

Roles and Titles

In writing *Ekklesia Then & Now*, I usually try to avoid comments that can be construed as judgmental, but there is one phenomenon in the broad Christian world that is so egregious, so contrary to biblical teaching, that it is difficult to avoid sounding harsh. In this issue of *ET&N* we'll look at roles and titles in the New Testament church and the implications for today.

Then

The fundamental problem that plagues much of the universal church is the unbiblical distinction between clergy and laity. The early church clearly understood that the ground at the foot of the cross was level. There is not even a hint of any clergy-laity division. The Greek root of the word "clergy" is **kleros**, means a portion or inheritance. Scripture makes it clear that the inheritance of eternal life is a gift of God promised to all believers. For example:

*"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the **inheritance (kleros)**. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossian 3:23-24)*

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an **inheritance (kleros)** which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5).*

The word "laity" comes from the Greek **laos**, meaning "people." Most often it is used simply to mean a group, but it is also used for God's people, as in 1 Peter 2:9: "A **people (laos)** for God's own possession" (what the KJV renders, "a peculiar people"). The inheritance (**kleros**, clergy) is for **all** of God's people (**laos**, laity). For a specialized class to rhetorically claim some unique right to this inheritance by usurping the word is offensive in the extreme!

The concept of a distinct priesthood comes from the Old Testament system God gave the Israelites, but with Christ's life, death, and resurrection this was replaced by a single high priest, Jesus, and the priesthood of all believers (Hebrews 13:20, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6). The Roman church, in defiance of Scripture, created an authoritative clergy to serve as unbiblical intermediaries. Not long after the apostolic age (about AD 100), this clergy was to be obeyed and became the only ones who could administer baptism or the Lord's Supper. None of this has any root in Scripture and violates the concept of Christ Jesus as our permanent High Priest.

Paul chastised the church in Corinth specifically because it was valuing some individuals over others based on perceived spirituality. His description of the church as an organism, as opposed to an organization (1 Corinthians 13:14-27), makes the

point that each member needs the other and that none can be considered more valuable than another.

Jesus clearly, specifically, and unequivocally enjoined His followers from the use of honorific titles:

*"Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: 'The scribes and the Pharisees...do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. 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'" (Matthew 23:1,5-12).*

When James and John sought an exalted position in the Kingdom, Jesus minced no words in His response:

*"Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, 'You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But **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 slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'" (Mark 10:42-45).*

Jesus was certainly not banning the roles of teacher (Hebrews 5:12), spiritual father (1 Corinthians 4:15) or leader (Hebrews 13:24)—he was referring to the self-exultation involved in assuming a special title. The New Testament church obviously took these commands very seriously because there is absolutely no example of any follower of Jesus using a title. In quoting Paul (or other apostles), I have previously used the title the Apostle Paul, but after searching the Scripture, I have realized that neither he nor anyone else referred to himself as such, so neither will I. The fact is that not only is there no "Apostle Paul" in the Bible, there's also no "Elder Peter," "Bishop James," "Deaconess Phoebe," "Pastor Timothy," or any other example of honorific titles! New Testament writers do sometimes refer to Old Testament prophets using with an honorific (Prophet Isaiah, Prophet Joel, etc.), but there was a hierarchical system before Christ.

Instead, the New Testament believers acknowledged the work and/or character of their brothers or sisters using common terms, and most often referred to one another by their first names:

- Prisca and Aquila, my **fellow workers** in Christ Jesus (Romans 16:3)
- Persis the **beloved**, who has worked hard in the Lord (Romans 16:12)
- Aristarchus, my **fellow prisoner** (Colossians 4:10)
- **Brother** Saul, receive your sight! (Acts 22:13)
- Epaphras, our beloved **fellow bond-servant** (Colossians 1:7)
- Epaphroditus, my **brother** and **fellow worker** and fellow soldier (Philippians 2:25)
- Apphia our **sister** (Philemon 1:2)
- Serving one another as good **stewards** of the manifold grace of God (1 Peter

4:10)

- (Phoebe) herself has also been a **helper** of many (Romans 16:2)
- Apelles, the **approved** in Christ (Romans 16:10)
- Rufus, a **choice** man in the Lord (Romans 16:13)

Similarly, in the entire collection of Ante-Nicene writers, there is not a single use of the term bishop, elder, presbyter, or deacon as an honorific. It is always [Name], bishop of [City]—this despite the fact that by early in the second century, these roles had been elevated to less biblical leadership positions, conferring upon bishops or their *specific* designees, for example, the exclusive right to preside over communion or perform baptisms.

Throughout the New Testament and the early writings of the church, however, there are only two who rate any honorific—**Father** God and **Christ** (Messiah) Jesus.

Now

Today, we have a plethora of honorific titles, only some of which even have linguistic roots in Scripture (those in italics): Acolyte, lector, *apostle*, *prophet(ess)*, cardinal, *evangelist*, pope, *pastor*, *presbyter*, monsignor, *elder*, doctor, *bishop*, *teacher*, *minister*, primate, *brother/sister*, *priest*, *saint*, reverend, *deacon(ess)*, etc. The church has more titles than the military! As stated earlier, however, even the biblical terms were used as functional descriptors, not honorific titles. The literal definitions of the biblical terms reveal their functional nature: an apostle is a *messenger*, an evangelist is a *preacher* of the Gospel, a pastor is a *shepherd*, a bishop is an *overseer*, a minister and a deacon is a *servant*.

