

The **GO**SPEL **Without** RELIGION

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THE CLERGY and LAITY TRADITION

When will the kingdoms of this world give way to the Kingdom of God?

We have the seen religious rulers who pursue what they think to be God's will, introduce a theocratic kingdom upon the earth. When men attempt to rule God's kingdom with human authority we see dangerous alterations to the Gospel. Such religious enterprises fall short of the Glory of God. Most of these efforts are founded upon good intentions including an interpretation of scripture. Formal theology and systems of ministry most often find themselves at variance with divine purposes. Probably the most notable feature of institutional religion is its oversight by a single prophet or a priest class.

Where did the clergy and the laity doctrine come from? Historical information exists to chronicle the transition of the first ecclesia to religion in the 3rd and 4th centuries. In my own experience of studying the word and watching religious scenarios play out, I have observed how worldly values and methodology gradually alter a Spiritual Christian life and practice. Jude exhorts in his short epistle to contend for the faith first presented by the apostles lest it be lost or corrupted. (Jude vs 3.)

In light of the gospel, we see a clear pathway that leads away from any doctrine of a priesthood. "The ministry" as a clergy-centered activity must be viewed in the light of apostolic exhortations Peter tells us, "For all those who have received a gift to minister that gift to one another," There remains of course, the need to continue to address the need for discipleship to mature those who come out of the world and enter the life of God. Those who carry experience and knowledge of the word are called 'elders' who mentor those who are new to the faith.

Priesthood by definition is any system in which a person (a leader or person of authority) intervenes with God on behalf of others. The revelation of the New Covenant **Gospel** points to a new dispensation: **a priesthood of all believers**. Further, in the book of The Revelation, John receives a vision of the churches and among these we find reference to the doctrine of the Nicolaitins, (Rev.2:6) a doctrine that God despises. Nicolaitinism is that system in which a leader takes control over body of common believers and essentially take them captive, ruling over them and dispensing whatever teaching they deem necessary and making merchandise of the sheep. Many cults such as Jim Jones and the Jonestown group, begin to function in accordance with this label. Pastors who exert a stifling control of a congregation I feel also fit this application.

We find it hard to compare the forms of worship or discipleship described in the Epistles to that which we find in most formal church practices known today. In the early days of the church there was no formalized ministry. There was apostolic leadership that disciplined believers and released them to lead and minister in their own communities. There were no theology schools, nor accreditation agencies to credential ministers. There were **only believers** who after being told the good news, free gift of salvation and were disciplined in matters of the Spiritual life afforded through an ongoing revelation of the Son of God. To these disciples it was given to *experience the powers of the world to come*, (The Kingdom of Heaven.) These first century believers were not graduates of Bible schools, but all experienced the mighty works of God on a day to day basis. All learned that Jesus (Yeshua the Messiah) made it possible for any and all who believed to become

adopted **children of God**. Believers then as well as now became **new creations** through acknowledgment that Jesus' died for the sin of all humankind. With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit each were led to understand that they could partake in the exploits that replicated Jesus' ministry.

Changes herald a new status of humanity

In the ancient times that followed Eden, mankind had lost their status as children of God and so it remained until Christ the Messiah was manifested in human form, only an occasional prophet was called to speak for God.

But for the most part humanity and the world **could not know God**, nor could meet with him for fellowship. When Adam lost his dominion over the earth, Satan became the default 'god of this world.' He was acting in this capacity when he tempted the Lord in the desert when he said, "All of these kingdoms are mine—" Lucifer was willing to make a deal with Jesus, offering these kingdoms with the stipulation that Jesus would still worship and give homage to him.

Jesus Christ came to fulfill his mission as the "son of man" and the lamb of God. In this role, He prepared the way for us. Crucified and raised from the dead Jesus became more than Messiah King of the Jews. He became "Savior" of all humankind. We could at last, know Him, meet with Him, have fellowship with Him, and even call Him Abba, Daddy. This is **the Good News!**

Throughout the earliest days of the Christian faith the question has been asked and must continue to be asked,

"*Should we obey God or man?*" In order to distinguish between these two voices something is required of us:

To begin, each of us must acknowledge that the Bible IS the Word of Truth and trust it to be the single valid source of truth and doctrine. Too few in the modern world have actually discovered this and believe it.

Secondly it is required of us to listen to the voice of inner witness which God has given to all his children. Those seeking truth are subject to some expert, theologian, or cleric explain to inform us what is written.

