

The "Clergy/Laity" Distinction: A Help or a Hindrance to the Body of Christ?

By Jon Zens



In February 1996, several well-known Christian leaders hosted a "Clergy Conference" in Atlanta. These kinds of events, though undoubtedly well-intended, nevertheless serve to perpetuate what I believe to be an unhealthy division of God's people into two classes: the "clergy" and the "laity" - a distinction that is totally without biblical justification. We have reproduced below the letter that I sent to the sponsors of this Atlanta conference.

To: The sponsors of the Atlanta "Clergy Conference"

Re: Undermining the authority of God's Word by your promotion of the unscriptural "Clergy/Laity" distinction

In several weeks you will be having a "Clergy Conference" in Atlanta. I know you are well-meaning in your desire to support and affirm the "clergy". However, in assuming this category of the "ordained", you are overlooking a more basic and pressing question that must be addressed: "Does the New Testament teach that there is a separate caste of church leaders designated as 'clergy' who are over the 'laity'?" It does not. I have prepared a paper on this question that is enclosed for you perusal.

By gathering "clergymen" together you are just assenting to the status quo and, in effect, putting band aids on it. What really needs to be done is to hold a conference where the New Testament's teaching on leadership is unfolded. If this were done, of course, then the traditional "clergy/laity" practice would have to be jettisoned in favor of the New Testament patterns.

Looking at the big picture, you are really doing harm to the very class of persons you are trying to help. By not challenging the "clergy" system, which has brought untold hurt to those within its pale, you end up giving pep-talks and encouragement to people who are functioning in an office Christ has nowhere revealed in His Word. You admit in *Men of Action* (Nov. 1995, p. 4), "Pastors are worn out, discouraged, and in need of affirmation. In fact, poll after poll reveals that most pastors are battling isolation, depression, and loneliness. They are so beaten up by the ministry . . ." Actually, the situation among the "clergy" is much worse than this brief statement.

But should this be surprising when people are forced to fill a job description found nowhere in the New Testament? The most Christ-honoring and caring thing you could do is to tell the 70,000 men that come to Atlanta to stop being "clergy", because God's Word teaches nothing about "clergy".

I guess I have to honestly wonder: Do you leaders care at all that the New Testament is, in fact, against the "clergy" system? Are you concerned that the "clergy" system, as James D. G. Dunn points out, does more to undermine the canonical authority of the New Testament than other heresies? You claim that God's Word must be our authority in all matters of faith and practice. But you undermine and nullify this confession by promoting a "clergy" system that is claiming the lives of men and their families every moment. By assuming that the "clergy" category is correct, your conference actually is perpetuating an unbiblical system that is to the detriment of those who attend. Does this concern you? Is your conscience pricked because you are promoting and cultivating that which the New Testament is against?

I do not think that I am beating in the air, or making a mountain out of a molehill. There is substance to my concerns. Do you care enough to give real answers to your constituents, or are you satisfied to go on encouraging a human tradition that has deeply wounded untold thousands of men?

Thank you for considering my thoughts and article.

Jon

My letter to the sponsors of the recent "Clergy Conference" in Atlanta reflects my deep concern over the biblically unjustified practice of dividing God's people into two classes - pulpiteers and pew-sitters. It is a pattern that certainly reflects the hierarchical patterns of the world, but which does not square with New Testament teaching.

This baseless "clergy/laity" distinction has become such an assumed given that it permeates nearly all of our evangelical literature. The excerpts provided at the end of this article * have been gleaned from magazines, books, catalogues and advertisements and are typical of the extent to which the "clergy/laity" division has become a part of our evangelical language and environment.

The following material has been adapted from the article I submitted with my letter to the conference sponsors. I have no desire to stir up unnecessary dissension, but I believe that if the Church is to attain her full potential as the visible body of Christ, she must divest herself of such unscriptural hierarchical structures and return to her intended "one-another" relationships and ministries.

