

"THE APOSTLES WERE LAYMEN"

-Extracts by Philip Lancaster



The world and the church agree about how you should address me. My proper name and title, by unanimous consent, is: The Reverend Mister Philip H. Lancaster.

I am one of the elite cadre of persons who has the right to be addressed as Reverend" ("Worthy of reverence; revered. A member of the clergy.") This distinction is mine because I successfully completed a three-year graduate program in theology (I'm also a "Master of Divinity") and passed a theological exam before a body of ministers and elders. Upon passing that examination I was ordained and granted the privilege of being addressed as Reverend. This distinction also entitled me to be the pastor of a church: its preacher, the one who oversees the church ordinances, and the one privileged to "pronounce the benediction."

According to the church and the world, I am one set apart. I am a member of the clergy, and my title distinguishes me as such. Sounds pretty good, huh?

Yes, it sounds good to modern ears. But there is a little problem: the title and what it implies is an affront to Jesus Christ and an insult to every other man in the church.

As an expression of my submission to my Lord I renounce the title and resist its implications.

Jesus said, "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers" (Matt. 23). Our Lord goes on to forbid other honorific titles among his people, the church, and then concludes, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 12).

Jesus explicitly forbade setting any man apart in the church by means of a special title-and yet the church has done it since not long after the apostolic age. Why is such a practice such an affront to Christ? Because he alone is Head and Master of his church.

The concept of a professional clergy, which corrupted the church within a few centuries of the apostles, was a direct expression of worldly concepts of leadership and power. Whereas Jesus had adorned himself with a towel and became a servant to his followers (John 13), "clergymen" began to adorn themselves with special robes and collars and assumed a place of superiority over the congregation of the church. Although later the Reformation removed some of the worst abuses of this clerical system, it retained the distinction between the "clergy" and the "laity", a distinction which survives to this day.

Do we see any evidence of a clergy/laity distinction in the New Testament? None whatsoever. We see quite the opposite: the church leaders were ordinary men who humbly served the flock and who neither sought nor accepted any special status, title or dress that set them apart from the rest of the brothers.

UNSCHOOLED, ORDINARY MEN

Consider the Apostles. These men were hand-picked by Jesus himself to be the foundation of his church, the human agents through whom he would establish the household of God on earth (Eph. 2:20). These were the very agents of divine revelation, the human authorities by which the church received its order and direction. Certainly the Apostles were the most important leaders the church has ever had. Surely if any men deserved special title, position and rank it was these men. But were the Apostles clergymen?

To the contrary, we find clear evidence that the Apostles, though exercising their leadership role and its attendant authority, were not a special class among Christians, a professional spiritual elite. Let's look at just some of the evidence.

In Acts 4:13 we read of the reaction of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish clergy) to Peter and John: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." What distinguished the Apostles was not their training and credentials; it was that they had spiritual power because they had been with Jesus and he was with them still by the Spirit.

My interlinear Greek-English New Testament suggests these words for those translated "unschooled" and "ordinary" above: "unlettered" and "laymen". The Apostles were perceived by the clergy of their day as "uneducated laymen"! How could these men count for anything? Who could take them seriously? The Lord Jesus could, and did; and he built his church on the work of these ordinary men.

Nor do we find the Apostles claiming any special rank and recognition for themselves. Paul called himself the "least of all God's people" (Eph. 3: and refused even the honor to which he was due by virtue of his role (1 Cor. 9:12). Peter, when addressing the church leaders, referred to himself simply as "a fellow elder" (1 Pet. 5:1). When the Apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem for a critical doctrinal debate, the Apostles submitted to one another, and the letter which the council sent to the churches went out in the name of "the apostles and elders, your brothers" (Acts 15:23).

A BROTHERHOOD

The church is a brotherhood, a family, in which there are no classes of people... The New Testament prescription for leadership in the local church is a body of elders, a

plurality of leaders who function as brothers, submitting to one another, with no one man in a superior position to another. (You can study these passages and meditate on their implications in regard to leadership structure: Acts 14:23; 20:17-31; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12,13; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-4.)

The clergy system is a direct attack upon the very nature of the body of Christ. It introduces a false concept of a special spiritual class, with the accompanying temptation to pride and abuse of power that comes when one man is exalted positionally over others. It also leads to passivity on the part of those who are, by implication at least, "second class" in the church. Members of the body do not use their gifts to carry on ministry since the professional "minister" is doing the work.

Perhaps the worst result of the clergy system is that it stifles the spiritual development of the men of the congregation. God's plan is that ordinary, unschooled men can become elders, overseers and shepherds (pastors) of God's flock. They can grow in grace, can learn their Bibles, can develop leadership in their families-to the point that they can be recognized and set apart to pastor the church as a part of the body of elders. They do not have to go to Bible college or seminary. They can strive through on-the-job training to be leaders in the congregation. However, the clergy system removes this possibility from most men and smothers the godly ambition to servant-leadership. So men are unchallenged, and the congregation is weakened-not mention its families whose leaders are given no practical incentive for spiritual growth.

Can you see how all this fits with a return to what we have called "the family-based church"? We must get away from the single pastor model in which he inevitably becomes a program manager, an executive in a bureaucracy. We must return to the concept of brotherhood where the church is seen as a family and no one man has a position by which he dominates others. We must abandon the model that burns out one man and leaves the rest unchallenged.

STARTING A CHURCH

Now here is what encourages me about all this. This non-clerical, family-based model of the church is one that can be reproduced by the hundreds and thousand around the nation (and the world). Any group of godly men who are committed to each other as brothers, who share the same scriptural understanding of the church, who are prepared to submit themselves to one another in the Lord-any such handful of men can constitute themselves a church and begin this adventure of seeing a family-based church in their community.

You see, they do not need "a pastor" (meaning a clergy-type professional preacher) to start a church. Better that they do not have such a man, unless he is willing to function by the brotherhood model endorsed by the Apostles.

"You mean you can just up and start a church with a few families?" Yes, you can....

The critical ingredient for successfully shaping a biblical church is the attitude of the men of the group. They must be absolutely committed to the Lord Jesus and his Word, ready to submit their own minds and wills to Scripture. They must also be committed to one another, ready to yield to one another in love. They must not seek a place of prominence over the others. They must cultivate an attitude of sacrifice and service on behalf of the whole group.

The men of the forming church can meet regularly to pray for the body, to discuss the spiritual and physical needs of the member families, to study the Bible, to oversee and shepherd the little flock of God. (In time they will need to recognize elders from among themselves and appoint deacons to assist the elders.) If several men are able to so devote themselves to the Lord and to one another, there is no reason they cannot see a solid church established in their midst.

Forget the "Reverend" business. The Lord chooses ordinary, working men and makes them extraordinary. That could be you!

