inspiration κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως, according to proportion of faith	Romans 12.6; 1 Corinthians 12.10
Ministering	<a href="#">διακονία</a>	Ministering to and serving others	Romans 12.7
Teaching	<a href="#">διδάσκω</a> <a href="#">διδασκαλία</a>	Teaching and explaining the Scriptures, Bible doctrine	Romans 12.7
Exhortation, Encouragement	<a href="#">παρακαλέω</a> <a href="#">παρακλήσις</a>	Encouragement, exhortation, comforting, and consoling believers	Romans 12.8
Giving	<a href="#">μεταδίδωμι</a>	Giving of one's own to those in need with <a href="#">ἀπλότης</a> simplicity, joy of giving	Romans 12.8
Rule	<a href="#">προΐστημι</a>	Leadership, administration to be exercised with <a href="#">οπουδή</a> , care, diligence	Romans 12.8;
Mercy	<a href="#">ἐλεέω</a>	Exercise mercy, sympathy with <a href="#">ιλαρότης</a> , cheerfulness, eagerness	Romans 12.8
*Word of wisdom	λόγος σοφίας	A speaking gift of discernment in communicating Biblical truth.	1 Corinthians 12.8
*Word of knowledge	λόγος γνώσεως	A speaking gift to reveal Biblical truth by revelation from the Holy Spirit.	1 Corinthians 12.8
Faith	<a href="#">πίστις</a>	Perhaps a special gift of faith to endure persecution or extraordinary hardship.	1 Corinthians 12.9
*Healing	χαρίσματα ιαμάτων	A gift to heal disease, illness	1 Corinthians 12.9, 28
*Miracles	ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων	Gift of performing miracles	1 Corinthians 12.10, 28
Discerning of spirits	διακρίσεις πνευμάτων	Ability to determine truth from error	1 Corinthians 12.10
*Tongues	<a href="#">γλῶσσα</a>	Gift of speaking an unlearned language	1 Corinthians 12.10, 28
*Interpretation of tongues	ἐρμηνεῖα γλωσσῶν	Gift of understanding and interpreting an unlearned language	1 Corinthians 12.10
Helps	<a href="#">ἀντίληψις</a>	Aid, help, perception	1 Corinthians 12.28
Administration	<a href="#">κυβέρνησις</a>	Wise governance in the Church	1 Corinthians 12.28
*Ceased with the completion of the canon of Scripture (1 Corinthians 13.8; Colossians 1.25 (DARBY)).			

God has provided every believer with personality and abilities. Each member of His body has a special function,

just as each part of the human body has a purpose. When led by the Holy Spirit, believers use these abilities to strengthen and encourage the Church, the body of Christ.

### Paul's Vocabulary of Church Ministries

Office	Word	Scripture
*Apostles	<a href="#">ἀπόστολος</a>	Ephesians 4.11
*Prophets	<a href="#">προφήτης</a>	
Evangelists	<a href="#">εὐαγγελιστής</a>	
Pastors <sup>9</sup>	<a href="#">ποιμήν</a>	
Teachers	<a href="#">διδάσκαλος</a>	
Ambassadors <sup>10</sup>	<a href="#">πρεσβεύω</a>	2 Corinthians 5.20; Ephesians 6.20
*Ceased with the completion of the canon (Colossians 1.25 (DARBY)).		

Paul wrote of saints, the offices of bishops (overseers), elders, deacons, and referenced numerous gifts and ministries in the Body. He noted apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, ambassadors. Again, notably missing is "priest." The reason for this is simple: the Church, the body of Christ, has no office of priest. "Priest" was a position God gave Israel, not the Church. The Lord Jesus Christ, as our redeemer, is our High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek.

### Paul's Usage of "Priest": An Important Exception

One of the most interesting facets in the study of priest/priesthood is Paul's use of the word [ἱερουργέω](#), "minister in the role of a priest" (Romans 15.16). This is the only time Paul used "priestly" language in reference to the Church. What is interesting is that Paul used the word *only* in reference to *himself*. To understand Paul's purpose requires an examination of the context of the passage, specifically, Romans 15.8-9:

<sup>8</sup> *For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers,* <sup>9</sup> *and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, And I will sing to Your name."*

The Lord Jesus Christ, in His earthly ministry, came to fulfill the Old Testament covenant and prophetic promises He had made to the Jews. The fulfillment of these promises would result in the blessing of Gentiles. God's great program of blessing began with the Abrahamic covenant, in which God promised He would bless His covenant people and extend blessings to all who blessed them (Genesis 12.2-3).

God promised to make Abraham a great nation and give him a large land grant with its borders being defined by the Nile, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Euphrates river (Genesis 15.18). In this land, God would establish a kingdom (2 Samuel 7.12-17; Psalm 2.6) ruled by an everlasting King and Israel would be preeminent among the nations of the world (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13). This was the hope of the Jewish people and defined their theology. Every godly Jew looked expectantly for this kingdom.

