The Clergy System
(And Why Its Not Biblical Nor Healthy For The Church)
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No class or order of men that ever appeared on earth have obtained so much influence, or acquired so complete an ascendancy over the human mind, as the clergy. The Christian clergy have exercised, for about fifteen hundred years, a sovereign dominion over the Bible, the consciences, and the religious sentiments of all nations professing Christianity. – Alexander Campbell

In this article I am going to discuss what I believe to be one of the gravest errors into which the religious world has ever fallen. So widespread has it become that it will be virtually impossible to ever overcome it. So subtle is its encroachment that even those who deny being guilty of it are nonetheless victims of its malignant influence.

Historians search in vain for the date of its birth, and analysts are just as puzzled about the motivation which foisted it upon an unsuspecting world. Everyone is agreed that once it was not a part of God's revelation or purpose, yet it was suddenly on the scene exercising a baleful influence and claiming divine sanction for its existence, intruding itself as an interloper into the vocabulary of those who proudly claimed to speak where the Bible speaks, and to remain silent where it was silent.

I refer to the rise of the clergy system with its unwarranted and unscriptural distinction between "clergy" and "laity." Never has there been a more serious imposition upon the kingdom of heaven, and never another more widely accepted. How did "the clergy" originate to first usurp the rights and privileges of all the saints, and then to claim their prerogatives as a divine right? Some assign the beginning, which ultimately resulted in "a universal father", a papa, or pope, to the need for a strong voice to sound out the position of orthodoxy in a time of schism and heresy.

Others ascribe it to the overweening (overbearing) ambition of aspiring men to stand between their fellows and God, and exercise a mediatorial office because of a fancied superior knowledge or life. Still others think the seed was planted in soil fertilized by political alliance with the church, making it possible for the secular ruler to control the destinies of a people by elevating men to hierarchical prominence in the spiritual structure.

Whatever its origin, it became so powerful that, almost without exception, it became "the way of life" for religious organizations, and in the case of one, the Roman party, it became "the church" itself, to the exclusion of other communicants who bore the tax burden and picked up the tab for its maintenance. So much a part of the thought processes of our generation has it

become that even those who seek to offset it are tricked into using its vocabulary and parroting its specialized jargon.

A good example is found in the book *Body Life* by Ray C. Stedman. The theme of the little volume is "to search out from the Scripture the nature and function of true Christianity and thus to recover the dynamic of early Christianity." The subtitle of the book is, "The church comes alive." Yet, in the Foreword, Bill Graham writes, "The Peninsula Bible Church began with only five laymen." And Stedman speaks of meeting "pastors and concerned laymen." He says a lot of fine things from which all of us could profit, but when he talks of "the ministry of the laity" as something separate and apart, he employs "the speech of Ashdod." There were pastors in the primitive community of saints but they were also a part of the "laos", the people of God.

Perhaps, as we shall later point out, there is nothing seriously wrong with the mere words clergy and laity. It is the creating of a distinction between them which is so fraught with danger. The fact is that all of God's clergy are laity, and all of God's laity are clergy. Every child of God is a priest. Every child of God is a minister. Every disciple of Jesus has entered the ministry. The word of God knows nothing of a disciple who is not a minister. So long as we pay empty lip service to this concept while practicing something which is exactly the opposite, we are hypocritical and acting out a sham.

Certainly those who justify their separate existence from the rest of the religious realm upon the ground that they represent a movement to restore the primitive order, ought to restore first of all the divinely revealed concept of the ministry of the saints, seeing that it was the gradual renunciation of this which resulted in the multiplication of parties from the hoary "mother of sects" upon the banks of the muddy Tiber, to the latest little group following a self-proclaimed member of the "reverend clergy."

Yet, my brethren, in spite of their anguished protestations to the contrary, they betray themselves in both speech and writing. Frequently, I sit in meetings of brethren, where a speaker will talk about how he involved "his laymen" in a certain project. A Roman Catholic prelate could not have said it better. The patronizing clerical tone in which one speaks of "my laymen" or "my elders" shows how much closer we are to Rome than to Jerusalem.

Before the precious blood of the Lamb wiped out distinctions and removed all thought of caste among those who are in him, God had a special clergy. Then the tribe of Levi stepped forward in answer to the call of Moses at a time of grave crisis, the members of that tribe were elevated to the status of a professional priesthood. They were separated from the people (the laity) in whose behalf they were to come before God with sacrifices and offerings, and in ritual observance. The tribe of Levi found their inheritance (kleros, clergy) not in the land with the people (laos, laity) but in the direct service of God.

