

## **Nicolaitanism — or The Rise and Growth of the Clergy**

"But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. "

"So have you also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate" (Rev 2:6,15).

The address to Pergamos follows that to Smyrna. This next stage of the Church's journey in its departure (alas!) from Truth may easily be recognized historically. It applies to the time when, after having passed through the heathen persecution, and the faithfulness of many an Antipas being brought out by it, it got publicly recognized and established in the world. The theme of this letter is: the Church dwelling where Satan's throne is. "Throne" it should be, not "seat." Now Satan has his throne, not in hell, which is his prison, and where he never reigns at all, but in the world, where he is expressly called the "prince of this world." To dwell where Satan's throne is means to settle down in the world, under Satan's government, so to speak, and protection. That is what people call the establishment of the Church. It took place in Constantine's time.

Although blending in with the world had been growing for a long time more and more obvious, yet it was then that the Church stepped into the seats of the old heathen idolatry. It was what people call the triumph of Christianity, but the result was that the Church had the things of the world, now as never before, in secure possession: the chief place in the world was hers, and the principles of the world everywhere pervaded her.

The very name of "Pergamos" tells us that. It is a word (without the particle attached to it, which is significant in and of itself) that really means "marriage," and the Church's marriage before Christ comes to receive her to Himself is necessarily unfaithfulness to Him to whom she is espoused. It is the marriage of the Church to the world which the letter to Pergamos speaks of - the end of a courtship which had been going on long before.

There is something, however, which is preliminary to this, and mentioned in the very first address; but there it is evidently incidental, and does not characterize the state of things. In the first address, to the Ephesians, the Lord says, "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate" (2:6). But now it is more than just the "deeds" of the Nicolaitanes. Now there are not only "deeds," but "doctrine." And the Church, instead of repudiating it, was holding with it. In the Ephesian days, they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitanes; but in Pergamos, they "had," and did not rebuke, those who held the doctrine.

The question now before us is: How shall we interpret this? And we will find that the word "Nicolaitanes" is the only thing really which we have to interpret it by. People have tried very hard to show that there was a sect of the Nicolaitanes, but it is considered by writers now almost on all sides to be very doubtful. Nor can we conceive why, in letters like these with the kind of the character we have seen them to have, there should be such repeated and emphatic mention of a

mere obscure sect — one that people can tell us little or nothing about, and that seems manufactured to suit the passage before us. The Lord solemnly denounces it: "Which thing I hate." It must have a special importance to Him, and must be of momentous significance in the Church's history, little understood as it may have been. And another thing which we have to remember is that it is not the way of Scripture to send us to church histories, or to any history at all, in order to interpret what it says. God's Word is its own interpreter, and we do not have to go elsewhere in order to find out what is there. Otherwise, it becomes a matter of learned men searching and finding out things for those who do not have the same means or abilities, resulting in applications that must be accepted on their authority alone. This is something He would not leave His people to. Besides, it is the ordinary way in Scripture, and especially in passages of a symbolical character, such as the part before us, for the names to be significant. I do not need to remind you how abundantly in the Old Testament this is the case. And in the New Testament, although less noticed, I cannot doubt but that there is the same significance throughout.

Here, if we are left simply to the name, it is one sufficiently startling and instructive. Of course, to those who spoke the language used, the meaning would not be a hidden or obscure thing at all, but as obvious as the names in Bunyan's allegories. It means, then, "Conquering the people." The last part of the word ("Laos") is the word used in Greek for "the people," and it is the word from which the commonly used term "Laity" is derived. The Nicolaitanes were simply those "subjecting — putting down — the laity," the mass of Christian people, in order to unduly lord it over them.

What makes this clearer is the fact that, side by side with the Nicolaitanes in the letter to Pergamos, we have those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, a name whose similarity in meaning has been observed by many. "Balaam" is a Hebrew word, whereas the other word is Greek. But its meaning is "Destroyer of the people," a very significant name in view of Balaam's history. And as we read about the "doctrine of the Nicolaitanes," so we also read about a "doctrine of Balaam."

You will recall what it was that he "taught" Balak. Balaam's doctrine was "to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication." For this purpose, he enticed them toward mixture with the nations, from which God had carefully separated them. Breaking down that needful separation was their destruction, to whatever degree it succeeded. In the same way, we have seen that the Church was to be called out from the world, and it is only too easy to apply the same divine symbolism in this case. But here we have an admittedly symbolic people, with a correspondingly significant name, and in such close connection as naturally to confirm the reading of the similar word, "Nicolaitanes," as similarly significant. We can talk more about that some other time, if it seems right.

For now, let us notice the development of Nicolaitanism. It is, first of all, certain people who have this character, and who (I am merely translating the word) start out by taking the place of superiors over the people. Their "deeds" show what they are. There is no "doctrine" yet, not at first, but it ends up in Pergamos with the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. That place of superiority is assumed, now, to be theirs by right. There is a doctrine — a teaching — about it, accepted at

least by some, and to which the Church at large — you might even say the Church as a whole — has become indifferent.

