

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-8

Dear Reader

Going back to newsletter 97-5 and the chart in Leslie Grant's article, "*God's True Ground*," we see that *clerisy* (the clergy-laity system) is indicated as one of the false grounds that many Christians occupy. Nearly all the "churches" of men hire or have appointed over them a clergyman, whether he be called a *priest*, a *reverend* or a *pastor*. Some clergymen wear robes reminiscent of the Levitical priesthood in the days of Moses and Aaron; others preach in normal clothing. But in essentially every case the clergy is looked at as spiritually superior -- as the man to do the preaching, to appoint others for certain tasks, to pass the communion emblems, to pray, and often to be the person who comes between the people -- the laity -- and God. Indeed, that *was* the position of the Old Testament priesthood! Let's look at the clergy-laity system in the light of the Scriptures from several viewpoints.

Nicolaitanism

The word *Nicolaitanism* is only found in two places in the Bible, both in Revelation 2, in the Lord's letters to both the Ephesian and Pergamos local assemblies. We believe this word refers to the clergy-laity system. We want you to be persuaded by the *Scriptures* that this is the proper interpretation, not by the pro or con opinions of any man ... and you will hear many opinions. The first heading below is quoted from Revelation 2:6.

You Hate the Deeds of the Nicolaitans Which I Also Hate

These are strong words! Christians are thought of as people who don't hate. Yet, I'm to hate some *things* because *God* hates them. Notice that the Lord hated the *deeds*, the *works* of the Nicolaitans. He did not hate *them*: they were fellow-believers whom the Lord loved. In some matters we are *not* to be easy-going, conciliatory, neutral or tolerant! But hating a *thing* is quite different from hating the Lord's *people*.

Much discussion has arisen over this term *Nicolaitan*. Nowhere else is it mentioned in the Bible, so people try to go back into history to find some obscure group that had this name or title. Some Bible scholars claim success in finding evidence that early "church-fathers" wrote of a small religious sect that may have had a similar name, *but that is not the way to interpret Scripture!* Scripture interprets itself. History may help expand its *internal* interpretation, but history never gives the *prime* interpretation! The mystery goes away when we realize we are reading Greek, *untranslated*, and *it isn't a name at all*. The Greek word is "nikolaites" from "nikao" (to conquer, prevail, get the victory) and "laos" (people). No person who understood ordinary, conversational Greek when the Apostle John wrote *Revelation* would have had any trouble understanding what he meant. *The Lord hated the works of those who were attempting to become the spiritual superiors over the common people -- to conquer the "laity,"* as the average Christian is called today.

Today, this "official" spiritually-superior class is called *the clergy*, and the persons who consider themselves to be the clergy take titles such as priest, bishop, right reverend, reverend, doctor of divinity, pastor, etc. *But no such class is found in the New Testament!* A select priesthood *was* found in Judaism, but not in Christianity. The late C.H.Spurgeon said, "Who am I, a mere worm of the dust, that I should attach to my unworthy name an epithet that belongs to God alone. Holy and *reverend* is His Name (Ps.111:9 KJV)." The NKJV and NASB use *awesome*.

Today, *all* believers are both holy and kingly (royal) priests (1 Pet.2:5,9) and thus have direct access to God to worship and serve Him. Read in 1 Peter 2:5,9 the responsibilities and privileges of holy and kingly priests. Holy priests are to "offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Holy priests can *worship!* Royal or kingly priests, who are the Lord's "own special people," can "proclaim the praises of Him who called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light." Royal priests can *serve* Him!

We don't need a go-between to pray, praise, worship, preach, evangelize, give thanks for and pass the bread and wine, etc.