Several of these are redundant. Presbyter is a transliteration of the Greek word for elder, bishop of the Latin word for overseer; and the terms pastor, elder/presbyter, and bishop/overseer are used interchangeably in Scripture to denote the **servant** leaders of individual congregations. Deacon and minister come from the same Greek word, **diakonos**, which literally means "servant." The term "doctor" comes from the Latin for "teacher."

To me, the worst of these is "Reverend," because it means "one to be revered," and that is often compounded with superlatives (Very Reverend, Right Reverend, and Most Reverend). Don't those who assume such titles hear Jesus' warning about exulting oneself over others? Oh, but these people earned the right to these titles by studying for years in seminaries, didn't they? Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't confer authority based on academic grounds. Instead it is based on gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit according to the will of God. Basing ecclesiastical authority on human institutions and ordination is a blatant attempt to usurp the authority of God. Who do you suppose is pleased by such a substitution?

Another commonly-used title is "Senior Pastor." The term "pastor" comes from the Greek, **poimen**, which means "shepherd;" therefore a "Senior Pastor" is a "Chief Shepherd." According to Scripture, there is only one chief shepherd, Christ Jesus. The use of the term "Senior Pastor" is therefore a subtle assumption of a title reserved for the Lord. To be precise, I suppose, all shepherd leaders should refer to themselves as assistant pastors.

What, you may ask, is the harm in such titles? While titles may not be inherently wrong, they are dangerous because of the affect they can have on both the

individuals assuming them and on the rest of the church. The dangers of pride are spelled out in the Bible, and the use of special titles clearly feed pride, too often leading church leaders to "to think more highly of (themselves) than (they) ought to think" (Romans 12: 3).

Honorific titles promote an authoritative, hierarchical church government artificially divides the body (clergy-laity). The implicit message of hierarchies is that only those near the top of the structure are most capable and, in the church, more "spiritual," than those at the bottom. That leads to a church where the congregants are too often mere observers, relying on the leaders to get the job done and creating a mass of complacent, pew-potato Christians.

Most importantly, an honored clerical class inevitably leads many people to put their allegiance in men, rather than in Christ Jesus only, where it belongs. As J.C. Ryle (*Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, pg. 300) has pointed out, "Human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister than an invisible Christ." Such misplaced reliance on human beings is extraordinarily dangerous. How many people's faith was damaged by the well-publicized fall of such leaders as Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggart? One only has to look at the historical evidence of the papacy to see that the wrong type of men have often been attracted to it.

None of this is intended to suggest that all church leaders using honorific titles are prideful or authoritative, but the seeds of the church's destruction as an instrument of God's message to humanity lies in the clergy-laity division and the elevation of individuals over Christ Himself. As Alexander Strauch (*Biblical Eldership*, p. 32) points out, "It is critically important for Christians today to understand that the language we use to describe our church leaders has the power to accurately reflect biblical thinking and practice or, conversely, to lead us far away from the true Church of Jesus Christ and into the false church." Nor is it meant to deny the need for leadership in the church. The Church Growth Movement identifies strong pastoral leadership as a key factor, but it is important to understand the type of leadership the Bible commands, which is one in which leaders lead by example and consider themselves absolute servants of others. Furthermore, Scripture calls for leadership by a plurality of elders (pastors), not by the centralization of power around a single individual.

In the church of Jesus Christ, we are all called to be priests, servants, ministers, messengers, ambassadors, and disciples. The effectiveness of the church is weakened by the fact that too **many** assume the titles, while too **few** assume the roles.

Discussion

Several subscribers commented on the "Roles and Titles" issue of ET&N:

Jack from cox.net:

Amen, Dick. This has been one of the burs under my blanket as well. I have a passion of working toward the unity of believers and feel that this is one of the most misunderstood aspects of Christianity and thus becomes a tall wall barring efforts toward unity.

My brother John (from Texas):

So, I would guess you are not following with much interest selection of the new Pope?

DS: Actually, I am following the stories about the elevation of Joseph Ratzinger to Benedict XVI, not because I recognize his position as legitimate theologically, but because the pope is a major world figure controlling the hearts and minds of millions of Catholics. To the extent that John Paul II broke down some of the barriers between Christians and, along with Ronald Reagan, helped bring the demise of the Communist bloc, we have seen that popes can affect positive change.

By the way, *World* magazine had called Ratsinger a dark horse prior to his election and commented, "At 77, he likely would be considered an 'interim pope' whose courageous promotion of orthodox Catholic teaching would keep John Paul II's doctrinal legacy intact." (April 16, 2005; pg. 21)

Darrell from Delaware:

Churches like Xenos, Willow Creek, Saddleback, and Hunter Hill's Baptist (5000 plus members) in Birmingham, all have great numbers of paid staff positions for their multi-functions. I happen to favor this approach because I don't honestly believe that the volunteerism we have in the Church of Christ gets it done as well as it should or can be done. I believe dedicated to the task and managed folk can do much more and do it better. I believe these paid folk can work harder at pressing the issue of volunteering for all members of the body. We generally operate in the 80/20 or 75/25 arena of volunteers or active participants. One man's judgment.

DS: I agree that paid staff have an important role (and one supported by biblical teaching), but it depends on how they view themselves. When they act as the keepers of doctrine and ritual, they tend to create pew-potatoes. When they act as teachers and encouragers, they can motivate congregants to get out of the pews and fulfill their individual missions.

David from Ohio:

Thanks for the good article about Robes and Titles. How true that man desires to exalt himself.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Repent America, Marvin Olasky, and Michael Peroutka

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