

Nicolaitanism - the Rise and Growth of the Clergy

by F.W. Grant

F.W. Grant's sermon explores the rise of Nicolaitanism and its implications for the Church's structure and the relationship between clergy and laity.

Scripture: John 4:24, John 10:27, John 18:37, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 12:4, 2 Corinthians 4:2, Galatians 1:11, 1 Timothy 3:1, 2 Timothy 2:2, Revelation 2:6

Topics: "Church Government", "Spiritual Authority"

Description

F.W. Grant delves into the issue of Nicolaitanism, highlighting the danger of clerisy and the rise of a spiritual caste within the Church. He emphasizes the departure from truth and the establishment of a worldly Church under Satan's influence, leading to the subjection of the laity by a privileged clergy class. Grant challenges the traditional concept of ordination, stressing that spiritual authority should come from God's Word and individual gifting, not human authorization. He calls for a return to the true essence of ministry, where every believer is a minister and priest, responsible for contributing to the body of Christ and ministering to one another in love.

Transcript

Nicolaitanism, Or

The Rise and Growth of the Clerisy

F.W. Grant

"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. " "So hast thou 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 characteristic of this epistle 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, he is expressly called the "prince of this world." To dwell where Satan's throne is, is 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 amalgamation with the world had been growing for a long time more and more decided, 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 every-where pervaded her.

The very name of "Pergamos" intimates that. It is a word (without the particle attached to it, which is itself significant,) - really meaning "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 and the world which the epistle 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 thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate" (2:6). Here it is more than the "deeds" of the Nicolaitanes. There are now not merely "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 reprobate, those who held the doctrine.

The question now before us is, How shall we interpret this? and we shall 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 owned by writers now almost on all sides to be very doubtful. Nor can we conceive why, in epistles of the character which we have seen these to have, there should be such repeated and emphatic mention of a mere obscure sect, about which people can tell us little or nothing, 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 with Him, and be of moment in the Church's history, little apprehended 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 its sayings. God's Word is its own interpreter, and we have not to go elsewhere in order to find out what is there; otherwise it becomes a question of learned men searching and finding out for those who have not the same means or abilities, applications which must be taken on their authority alone. This 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 is the part before us, for the names to be significant. I need not 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 be no hidden or recondite thing, but as apparent as those of 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 just those "subjecting - putting down the laity" the mass of Christian people, in order unduly to lord it over them.

What makes this clearer is, that, - side by side with the Nicolaitanes in the epistle 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, as the other is a Greek; but its meaning is, "Destroyer of the people," a very significant one in view of his history; and as we read of the "doctrine of the Nicolaitanes," so we read of a "doctrine of Balaam."

You have pointed out what 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 to mixture with the nations, from which God had carefully separated them. That needful separation broken down was their destruction, so far as it prevailed. In like manner we have seen the Church to be called out from the world, and it is only too easy to apply the divine type in this case. But here we have a confessedly typical people, with a corresponding significant name, and in such close connection as naturally to confirm the reading of the similar word, "Nicolaitanes," as similarly significant. I shall have to speak more of this at another time, if the Lord will. Let us notice now the development of Nicolaitanism. It is, first of all, certain people who have this character, and who (I am merely translating the word.) first take the place of superiors over the people. Their "deeds" show what they are. There is no "doctrine" yet; but it ends in Pergamos, with the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. The place is assumed now to be theirs by right. There is a doctrine - a teaching about it, received at least by some, and to which the Church at large - nay, on the whole true souls, have become indifferent.

Now what has come in between these two things, - the "deeds" and the "doctrine"? What we were looking at last time - the rise of a party 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.

We were looking but a little while since at what the characteristics of Judaism are. It was a probationary system, a system of trial, in which it was to be seen if man could produce a righteousness for God. We know the end of the trial, and that God pronounced "none righteous - no, not one." And then alone it was that God 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, as long as this trial went on, to shut him out; for 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 every one, however much a sinner, to draw near to God, and to find, in the first place, at His hand, justification as ungodly. To see God in Christ is not to die, but 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, learned what He is in Christ, and been justified before God, are able to take, and taught to take, a place distinct from all others, as now His, children of the Father, members of Christ - His body. That is the Church, a body called out, separate from the world.