Now what has happened in between these two things, after the "deeds" and before the "doctrine"? It was the rise of a faction whom the Lord marks out as those who said they were Jews and were not, but who were the synagogue of Satan: the adversary's attempt (alas! too successful) to Judaize the Church.

You may already know something of what the characteristics of Judaism are. It was a probationary system, a sort of trial period, in which it was to be seen whether man could produce a righteousness for God. We know how the trial ended, and that God pronounced "none righteous — no, not one." And then it was seen that God alone could manifest His grace. As long as He was putting man under trial, He could not possibly open the way to His own presence and justify the sinner there. He had to, as long as this trial went on, shut him out. After all, on that ground nobody could see God and live.

Now, the very essence of Christianity is that all are welcomed in. There is an open door and ready access, where the blood of Christ entitles everyone, however much a sinner, to draw near to God. In the first place, it enables the sinner to find, at His hand, justification as ungodly. To see God in Christ is not to die, but to live. And what, further, is the consequence of this? The people who have come this way to Him — the people who have found the way of access through the peace-speaking blood into His presence, who have learned what God is in Christ, and who have been justified before God — are able to take, and are taught to take, a place distinct from all others. For now they are His, children of the Father, members of Christ. They are His body. That is the Church, a body called out, separate from the world.

Judaism, on the other hand, necessarily mixed everything together. Nobody there could take such a place with God. Nobody could cry, "Abba, Father." Not really. Therefore, there could not be any separation. This mixture of things had been necessary, then, and undoubtedly from God. But now, Judaism being set up all over again, after God had abolished it... It was no use, no use at all to insist that it was once from Him. Setting it up again was the all-too-successful work of the enemy against His gospel and against His Church. He labels these Judaizers as the "synagogue of Satan."

Now, we can understand at once that when the Church in its true character was practically lost sight of, when "Church members" meant people baptized by water (or attending "services" or participating in programs or contributing money or...) without necessarily being baptized by the Holy Spirit, then, of course, the Jewish synagogue was practically set up all over again. It became more and more impossible to talk about Christians being at peace with God, or saved. They were *hoping* to be saved, with sacraments and ordinances becoming the means of grace to ensure, as much as possible, a far-off salvation.

Let us see how far this would help on the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. It is plain that when and as the Church sank into the synagogue, the Christian people practically became all that the Jewish

people of old had been. Now, what was that position? As I have said, there was no real drawing near to God at all. Even the high priest who (symbolic of Christ) entered into the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement, had to cover the mercy seat with a cloud of incense so that he wouldn't die. But the ordinary priests could not enter there at all. They could only go into the outer Holy Place, while the people in general could not even come in there. And this was intentionally designed as a testimony to their condition. It was the result of failure on their part. For God's offer to them, which you may find in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, was this: "Now, therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, you shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."

Thus they were conditionally offered equal nearness of access to God — they should be all priests. But this offer was withdrawn, for they broke the covenant. So then a special family was put into the place of priests, and the rest of the people were put into the background, only able to draw near to God *through* these priests.

Thus a separate and intermediate priesthood characterized Judaism, while on the other hand, for the same reason, the many gifts of the Spirit that are in Christ were completely missing among the common people. There was no "encouraging and admonishing one another daily," nor was there any provision, any command, to share the law with others at all. What, in fact, could they say? That God was in the thick darkness? That no one could see Him and live? It is surely evident there was no "good news" there. Judaism had no true gospel. The absence of the gifts and personality of Christ distributed amongst His people, and the presence of the intermediate priesthood, told the same sorrowful story. They were in perfect keeping with each other.

Such was Judaism. How different, then, is Christianity! No sooner had the death of Christ ripped open the veil, opening a way of access into the presence of God, than at once there was a good news to be told. And the new order was, "Go out into all the world, and announce the good news to every creature." God is making Himself known, and "is He the God of the Jews only?" Can you confine all that within the bounds of a nation? No! The fermentation of the new wine would burst the bottles.

At the same time, the intermediate priesthood was done away with, for all the Christian people are priests to God now. What was conditionally offered to Israel is now an accomplished fact in Christianity. We are a kingdom of priests now. It is no coincidence that, in God's wisdom, Peter (the same Peter whom many men mistakenly hail as the great head of ordained ritualism) is the one who, in his first letter, announces the very two things which destroy ritualism from the roots up, for any who choose to believe him. First, Peter declares that we are "born again," not through ritual, but "by the word of God that lives and abides forever," and this is "the word which by the good news is announced to you." Secondly, instead of to a set of priests, he says to all Christians: "You also, as living stones, are built up as a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (2:5). The sacrifices are spiritual, including praise and thanksgiving, and our lives and bodies as well (Heb 13:15, 16; Rom 12:1). But

this is to be with us true priestly work, and that is where our lives get their proper character. Our entire lives are to be the thank-offering service of those able to draw near to God.