Before we examine the historical and biblical evidence, consider the following three examples of the kind of teaching that has influenced this "clergy/laity" thinking:

On this office [of Pastor] and the discharge of it He has laid the whole weight of the order, rule, and edification of His Church. 1

[The Pastor] is like the cerebellum, the center for communicating messages, coordinating functions, and conducting responses between the head and body . . . The pastor is not only the authoritative communicator of the truth from the Head to the body, but he is also the accurate communicator of the needs from the Body to the Head. 2

[Pastor Hamman] likened the total church to an army. The army has only one Commander-in-Chief, Jesus Christ. The local church is like a company with one company commander, the pastor, who gets his orders from the Commander -in-Chief. The company commander has lieutenants and sergeants under him for consultation and implementation, but the final responsibility for decisions is that of the company commander, and he must answer to the Commander-in-Chief . . . The Pastor has the power in a growing church . . . The pastor of a growing church may appear to outsiders as a dictator. But to the people of the church, his decisions are their decisions. 3

A recent ad in an evangelical magazine, had the heading, "Not Every Question Gets Answered On Sunday Morning". The truth is that probably no one's questions are answered because no inquiries are allowed. The pulpit monologue precludes dialogue. The pulpit can only be occupied by certain people - the "clergy". The rest - the "laity" - sit in pews. In this dichotomy you have the essence of our religion - Catholic, Protestant, or otherwise - in a nutshell: the "clergy" are paid to give and the "laymen" pay in order to receive. This distinction permeates our religious vocabulary, and unfortunately captures the heart of our practice: we pay the "clergy" to do the necessary religious activities. It is wearying to hear refrains like these repeated in so many evangelical advertisements: "Finally, a commentary that both pastors and laymen can understand" . . . "this video is equally profitable for clergy and laity".

While the "clergy/laity" distinction is embedded and assumed in religious circles, it cannot be found in the New Testament. It reared up its ugly head in the third century, long after Christ's apostles died. We should be pointedly reminded of the utter deceitfulness of sin when we realize how deeply such an unscriptural and damaging concept has taken root in visible Christianity.

The New Testament teaches leadership among the people of God, but not in a way that leads to the "clergy/laity" conclusion. The root words from which we derive the English words "clergy" and "laity" are found in the New Testament, but our usage of "clergy/laity" is far removed from the New Testament concepts.

Clergy . . .

The English word "clergy" is related to the Greek word "cleros". It means "a lot or inheritance". For example, in 1 Peter 5:3 the elders are exhorted not to lord it over "the lots" (Greek: ton cleron), which refers to the entire flock of God's people. Nowhere in the New Testament is any form of "cleros" used to designate a separate class of "ordained" leaders. Instead, it refers to the "inheritance" (Greek: clerou) laid up for all the saints (Col. 1:12; Acts 26:18). The saints as a collective whole are conceived of in the New Testament as God's "inheritance". We have utterly

perverted and turned upside-down the New Testament teaching by using the term "clergy: to refer to a special elite group of church leaders.

Laity . . .

This English word is related to the Greek word "laos", which means "people". The Greek word "laikos", which means "laity", is not found in the New Testament. All in the body of Christ, whether "saints, bishops, or deacons" (Phil. 1:1), are the "people" ("laos") of God. "People of God" is a title of honor bestowed upon all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

It was not until the third century that "clergy" was employed to designate a limited number of persons who functioned in the Christian assemblies. One of the worst outcomes of the "clergy" doctrine was that it communicated the notion that without the "clergy" present there simply was no church. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and many other church practices, could not happen unless a "clergyman" was present. This idea persists to our day even in the workplace, as James D. G. Dunn notes, when "some of the early statements regarding industrial chaplaincies . . . seemed to imply that the church was not present in industry unless and until an ordained clergyman became involved on the factory floor". 4

Because the New Testament knows nothing of "clergy" the fact that a separate caste of the "ordained" permeated our vocabulary and practice illustrates rather forcefully that we do not yet take the New Testament very seriously. The "clergy" practice is a heresy that must be renounced. It strikes at the heart of the priesthood of all believers that Jesus purchased on the cross. It contradicts the shape Jesus' kingdom was to take when He said, "You are all brethren". Since it is a tradition of men, it nullifies the Word of God (Mark 7:13). Dunn sees the emergence of "clergy" as a very negative historical fact:

When Clement resorted once again to the distinction between "priest" and "laity" (1 Clem. 40:5), he was pointing down a road which would fundamentally compromise if not make a mere cipher of a very basic element in earliest Christianity's self-understanding . . . It is the apparent disregard for something quite so fundamental by subsequent Christian history that does more to undermine the canonical authority of the New Testament than most heresies . . . The major authority acknowledged by all Christians [the New Testament] has been effectively discounted and ignored. 5

Every Christian tradition has its insights and blind spots. But the "clergy" system is practiced across the board and is thus a universal blind spot. Seminaries and Bible Schools have multiplied to produce people for the "clergy" profession; ministerial conferences abound to supply support and encouragement that the "laity" cannot give; magazines are published to provide ministerial tips; pastoral search committees must be formed every time a minister moves on; clergy counseling must be provided for those who burnout and have nervous breakdowns; etc., etc. A whole intricate system is in place to perpetuate and preserve a role which the New Testament knows nothing about.