Judaism, on the other hand, necessarily mixed all together. Nobody there could take such a place with God: nobody could cry, "Abba, Father," really; therefore there could not be any separation. This had been then a necessity, and of God, no doubt; but now, Judaism being set up again, after God had abolished it, it was no use, it is no use, to urge that it was once of Him; its setting up was the too successful work of the enemy against His gospel and against His Church. He brands these Judaizers as the "synagogue of Satan."

Now we can understand at once, when the Church in its true character was practically lost sight of, when Church-members meant people baptized by water instead of by the Holy Ghost, or when the baptism of water and of the Holy Ghost were reckoned one, (and this very early became accepted doctrine,) how of

course the Jewish synagogue was practically again set up. It became more and more impossible to speak of Christians being at peace with God, or saved. They were hoping to be, and sacraments and ordinances became means of grace to insure, as far as might be, 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 became practically what of old the Jewish 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 (as a type of Christ,) entered into the holiest once a year, on the day of atonement, had to cover the mercy-seat with a cloud of incense that he might not die. But the ordinary priests could not enter there at all, but only into the outer holy place; while the people in general could not come in even there. And this was expressly designed as a witness of 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 ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine; and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."

They were thus conditionally offered equal nearness of access to God, - they should be all priests. But this was rescinded, for they broke the covenant; and then a special family is put into the place of priests, the rest of the people being put into the background, and only able to draw near to God through these.

Thus a separate and intermediate priesthood characterized Judaism, as on the other hand, for the same reason, what we should call now missionary-work there was none. There was no going out to the world in this way, no provision, no command, to preach the law 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 evangelist and the presence of the intermediate priesthood told the same sorrowful story, and were in perfect keeping with each other.

Such was Judaism; how different, then, is Christianity! No sooner had the death of Christ rent the vail, and opened a way of access into the presence of God, than at once there was a gospel, and the new order is, "Go out into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." God is making Himself known, and "is He the God of the Jews only?" Can you confine that within the bounds of a nation? No; the fermentation of the new wine would burst the bottles.

The intermediate priesthood was, on the other hand, done away; for all the Christian people are priests now to God. What was conditionally offered to Israel is now an accomplished fact in Christianity. We are a kingdom of priests; and it is, in the wisdom of God, Peter, ordained of man the great head of ritualism, who in his first epistle announces the two things which destroy ritualism root and branch for those who believe him. First, that we are "born again," not of baptism, but "by the word of God, that liveth and abideth for-ever;" and this, "the word which by the gospel is preached unto you." Secondly, instead of a set of priests, he says to all Christians, "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priest-hood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." (2:5). The sacrifices are spiritual, praise and thanksgiving, and our lives and bodies also (Heb. 13:15, 16; Rom. 12:1); but this is to be with us true priestly work, and thus do our lives get their proper character: they are the thank-offering service of those able to draw nigh to God.

In Judaism, let me repeat, no one drew really nigh; but the people - the laity (for it is only a Greek word made English,) - the people not even as the priest could. The priestly caste, wherever it is found, means the same thing. There is no drawing nigh of the whole body of the people at all. It means distance from

God, and darkness, - God shut out.

Let us see now what is the meaning of a clergy. It is, in our day, and has been for many generations, the word which specially marks out a class distinguished from the "laity," and distinguished by being given up to sacred things, and having a place of privilege in connection with them which the laity have not. No doubt in the present day this special place is being more and more infringed on, and for two reasons. One is, that God has been giving light, and, among Protestants at least, Scripture is opposing itself to tradition, - modifying where it does not destroy this. The other is a merely human one - that the day is democratic, and class-privileges are breaking down.

But what means this class? It is evident that as thus distinguished from the laity, and privileged beyond them, it is real and open Nicolaitanism, if Scripture does not make good their claim. For then the laity has been subjected to them, and that is the exact meaning of the term. Does Scripture, then, use such terms? It is plain it does not. They are, as regards the New Testament, an invention of later date, although, it may be admitted, as imported really from what is older than the New, - 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 of 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 speaking of people (God forbid!): I am speaking of a thing. Our unhappiness is, that 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 "tradition of the elders," associated with names which we all 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 there are many thus whom we gladly recognize as truly men of God and servants of God in a false position. It is of that position I am speaking. I am speaking of a thing, as the Lord does: "Which thing I hate." He does not say, Which people I hate. Although in those days evil of this kind was not an inheritance, as 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 need not be ashamed or afraid to be where the Lord is; - nay, 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 caste, or class, - a set of people having officially a right to leadership in spiritual things; a nearness to God, derived from official place, not spiritual power: in fact, the revival, under other names, and with various modifications, of that very intermediate priesthood which distinguished Judaism, and which Christianity emphatically disclaims. That is what a clergy means; and in contradiction to these, the rest of Christians are but the laity, the seculars, necessarily put back into more or less of the old distance, which the cross of Christ has done away.

