

## The Clergy: from God or Man?

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The Clergy: from God or Man?

By Stan Thompson

The purpose of this tract is to bring before the reader God's thoughts as to Divine order within the Church. It must be clear at the outset that there is no intent to demean true servants of God who have chosen clerisy for their sphere of ministry. The clergy-laity system is so commonly accepted that many sincere God-fearing believers have taken up positions without having first understood God's design for the Church in His Word.

I realize that questioning the clerical system is disturbing to many who know no other way to conduct the worship and ministry of the local church. There also may be thoughts of "there are so many well-read Godly men and women who believe and practice clericalism, how can I dare begin to question their position?"

To address both of these concerns, let me ask the reader these questions: (1) Are we safer following the teachings and traditions of men and their denominational organizations or following God's Word? (2) Can the believer understand the Scriptures through the operation of the Spirit alone or is he dependent upon those more educated than himself to guide him? If you are comfortable depending upon others to tell you what is of God, then this tract is not for you. You may as well discard it now. If, however, you believe in your heart of hearts that God's Word alone is able to thoroughly furnish the man of God (2 Timothy 3:17), and it is through the Spirit alone that we can understand His truth (John 16:13), read on. As you do, be alert to your responsibility to refuse any thoughts herein presented or thoughts of your own which are not supported by Holy Scripture.

### Headship

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only Scripturally recognized head of the Church: "(God) has put all things under His (Christ's) feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:22). "(Christ) is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18).

For individuals to presume authority over the Church is to dishonor the Head. Diotrophes made this terrible mistake. He loved to have preeminence among the Church and acted on its behalf by not receiving the apostles (3 John 9,10).

Many Christians readily acknowledge the headship of Christ in principle but fail to see the practical out-working of Christ as Head. First, we accept by faith that He is present among those gathered to His Name: "For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20). Second, He directs and leads the Church by His Spirit: "In (Christ) you also are built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21, 22). "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:2). It was not the clergy making the decisions as directed by the Spirit. It was the Spirit of God making known to the gathered believers what the mind of Christ was.

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Christ has given the Church authority to act on His behalf: "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan" (1 Corinthians 5:4,5). This authority was not given to the clergy or to any other subset of the Church. All believers gathered in a single locality form the Church at that place. Only the local Church as a whole has authority to act in His Name.

Practically speaking then, how are decisions to be made? How is the Church to determine what is the mind of Christ? The example in Acts holds the key, "as they ministered to the Lord and fasted." If each heart were in prayer and submissive to the Lord, He will make His mind known just as clearly as He did in the Acts.

What if a vote were taken and 80% thought to take one action and 20% another? Should the Church go with the 80%? How can it? 80% of the church is not the Church and, therefore, has no authority from Christ to act. Perhaps the 20% have the Lord's mind. God is often pleased to work with a minority (e.g. in Salvation, Matthew 7:14; 22:14; with Gideon, Judges 6; with Asa, 2 Chronicles 14:11; with the Jewish remnant, Isaiah 1:9).

If the church is divided, then part or all are not being submissive to Christ. An action taken in this condition cannot be considered the Lord's mind. The objection often heard to this is "if we wait for everyone to agree then nothing will ever be done." How much we need to learn God's ways! He has so much to teach us about patience, humility, submission and love for one another. His work in us is far more important than any work we could do for Him. He repeatedly commands us to "be of one mind" (1 Peter 3:8; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2). Why circumvent His work in us by choosing to be disobedient? "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22,23).

### Worship

The Jewish system of appointing certain ones to perform priestly duties has been done away with. The work of Christ on the cross has rent the veil providing every believer free access to the Father (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:20). In Christ all believers are priests and have the responsibility to function as priests. "You also as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ...you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that you should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:5,9).

Christian worship is not by schedule or outward forms, but is simply the overflow of the heart to God: "God is Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), "But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped Him" (Mark 5:6). Corporate worship is to be conducted "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40) as empowered by the Spirit: "We are the true circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:3).