Such blessings depended upon the Jews relationship to God. Paul recounted God's promises to the nation in relation to Gentiles in Romans 15.9-12. He could have enumerated many other passages such as Isaiah 2.2-4, 49.5-6, 59.20-21, 60.1-3; Zechariah 8.20-23. As a result of these promised blessings, Paul wrote:

*Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15.13).*

Paul continued his thought and wrote a couple verses later:

*<sup>15</sup> But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, <sup>16</sup> to be the minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest [ἱεραουργοῦντα] the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15.15-16).*

Paul wrote that Christ had designated him to minister to Gentiles and that in this capacity he was “serving as a priest” (present active participle, ἱεραουργοῦντα). Paul did not mean his “priesthood” had anything to do with mediation in terms of salvation for he wrote Timothy:

*<sup>5</sup> For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time (1 Timothy 2.5-6).*

One mediator exists between God and man with respect to salvation: Christ Himself. What Paul meant by ἱεραουργοῦντα is that he was serving as “proxy Israel” in its redeemed role of priests to convey blessings to Gentiles. God had revealed through the prophets that Israel would be His channel of blessing to Gentiles. But Israel had failed. They had rejected the Messiah. Thus, according to the revealed prophetic program, God had no way to bless Gentiles apart from Israel. But God, being rich in mercy, revealed a new plan to bless Gentiles, a way not revealed to the prophets.

God saved and commissioned Saul of Tarsus to be the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13). Paul wrote he was “born out of due time” (1 Corinthians 15.8). This verse is a parallel verse to Romans 15.16. Paul was “born out of due time” in the sense that he could serve as believing Israel to bless Gentiles.

Paul wrote that one day, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11.26). The "all Israel" will be Jews who will repent at the coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. They will enter the kingdom and begin to serve as priests (Exodus 19.4-6). Until that day comes, Paul serves as redeemed, repentant Israel, in the role of priest. Since Paul was a Jew, since God commissioned him as the apostle to the Gentiles, this divine plan, though previously hidden by God, was faithful to the Abrahamic covenant. Is anything too difficult for God?

Every Believer a Priest?

One last comment should be made regarding the subject of "priesthood." "Priesthood" was God's great promise to Israel. In Exodus 19, God told the Jews:

*<sup>4</sup> You have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: <sup>6</sup> And you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which you shalt speak unto the children of Israel (Exodus 19.4-6).*

God's ultimate destiny for Israel was for every Jew to serve as a priest. When Christ sets up His kingdom, Jews will occupy this role and represent God to Gentiles. Zechariah wrote of this:

*<sup>20</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: <sup>21</sup> And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also. <sup>22</sup> Yes, many*

*people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord.* <sup>23</sup> *Thus says the Lord of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you (Zechariah 8.20-23).*

Some have taught “every believer is a priest.” Such teaching is based on 1 Peter 2.9, Revelation 1.6, 5.10. But Peter and John wrote to Jews who had believed the gospel of the kingdom, not Paul’s gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4). These believers were “true Israel,” not the Church, the body of Christ.

Peter addressed fellow believing Jews (1 Peter 1.1) and recognized them as fulfilling Exodus 19.4-6:

*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2.9).*

John’s language is similar to Peter’s. In the book of Revelation, writing to the seven Jewish assemblies John wrote:

*And has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen (Revelation 1.6).*

This was the witness of believing Jews fulfilling Exodus 19.

Revelation concerns Israel and the nations. The Church is absent from Revelation and since this is the case, no Church doctrine is found there. The “churches” (ἐκκλησίαι) Jesus addressed in Revelation were not Pauline churches, i.e., the body of Christ, but Jewish assemblies. The language the Lord

used towards them is wholly different from the language He gave Paul regarding Christian churches. Revelation is a record of the prophetic Day of the Lord (Revelation 1.10) and the Scriptures explicitly state the Church will not experience that day (1 Thessalonians 1.10, 5.9). Before the Tribulation, the Lord will complete the Church, the body of Christ, and remove it from the earth.<sup>11</sup> This is the great doctrine of the Rapture, the resurrection of the Church, every godly believer's "blessed hope" (Titus 2.13). This is proof that John did not write to the Church, the body of Christ.

## Conclusion

In summary, these are the conclusions of this study:

1. The office of "priest" and the "priesthood" concern Israel. After God gave Moses the Law, the Aaronic priesthood offered true worship and service to YHVH by animal sacrifices and the keeping of the Mosaic Law. During the glorious age of the Messianic kingdom, Jews will serve as priests (Exodus 19.4-6).
2. Pagan priests served false gods and conducted worship of them. Their priesthood was under the domain of Satan's rule and power.
3. The priesthood of Melchizedek is unique: the Lord Jesus Christ serves as its sole member as "King of Righteousness." His priestly function of offering Himself as the sacrifice for man's sin solved the problem of sin and death and satisfied God's justice.
4. Despite widespread usage of the term "priest" in Christendom, the Church has *no* priests. The Body of Christ is composed of saints who serve in the offices of bishop/elders and deacons, minister as evangelists, pastors, teachers, and exercise spiritual gifts such as administration, exhortation, leadership, mercy, discernment, and service. The Lord designated every member of the body of Christ as a saint, child of God,

heir of God, and joint-heir of Christ (Romans 8.16-17). We are also called ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5.20) but *not* priests.