As priests of God the members of this tribe could perform certain functions which were forbidden to others under the penalty of death. They could touch

holy things which others were not permitted to touch. “At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto him, and to bless in his name, unto this day. Wherefore Levi hath no part nor inheritance with his brethren; the Lord is his inheritance, according as the Lord thy God promised him.” (Deuteronomy 10:8-9).

This is very clear and one need not be too astute to observe that under the Mosaic economy a select group was set apart from the rest of God’s people and ordained to officiate and minister unto God. It was the exclusive right of the priests to bear the sacred ark. They intoned the regulation blessing over the heads of the people in the name of God. The people were barred from encroaching upon or entering the sacred precincts. They dared not touch a piece of the hallowed furniture.

The priests wore a special garb, a robe or tunic, girded with a special sash, and topped off with a tall headdress. No one outside the priesthood was allowed to wear this distinctive attire and any person who did so would suffer death for impersonating a priest. The priest was a mediator. He stood between the people and God. Men approached God only through other men who were empowered with sacerdotal (priestly) authority. “And he shall bring a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation, for a trespass offering, unto the priest: and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his ignorance wherein he erred and wist it not, and it shall be forgiven him.” (Leviticus 5:18).

A special priesthood must draw its support from those for whom it officiates. The priests cannot farm or make a living. They must busy themselves with affairs of the temple. They must keep the ritual program moving. Those who constituted the priestly clergy could not farm, and those who farmed could not be a priestly clergy. So the people (laity) had to support the priesthood with their tithes and offerings.

“The priests the Levites, and all the tribe of Levi, shall have no part nor inheritance with Israel: they shall eat the offerings of the Lord made by fire, and his inheritance. Therefore shall they have no inheritance among their brethren: the Lord is their inheritance, as he hath said unto them.” (Deuteronomy 18:1-2). The priest was entitled to demand the part coming to him before the contributor could use anything for himself. “And this shall be the priest’s due from the people, from them that offer a sacrifice, whether it be ox or sheep; and they shall give unto the priest the shoulder, and the two cheeks, and the maw. The firstfruit also of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the first of the fleece of thy sheep, shalt thou give him. For the Lord thy God hath chosen him out of all thy tribes, to stand to minister in the name of the Lord, him and his sons for ever.” (Deuteronomy 18:3-5)

There can be no question but that under the fleshly covenant, written and engraved in stones, God created a clerical caste separate and apart from the people. Members of this group encamped between the body of Israel and the

sanctuary where God dwelt. They wore beautiful robes which distinguished the wearers from the remainder of the people of God. They performed functions forbidden to those who had not been anointed.

The Great Change

But the cross of Christ forever wiped out all such distinctions. They were abolished and done away when the legal custodian delivered us to Jesus, and faith in God's son superseded that righteousness which is by deeds of the law. Every child of God is now a priest. Every person on this whole earth who has been purged and purified by the blood of Jesus is a priest of God. "And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." (Revelation 1:5-6).

The old covenant, being a covenant of the flesh, with its seal of circumcision in the flesh, made its appeal to the fleshly nature. It provided pomp and pageantry, ritual and liturgy, gold and glitter. It had its visible temple of wood and stone called "the house of God." But this whole arrangement was temporary. " Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation." (Hebrews 9:9-10).

The time of reformation came! The age of which the prophets spoke was ushered in. The new covenant, written not with ink, but with the Holy Spirit upon tablets of the heart became a reality. We were no longer minors in virtual slavery. The term was completed. God sent his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons.

But what happened? *Like the trembling, cowering multitude at the foot of Horeb, when the first covenant was given, we did not want God speaking to us. We did not want to become a family with its intimacy. We were afraid to be sons. We rebelled at the idea of a Father. We wanted a God afar off, a remote Deity to be worshipped in an institution and by a prescribed ritual. One can be a member of an organization, pay his dues and attend the meetings, without ever really becoming involved. His contribution pays for the benefits which the institution is created to provide.*

So we wanted worship to be something done for us, a performance prepared in advance and carried out by trained actors whom we could watch and applaud and appreciate for their skills. We did not want worship to be the crying out of our own hearts for help or the sobbing on the shoulder of our elder brother, who endured all things as we do and was yet without sin. We craved an "order of worship" printed in a program and appropriate to holy

days and holy seasons. And the flesh triumphed over the Spirit. We got what we wanted and we can go through it for an hour once per week wholly detached in life and concern. Once more the startling questions of yesterday come echoing through the empty, dusty, cobweb-strung hearts which are no longer being led by the Spirit. “Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if it be yet in vain.” (Galatians 3:3-4). **We have not progressed in the Spirit. We have retrogressed to the law.** *We have gone back to the weak and beggarly elements.* We are acting as if the death of Jesus was a myth and the cross at Calvary a fantasy. **We are not the family for which God planned. We are an organization of our own design**, coming before God with a mixture of Judaistic and cultural forms which we have blended together and call worship. There is a veil over our eyes in the reading of the Word.

