

THE PRIESTHOOD

After the fall of mankind (Genesis 3), God provided a way of salvation and forgiveness in which each individual could find atonement for sin in anticipation of the perfect sacrifice for sin which Jesus would make by his death upon the cross. Therefore in the Bible we find examples of key people such as Abel, Noah and Abraham approaching God by sacrifice. Such sacrifice focused upon repentance, faith and the shedding of the blood of an animal. (See Hebrews 11:4.)

Mankind is in rebellion against God and has been ever since the Fall. The image of God in each person is marred and tarnished by sin. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). God chose to form a particular people – through the covenant with the patriarch Abraham (Genesis chapters 12, 15 and 17) and later through the covenants with Moses and David – to serve Him and to point the way back to Him. In a sense the whole Jewish nation became a nation of priests (Exodus 19:5–6), yet to the tribe of Levi God gave particular priestly functions within firstly the tabernacle and, later, the Jerusalem temple.

In the fullness of God's time and salvation purposes, He sent His Son Jesus into the world (see John 3:16, Romans 5:6–11). Through the perfect life and obedient death of Jesus a complete and once-for-all sacrifice for sin was made. Jesus became sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21) The veil of the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn open (Matthew 27:51) and a 'new and living way' was made, so all people can receive atonement for sin and be reconciled to God through Jesus.

Christians are called to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). Christians are now a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) as they share in the benefits of Jesus' priestly ministry. (See Hebrews 10.)

The word 'priest' has two main meanings today. In the Bible the term predominantly comes from the Hebrew *kohen* or the Greek *hiereus*, and in the New Testament usage the term refers variously to Jewish temple priests, the Lord Jesus as high priest, or to Christians offering spiritual sacrifices. In some Church traditions and prayer books the Greek work *presbuteros* (probably best translated 'elder') is sometimes rendered as 'priest'. This is largely unhelpful as there is little connection between the New Testament 'elder' (church leader) and the Old Testament 'priest'.