In Judaism, let me repeat, no one *really* drew near, but the people — the laity (which is really nothing but a Greek word made English) — the people could not even draw as near as the priest could. And this same kind of priestly social class, wherever it is found, means the same thing today. There is no way for the whole body of the people to draw near at all. It means distance from God, and darkness — God, shut out from His own people.

Let us see now what is the meaning of a “clergy”. In our day, as well as for many generations, it has been the word which specially marks out a class of people distinguished from the “laity.” This group is distinguished by being given up to sacred things and having a place of privilege in connection with those things which the laity do not have. No doubt, in the present day, this special place is being more and more infringed upon, for two reasons. One reason is that God has been giving light and, among Protestants at least, Scripture is opposing itself to tradition, modifying it even where it does not destroy it. The other reason is a merely human one — that we live in a democratic day and age, when class privileges are breaking down.

But what does it mean to have this class of people? Obviously, if Scripture does not make good their claim, then distinguishing themselves in this way from the laity, and making themselves privileged beyond everyone else, is real and open Nicolaitanism. For then the laity has been subjected to them, and that is the exact meaning of the term. Does Scripture, then, use such terms in a way that justifies their practice today? It is plain that it does not. Such things are, as far as the New Testament is concerned, an invention that came along at a much later date. Granted, however, it may be admitted that these were actually imported from something that is older than the New Testament — the Judaism with which the Church (as we have seen) was quickly permeated.

But we must see the important principles involved, to see how the Lord has (as He must have) cause to say about the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, “Which I also hate.” We too, if we would be in communion with the Lord in this, must hate what He hates. I am not talking about hating people. I am talking about a thing. Unfortunately for us, we are at the end of a long series of departures from God and, as a consequence, we grow up in the midst of many things which come down to us as “traditions of the elders,” associated with names which so many of us revere and love, upon whose authority in reality we have accepted them, without ever having looked at them really in the light of God’s presence. And so there are many whom we gladly recognize as truly men of God and servants of God in a false position. It is that position I am talking about. I am talking about a thing, as the Lord does: “Which thing I hate.” He does not say, “Which people I hate.” Although in those days this kind of evil was not an inheritance, as it is now, and the first propagators of it, of course, had a responsibility, self-deceived as they may have been, peculiarly their own. Still, in this matter as in all others, we do not need to be ashamed or afraid to be where the Lord is. In fact, we cannot be with *Him* in this unless we are. And He says of Nicolaitanism, “Which thing I hate.”

Because what does it mean? It means a spiritual social grouping, or class, a set of people having an official right to leadership in spiritual things. It means a nearness to God derived from official place, not spiritual power. It means, in fact, the revival (under the guise of other names and with various modifications) of that very same intermediate priesthood which distinguished Judaism, and which Christianity emphatically disclaims. That is what a clergy means. And in contrast to these folks, the rest of Christians are just the laity, the seculars, who have to be put back into that old distance, more or less, which the cross of Christ has done away with.

We see, then, why it was necessary that the Church should be Judaized before the deeds of the Nicolaitanes could ripen into a "doctrine." After all, the Lord had even authorized obedience to scribes and Pharisees sitting in Moses' seat. So to make this text apply today, as people apply it now, of course Moses' seat had to be set up in the Christian Church. With this done, and the mass of Christians removed from the priesthood Peter spoke about and degraded into mere "lay members," the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes was at once established.

Do not misunderstand me. This by no means negates the fact that, when Jesus "ascended on high, He gave gifts to men," or that "it was He who gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some bearers of good news, and some shepherds and teachers" for the purpose of preparing God's people for "works of serving, so that the body of Christ will be built up." These are of far more importance than most realize, and Scriptures plainly teach that not all are apostles, not all are prophets, not all are teachers... (1 Cor 12). And yet the functioning of these gifts, the practical working out of these expressions of Jesus' character and personality within the body of Christ, was always, throughout the New Testament, as brothers living amongst brothers — never as ones who rule over the people. And the end result was always "that the body of Christ will be built up," not pushed down and prevented from functioning in the rest of the gifts from on high. The miserable system which we see all around us degrades true servant leadership from Jesus' original intention, and actually enslaves it to the carnal ways of men.

What do the Scriptures teach about all this? The Assembly, the Called-Out, the Church of God is Christ's body. All the members are members of Christ. There is no other membership in Scripture than this, the membership of Christ's body, to which all true followers of Jesus belong. Not many bodies of Christ, but one body. Not many Churches, but one Church. There is, of course, a different place for each member of the body by the very fact that he is part of the body. Not all parts have the same function: there is the eye, the ear, and so on, but they are all necessary, and all necessarily serving, in some way or sense, one another. And one cannot say to the other, whether out loud or by living as if it were so: "I have no need of you."