About new believers:

We all go through a spiritual infancy. At such times you are open and eager to grow in the knowledge of God. During these times we find that God is always close at hand. He is quick to reveal himself and to answer prayers and to support you as you grow. But this is also a precarious time because in our eagerness to learn the ways of God we can be taken captive easily by wrong doctrine and fall into the trap of religion which we accept willingly enough. (1Corinthians 12v1-2)

New believers require time to renew their minds and their habits of lifestyle and even beliefs they formerly held to be reasonable and true. The renewing of the mind is achieved more or less quickly as we absorb the words pertaining to the Good News. The epistles written by the first apostles describe the nature of the spiritual life and the parameters of community and discipleship. The Holy Spirit baptism is the prerequisite for any such discipleship and growth. This baptism opens our eyes to heavenly things. It bears witness to the Spirit of Truth that the world can not receive nor comprehend.

If any expert tells you, with assumed authority, that the gifts of the first century apostolic church have disappeared, do not believe them. But flee quickly association with any such authority. As Jesus said addressed leaven of the Pharisees (religious traditionalists without spiritual understanding); who resisted the Holy Spirit. Matt 23: 15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." (also see Revelation C.8, Stephen's testimony)

We begin our spiritual path as spiritual infants who crave "the milk of the Word," Too many who God has called to be established as a new born child of God become polluted with religious doctrine. Our understandings can be poisoned and corrupted by evil doctrine. As a result, many receive the wrong Jesus, the wrong spirit, or the wrong gospel. (1 Corinthians, 11;3) Discerning truth is a constant challenge.

Religion presents teachings or stipulations that become binding or obligatory upon the followers. Are we to

question the teachings of traditional authorities? Yes, prove all teachings with scripture. Are we to question the doctrine of our church or church leadership? Yes, there are many in the pulpit, who are nothing more than "blind guides." Many who question will be shunned, or dismissed as heretical. Though we suffer condemnation it becomes the path to liberty.

WHAT IS MINISTRY? What is a Minister?

In the New Testament texts, the word translated "ministry" is translated from **service**. The term ministry comes from *Greek Diakonia*. Thus **ministry means to serve**. Through the process of generations of religious practice, ministry has come to mean something else, something formal and liturgical. Gifts denoted experience and leadership become designated as a religious **office**. e.g. Pastor, Deacon, Bishop, or Cardinal. Within the context of "church house" practices, ministry has been defined and restricted to that which is done behind a pulpit and then only by the few with "credentials."

Discipleship is for all believers.

According to the Scripture, discipleship is the keystone of the gospel. Yet, it is rarely taught to church congregations with the emphasis that Jesus gave to his own first disciples or apostles. All **believers are trainees or disciples** in the Kingdom of God. And all disciples are expected to minister what he has been given by the Holy Spirit (A particular gift of God). **"As every person has received the (free) gift, so minister the same to one another."** (1Peter 4:11)

To grow in the Spiritual life of God we are instructed that we can be transformed into the pattern of Jesus the Son of God. and through him becoming partakers of the Lord's ministry as well as his spiritual attributes. These attributes include the gifts of the Spirit, (Galatians 5:22) love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All demonstrate the character of compassion and the ability to serve in kindness, (charity) through the Spirit of Love. Through such ministry (service) the path is open to see human lives restored and perfected.

The Tradition of the Professional Clergy

There are some elements in the institutional church that are positive. These include social relationships and a place to receive teachings and moral precepts that are Biblical. But even in this light such deeper and more intimate relationships are limited and lack deeper levels of discipleship and growth in the knowledge of heavenly things. Institutional religion has remained a long standing stronghold and is resistant to change and resolute. Institutional religion in some ways is in descendency as numbers who participate gradually decline. But old habits and traditions die hard. The inertia of centuries of social tradition is hard to alter.

We have learned to accept without question, the role of a professional clergy person. Many of these men and women have wonderful natural gifting. Many are brilliant communicators, possessing compassion and dedication. These will I believe, received their heavenly rewards according to the fruitfulness in their calling. Such who carry the love and zeal of God are beloved by those who they touch or disciple. The gift and calling of a Spiritual shepherd is **a gift** to disciple the body. A pastoral gift enables mentor-ship and , encouragement. The pastoral call may just as easily minister that gift outside of the parameters of religious formalism. But this may be a call without a salary or a congregation. The shepherding gift forms caring relationships. It brings with it a necessary compassion and wisdom to minister hope, encouragement, wisdom to strengthen the 'flock.' Leadership is based upon experience and depth of understanding of the Word of God and the True Gospel. It should not be imagined as a mere career calling. I know very few who fit these criteria.