Like it or not, this "clergy" role ends up requiring a virtual omni-competence from those behind the pulpit. "Clergy" are paid to perform whatever is necessary to keep the religious machinery going, and the expectations are very high for those who wear the many hats this profession demands.

The deadly problem with this unscriptural system is that it eats up those within its pale. Burnout, moral lapse, divorce, and suicide are very high among the "clergy". Is it any wonder such repeated tragedies occur in light of what is expected of one person? Christ never intended anyone to fill such an ecclesiastical role. In light of Paul's remark in 1 Cor. 12:14 that "the body is not one part but many", we should be able to discern that the "clergy" position is neither healthy for those in it, nor is it beneficial for the body of Christ.

Scholars have debated the propriety of ordaining women as "clergy". However, a larger, more fundamental question has been passed over in the process: should anyone, male or female, be ordained as "clergy", since the Bible does not know of such an office? 6

The terms "Reformation" and "Renewal" are buzzwords in religious publications. Sadly, most periodicals of this sort approach the "clergy" system as sacrosanct, thereby reinforcing its stronghold in contemporary churches. I submit that to seek the renewal of the "laity" while perpetuating the "clergy" system is like mixing oil and water. Deep renewal (a healthy body) will come only as every member contributes his/her gifts and graces, which includes a leadership that practices the servant model revealed by Jesus in Mark 10:42-45. The "clergy" system stands as a monumental obstacle to genuine reformation and renewal. The church must jettison this system in order for the Word of God to have free course.

If those who function as "clergy" come to conviction that this role originates from unscriptural traditions and not from New Testament patterns, there are some practical steps that must be taken:

- * Stop using "Reverend" and other religious titles in connection with your names (and encourage others to cease using language that reflects the "clergy/laity" distinction).
- * Renounce your "clergy" status and see yourself as part of the "laos" of God who has manifestations of the Spirit, along with everyone else, for the good of the body (1 Cor. 12:7).
- * Teach the body that your "clergy" roles and all the expectations that go with them are based on human traditions and not the gospel.
- * Instruct the brethren that all aspects of caring for one another rest with the body, not on some spiritual elite.
- * Begin a new methodology of truth-seeking and truth-speaking. Instead of the "clergy" spoon-feeding the "laity", study important issues together from the Word with a view to finding Christ's will and acting upon it.

* Adopt a teaching style where dialogue occurs and questions/insight from others are encouraged.

* As the body makes concrete changes in the way "church" is done the emphasis shifts from dependency on one person to edifying multiple participation.

* Your financial support as a clergy person is admittedly a difficult issue, but needs to be creatively evaluated. The traditional view that it is necessary to pay the "clergy" to preach, visit parishioners, do various administrative duties, etc., is without New Testament foundation. As long as "clergy" are paid to do religious duties why should the body develop its "one-another" ministries? Paul testified to the elders at Ephesus: "I coveted no one's silver, gold, or costly garments. You yourselves know personally that these hands ministered to my own needs and those of others with me. In everything I have pointed out to you that, by working in this way diligently, we ought to support the weak, being mindful of Jesus' words, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20: 33-35)". As ministry becomes increasingly shared in the body, it takes the load off one person and frees the congregation to evaluate how its financial resources can be maximized for edification and meeting people's needs.

Obviously, the "clergy" system has become a mammoth institution. When you touch this nerve the whole body quivers. This long-standing system will not disappear overnight. Not every "clergy" person takes the New Testament seriously, but those who do need to lead the way by personal example to a paradigm shift which will better reflect the New Testament revelation of church life. People who withdraw from the traditional "clergy" model out of faithfulness to Christ will have a heavy price to pay. Nevertheless, the question still remains: Is our confession that the New Testament is sufficient for faith and practice a reality or a sham? If we are serious about following Christ, how can we remain party in perpetuating a "clergy" system which contradicts the very essence of the ecclesia our Savior purposed to build? When is enough, enough?

