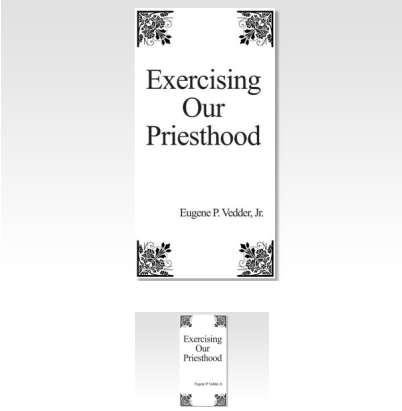

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Description

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“Yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ But ye are a chosen race, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a people for a possession, that ye might set forth the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness to His wonderful light; who once were not a people, but now God's people; who were not enjoying mercy, but now have found mercy” (1 Peter 2:5,9-10-JND throughout). “That he may serve Me as priest that they may serve Me as priests” Exodus 28:1,41).

“The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, took each of them his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and presented strange fire before Jehovah, which He had not commanded them. And there went out fire from before Jehovah, and devoured them, and they died before Jehovah. And Moses said to Aaron, This is what Jehovah spoke, saying, I will be hallowed in them that come near Me, and before all the people I will be glorified that ye may put difference between the holy and the unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which Jehovah hath spoken to them that ye might bear the iniquity of the assembly, to make atonement for them before Jehovah” (Leviticus 10:3,10-11,17).

When we look around us in the world today we see priests of every description. Besides God's priests there are many heathen priests in the world. Their gods are really malevolent demons and their followers live in a world of fear. These priests are known by various names: witchdoctors, shamans, priests, lamas – some even designate themselves as reverend! The freedom of religion we enjoy in so many lands not only benefits what is according to God but also protects those who without any sense of shame whatsoever openly worship Satan. So we must ask some questions: What does the Bible mean by a priest? What are the different kinds of priests? How does one become a priest? What does God desire of priests today?

A priest in Scripture is someone who stands between God and man, bridging the gap as it were. Melchizedek in Genesis 14 is the first priest mentioned in the Bible. He foreshadows Christ, and as we look at him we see some important facts about a priest. A priest blesses or speaks well of God. This brings in the thought of worship and sacrifice. A priest also blesses and thus refreshes and encourages man, setting God before man to meet his need. Hebrews 5:4 tells us that no one takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God.

Revelation 1:5-6 tells us that Jesus Christ “loves us, and has washed us from our sins in His blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.” Every true believer in our Lord Jesus Christ today is a priest. He or she is both a holy priest and a kingly or royal priest. Age, sex, education or theological training, degrees and titles granted by human institutions, pomp and ceremony, wealth, seniority, a scintillating résumé, status in life-all these make no difference here. The Lord Jesus, greater than Melchizedek but pictured by Aaron in type, is our great High Priest. We believers are pictured by Aaron's sons. Our first and foremost function as priests is to serve the Lord. Every other function flows out from this.

True service for the Lord must be given according to His standards. Our thoughts and wishes do not count here. He is holy and He does not compromise His holiness. Every detail of the life and service of Israel's priests was closely regulated by God's direction and was to be to His glory: the holy garments they wore, the ceremonies inducting them into their service, the sacrifices they had to offer, whom they might marry, where they were to live, how they were to be supported, their many tasks and responsibilities of all kinds. We believer priests of this dispensation of grace too are to be entirely to God's glory. The everyday details of our lives, however, are not spelled out for us as minutely as for them, for we have both the complete Word of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit who inspired it to guide us. May our walk be one of dependence and obedience!