Every member has its place, not merely locally, and for the benefit of certain other members, but for the benefit of the whole body. Each member has its gift, as the apostle teaches distinctly. "For as we have many members in one body, and all members do not have the same function; so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us" (Rom 12:4-6). In the twelfth chapter of first

Corinthians, the apostle speaks extensively about these gifts, and he calls them by a significant name — "manifestations of the Spirit." They are gifts of the Spirit, of course; but beyond that, they are "manifestations of the Spirit."

For instance, if you take the gospel of God, where does it derive its authority and power from? From any sanction of men? Any human credentials of any kind? Or from its own inherent power? I dare maintain that the common attempt to authenticate the messenger takes away from, instead of adding to, the power of the Word. God's Word must be received as such, as God's own Word. He that receives it testifies that God is true. Its power to redeem the heart and conscience is derived from the fact that it is "God's good news." He knows perfectly what man needs, and He has provided for it perfectly. Whoever has known its power to change lives also knows good and well from whom it comes. The work and witness of the Spirit of God in the soul need no witness of man to supplement them.

Even the Lord's appeal in His own case was to the truth He uttered: "If I speak the truth, why do you not believe Me?" When He stood forth in the Jewish synagogue, or elsewhere, He was, in men's eyes, nothing but a poor carpenter's son. He was accredited by no school or set of men at all. All the weight of authority was ever against Him. He disclaimed even "receiving testimony from men." God's Word alone should speak for God. "My teaching is not Mine, but His that sent Me." And how did it approve itself? By the fact of its being truth. "If I speak the truth, why do you not believe Me?" It was the truth that was to make its way with the true, that is, with those who are true on the inside.

"He that will do God's will shall know whether my teaching comes from God, or whether I speak out of Myself." He says, "I speak the truth, I bring it to you from God; and if it is truth, and if you are seeking to do God's will, you will learn to recognize it as the truth." God will not leave people in ignorance and darkness, not if they are seeking to be doers of His will. Can you suppose that God would allow true hearts to be deceived by whatever plausible deceptions might be going around? He is able to make His voice known by those who seek to hear His voice. And so the Lord says to Pilate, "Every one that is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:37). "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." And again, "A stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him; for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:27, 5). Such is the nature of truth, then, that to presume to authenticate it to those who are true, themselves, is to dishonor it, as if it were not capable of being self-evident. In the process, such claims dishonor God, as if He could be insufficient to souls, or to what He Himself has given.

No, instead the apostle speaks of "by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). In the same way, the Lord speaks of that manifestation of the truth as being the condemnation of the world. "Light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). There was no lack of evidence — light was there and men admitted its power, to their own condemnation, when they sought to escape it. Even so, in the gift itself there was "the manifestation of the Spirit," and it was "given to every man to benefit from." By the very fact that he had it, man was

responsible to use it — responsible to Him who had not given it in vain. In the gift itself lay the ability to serve, as well as the *responsibility*. For I am bound to help and attend to the needs of others with what I have. And if souls are genuinely helped, they scarcely need to ask if I had commission to do it.

This is the simple character of gifting: the service of love, according to the ability which God gives. It is the mutual service of each one to each other, and of each one to all, without any jostling or excluding of one another. Each gift was thrown into the common treasury, and all were made that much richer by it. God's blessing and the manifestation of the Spirit were the only authorization or endorsement needed. Not all were teachers, let alone apt to teach in a public or noticeable sort of way. And yet the same exact principles applied to all the gifts within the body of Christ. There was One Body made of many parts serving many functions, each of whom served and helped build up the Body according to his sphere.

Was there nothing else than that? Was there no ordained class at all, then? Not at all. That is another thing altogether from anything remotely discussed in the Scriptures. There were, without doubt, what many refer to as "deacons" (another Greek word brought straight into English by changing the spelling ever so slightly). The word itself simply means "servants," and that is what they were. Then there were elders, implying older and more experienced, also referred to as overseers (Acts 20:28 Tit.1:5, 7). Their work was to "oversee," and although for that purpose their being "apt to teach" was a much-needed qualification, in view of errors already spreading, yet no one could suppose that teaching was limited to just those who were "elders." They led and guided the flock much as a shepherd, with the gentleness of a father with his own children. This kind of leadership stood in stark contrast to the way of the gentiles, who "lord over" the people.

So that, in a nutshell, is what the Scripture teaches on the subject. Our painful duty, now, is to contrast all that with the world system and to expose it. In that system, a distinct class of people are formally devoted to spiritual things. And to the same degree that those people are set distinguished in this way, the rest of the people — the laity — are excluded from such involvement. This is true Nicolaitanism, the "subjection of the people."