There are at least 58 commands in the New Testament unfolding our "one-another" responsibilities, and zero in the New Testament about "the pastor" being the cerebellum . . . the one company commander in the local church . . . the one who has the power . . . upon whose shoulders rests the whole weight of the order, rule, and edification of His church. When are we going to wake up and realize that the evil one has tricked us into squandering resources for a "clergy" system that is unknown in and opposed to the New Testament, and thereby diverted us from spending ourselves for all the implications of loving one another, for which there is abundant New Testament warrant? Larry Crabb summarizes a crucial goal that believers should have in their life together:

Change takes place when truth is presented in relationships. Perhaps a relationship of deep regard and empathetic concern is the context for change, creating an atmosphere in which the truth of God can be heard non defensively and thus penetrate more deeply . . . To be healthy, a church must present truth in the context of encouraging relationships. 7

The reality in local church life is that nothing hinders the fostering and cultivating of encouraging relationships more than the "clergy/laity" distinction. It stands as a huge road block

to the very atmosphere we desperately need in our assemblies. The time has come for each of us to personally take the responsibility to live a life that refuses to knuckle under to the stifling "clergy/laity" tradition, and to begin fresh new paths of obedience where the body of Christ functions as vital parts contributing to the growth of the whole in live (Eph. 4:11-16).

"No Christian, whether minister or lay member can build on any ..."

"The clergy and laymen who sided with Hitler gained 70 ..."

"A guide to show how churches can bridge the communications gap between pastor and congregation ..."

"This journal was created with input from more than 25 pastors and lay persons ..."

"In-depth look at the pastor's role as a team member working with lay persons ..."

"Dialogue between a voice from the pew and a voice from the seminary - between laity and clergy. Written in everyday language ..."

"Lay person's Introduction to the Old Testament ..."

"Speaking to both pastors and lay persons, Dr. Proctor offers spirit-enriching ..."

"I was a pastor who needed help. Unfortunately, my church couldn't offer any direction ..."

"Emphasizing the Pastor's role as equipper of the laity, Myrlene Hamilton recognizes ..."

"A Reforming Church: Gift and Task - a conference for Pastors and Lay people..."

"While some lay persons and pastors still are very skeptical about the recovery ..."

"Today American Baptist clergy called to chaplaincy and pastoral counseling labor in organ transplant ..."

"There laity and clergy, denominational leaders and missionaries have grappled with issues ..."

"We hope clergy will encourage a number of small lay led groups, in each congregation ..."

"Some 300 persons - pastors and laity - attended this conference ..."

"A total of 46 lay persons participated in the yearly summer sessions ..."

"Yes, I will be able to attend: Myself and spouse Layman and wife"

Providing a place and time for fellowship, support and collegiality for the clergy of our area ..."

"I simply wanted to be better prepared to defend and promote them as a good lay person should. I thought a year or two of Bible school would stay with me the rest of my life."

"DAKOTAS TEMPORARILY WITHOUT PASTORAL SERVICES: We regret to announce the resignation of Elder Jerry Morgan from the Alfred, North Dakota church. This resignation took place October First. Brother Morgan took a pastorate in the Oklahoma City area. We are very disappointed to see him leave the district, but do wish him well in his new pastorate ..."

Clergy Sexual Abuse: Wives who were victims of domestic violence in the parsonage continue to call attention to the corruption which is eating away all credibility in the community and the profession ..."

"A Handbook for Clergy and Church Members ..."

"Give Your Pastor A Boost Next Month

Did you know that October 1994 has been designated 'Clergy Appreciation Month'? Focus on the Family, in conjunction with the National Day of Prayer, Promise Keepers,

Under His Wings Ministries, Inc. and a host of denominations, is encouraging local congregations to honor their clergy and family in a special way ..."

"Nor is it polite to put a guest on the spot by asking him or her to say grace at your table. The exception is a guest who is a member of the clergy: this is a rare exception to the rule against asking guests to do socially in your home what they do professionally outside it ..."

"While much has been said and written about equipping the laity, churches during this century have become more and more dependent upon leadership from the clergy .."

"P.S. - Don't tell Pastor - it's a surprise!"

"Clergy Getaways ..."

"Clergy: Persons who have received tonsure or Holy Orders; those elevated to a higher rank than the laity and given a special duty in the divine service or in administering to the Church. Sometimes the use of the word includes all religious, even sisters and lay brothers ..."

"But in the institutionalized church, and especially in large congregations, a minority of members are actively engaged in the church's business while the remainder only make up the audience. Among the so-called laity there are only a few functions possible, such as teaching Sunday School, participating in prayer meetings, and helping raise money. The really significant religious functions are matters for the clergy or the ministers ..." - Floyd Mackler