

## ***The Distinction between Clergy and Laity – Is it of God?***

Some Christians attend gatherings in which a distinction is made between those who are "clergy" and those who are "laity", while others attend gatherings at which no such distinction is made. So how and when did this distinction come about? and is it a Biblical distinction?

### **GREEK WORD ORIGINS**

Let us first consider the Greek forms, definitions, and Biblical uses of these words. The Greek form of the word "clergy" is "kleros", which James Strong assigns the number 2819 and defines as "heritage, inheritance, lot, part" in his Dictionary of Bible Words. It is used 13 times in the New Testament for the following:

- the "lots" cast on Jesus' vesture (Matthew 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:24, and John 19:24)
- Judas Iscariot's "part" in service (Acts 1:17); the "part" of the service and apostleship from which Judas fell (Acts 1:25)
- the "lots" given on Barsabas and Matthias, and the "lot" which fell on Matthias (Acts 1:26)
- the "lot" which Simon did not have (Acts 8:21)
- the "inheritance" which saved Gentiles receive (Acts 26:18); the "inheritance" which the saints share (Colossians 1:12)
- members of the flock, God's "heritage" or "allotment", whom the elders are to shepherd and not to lord it over (1 Peter 5:3)

The Greek form of the word "laity" is "laos", which Strong assigns number 2992 and defines simply as "people". It is used 143 times in the New Testament – in Matthew 2:6 for God's "people" Israel; in Luke 2:31 for all "peoples", before whose face God has prepared His salvation; in Romans 9:24-26 for Gentile "people" whom God has called; in 1 Peter 2:9-10 for a "people" for a possession, God's "people"; in Revelation 14:6 for every "people" to whom the everlasting gospel is preached; and in Revelation 21:3 for God's "people" with whom He will dwell eternally.

So *kleros* and *laos* are clearly Biblical concepts. But there is no suggestion in scripture that the *kleros* are a class or group of persons *distinct* from the *laos*.

## EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

So when did this unbiblical distinction between clergymen and lay persons come about? Church historian Charles Jacobs, in The Story of the Church, writes: "In the beginning most of the work of the congregation was done by people who had no official position. It was voluntary service, freely rendered. By the middle of the third century, it was done by the professional clergy. Between clergymen and laity there was a sharp distinction. The clergy, too, were divided into higher and lower grades. In the higher grades were bishops, presbyters and deacons; in the lower grade sub-deacons, lectors, exorcists, acolytes and janitors. All of them were inducted into office by some form of ordination, and the idea of local organization had gone so far that in some churches even the grave diggers were ordained. Thus the work of the Church was passing out of the hands of the many into those of the few, and these few were coming to be regarded as belonging to a higher class."

Several influences contributed to this situation. As persons converted from Judaism and from Gentile paganism, they tended to bring with them the sacerdotalism of Judaism and the traditional notions of their Gentile pagan religions. And in the post-apostolic era, the "church fathers" (especially two men from Carthage, North Africa – Tertullian and Cyprian) gradually planted the seeds for the distinction of a class of teachers and priests from the laity, until by the 3rd century, the clergy was an entrenched institution.

For instance, early in the 2nd century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Ephesians, urging them to revere and be subject to a ruling bishop\* (chapters II and VI) and to look upon him even as they would look upon the Lord Himself (chapter VI). Clement of Rome referred to the peculiar services assigned to the high priests, the proper place prescribed to the priests, the special ministrations devolving on the Levites, and the "layman" being bound by the laws that pertain to laymen (first letter to Corinth, chapter 40).

\* Interestingly, in Revelation 2:4, we read of the Ephesians hating "the works of the Nicolaitanes" which God also hates; later, we read of some who "hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes". I have

found no evidence of a Nicolaitane sect in the apostolic era. Indeed, the word *Nicolaitane* is a composite of the two Greek words *nikos* (conquer) and *laos*(people).

Then, around the end of the 2nd century, Tertullian of Carthage, in his paper entitled "On Monogamy", may have been the first to use the word *clerus* in the sense of clergy, writing in chapter 12, "*Unde enim episcopi et clerus? ...*" In English, the passage reads, "For whence is it that the bishops and clergy come? Is it not from all? If all are not bound to monogamy, whence are monogamists (to be taken) into the clerical rank? Will some separate order of monogamists have to be instituted, from which to make selection for the clerical body?"