Again I say not only that giftedness is entirely right, but that those who have special gifts are responsible (though still not exclusively) to walk in them. But priesthood is another thing, something distinct enough, I might add, as to be easily recognized wherever it is claimed or, in fact, exists. Of course, I am aware that protestants, in general, claim not to give any priestly powers to their leaders. I have no wish nor thought of accusing them to be dishonest in this. What they mean is that they do not think of "the minister" or "the pastor" as having any authoritative power to take away sins. Likewise, protestants do not set up any kind of altar where, day after day, the perfection of Christ's one offering is denied through countless repetitions. And I would have to say they are right in both respects, but that is hardly the whole matter. If we look more deeply, we will discover that, even where these things are absent, a lot of other priestly characteristics may show up.

Priesthood and gifting may be distinguished from each other in this way: Gifting (in the sense we are now considering) is to men, that the Body of Christ might be built up. Priesthood, on the other hand, is to God. The gifts bring God's character and personality and message to the people, as earthen vessels speaking for Him to them. The priest goes to God for the people, and he speaks in the reverse way, for them to Him. It is surely easy to distinguish these two postures.

"Praise and thanksgiving" are spiritual "sacrifices." They are part of our offering as priests. Anytime you put a special class of people into a place where they regularly and officially (or sometimes "unofficially") act in this way on behalf of the rest, you have given them the rank of an intermediate priesthood. You have made them mediators with God for all those others who are not so near to Him. For example... Breaking bread together is one of the more outward and visible reminders of our oneness together in Christ's death and resurrection, as One Loaf without leaven, without mixture. And yet, how many protestant "leaders" look upon it as their official right to "administer" this, or even "preside over" it? How many "layman" shrink at the thought of somehow profaning it with their hands? And this is one of the terrible evils of the system, that the mass of Christian people are thus distinctly secularized. Occupied with worldly things, they cannot be expected to be, spiritually, what the clergy are. And they are resigned to this, as it were. They are released from having to concern themselves with spiritual matters, to which they are not equal, and to which others give themselves entirely.

But, obviously, this must go much farther. "The priest's lips should keep knowledge." The laity, who have become laity by abdicating (giving up) their priesthood — how should they retain the knowledge belonging to a priestly class? The un-spirituality to which they have given themselves up pursues them here. And so the special class who have made it their business to know God also become the authorized interpreters of the Word. After all, how should the secular man know so well what Scripture means? Thus the clergy become spiritual eyes and ears and mouth for the laity, and are well on their way to becoming the whole body, too.

But it suits people well. Do not misunderstand me, as if I meant that all this has come about strictly because a certain class of people were presumptuous. That is part of it, no doubt. But never could this miserable and unscriptural distinction of clergy and laity have taken place so rapidly as it did, and so universally, if it were not for the fact that, everywhere it spread, it was well adapted to the tastes of the very people it displaced and degraded. Not just in Israel, but in christendom too, has the Scripture been fulfilled: "The prophets prophecy falsely, and the priests bear rule through their means, and My people love to have it so!" So they did, and so they do now. As spiritual decline sets in, the heart that is turning to the world is more than willing to barter, to trade like Esau did, its spiritual birthright for a mess of pottage. It gladly exchanges its need to care too much about spiritual things with those who will accept the responsibility. Worldliness is well covered with a layman's cloak. And as the church at large dropped out of first love (which it did rapidly, and then the world began to come in through the loosely guarded gates) it became more and more impossible for the rank and file of christendom to take the blessed and wonderful place that belonged to Christians. Each step in this downward spiral, without the courage to turn back against the flow, only made the next step that much easier until, in less than

three hundred years from the beginning, a Jewish priesthood and ritualistic religion had been installed everywhere. Only this time it was worse, because the precious things of Christianity left their names on everything, like spoils left to an invading army. And for most people, the shadow (or symbolic things) took the place of the actual substance itself.

But I must return to look more specifically at one feature of this system of “clerics”. I have already noted the way that priesthood has been substituted for gifting, as well the assumption of an official title in spiritual things and special permission to do certain things. And I suppose I ought to add to that list the special permission to baptize, even. None of these special privileges can be found in the Bible at all. But I must dwell a little more on the emphasis that is laid on ordination. I want you to see a little more what it means to ordain.

In the first place, if you look through the New Testament, you will find nothing about people being “ordained” to teach or to share the news about Jesus. You find people going around everywhere, freely exercising whatever gifts they had. The whole Church was scattered abroad from Jerusalem, except the apostles, and they went everywhere announcing the Good News. The persecution did not ordain them, I suppose. So with Apollos, so with Philip. There is, in fact, no trace of anything else. Timothy received a gift of prophecy through the laying on of Paul’s hands with those of the elders. But that was a gift, not some sort of official authorization or endorsement. So he is bidden to communicate his own knowledge to faithful men, who should be able to teach others also. Here again, there is not a single word about ordaining them. We have already talked about elders. The case of Paul and Barnabas at Antioch is, sadly, one of the most misapplied, in the way that people use it. For they make it as if prophets and teachers were “ordaining” an apostle, when Paul himself insisted that he had been sent “not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.” And even there, in Antioch, the Holy Spirit does not “confer power to ordain” anyone, but simply says, “Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them (see Acts 8, 11, 13, 18; 1 Tim, etc.).