This *priesthood of all believers* is a very great but little understood privilege. Otherwise, if really understood, believers would revolt against the clergy-laity system because it robs them of so much practical blessing! God also gives gifts by the Holy Spirit to each of us (Rom.12:5-6; 1 Cor.12:7, 11; Eph.4:7): some of us may be *ourselves* gifts to the Church. Some of those gifts (or gifted men) are more public (such as teachers) in the Assembly, but people with such gifts are *servants*, not bosses (Mk.10:43-45; 1 Cor.9:19; 2 Cor.4:5). Furthermore, their special place is in *ministry* (teaching, shepherding, evangelizing), not in worship or prayer. Prayer and worship in the local church is the work of the *priest*. *Each believer-priest is on the same footing as every other believer-priest*. But if we fail to function as priests, it will leave the door open for a clerical system to develop, even locally (3 Jn.9)! Even when speaking of *leadership* in the local church, the Holy Spirit, not man, appoints elders (Acts 20:28) and they watch out for the good of the assembly and take the *lead*, but even they don't have authority to act as bosses. We will look at this in much more detail, the Lord willing, in future newsletters.

The second quote is from Revelation 2:15 in the Lord's letter to the assembly at Pergamos.

Thus You Also Have Some Who in the Same Way Hold the *Teaching* of the Nicolaitans

In Revelation 2:6, the Ephesian believers *hated* the *deeds* of those who took the place of superiority and authority over the average Christian, in effect becoming a clergy over a laity. The Lord said He also *hated* such deeds. If *He* hates something, we better hate it too!

In Ephesus, the Nicolaitan sin was an outbreak of only a few and was opposed by that local church. In Pergamos, it was an *accepted doctrine or teaching* by at least a faction in that local church. The Lord does not condemn a local assembly for an outbreak of sin on the part of one or more individuals *if that sin is dealt with*, but when the wrong teaching or practice is allowed to prosper, that is quite another thing. For example, Ephesus had left its first love -- its love for Christ. Such a local assembly was in danger of losing its lampstand of testimony (Rev.1:12-13; 2:5).

Historically, it was about 400-500 AD that the combination of the average Christian failing to use his spiritual gift(s) and failing to exercise priesthood-responsibilities to fulfill his mission as part of God's Church, and gifted and energetic men (and perhaps ego-seeking men) taking for themselves the position that God gave to *all*, brought on the clergy-laity system. An example of an ego-seeking man is Diotrephes "who loves to have the pre-eminence among [the church]" (3 John 9). This clergy-laity system still reigns virtually everywhere, unchallenged by any widely-heard voice. But in God's things, the majority are not necessarily right. All doctrine and practice *must* be tested by Scripture.

We certainly do not consider all clergymen to be like Diotrephes. Many are working extremely hard for the Lord whom they love, and are truly spiritually gifted evangelists, pastors (in the biblical sense of certain persons gifted to help meet the needs of fellow-believers, to make them "comfortable" as part of the body of Christ) and teachers. But they are doing the right thing in a wrong way, while mixed up in a system that makes them the hireling prophet of the sheep! Where is such a terrible system found in Scripture?

How the System Works Today

The general view today among evangelical/fundamental "pastors" illustrate what the doctrine and works of *Nicolaitanism* has become. They believe in two *ordained* officers of the church, the elder/pastor and the deacon. The *presbuteros* or *elder* is believed to be the word that defines the *respect* the congregation is to have for their "spiritual leader." Note, however, that the Bible *always* speaks of elders (when functioning) in the *plural* and nowhere are they looked at as the primary spiritual *gift* or *preacher* in a local assembly. They rather take the lead in seeing that the local assembly functions according to the scriptural directions.

Then, the Greek word *episkopos* or *overseer* (Acts 20:28) is believed to refer to the function of *rulership*, the assignment, the godly work of the *pastor* in the local "church." Now, that is quite an assumption: to take the

work of the presbuteros or elders (plural) (Acts 20:17) and turn it into the work of one pastor who supposedly has all the gifts wrapped up in one person! In fact, the term *pastor* in Scripture is *never* an *office* in the local church, but speaks of a *type* of gift some believers have -- to be of special help in solving problems between people or problems individuals have (Eph.4:11). No formal schooling (beside the school of God) or ordination is required to be a *scriptural* pastor or shepherd; one *is* a scriptural pastor if he is given the Lord's pastoral or shepherd's gift. The term *pastor* or its meaning of *shepherd* isn't even used in the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28. In fact, the above reference in Ephesians 4 is the *only* place the word *pastor* is used in the New Testament when referring to gifted men. The Greek word *poimen* is used a number of other times, but it *always* refers to the *Lord* and is translated *Shepherd* (Mt.9:36; 26:31; Mk.14:27; Lk.2:8; Jn.10:2, 11-16; Heb.13:20; 1 Pet.2:25; etc.).

