

The Clergy System

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(1908-1989)

"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

ISRAEL'S CLERICAL SYSTEM

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. ... They ... wore a special garb, a robe or tunic, girded with a special sash, and topped off with a tall head-dress. No one outside the priesthood was allowed to wear this distinctive attire and any person who did so would suffer death for impersonat-

ing 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 authority.

“And if any one of the common people sin through ignorance, while he doeth somewhat against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done, and be guilty; or if his sin, which he hath sinned, come to his knowledge: then he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats ... and the priest shall make an atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him” (Leviticus 4:27-31).

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 what, 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.

PROFESSIONAL WORSHIP

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 comes 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 into the house of the Lord ” (Psalms 122:1).

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 ...

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 in 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 ...

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 ... may serve in carrying out the will of God. The relegation of that which belongs to all to a special coterie of saints is a step away from the simplicity in Christ and God's purpose ...

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 with whether "the common people" designate one by such titles as "Reverend," or "Right Reverend." ...

The pagan business world looks upon "the minister" of a church as identical in status with the parish priest ... A lot of those who inveigh 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 ...

Not only the world which surrounds our little oasis regards us as "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 ... 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.

... "The System" operates to produce professionals, and a lethargic and indolent people, good-hearted 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. ... "The System" operates only to perpetuate itself just as does the political system or the economic system ... 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.

Sound Words

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