5. Paul served in a priestly role, “one untimely born” (1 Corinthians 15.8) as proxy Israel. He represented believing Israel in accordance with the Abrahamic covenant to bless Gentiles as “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Romans 11.13). The risen Lord designated Paul as the founder of the Church (1 Corinthians 3.10-11; 1 Timothy 1.15-16), the body of Christ, and communicated all Church doctrine through him.<sup>12</sup> Since that time, the Church has had no priests except the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in His role as Melchizedek, is the Great High Priest of all believers.

Priesthood in God’s Programs for Believers	
The Levitical Priests Served as Priests of Israel	Every Believing Jew Will Be a Priest in the Kingdom
The Apostle Paul Served as a Priest to Minister to Gentiles (Church) The Risen Lord Communicated All Church Doctrine to Paul	
The Lord Jesus Christ, as Melchizedek, is the Great High Priest of All Believers	

<sup>1</sup> See the article, [For Whom Did Christ Die?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Death is a great, overlooked proof of the Bible. Why do men die? They die because of sin, just as the Bible says. How else does one explain death? Science cannot explain death. But the Scriptures reveal it: sin.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, כִּיְרָמֵה, used 29x in the Old Testament, was used first of God providing clothing for Adam and Eve. Its second use was the famous multi-colored coat Jacob made Joseph (Genesis 37.3). Its third use was of the tunics of the Levitical priests (Exodus 28.4, 39-40). Its last use was Isaiah 22.21. This passage had an immediate fulfillment in Isaiah’s day but projected to a future Messianic fulfillment.



God stated He would clothe the Messiah with the tunic of those who failed Israel and will rule the nation (Isaiah 22.21-25). Thus, rule will be taken from the unrighteous and given to the Righteous One. For the clothing of righteousness, see Isaiah 61.10; Psalm 132.9, 16; Romans 13.4; Galatians 3.27; Philippians 3.9; Revelation 7.13-14, 19.7-8.

<sup>4</sup> On, a city of Egypt, also known as Heliopolis, the city of the sun, was located ten miles northeast of the modern city of Cairo. Its inhabitants worshiped Ra, the sun god. The high priest of On was known as the "Greatest of Seers."

<sup>5</sup> A large topic of discussion in Old Testament studies has been the constitution of Israel's priesthood. Leviticus and Numbers indicate sons of Aaron were priests. But Deuteronomy seems to indicate all Levites were or could be priests. Examination of the subject may be found in the following articles: Raymond Abba, "Priests and Levites in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 27, Fasc. 3 (Jul., 1977), pp. 257-267; J. A. Everton, "Priests and Levites in Deuteronomy: An Examination of Dr. G. E. Wright's Theory," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 12, Fasc. 2 (Apr., 1962), pp. 129-138; George R. Berry, "Priests and Levites," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 3/4 (1923), pp. 227-238; J. Gordon McConville, "Priests and Levites in Ezekiel: A Crux in the Interpretation of Israel's History," *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983) 3-31; A. Avreich, "The Kohanim the Levi'im: An In-Depth Analysis" for Project TABS – TheTorah.com. Useful information is present in these studies, however, they are marred by the fact the writers accept the documentary hypothesis (JEDP). This fanciful theory creates more problems than it resolves and results in great confusion of the Biblical text. For example, when portions of Scripture not understood they are deemed unhistorical or imaginary.

<sup>6</sup> Religion almost always has a negative connotation in Scripture. It usually means man's attempt to approach God in his own way rather than in God's revealed way.

<sup>7</sup> Pilate's inscription over the cross, written in Hebrew,

Latin, and Greek, “This is Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” (Matthew 27.37; Mark 15.26; Luke 23.38; John 19.19) was prophetic. Little did he realize the One he hung on the cross will return to fulfill his words. The land of Israel, which Pilate governed, will be governed by the Lord Jesus Christ. He will reign as King of the Jews and King of the world (Zechariah 14.9).

<sup>8</sup> See the author’s study, [Melchizedek and the Most High God](#).

<sup>9</sup> Some view the office as pastor-teacher due to the conjunctive καὶ. This may be the case but the ministerial offices of pastor and teacher can also be separate. Usually, only Jewish believers are designated “sheep.” However, Paul used the word ποιμήν (shepherd) in this passage (only here) to describe the overseeing or shepherding role of a pastor.

<sup>10</sup> Every saint, every believer, is an ambassador of Christ. We represent our Head and His heavenly kingdom to a fallen world.

<sup>11</sup> This fact is so well documented in the Scriptures it is incredible such confusion exists in Christendom. See the author’s articles, [The Church \(the Body of Christ\)](#), [The Rapture](#), [1 and 2 Thessalonians](#).

<sup>12</sup> See the author’s article, [Paul: Chief of Sinners?](#) for an examination of this subject.

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