Now, what does this thing called “ordination” mean? Quite a bit, you may be sure, or it would not be so zealously contended for as it is. There are, no doubt, two phases to it. In the most extreme case, as among Romanists and ritualists, the claim is made in the fullest way that it conveys, not only authority, but spiritual power. They assume, with all the power of apostles, to give the Holy Spirit by the laying on of their hands. And here is priesthood in the fullest sense. The people of God, as such, are rejected from the priesthood He has given them, and a special class of people are put into their place to mediate for them in a way which sets aside the fruit of Christ’s work and ties them to the man-made organization as the channel of all grace. Among protestants, you may think, I do not need to dwell on this, but it is done among some of these also. It is done in words which, to a certain class of them, seem strangely to mean nothing, while another class find in those words the abundant authorization of their highest pretensions.

On the other hand, there are those who rightly and consistently reject these un-Christian assumptions and do not presume outright to confer any gift in ordination. They say that they are merely “recognizing” the gift which God has given. But then, in the end, this official “recognition”

is considered necessary before the person can baptize anyone, or do other things which really require no particular gift at all. And as for the daily application of the Word into lives and situations around them, God's command to "admonish one another daily" is made to require human sanction. And this sanction is "recognized" on behalf of His people by those who are considered to have a discernment which the people, as such, do not have. Blind themselves or not, these men are to become "leaders of the blind." So the masses need others to be eyes for them, while their own souls are taken out of the place of immediate responsibility to God and, instead, made responsible in an improper way to man. An artificial conscience is manufactured for them, and conditions are constantly imposed, to which they have to conform in order to obtain the needed recognition. Once "recognized," they are generally under the control of their ordainers as to their path of service, as well.

In principle, this is unfaithfulness to God. For, if He has given me a gift to use for Him, I am surely unfaithful if I go to any man or body of men to ask their permission to use it. The gift itself carries with it the responsibility to use it, as we have seen. If they say, "But people may make mistakes," I admit that readily. But who is to assume my personal responsibility if I am mistaken? And again, the mistakes of an ordaining body are infinitely more serious than those of one who merely runs unsent. Their mistakes are consecrated and perpetuated by the ordination they bestow. Here is what I mean: The man who gets "ordained" would have, if he stood simply upon his own merits, eventually found his true level soon enough. But now, thanks to the ordination, he has this depth of character "conferred" upon him, as if that were possible, which the whole weight of the system must struggle to sustain. Whether it was a mistake or not, he is nonetheless one of the clerical body — an official servant, even if he has nothing really to serve with. Now the system is duty-bound to provide for him, even if it is only with some less conspicuous place where souls, dear to God as any others, are put under his care, only to go unfed if he cannot feed them.

Do not think I am being sarcastic here. Actually, the only sarcasm here is this very system I am speaking of — the binding of the body of Christ in bands which hinder the free circulation of the revitalizing blood which ought to be permeating the whole body without restriction. Nature itself should rebuke this foolishness — this enormous inference, loosely based on scriptural premises, that apostles and apostolic men "ordained" elders, or anyone else, in the sense that they are ordained today. Even if they could somehow prove that, scripturally, they would be hard pressed to prove that the "elder" might be a young, unmarried man just out of his teens, or that he also took the place of evangelist, shepherd, teacher — all of God's various gifts rolled into one! This is what the system refers to as "the minister" (or "the pastor" or "the preacher" or...). The all-in-all to the fifty or five hundred souls who are committed to him as "his flock," with which no one else has a right to interfere! Surely, surely, the brand of "Nicolaitanism" is upon the forefront of such a system as this!

Take it at its best, the man, if gifted at all, is scarcely likely to have every gift. Suppose he is an evangelist, and souls are happily converted. He is no teacher, and so he cannot build them up. Or perhaps he is a teacher, sent to a place where there are only a few Christians, and the bulk of the people around him are unconverted men. Few are turned to the Living God, and his presence there (playing by the rules of the system, anyway) keeps away the gifts who are most needed

there. Thank God! He is ever breaking up these systems, and in some irregular way the need may be supplied. But the supply is disruptive and brings confusion. In other words, the new wine breaks the poor human bottles.

