



The New Testament doctrine of ministry rests therefore not on the clergy-laity distinction but on the twin and complementary pillars of the priesthood of all believers and the gifts of the Spirit. Today, four centuries after the Reformation, the full implications of this Protestant affirmation have yet to be worked out. The clergy-laity dichotomy is a direct carry-over from pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism and a throwback to the Old Testament priesthood. It is one of the principal obstacles to the church effectively being God's agent of the Kingdom today because it creates a false idea that only "holy men," namely, ordained ministers, are really qualified and responsible for leadership and significant ministry. In the New Testament there are functional distinctions between various kinds of ministries but no hierarchical division between clergy and laity. —Howard Snyder

When we go back to the Word of God and read it afresh, we see that the clergy profession is the result of our human culture and history and not of God's will for the church. It is simply impossible to construct a defensible biblical justification for the institution of clergy as we know it. —Christian Smith

Today, the leadership structure that characterizes the contemporary church is hierarchical and positional. In the following pages, we'll examine this structure and reimagine a form of leadership that's completely different. One that is envisioned in Scripture and rooted in the triune God.

The present-day leadership structure is derived from a *positional mindset*. This mind-set casts authority in terms of slots to fill, job descriptions to carry out, titles to sport, and ranks to pull. It resonates with concern over explicit leadership structures. According to the positional mind-set, terms like *pastor, elder, prophet, bishop,* and *apostle*

are titles representing ecclesiastical offices. (An office is a sociological slot that a group defines. It has a reality apart from the character and actions of the person who fills it.)

By contrast, the New Testament notion of leadership is rooted in a *functional mind-set*. It portrays authority in terms of how things work organically. That is, it focuses on the expression of spiritual life. Leadership in the New Testament places a high premium on the unique gifting, spiritual maturity, and sacrificial service of each member. It lays stress on functions, not offices. It emphasizes tasks rather than titles. Its main concern lies in activities like pastor-
ing
, elder-
ing
, prophesy-
ing
, oversee-
ing
, apostle-
ing
, etc.

To frame it another way, positional thinking is hung up on nouns, while functional thinking stresses verbs. In the positional leadership framework, the church is patterned after the military and managerial structures of contemporary culture. In the functional leadership framework, the church operates by life—divine life. Mutual ministry comes forth naturally when God's people are equipped and hierarchical structures are absent.

Native to hierarchical/positional-oriented churches is a political machine that works behind the scenes. This machine promotes certain people to positions of ecclesiastical power and authority. Native to functionally oriented churches is the mutual responsibility and collegial interplay of its members. They listen to the Lord together. They affirm each other in their Spirit-endowed gifts. They encourage one another toward Christ.

In sum, the New Testament orientation of leadership is organic and functional. The hierarchical/positional orientation is fundamentally worldly.

Jesus and the Gentile/Hierarchical Idea of Leadership

Our Lord contrasted the hierarchical leadership style of the Gentile world with leadership in the kingdom of God. After James and John implored Jesus to grant them the glorified powerseats beside His throne, the Lord replied, saying,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

(Matt. 20:25–28 nasb)

And again,

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors.” But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.

(Luke 22:25–26 nasb)

Significantly, the Greek word for “exercise authority” in Matthew is *katexousiazo*. *Katexousiazo* is a combination of two Greek words:

kata

, which means over; and

exousiazo

, which means to exercise authority. Jesus also used the Greek word

katakuriuo

in this passage, which means to “lord it over” others.

What Jesus is condemning in these texts is not oppressive *leaders* as such. He’s condemning the hierarchical *form* of leadership that dominates the Gentile world. That bears repeating. Jesus was not just condemning tyrannical leaders. He was condemning the hierarchical form of leadership itself.

What is the hierarchical form of leadership? It’s the leadership style that’s built on a chain-of-command social structure. It’s rooted in the idea that power and authority flow from the top down. Hierarchical leadership is rooted in a worldly concept of power. This explains why

it's endemic to all traditional bureaucracies. It's present in the vicious forms of liege/ lord feudalism and master/slave relationships. But it's also present in the highly stylized spheres of military and corporate America. While often bloodless, the hierarchical leadership style is undesirable for God's people. Why? Because it reduces human interaction into command style relationships. Such relationships are foreign to New Testament thinking and practice. Yet hierarchical leadership is employed everywhere in secular culture. And the institutional church operates by it.

Summing up our Lord's teaching on this style of leadership, the following contrasts come into sharp focus:

- In the Gentile world, leaders operate on the basis of a political, chain-of-command social structure—a graded hierarchy. In the kingdom of God, leadership flows from childlike meekness and sacrificial service.