The concept of having an office in the church whose function it is to dictate corporate worship denies the priesthood of believers and undermines the leading of the Holy Spirit. It requires the one appointed to be filled with Spirit praise at the appointed hour when in fact he may be empty. It reestablishes the Judaistic system whereby only select individuals can perform certain services. In effect, it puts the veil back up between the soul and God.

## Ministry

Each member of the body of Christ has been given a special gift and is responsible to use it for the good of the body: "Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace that is given to us, let us exercise them accordingly" (Romans 12:6 NASB). "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal" (1 Corinthians 12:7). "As every man has received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). "But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ...For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:7,12).

The Spirit directs the use of the gifts: "all these works that one and self same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:7). "Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is Liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17).

God's order in the Church allows for the liberty of the Spirit in ministry: "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge. If anything be revealed to another that sits by, let the first hold his peace. For you may all prophecy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted" (1 Corinthians 14:29-31). "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God gives: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ"(1 Peter 4:11).

The concept of having an office in the church whose function it is to monopolize public ministry at the exclusion of other gifted brethren denies the gifts Christ gave and undermines the operation of the Holy Spirit. It requires the one appointed to have all the gifts. It requires him to have a message at the appointed hour regardless of whether the Spirit has laid a message on his heart.

## Pastors

"Pastor" appears once in the New Testament of most English translations. It refers to one of the gifts given by Christ to the Church (Ephesians 4:7-13). It was never used as a title. It was never connected with a church office that controlled the ministry and worship of the local church. The word itself means "shepherd." How much we need shepherds today among God's people! We hear so often the question, "Who is your pastor?" If the question were, "Who is your shepherd?", I am sure that many Christians would refuse to put a man in that place and respond, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1).

## Offices

Deacons were those appointed by the apostles or one directly commissioned by an apostle to serve the church in temporal things such as serving tables (1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-7).

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Overseers were elder men in the church (Titus 1:5-9; Acts 20:17,28,29) appointed by the apostles or one directly commissioned by an apostle (Acts 14:19-23; Titus 1:5-9) to shepherd the flock and hold the truth (Acts 20:17, 28-31; Titus 1:9).

There is an attempt today to justify the modern day clergyman as a Biblical overseer. There are a number of problems with this beyond what we have already seen from God's Word:

The local churches had more than one overseer in their midst (Philippians 1:1; Acts 10:17, 28, 29).

The overseers were not necessarily teachers: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17,18).

Teaching in the local church was not confined to the overseers. "I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,) That ye submit yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with us, and laboureth" (1 Corinthians 16:15,16). "And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:24-26).

The qualifications of an overseer rule out many of today's ordained clergymen who are not elder men, married with children (Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7).

The Church today has no authority to appoint overseers.

We never read of overseers being appointed by a local church. The apostles are gone. Those commissioned by the apostles are gone. "Apostolic succession" is not in Scripture. It puts the Protestant in the difficult position of having to own that there was authority in the Roman Catholic church to ordain ministers who later separated from it. The Protestant must then attempt to justify separating from that which they must own to be of God.

When the New Testament was completed, the need for appointed overseers was gone. Today, the church has the Spirit of God, the Word of God and the gifts Christ gave to guide, direct, teach, serve, minister and worship. The work of the overseer is still needed and blessed is every one who aspires to that work, but today we look not to men as having authority. We respect those who labor in the Lord and show their godly care for us (Hebrews 13:17), but our Leader, our Master sits upon the right hand of God.

### Sin Against the Holy Spirit

Suppose the Spirit of God has filled a brother's heart with praise prompting him to lead the saints in public worship. Similarly, suppose the Spirit burdens a brother with a message for the gathered believers. He is a priest but cannot function. He has a message and a gift but cannot exercise it. Why? Simply because he is not ordained. He does not have credentials from man. The Spirit is quenched (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Blessing is lost. The Name of Christ is not exalted. The justification is "we can't let just anyone lead in worship and the ministry the Word. There would be confusion. We would be opening the door to erroneous and unprofitable ministry."