The system is responsible for all this. The exclusive gifting of one man, or of a number of men, amongst the community of Believers has no shred of Scripture to support it. Meanwhile, the ordination, as we have seen, is an attempt to confine all the functioning of the Body to a certain privileged class and to make it rest on human authorization rather than on divine gifting. The end result is that the people, Christ's sheep, are denied their competency to hear His voice. The inevitable tendency, then, is to fix upon the man all the attention which should be devoted to the words he brings. The question becomes: Is he accredited? Is he ordained? The focus is no longer on whether or not he speaks truly. Actually, the truth of his words is already settled in the minds of his listeners by the fact that he has been ordained.

Paul — an apostle, not of men, nor by man — refused to be received on such grounds. There were apostles before him, and he neither went up to them nor got anything from them. If there were a succession, it ended with him. And everything he did, he did it purposefully, to show that his gospel was not from man (Gal 1:11), so that it might not rest upon the authority of man. No, if he himself proclaimed a different gospel from what he had proclaimed (for there was no other), or even an angel from heaven (where the authority, if that were in question, might seem conclusive), his solemn decision is, "Let him be accursed."

Authority, then, is nothing if it be not the authority of the Word of God. That is the test. Is it according to the Scriptures? "If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into the ditch?" To say, "I could not know the way, of course, so I trusted another," will not save you from the ditch.

But the unspiritual and unlearned layman — how can he pretend to equal the knowledge of the educated and accredited "minister" devoted to spiritual things? As a matter of fact, in general, he does not. He yields to the one who should know better and, practically speaking, the appointed expert's teaching largely supplants the authority of the Word of God in his life. That is not to say that, by doing this, he achieves perfect certainty on the matter. He cannot hide from himself the fact that people differ in their opinions, no matter how wise and good and learned and accredited they may be. You might think he would recognize that God is allowing men's "authorities" to get into a Babel of confusion. But here is where the devil steps in and suggests to the unwary soul that the confusion must be the result of the obscurity of Scripture. All along, the truth is that they have got into this mess by disregarding Scripture.

But this is everywhere! Opinion, not faith, but opinion to which you are welcome and have a right, of course. And you must allow others a right to theirs. You may say, "I believe," as long as you do not mean by that, "I know." To claim "knowledge" is to claim that you are wiser, more learned, better than whole generations before you, who thought just the opposite of what you do.

Need I show you how infidelity thrives upon this? How Satan rejoices when, for the simple and emphatic "Yes" of the divine voice, he succeeds in substituting the Yes and No of a host of jarring commentators? Do you think you can fight the Lord's battles with the rush of human opinions instead of "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" applied specifically to real lives and practical situations? Do you think "Thus saith John Calvin" or "John Wesley" will meet Satan as satisfactorily as "Thus saith the Lord"?

Who can deny that such thoughts are out there, and not at all limited to papists or ritualists? Sadly enough, this tendency toward the heart of unbelief, ever departing from the living God, is as near to His own People today as at any other time through the centuries that His Church has traveled. Yet He remains just as competent to instruct as ever, just as ready to fulfill the word that says: "Whoever will do His will shall know whether the teaching comes from God." But it takes seeing with the "eyes of the heart" and not the head. He has hidden from the wise and learned what He reveals to babes. The school of God is more effective than all the colleges combined. And in this school, layman and cleric are equal: "he that is spiritual discerns all things," and he alone. There is no substitute for spirituality, and un-spirituality is something that the Spirit of God alone can remedy. Ordination, such as practiced, is rather like a stamp of approval put upon un-spirituality. It is an attempt to manifest what has to be either the manifestation of the Spirit, or not His work at all. It is an attempt to provide leaders for the blind when, no matter how hard they try, they cannot ensure that those leaders will not be blind themselves.

Before I close, I must say a few words about "succession." An ordination which claims to be derived from the apostles has to be (in order to be consistent) a successional one. Who can confer authority (and in the least and lowest theories of ordination authority is conferred) except someone who has, himself, been authorized for this very purpose? You must, therefore, have a chain (a linear succession) of ordained men, one after the other. Apostolic succession (the idea that this was handed down from the apostles) is just as necessary to the presbyterians as it is to the episcopalians.

But then, notice the result. This idea of succession has nothing to do with spirituality or with truth, even. A Romish priest may have it as well as any. In fact, it was through the gutter of Rome that most of the religious trappings we have around us must necessarily have come down. So then, look at the fruit of this way of thinking: A man can demonstrate a gross lack of holiness and purity, yet this is not considered to invalidate Christ having commissioned him, not in the least. The teacher of false doctrine can be considered, at the same time, to be God's messenger as a teacher of truth. As a matter of fact, having the truth, along with the gift to share it and godliness combined, are not even considered to be part of the credentials of a true ambassador. He may have all these qualities and not be one; he may lack them all and be considered Christ's ambassador anyway.