- In the Gentile world, authority is based on position and rank. In the kingdom of God, authority is based on godly character. Note Christ's description of a leader: "Let him be a servant," and "let him be as the younger." In our Lord's eyes, *being* precedes *doing*. And *doing*

flows from being. Put differently, function follows character. Those who serve do so because they *are* servants.

- In the Gentile world, greatness is measured by prominence, external power, and political influence. In the kingdom of God, greatness is measured by humility and servitude.

- In the Gentile world, leaders exploit their positions to rule over others. In the kingdom of God, leaders deplore special reverence. They rather regard themselves "as the younger." In brief, the hierarchical leadership structure characterizes the spirit of the Gentiles. The implanting of these structures into the church, therefore, is at odds with New Testament Christianity. Our Lord didn't mince words in declaring His implicit disdain for the Gentile notion of leadership: "*It shall not be so among you!*"

(Matt. 20:26 kjv) is His explicit feeling on it. All in all, there is no room in the teaching of Jesus for the hierarchical leadership model that characterizes the institutional church.

Jesus and the Jewish/Positional Model of Leadership

Our Lord also contrasted leadership in the kingdom with the leadership model that marks the religious world. In the following text, Jesus vividly expresses God's perspective on authority in contrast to the Jewish perspective.

Note His words:

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

(Matt. 23:8–12 nasb)

Gathering up the content of this text, we may glean the following:

- In the religious climate of the Jews, a class system exists made up of religious, guru-like specialists and nonspecialists. In the kingdom, *all* are brethren in the same family.
- In the Jewish world, religious leaders are accorded with honorific titles. (examples: teacher, father, reverend, pastor, bishop, minister, etc). In the kingdom, there are no distinctions of protocol. Such titles obscure the unique honor of Jesus Christ and blur the New Testament revelation that envisions all Christians as ministers and priests.
- In the Jewish world, leaders are exalted into positions of prominence and outward display. In the kingdom, leaders find their identity in the lowly towel of servitude and in the unassuming basin of humility.
- In the Jewish world, leadership is rooted in status, title, and position. In the kingdom, leadership is rooted in inward life and character. (In this vein, the current fad of bestowing honorary "doctorates" before the names of countless clergy is one example of how the contemporary church mirrors those values that run contrary to God's kingdom.)

In sum, leadership according to Jesus is a far cry from what it is in the institutional church. Our Lord dealt a deathblow to both Gentile/hierarchical and Jewish/positional leadership models.

These ego-massaging models are incompatible with the primitive simplicity of the organic church and the upside-down kingdom of Jesus Christ. They impede the progress of God's people. They suppress the free functioning of the believing priesthood. They rupture the image of the church as family. They do violence to the leadership that exists in the triune God. And they place severe limitations on the headship of Christ. For these reasons "it shall not be so among" those who bear the name of the Savior.

The Modern Clergy System

Scripture makes clear that Jesus condemned the hierarchical/positional leadership structure. But what about Paul and the other apostles?

Contrary to popular thinking, the New Testament letters never cast church leaders in terms of "offices" and other conventions of human social organization.

Whenever the New Testament describes people who are chiefly responsible for spiritual oversight, it does so by mentioning the work they do. Functional language dominates. Verbs are prominent.

In this connection, the modern clergy system is a religious artifact that has no biblical basis. This system has allowed the body of Christ to lapse into an audience due to its heavy reliance on a single leader. It has turned church into the place where Christians watch professionals perform. It has transformed the holy assembly into a center for professional pulpiteerism supported by lay-spectators.

Perhaps the most daunting feature of the clergy system is that it keeps the people it claims to serve in spiritual infancy. Because the clergy system usurps the Christian's right to minister in a spiritual way during corporate gatherings, it ends up debilitating God's people. It keeps them weak and insecure.

Without question, many—if not most—of the people who are part of the clergy profession love God’s people and desire to serve them. Many of them sincerely want to see their fellow brethren take spiritual responsibility. (Numerous clergy have expressed their frustration with not seeing their congregations take more responsibility. But few of them have traced the problem to their own profession.)

Yet the clergy profession ends up disempowering and pacifying the believing priesthood. This is the case regardless of how uncontrolling the person who fills the clergy position may be.

Here’s how it works. Since clergy carries the spiritual workload, the majority of the church becomes passive, lazy, self-seeking (“feed me”), and arrested in their spiritual development.