In Leviticus 8 and 9, when Aaron and his sons first entered upon their service as priests, God sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices they had offered and laid on the altar. Sadly, Aaron's two oldest sons then proceeded to use “strange fire”-fire other than what God had sent-to offer incense, a picture of worship. Just as He did not accept Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground, so God did not accept the incense offered with strange fire. It did not come up to His holy standard. This initial failure of the priesthood was followed by others, and ultimately culminated in the chief priests together with the Pharisees plotting the death of the Lord Jesus in John 11:47-57, and after His death and resurrection relentlessly persecuting His followers. The fire of God's judgment indeed fell upon Christ on the cross. Calvary was a holy and most solemn

occasion. Our worship today, while expressive of great joy, also reflects the holiness and solemnity of this occasion. Public worship is the overflow of the occupation of hearts taken up with Christ, who He is and what He has done. As holy priests we have access into the very presence of God, a privilege that goes beyond that of Israel's priests of old. We present Christ in His beauty and in the value of His precious sacrifice to God, whether in the hymns that we sing or in our prayers of praise and thanksgiving. We may also read Scripture passages that set Him before our hearts. Our meditations of Him are precious and sweet. These are spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

What a privilege as holy priests thus to overflow in worship in the presence of God! One brother after another can lead out with his contribution as the Spirit of God brings thoughts to mind. But note, there was no such thing as a woman priest in Israel. So today sisters do not lead in priestly functions but are silent in public meetings, apart from joining in the singing and in the Amens to prayers expressed on behalf of the group. But they can and should personally quietly add praise flowing from their hearts to the worship already going up, doing so in the quiet moments between oral contributions as brothers wait for one another.

Because many Christians do not understand the difference between God's earthly people Israel and His heavenly people the Christians, a portion of what was God's instruction for Israel's priests has found its way into the Christian profession. The priesthood of all believers, while professed in many churches, is really little known and even less practiced. Few live in the enjoyment of the truth of Hebrews 10:19-22 that the believer priest is invited to boldly enter into the very presence of God. Most feel that there must be some man (or woman) – pastor, priest, minister, reverend, or whatever his (or her) title may be – between them and God. This person should represent them to God and God to them.

What a contrast, too, the carrying out of our holy priesthood is to what in the Christian world is often termed worship! Such worship generally centers on a sermon, sometimes profitable and enjoyable for the hearers, but often centered on subjects far removed from Christ and the work He has accomplished for God's glory. A man (or woman), the minister, generally hired for the purpose, determines who will do what and when, and usually takes the most part himself. Many ministers are Christians who truly love the Lord and desire to serve Him. Some, on the other hand, view the ministry as an honorable profession by which to serve mankind and earn a respectable living. Sadly enough, still others may be bitter opponents of the gospel and the truth of God who delight to persecute in one way or another all who do not subject themselves to them.

Where the priesthood of believers is not known or practiced in a scriptural manner, churches often employ “worship leaders,” whether trained for such a position or volunteers, to stimulate audience participation in singing, clapping, or other physical activities. Musical instruments along with electronic technology of many kinds are employed, often quite raucously at high decibel levels, to aid in this. Other titles too are given and other duties assigned in many churches. Man's senses are stimulated to follow a human leader or leaders. But where is the Spirit of God in all this? And who is concentrating on Christ, on who He is, and what He has done at Calvary? What does God receive from such “worship”? If people “don't get anything out of it” they're often quick to change churches to find more comfort and ease and enjoyment for themselves. True edification and sound doctrine are secondary, if they are thought of at all. And where do our Lord's words to the woman in John 4, that the Father seeks worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth, factor into all this? Does this constitute “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ”? Outward form, outward impressiveness, are not what God is really looking for. He seeks reality! God delights in those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Is God satisfied when His chosen priests come to church simply to fill a seat, contribute something to the collection, and get entertained or even edified by a skilled professional staff hired for the purpose? Is this fulfilling their priesthood? How can this be? Scriptures like Numbers 4:5-14,16,28,33; Luke 1:8-9; and Proverbs 16:33 show us that in Israel God assigned each priest his duties. Leviticus 21:16-24 shows us that some priests were debarred by God's law from serving publicly as priests. In David's day Israel's priests were divided into twenty-four courses, each of which functioned actively for a week at a time in rotation. We tend to be few enough in number that it would be rare to be able to serve actively as priests only twice annually. Today God in grace has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us in the exercise of the many aspects of our priesthood. And just as His priests in Israel worked together in happy harmony according to His directions, so He would have His priests today serve Him harmoniously as led by the Holy Spirit.