Who can believe such teaching? Can He who is truth give His stamp of approval to error? Can the Righteous One condone unrighteousness? It is impossible. This ecclesiasticism violates every principle of morality, and it hardens the conscience that has to do with it. For why should

we be careful about truth if He is not? And how can He send messengers that He would not expect to be believed? His own test of a true witness fails. For "he that speaks of himself seeks his own glory; but he that seeks His glory who sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him." His own test of credibility fails. For "if I speak the truth, why do you not believe Me?" That was His own appeal.

No — to state this principle is to condemn it. After all, He foresaw and predicted the failure of what should have been the bright and evident witness of His truth and grace. Therefore, He could not have ordained a succession of teachers for that witness who would carry His commission (indispensable as it was) right into their own failure! Before apostles had left the earth, the house of God had become a "great house," and it was necessary to separate vessels of honor from vessels of dishonor in it. The same God who urged one of His apostles to instruct a fellow pilgrim to "follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart," could not possibly tell us to listen to men who are completely foreign to that way of life. He could not approve of them as His "official" anything, or as having His commission in spite of it all. And thus notably, in the second letter to Timothy, in which this is said, it is "faithful men" who are wanted, not for ordination, but for the deposit of the truth committed to Timothy. "The things which you have heard me say among many witnesses, commit those to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

Thus God's holy Word vindicates itself to the heart and conscience ever. The effort to attach His approval, whether to a Romish priesthood or a protestant hierarchy, fails equally upon the same grounds. For, in this matter, they really are on the same ground. Alas! Nicolaitanism is not just a thing of the past. It is not just some obscure teaching of past ages, but a widespread and gigantic system of error, fruitful in evil results. Error is long-lived, though deadly. Reverence it not for its gray hairs, and do not follow the crowds to do evil. It is for good reason that the Lord say in this case, "Which thing I hate." If He does, shall we be afraid to have fellowship with Him? There are good men tangled up in it, I must admit. There are godly men, and true servants, ignorantly wearing the insignia of men. May God deliver them! May they cast aside their shackles and go free! May they rise up to the true dignity of their calling, responsible to God, and walking before Him alone!

On the other hand, dear brothers, it is of immense importance that all His people, however diverse their places in the body of Christ may be, should realize that they are all responsible to build up the body with the various gifts they have been entrusted with. Likewise, they are all to function as priests. We need to recognize that every Christian has spiritual duties flowing from spiritual relationship to every other Christian. It is the privilege of each one to contribute his share to the common treasury of gift, with which Christ has endowed His Church. In fact, he who does not contribute is actually holding back what is his debt to the whole family of God. No possessor of one talent is entitled to wrap it up in a napkin on that basis — it would be sheer unfaithfulness and unbelief.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Brothers in Christ, when shall we awake to the reality

of our Lord's words there? Ours is a never-failing spring of perpetual joy and blessing and, if only we'll come to it when we thirst, out of our bellies shall flow rivers of living water. The spring is not limited by the vessel which receives it. It is divine, and yet ours fully — fully as can be! Oh, to know more of this abundance, and the responsibility that comes with having it, in a dry and weary scene like this! Oh, to know better the infinite grace which has taken us up as channels of its outflow among men! When shall we rise up to the sense of our common dignity, to the sweet reality of fellowship with Him who "came not to be served, but to serve"? Oh, for unofficial service — the overflowing of full hearts into empty ones, as many as there are around us! How we should rejoice, in a land of want and misery and sin, to find perpetual opportunity to show the competency of Christ's fullness to meet and to heal every form of it.

Official service is, practically speaking, independence from the Spirit of God. It is to decide that one vessel should overflow even when, at the time, it may be practically empty. And on the other hand, it is to decide that another such vessel should not overflow, regardless of how full He may have filled it up. Having an "official" anything is to presume (in the face of the Spirit who has come on Christ's authority to be the Guardian of His people) to provide for order and for edification, not by spiritual power, but by legislation. It would make up for any failure on the part of Christ's sheep to hear His voice, by making it as far as possible unnecessary for them to do so. It thus excuses and perpetuates un-spirituality, instead of condemning or avoiding it.

It is quite true that, in God's mode of treating it, the failure on man's part may become more evident externally. For He cares little about a correct outside when the heart is nevertheless not right with Him. In fact, He knows well that the ability to maintain a correct outside may actually prevent a truthful judgment of what our real condition is before Him. Men would have scolded Peter for trying to walk upon those waves, which made his little faith so apparent. But the Lord would only rebuke the littleness of the faith which made him fail. And man, to this day, would propose the boat as the remedy for failure, instead of the strength of the Lord's support, which He made Peter put to the test. Yet, after all, it must be admitted that the boat may fail. Winds and waves may overthrow it. But "the Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters — yes, mightier than the mighty waves of the sea." Throughout these many centuries of failure, have we proved Him untrustworthy? Beloved, is it your honest conviction that it is absolutely safe to trust the living God? Then let us make no provision for His failure, however much we may have to admit that we have failed! Let us act as if we really trusted Him.