

THE APOSTLES were NOT "REVERENDS"

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...

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... 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 to mention its families whose leaders are given no practical incentive for spiritual growth...

We must abandon the model that burns out one man and leaves the rest unchallenged.