Let me not be vague. Let me not hint at what I mean. We have refused to believe that the God who created heaven and earth and all that is in them does not dwell in temples made with hands, and neither is worshipped with men’s hands as though he needed anything. So we continue to spend billions of dollars every year to prove that Paul was mistaken when he stood among the pagan shrines at Athens. One of the strengths of primitive saints was that they had no shrines like the pagan world. Their God could not be localized, confined or shut up, so that men would have to visit him as they did the sick. And now we dedicate buildings to God exactly as Solomon did in the days of spiritual adolescence, and men stand up and intone in sepulchral tones, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go up to the house of God.”

We have refused to learn that Jesus did away with holy places and holy days. **We are the temple of God. We are the house of God. Men can no longer dedicate material structures to God who gives us life and breath and all things. We do not go up to the house of God. It is the house of God which does the going.** The only sanctuary God has on this earth is a consecrated human heart. He recognizes no place as a sanctuary or holy place because it has stained glass windows, wall-to-wall rug of institutional quality as the salesman stressed in his pitch to the building committee, or pews to match the pulpit furniture. I am the house of God when I am in a library, or the bathroom, or the shopping center. And if I am not the sanctuary of God there I will not be when I am in a meeting house designed for my air-conditioned comfort.

Such a place is only holy when it is filled with sanctuaries, with living, loving, throbbing, pulsating bodies of the ransomed and redeemed, sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty, brothers and sisters rejoicing together, weeping together, sharing pain and tribulation, and joy and peace. When we build a “house of worship” and have a dedication ceremony, call it temple or what you will, we must think of a clergyman to conduct the ritual. A temple requires a special priest to minister. **The pulpit becomes a stage for a performance on our behalf and the pews become a grandstand from which spectators view the performance**.

When people find the Lord Jesus in a real and vital way, and want to live very close to him and experience the fellowship of others in praise that is spontaneous and unrehearsed they find a pall and chill when forced to sit through a dramatization with a robed choir and an actor. The praise of God is not intended to be a spectator sport but the pouring out of one's own heart. A great many young people in the university, who come on the first day of the week, often to sit on the floor for lack of chairs, sing together, share together, sit down at the table of the Lord together, weep over their sins and comfort one another while holding hands, find themselves when they go back home [to the churches in their home towns], in an atmosphere so detached from real life they can hardly stand it.

I hold no brief for the inappropriate jokes and undue levity which pulpit clowns feel they must indulge in to keep the folks happy and entertained. Many times these are a cover-up for superficial knowledge of the Word of God and serve to fill in the borrowed sermon outlines from the latest book supplying such predigested food to harried preachers who must meet the needs of every other person in the community while neglecting their own families. There is such a thing as quiet dignity. There is a peace that passes understanding. But I deplore the cold, sluggish and frigid approach which Alexander Campbell described as "sacred gloom, holy melancholy and pious indolence." The calm of the cemetery hardly appeals to one who has been born from above.

In Christ Jesus our Lord there is not one item of praise or spiritual performance which is the exclusive right of a particular class. Any child of God who is qualified may serve in carrying out the will of God. The relegation of that which belongs to all, to a special coterie (exclusive group) of saints is a step away from the simplicity in Christ and God's purpose.

No one is an authorized baptizer by virtue of position or office. Any Christian has the right to baptize a person who confesses his faith in Jesus as the Messiah and God's Son. This is not a clerical act. It is not the prerogative of an "ordained minister" for every child of God is a minister of God, and ordained of God to fulfill the divine will. We should encourage Christian fathers to immerse members of their own families, or those who lead others to the Lamb of God to immerse them. What is wrong with allowing a high school student who has been instrumental in the conversion of one of his schoolmates to baptize that one in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

In open forums the question of performing marriage ceremonies is always raised as an exception to what I have stated. But one who performs marriages does so as a representative of the state, not of the community of the saints. It is a license from the state which permits him to serve in this capacity and the qualification for officiating is set by the constitution of the state, and not provided within the framework of God's revelation.