Conversely, there are others among the certified clergy who may not even know God. Some do not apprise themselves of all his promises and power. Unlike the apostle Paul who said I determine to know nothing

among you but Jesus Christ crucified and to demonstrate the reality of his ruler-ship by the power of God. There are innumerable trained clergy professionals who presume to substitute sermonettes rather than in demonstrating and discipling believers in the Spiritual life, understanding and demonstrating the power of the Spirit. Among those in the ministry, many exalt 'preaching.' Eloquence and persuasive speech and the ability to hold an audience in awe is a prerequisite for clerical success.

I believe that most in professional clergy presume their own pre-eminence owing to their credentials. It would be a great if people approved with seminary credentials would use as a doorway to service, to bless and to edify. Sadly these spiritual credentials are often turned into a tool of personal gain and control over others.

Examining The Clergy and the Laity

The Clergy-Laity doctrine ***divides the flock into two disparate parts.*** The good shepherd story described in John's gospel, chapter 10, describes the characteristics of a good shepherd. It lists among the virtues, intimacy and closeness of the shepherd to the flock. The shepherd knows each of his charges and calls them by name; he will sacrifice his personal comfort and life for the flock. Finally we are told that Jesus is this shepherd. The psalmist has written almost a thousand years before, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Jesus Christ remains the true shepherd, the ***true bishop (overseer) and shepherd (pastor) of our souls.***"

Jesus modeled correct shepherding, in his ministry process of preaching, teaching and leading with care and compassion. The Lord demonstrated his Spiritual credentials with miracles, signs and wonders, and with deliverance from the demonic. To those who did not know of the Father's plan to extend the Kingdom of God **he Preached** the Gospel of the Kingdom; To his closest disciples, he gave more intimate insight and **he taught** them through dialogue of questions and answers. It was through dialogue with his closest disciples and associates that he expounded deeper truths and unraveled parables.

Jesus came and ministered with authority and yet with the meekness of a servant. He was a friend to sinners. He came to seek and to save and to serve. Modern church members tend to exalt leadership and place them on unrealistic pedestals and grant them unusual authority. **Jesus taught us about those who lead:** (Matthew 23) *"Who is the greatest among you, Jesus said, shall be a servant to all." Moreover, Jesus instructed his own disciples not to place one man over others. He required that they were not to give titles to these 'masters' saying call no man master, No man teacher, No man father.* This ought to qualify as a template by which to measure the character and role of those in the role of pastoral leadership.

THE BODY : Edified by a multiplicity of gifts

One individual with a pastoral gifting most probably does carry **all** of the ministry gifts. A multiplicity of ministry gifts are needed to fully edify the body. (Ephesians 4) *God in fact has more than one finger on his hands. There is something called the 5-fold ministry, which includes apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, and evangelists. We might also consider the other hand as a body has two hands; consider additional gifts or, 5 other ministries which serve the body in a less formal or visible way. So called apostolic movements tend to reintroduce the hierarchical structure and a network or association of high profile and highly paid Christian 'celebrities' all eager to provide seminars or conferences to garner large offerings and expand their ministries .*

Guidance by Spiritually wise and experienced

Throughout the apostolic letters we are told that mature men of God were to guide and direct and to maintain purity of doctrine and practices. These were designated overseers (Gr. *presbuteros*) of the local flocks (fellowships) of God. These bodies met in a form and place having no resemblance to church houses that are the norm today.

Overseers need spiritual experience more than theological credentials! The apostolic intention was to

keep our faith and traditions accurate and steadfast. This model must continue to stand. What was written by the apostles was delivered with the intention of providing guidance and knowledge of the kingdom for believers in perpetuity. Maturity in faith and spiritual understanding encouraged the guidance of elders or overseers. These men and woman having depth of experience in **the *Spiritual life*** we called to provide balance and correction so that true doctrine be maintained and enforced among the fellowship:

In the early days of Christianity, elders, pastors, or overseers evolved into an office that assumed the whole responsibility of "ministry." This evolved into the clergy roles of today. Interesting things regarding the form of the early church are in evidence today revealing a return to New Testament forms of *Koinonia*, Ecclesia (Christians assembling together)

See recent publications by Frank Viola and George Barna, regarding the Open Church, etc.

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