Lastly, during the 3rd century, Cyprian of Carthage wrote several epistles in which he commonly and overtly distinguished between clergy and laity, and also limited the role of the priesthood to a select few. For example, in epistle XI, he wrote, "... I have written both to the clergy and to the martyrs and confessors ...". And in epistle XXII, he wrote, "I wrote to my clergy about these matters". In epistle XXX, the Roman clergy wrote to Cyprian, "what you also have yourself declared in so important a matter, is satisfactory to us, that the peace of the Church must first be maintained; then, that an assembly for counsel being gathered together, with bishops, presbyters, deacons, and confessors, as well as with the laity who stand fast, we should deal with the case of the lapsed". In epistle LI, Cyprian wrote, of one Cornelius, "he was not one who suddenly attained to the episcopate; but, promoted through all the ecclesiastical offices, ... he ascended by all the grades of religious service to the lofty summit of the Priesthood. ... Cornelius was made bishop by the judgment of God and of His Christ, by the testimony of almost all the clergy, by the suffrage of the people who were then present, and by the assembly of ancient priests and good men". In the same epistle he wrote that one Trophimus "was admitted in such a manner as only to communicate as a layman, not, according to the information given to you by the letters of the malignants, in such a way as to assume the place of a priest". In epistle LIV, he wrote, "there is one person for the time priest in the Church, and for the time judge in the stead of Christ; whom, if according to divine teaching, the whole fraternity should obey, no one would stir up anything against the college of priests".

These excerpts from writings spanning about 150 years after the apostolic era, testify to the developing state of things in what Cyprian began to call "the Catholic church" (epistle XL).

## ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

[The Bible translation comparison table](#) compares four versions of several key verses bearing on this subject – the Greek Textus Receptus, the literal English translation, the King James (authorized) translation, and the Darby translation – and includes brief notes on each verse. This table shows disturbing evidence of a bias in the King James translation toward persons being humanly ordained and having "office", whether it be of a bishop, a deacon, or even the priesthood. Words to this effect were added or uniquely translated this way in certain key verses, rather than simply translating them literally, according to their common usages.

In one of the most obvious instances, the generally helpful King James Bible erroneously translates the last phrase of Acts 1:22. The phrase translates literally: "a witness of his resurrection to become with us one of these" or more readably: "one of these should be a witness with us of his resurrection". But the King James Bible renders it: "*must one be ordained* to be a witness with us of his resurrection". The words "*must ... be ordained*", inserted by the translators, seem to support the notion of an ordained clergy. But these fabricated words are not in the Textus Receptus, from which the King James Bible was translated!

## CONCLUSION

Well, we have (1) considered the meanings and Biblical uses of the Greek words *kleros* and *laos*, (2) found that the concept of a clerical class as distinct from the laity is not scriptural, (3) learned how this distinction gradually developed in the post-apostolic era, and (4) carefully reviewed how certain relevant Greek words and phrases have been translated (and mis-translated) into English.

Let's close this paper by reading and prayerfully considering a few verses from the inspired Word of God which bear on our subject:

- "For where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them." Matthew 18:20.
- "But ye, be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your instructor, and all ye are brethren. And call not any one your father upon the earth; for one is your Father, he who is in the heavens. Neither be called

**instructors, for one is your instructor, the Christ." Matthew 23:8-10.**

- **"For, as in one body we have many members, but all the members have not the same office; thus we, being many, are one body in Christ, and each one members one of the other. But having different gifts, according to the grace which has been given to us, whether it be prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or service, let us occupy ourselves in service; or he that teaches, in teaching; or he that exhorts, in exhortation; he that gives, in simplicity; he that leads, with diligence; he that shews mercy, with cheerfulness." Romans 12:4-8.**
- **"What is it then, brethren? whenever ye come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done to edification. If any one speak with a tongue, let it be two, or at the most three, and separately, and let one interpret; but if there be no interpreter, let him be silent in the assembly, and let him speak to himself and to God. And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if there be a revelation to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For ye can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all be encouraged. And spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the assemblies of the saints." 1 Corinthians 14:26-33.**
- **"We have such a one high priest who has sat down on the right hand of the throne of the greatness in the heavens; minister of the holy places and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord has pitched, and not man." Hebrews 8:1-2.**
- **"To whom coming, a living stone, cast away indeed as worthless by men, but with God chosen, precious, 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." 1 Peter 2:4-5.**
- **"To him who loves us, and has washed us from our sins in his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father: to him be the glory and the might to the ages of ages. Amen." Revelation 1:5-6.**

**Let us simply gather to the name of the Lord Jesus, and experience the joy of His presence in the midst. All true Christians are God's people (laos), His inheritance (cleros). And Jesus is Minister of the sanctuary, our great High Priest, our glorious living Head, our Instructor, and our Savior.**

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