The *pastor* is believed to be the *ruler* of the local church and thus God intends for the rulership of the church to lie in the pastor, so they say!.. Where is that found? Although most translations other than the JND speak of *elders* "ruling" in 1 Timothy 5:17, the Greek plainly should be translated as "elders *leading*" -- quite a different thing! The Greek word is *proistemi* and is found in Romans 12:8; 1 Timothy 3:4, 12 and 5:17. It means "to stand before, hence, to lead" (Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words). In Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24, the Greek word translated *rule* in the KJV is *hegeomai* which means "to act as a shepherd, tend flocks." These are quite different expressions than ruling in the sense of a boss. Even the word "obey" (*peitho*) in Hebrews 13:17 has the thought of submitting because you have been *persuaded by the Word of God* as presented by the leaders. They are to *lead*, which is quite different from being a spiritual super class above and in charge of a laity. See 1 Peter 5:1-4.

A third word, *poimen* (shepherd) is used to infer that the pastor is to be the shepherd of the flock, so they say. But, again, there is no Scriptural basis for *one* of the elders being *the* pastor of a local church, although *all* the elders (whom the Holy Spirit, not man chooses) are to shepherd or care for the flock (Acts 20:28) -- the local assembly. *Never* in Scripture does a local assembly choose its elders! Yet, in those denominations where the clergyman isn't appointed over them by a ruling board, the congregation both hires and fires their clergyman.

God *does* raise up people to whom *He* gives a shepherd's gift to care for the practical and spiritual problems that arise among the Lord's people, just as He raises up and gives a teacher's or evangelist's gift to some. They themselves become God's gift to His universal Church, not to a local congregation. *Having the gift is God's ordination to use it under the Holy Spirit's leading* (1 Cor.12:11; 1 Pet.4:10), but such gift *gives no personal authority, nor does it put the gifted person in a place of superiority*. If anything, the gifted persons become the *servants of the brethren* (Mk.10:43-45; 1 Cor.9:19; 2 Cor.4:5) although they first are the servants of the *Lord* (Rom.1:1; Gal.1:1, etc.).

What is the modern "pastor"? First of all, to even be allowed the title, one must graduate from an accredited seminary and be ordained by some "board" -- none of which is found in Scripture. Then comes getting hired! A recent article in a national news magazine told about eleven "ministers" who nervously await to see if they have been chosen as semifinalists for the pastoral position of a large Protestant denominational evangelical church. The semifinalists will come for interviews. The preachers who don't make the cut will find polite rejection notices in the mail. The article states this is the common way for Protestant churches to find their spiritual leaders. The article refers to the process as half prayer, half politics (and, I might add, *all sin!*).

The article explains that the candidate probably will be asked to preach a sample sermon. Afterwards, church members will convene for a *vote* on whether or not to *hire* him. I personally sat through the proceedings that discussed prospective new ministers of a certain denomination. There was negotiation as to what their salary would be and the hours of work and the fringe benefits! No wonder God says He *hates* Nicolaitanism! The modern pastor becomes the hireling prophet of the congregation. In fact, the man who officiated at our wedding was shortly thereafter removed from his "pastorate" because his congregation didn't want to hear the truth he plainly and bluntly preached. "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, *they will heap up for themselves teachers*" (2 Tim.4:3). The NASB translates the last line that "*they will accumulate to*

themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires." This couldn't happen in a scripturally functioning local assembly.