If "the minister" is jealous and afraid that others will steal his glory,

he is a living example of one who is disqualified by temperament and understanding to fulfill the role which he assumes. The purpose of special functionaries is to "train or adapt the saints to carry out the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ." The body grows through that which every joint supplies. ***The best leader is not one who does everything but one who can get others to do it***.

No one has an exclusive right to engage in teaching, exhorting or admonishing the saints. Why should the talents of scores of brethren be stifled and sublimated so that one can grow by exercise? Shall we bind all of the members of the body but one, and let them become paralyzed through disuse? Are not all of the bodily members expected to perform the work for which they are gifted by the Lord? Are any gifts of God useless and worthless?

We owe a tremendous debt to men like Elton Trueblood, the eminent Quaker philosopher of Richmond, Indiana, who has written some of the most startling and revolutionary material on the subject of "ministry" in our generation. It is startling because so little of it is heard from other sources, and revolutionary because it is an honest attempt to restore the concept of ministry as it was in the primitive company of the redeemed.

No one can seriously read the chapter "A Practical Starting Point" in the book *The Incendiary Fellowship*, or the one titled "The Abolition of the Laity" in the book *The Yoke of Christ* without being made to think about the great chasm between what we practice and what God purposed. Unfortunately, we suffer from two evils. Many of our brethren never read anything that is spiritually enlightening. They consider that is the "duty" of the preacher. And many of those who read never do so seriously, with a view to making any real change in their thinking. It is not likely that a Quaker philosopher will change those who refuse to be changed by apostolic disclosures.

We are tricked into thinking that we are free from "the clergy system" because we have been clever enough to employ other terms to designate our clergy. But being a clergyman has little to do whether "the common people" designate one by such titles as "Reverend" or "Right Reverend." **One who appropriates to himself by reason of his status, the regulation and conduct of that worship which is the right of all, is a clergyman whether he admits it or not.**

The pagan business world looks upon "the minister" of a church as identical in status with the parish priest. Both can get reduced fares for the clergy upon airlines. Both can carry a "clergy certificate" for purchase of tickets on bus lines. In some places they will both receive cards admitting them to professional sporting events upon mere payment of the sales tax. In other places they receive a "clerical discount" when they purchase a suit or topcoat. A lot of those who inveigh (protest) against "the clergy system" from the pulpit on Sunday, accept a "clergy discount" on Monday, thus demonstrating anew that where a man's treasure is there will his heart be also.

It may have been such casuistry (excessive reasoning) which caused Edward Gibbon in his well-known literary work *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to write, “To a philosophic eye the vices of the clergy are far less dangerous than their virtues.” It is easy to dismiss this by reminding ourselves that Gibbon was a skeptic, but it might help if we earnestly weighed the observation.

Not only the world which surrounds our little oasis regards us as the “the clergy” when we appropriate the function of preaching, and contract to proclaim the word at so much per annum with vacation time specified. The saints who are taxed to support the organizational complex feel the same way. It is “the minister” who has his name on the signboard out front and upon the official letterhead. He has an office in the consecrated structure, and often a secretary who alone can admit you to the inner sanctum. The very world we have created for ourselves sets him apart.

In justification for the brethren who hoped to devote their efforts to proclaiming the message of God’s grace, I must point out that they are upset and frustrated because they have been caught in the gears of the institutional meat-grinder or are constantly being run through the congregational corn-sheller. In their hearts they believe in the priesthood of all believers and in the ministry of all the saints. Secretly, I think a lot of them resent being put on the stage to say “the right things” in “the proper way” which means to employ the kind of religious jargon and double-talk which opposes sin without making it lose its respectability.

But “The System” operates to produce professionals, and a lethargic and indolent (lazy) people, goodhearted though they may be, **would rather hire someone whom they can own** to “conduct worship,” whatever that may mean, than to worship in Spirit and in truth. And “The System” operates only to perpetuate itself just as does the political system or the economic system. And it makes no difference who is elected or selected. The System does not change.

“The System” uses men so long as they follow its unwritten creed and conform to its traditional method. But men are expendable. They are good only so long as they produce. Once they rebel at being owned and made flunkies they will be sent packing and reduced to a pulp, made to feel that they are deserters, renegades and apostates. And all of this will be done by good people who think they are following the will of Jesus. So it becomes easier just to play ball than to fight the team, the umpires and the fans in the stands. I say it is easier, but deep inside it corrodes the soul.

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