As to confusion, God does not author it (1 Corinthians 14:33). If confusion results, then brethren are acting in the flesh and not being led of the Spirit at all. Confusion may be removed when a man dictates all worship and ministry, but this is a mute point since God would then not be the author.

As to error and unprofitable ministry, have you considered what is preventing the appointed minister from speaking error or giving unprofitable ministry"? That minister's human credentials, nothing else. The apostle Paul would not be allowed to speak at most denominations because he came "not of men, neither by man" (Galatians 1:1). Satan, however, disguised perhaps as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), could come ordained of men and have full freedom to minister to the church and conduct its corporate worship.

## Nicolaitanism

"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate...So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate" (Revelation 2:6,15). Who are the Nicolaitans? It is not God's way to send us to church histories to understand His Word. Since the term appears nowhere else in the Scriptures, the word itself is the only means whereby we can interpret its meaning. "Nicolaitan" means "conquering the people." The last part of the word ("Laos") is the word from which our English word "laity" is derived. The Nicolaitans were those in the church that subjected the common people, the laity, to a lower position. Who are those in the church today that claim a higher position, with certain privileges and authority above the laity? None other than the clergy.

We saw earlier the hateful deeds of Diotrephes in usurping Christ's authority in the church. The deeds, however, later developed into a doctrine – as most unchecked evil practices will. What began as the pride of men seeking the first place among God's people has developed into the teaching that such is as God would have it. The reaction of the masses today are not unlike the masses in Israel: "The prophets prophecy falsely, and the priests bear rule through their means, and My people love to have it so" (Jeremiah 5:31). As spiritual decline sets in, the heart readily gives up its need of caring too much for spiritual things to those who will accept the responsibility. As with Israel so with the church, unbelief will always seek to have some visual, tangible object between the soul and God. The Lord seeing this trend looks at it and says "which thing I hate." It is not the people in the position that are hated. It is the deeds and the doctrine. We thank the Lord that there are many among the clergy who faithfully preach the gospel and the Word of God, but from the Scriptures we must conclude that they are doing so in the wrong position.

## Labourers

"The labourer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18). Verses such as this are often used to justify paid clergymen. The difficulty of this, however, is evident. The labourer is certainly worthy of his hire. But what if that labourer has not been humanly ordained, is he still worthy of his hire? Certainly. The qualification of his worthiness is based upon his labour and not upon his human credentials. What if the one who has been ordained does not labour for Christ? Is he worthy of his hire? Certainly not. Verses like this show us how God works independently of man's clergy-laity system.

## Flattering Titles

Men love titles. Job, however, understood the danger of them. "Let me not, I pray you, accept any man's person, neither let me give flattering titles unto man. For I know not to give flattering titles; in so doing my maker would soon take me away" (Job 32:21,22).

Of all the titles used to designate a clergyman, by far the worst is "reverend." This title ascribes to man what alone belongs unto God: "holy and reverend is His name" (Psalm 111:9).

## Women

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The verses relating to priesthood and ministry do not single out the men. They apply to the whole body of Christ, to the sisters, as well as, to the brothers. Though the Jewish system had only male priests, the Church is comprised of both male and female priests. Sisters in the Lord have been given a gift just as the brothers. The only difference is that the women are to exercise their priesthood and gifts privately instead of publicly: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35), "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

Does this truth restrict the leading of the Spirit in public worship and ministry? In no way. The Spirit of God would not lead contrary to His Word. A woman would not be led by the Spirit to assume a place that is not given her in the Scriptures.

The Spirit would, however, lead a sister in the Lord into many services for which she is uniquely fitted (see Romans 16:1-3,6,12; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Timothy 5:10; Acts 18:26; 21:9).