Just as serious, the clergy system warps many who occupy clerical positions. The reason?

God never called anyone to bear the heavy burden of ministering to the needs of the church by himself.¹ Yet regardless of the spiritual tragedies the clergy profession engenders, the masses continue to rely on, defend, and insist upon it. For this reason if the truth be told, many Christians prefer the convenience of paying someone to shoulder the responsibility for ministry and shepherding.

In their minds, it’s better to hire a religious specialist to tend to the needs of God’s people than to bother themselves with the self-emptying demands of servanthood and pastoral care. The words of the ancient prophet capture the Lord’s disposition toward this mind-set: “They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not.” (Hos. 8:4a kjv).

In short, the modern clergy system is far removed from the thought of God. It puts the living, breathing organism of the church into an Old Testament straightjacket.

In light of these sobering facts, one may intelligently ask how it is that the clergy profession remains to be the commonly accepted form of church leadership today. The answer lies deeply entrenched in the history of the Reformation. And it continues to be reinforced by current cultural imperatives.

In short, the clergy profession is little more than a one-size-fits-all blending of administration, psychology, and oratory that's packaged into one position for religious consumption. As such, the sociological role of clergy, as practiced in the West, has few points of contact with anything or anyone in the New Testament.

Again, clergy need not be despots in order to hinder mutual ministry. Most of them are well-intentioned and gifted Christians who sincerely believe that God has called them to their profession. Many are benevolent dictators. Some are spiritual tyrants with a Machiavellian quest for power who imprison and freeze the life of their congregations.

The point is that clergy need not use vicious forms of authority to be harmful to body life. The mere presence of the one-up/one-down hierarchical mode of leadership suppresses mutual ministry. This is true regardless of how non-authoritarian in temperament the clergyman may be. The mere presence of clergy has the deadening effect of conditioning the congregation to be passive and perpetually dependent. Christians are taught from childhood that pastors (and priests) are the religious specialists. They are the qualified ones who handle the "spiritual" things of God, while everyone else is called to secular work. Because clergy are viewed as the religious specialists, the rest of the church sees themselves as passive recipients.

As Christian Smith says, "The problem is that, regardless of what our theologies tell us about the purpose of clergy, the actual effect of the clergy profession is to make the body of Christ lame. This happens not because clergy intend it (they usually intend the opposite) but because the objective nature of the profession inevitably turns the laity into passive receivers."²

The average believer is probably unaware that his or her notion of leadership has been shaped by centuries of ecclesiastical history (about seventeen hundred years' worth). For this reason, the clergy concept is so embedded in our thinking that any attempt to deviate from it will often meet fierce opposition.

Many modern Christians are just as resistant to the idea of dismantling the clergy as are the clergy themselves. The words of Jeremiah have pertinent application: "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and *my people love to have it so*" (Jer. 5:31 kjv). In short, clergy and non-clergy alike are responsible for the ailments of the present-day church.

The truth is that many of us—like Israel of old—still clamor for a king to rule over us. We want a visible mediator to tell us what “God hath said” (Ex. 20:19; 1 Sam. 8:19). The presence of a human mediator in a church is a cherished tradition to which many Christians are fiercely committed. But it doesn’t square with Scripture. And in my judgment, it suppresses the free functioning and full maturing of Christ’s body.

To repeat the point: The trouble lies not with clergy as people. It lies with the system to which they belong. Christian Smith puts it beautifully:

The clergy profession is fundamentally self-defeating. Its stated purpose is to nurture spiritual maturity in the church—a valuable goal. In actuality, however, it accomplishes the opposite by nurturing a permanent dependence of the laity on the clergy. Clergy become to their congregations like parents whose children never grow up, like therapists whose clients never become healed, like teachers whose students never graduate.

The existence of a full-time, professional minister makes it too easy for church members not to take responsibility for the on-going life of the church. And why should they? That’s the job of the pastor (so the thinking goes). But the result is that the laity remain in a state of passive dependence.

Imagine, however, a church whose pastor resigned and that could not find a replacement. Ideally, eventually, the members of that church would have to get off of their pews, come together, and figure out who would teach, who would counsel, who would settle disputes, who would visit the sick, who would lead worship, and so on. With a bit of insight, they would realize that the Bible calls the body as a whole to do these things together, prompting each to consider what gift they have to contribute, what role they could play to build up the body.

Frank Viola

Excerpt from Reimagining Church

See Frank's website for if you wish to order this book in English

<http://www.ptmin.org/>

See our Resource Section if you wish to order this book in Russian