I was talking to a "pastor" of a fundamental denomination who said he knew about and believed that Scripture taught that all brothers and sisters positionally were equal before God, but had different assignments from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.12:11). So I very bluntly challenged him by asking him why he continued in the clergy-laity system. He looked me right back in the eye and said, "Because *it means something* to be a _____." To have the position of prominence and authority he enjoyed as a "pastor" of his particular denomination was more important than simply obeying the Lord and trusting Him for the proper use of his spiritual gift or gifts! I told him I admired his honesty and forthrightness, but could not agree with his position.

The second "ordained" office is believed to be that of a *diakonos*, a servant or helper, *the layman*, who stands at the side of the pastor. Rather, Scripture teaches that, while a *diakonos* (deacon) may be chosen or appointed by the local church for practical service such as being the treasurer, or to make announcements or to look after other practical necessities (Acts 6:1-6), *there is no thought of the local churches choosing or appointing their elders* or anyone for *spiritual* service -- for preaching, prayer, etc. The Holy Spirit had *already* chosen the elders (Acts 20:28); they were only appointed (or pointed out) by apostles or apostolic delegates.

In Acts 14:23 the KJV wrongly uses the term "*ordained*" for "choosing" or "appointing" elders, and this has caused considerable confusion. But *notice who did the choosing!* It was the *apostles*, not the congregation, not the local assembly! A note in the generally-good New Scofield Reference Bible says "Chose, i.e., by raising of hands," implying the *congregation* voted. Nonsense! Who raised their hands? Who voted? Paul and Barnabas? No! They didn't vote at all! Rather, *they*, as directed by the Holy Spirit, simply pointed out, possibly by pointing a finger, those whom the *Holy Spirit* (Acts 20:28) had made overseers in that local church. Note in both these verses, the use of the plural for elders.

Summary

The clergy-laity system goes back to biblical times. It is seen active both in 3 John and in Revelation 2. Today, it has become the virtually unquestioned standard, *but it is dead wrong!* How sad that so many godly and spiritually-gifted believers are caught up in such an ungodly system! We are thankful wherever Christ is preached, but what *seems* so right because of its antiquity and universality, is terribly false! J.N. Darby called the clergy-laity system *the dispensational sin against the Holy Spirit*. By it, the Holy Spirit is effectively displaced as the Director of the gifts in the local assembly (1 Cor.12). Scriptural ministry is hindered or almost eliminated. There may be many in the congregation whom *God* would have pray or preach who never make it because the "system" prohibits them from using their gift. All or most of the gift has to be wrapped up in one person (perhaps with an assistant or two) and priesthood-privileges (such as breaking the bread) are kept from the audience by the system. *The system is evil and we should recognize it for what God says it is!* Remember, God hates the *thing* (the system), not the *people* involved in it, who often are truly dedicated and gifted Christians.

God's condemnation of Pergamos is in part because they were supporting this doctrine. How about your local church or assembly? Is the full range of ministry by every Holy Spirit-gifted brother, as *God* defines it in His Word, allowed *and* encouraged? Or is there a clergyman who is *the* minister and/or the one who seeks (and perhaps is *hired*) to lord it over the other brothers and sisters? Remember, one doesn't have to be an *official* clergyman to do the deeds of the Nicolaitans! Would God approve or reprove your local assembly in this matter?

RPD

Suggested Reading

We have several times mentioned the book, "*The Step I Have Taken*" (Christian Update Series, Volume 3) which gives a fascinating autobiographical account of the mental and spiritual struggles of a fundamental,

godly clergyman named Edward Dennett concerning his personal and church position. It took him several years of deep exercise before he gave up the church- and clergy-position he had learned was wrong. For a challenging discussion of Nicolaitanism, I recommend "*Nicolaitanism: the Rise and Growth of the Clergy*" by F.W.Grant, Volume 1, Christian Update Series. The above explanation of *Nicolaitanism* is primarily taken from "*God's Performance Review of the Seven Churches of Revelation 2 and 3*" by R.P. Daniel. These thought-provoking books are available from Believers Bookshelf USA and Canada.