God's priests in Old Testament times had many responsibilities: we cannot consider them all here. Besides their functions in worship they had the responsibility to teach the people God's commandments given through Moses. In that day when books had to be copied out by hand, God made the priests responsible to take care of the official copy of the law. They were to read it to the people every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles according to Deuteronomy 31:9-13. In chapter 17:8-13 of that same book we find that the people were to resort to not just any priest or judge, but to the priests and the judge who were in the place where the Lord would set His name when they needed help with a difficult or controversial matter. King Jehoshaphat sent out some of his princes, Levites, and priests, “and they taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of Jehovah with them; and they went about through all the cities of Judah, and taught among the people” (2 Chr. 17:7-9). Malachi 2:7 tells us that “the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and at his mouth they should seek the law; for he is the messenger of Jehovah of hosts.”

The priests were also given charge of the two silver trumpets used to call together the people or their princes on various occasions. Theirs was the responsibility of signaling the people when the pillar of cloud indicated an onward move. They blew on the trumpets when calling on God for help against their enemies, and they were to encourage the people when going to war against their enemies (Num. 10:1-10; Dt. 20:1-4). They discerned whether a person suspected of having leprosy truly had this dread disease, or simply had another lesser disorder. The tasks of the priests all have their spiritual counterparts among believers of today's dispensation.

After going into the presence of God with their offerings, the priests had the lovely privilege of coming out and blessing the people (Lev. 9:22-23). We have a similar situation today. Many of the things we have been looking at are really a part of this blessed ministry. After entering into the presence of the Lord with our spiritual sacrifices of worship and praise, we have the privilege of coming forth from His presence with blessing for others round about us. To the lost we can preach the gospel, the good news of salvation; to the saved we can bring edification, encouragement, and consolation. We can set forth the excellencies and unfold the unsearchable riches of Christ. Are we doing these things? Are others being drawn to Him? The rich ministry of John the Baptist as He spoke of Christ, warming his hearers' hearts, was used by God to draw others to the Lord Jesus. So it should be with us also.

As they were scattered from place to place by persecution, the early Christians “went through the countries announcing the glad tidings of the

word” (Acts 8:4). Paul made extended missionary journeys as “minister of Christ Jesus to the nations, carrying on as a sacrificial service the message of glad tidings of God, in order that the offering up of the nations might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit”(Rom 15:12). Serving God thus brought much benefit to the people too. Here too we see great differences in the methods used by the Old Testament priests before Christ and the communication of the glad tidings in the present dispensation of grace. The pomp and elaborate rituals of that past time are no longer needed. The Lord and His disciples were characterized by simplicity rather than outward impressiveness. The gospel has been authenticated by sign and miracles in the early years of this era. God is still sovereign and has lost none of His power, but today He displays His power more in the conversion of sinners than in outwardly attesting to the truth of Christianity by signs and wonders and displays of power. Never do we find elaborate mega churches built for Christian worship or outreach, nor do we find God hinting that He would desire such.

In the beginning of Christianity many of the disciples sold what they owned and pooled these resources to help the needy. A bit later we find the apostles writing letters to confirm the necessity of aiding the needy, but not a word do they utter about erecting beautiful buildings or spending thousands of denarii to advertise the gospel and its preachers. The apostles did not sell copies of their letters and books, nor did they earn millions of dollars promoting themselves and their ministries and writings! One of them wrote: “For I think that God has set us the apostles for the last, as appointed to death. For we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye prudent in Christ: we weak, but ye strong: ye glorious, but we in dishonor. To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are in nakedness, and buffet, and wander without a home, and labor, working with our own hands. Railed at, we bless; persecuted, we suffer it; insulted, we entreat: we are become as the offscouring of the world, the refuse of all, until now” (1 Cor. 4:9-13).

Just as His priests in Israel worked together in happy harmony according to God's directions, so He would have His priests today serve Him harmoniously as led by the Holy Spirit. It's interesting to look on to our future priesthood, too. We see the believers pictured as kingly priests in the Revelation, bowing at the feet of the Lord Jesus and proclaiming His worth. Revelation 22 looks on to the coming kingdom and tells us that in that coming day “His servants shall serve Him.” The terms used in this expression indicate that His bondmen, those bought with a price, shall serve Him as priests. This is already our wonderful privilege today! Let's enjoy it and use it to the glory and honor of our Lord Jesus today!

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