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

Understand me fully, that I am in no wise questioning the divine institution of the Christian ministry. God forbid! for ministry in the fullest sense is characteristic of Christianity, as I have already in fact maintained.

Nor do I, while believing that all true Christians are ministers also by the very fact, deny a special and distinctive ministry of the Word, as what God has given to some and not to all - though for the use of all. No one truly taught of God can deny that some, not all, among Christians have the place of evangelist, pastor, teacher. Scripture makes more of this than current views do; for it teaches that every true minister is a gift from Christ, in His care, as Head of the Church, for His people, and one who has his place from God alone, and is responsible in that character to God, and God alone. The miserable system which I see around degrades him from this blessed place, and makes him in fact little more than the manufacture and the servant of men. While giving, it is true, a place of lordship over people which gratifies a carnal mind, still it fetters the spiritual man, and puts him in chains; every where giving him an artificial conscience toward man, hindering in fact his conscience being properly before God.

Let me briefly state what the Scripture-doctrine of the ministry is - it is a very simple one. The Assembly 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 Christians 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 such. All members have not the same office: there is the eye, the ear, and so on, but they are all necessary, and all necessarily ministering, in some way or sense, to one another.

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 have not the same office; so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, etc. (Rom. 12:4-6.)

In the twelfth chapter of first Corinthians, the apostle speaks at large of these gifts; and he calls them by a significant name - "manifestations of the Spirit." They are gifts of the Spirit, of course; but more, they are "manifestations of the Spirit;" they manifest themselves where they are found, - where (I need scarcely add that I mean,) there is spiritual discernment, - where souls are before God.

For instance, if you take the gospel of God, whence does it derive its authority and power? 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: he that receives it sets to his seal that God is true. Its ability to meet the needs of heart and conscience is derived from the fact that it is "God's good news," who knows perfectly what man's need is, and has provided for it accordingly. He who has felt its power knows 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 say the truth, why do ye not believe Me?" When He stood forth in the Jewish synagogue, or elsewhere, He was but in men's eyes a poor carpenter's son, 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 doctrine 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. "He that will do God's will shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak 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, if they are seeking to be doers of His will. Can you suppose that God will allow true hearts to be deceived by whatever plausible deceptions may be abroad? 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 heareth My voice." (John 18:37.) "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;" and again, "A stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him; for they know not the voice of strangers." (John 10:27,5.)

Such is the nature of truth, then, that to pretend to authenticate it to those who are themselves true is to dishonor it, as if it were not capable of self-evidence, and so dishonor God, as if He could be wanting to souls, or to what He Himself has given.

Nay, 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): and the Lord, of its being the condemnation of the world, that "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 owned its power to their own condemnation, when they sought escape from it.

Even so in the gift was there "the manifestation of the Spirit," and it was "given to every man to profit withal." By the very fact that he had it, he was responsible to use it - responsible to Him who had not given it in vain. In the gift itself lay the ability to minister, and title too; for I am bound to help and serve with what I have. And if souls are helped, they need scarcely ask if I had commission to do it.

This is the simple character of ministry - the service of love, according to the ability which God gives, mutual service of each to each and each to all, without jostling or exclusion of one another. Each gift was thrown into the common treasury, and all were the richer by it. God's blessing and the manifestation of the Spirit were all the sanction needed. All were not teachers, still less public teachers, of the Word; still in these cases, the same principles exactly applied. That was but one department of a service which had many, and which was rendered by each to each according to his sphere.

Was there nothing else than that? Was there no ordained class at all, then? That is another thing altogether. There were, without doubt, in the primitive Church, two classes of officials, regularly appointed, or (if you like) ordained. The deacons were those who, having charge of the fund for the poor and other purposes, were chosen by the saints first for this place of trust in their behalf, and then appointed authoritatively by apostles mediately or immediately. Elders were a second class, - elderly men, as the word imports, - who were appointed in the local assemblies as "bishops," or "overseers," to take cognizance of their state. That the elders were the same as bishops may be seen in Paul's words to the elders of Ephesus, where he exhorts them to "take heed to . . . all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers." There they have translated the word, "bishops," but in Titus they have left it - "that thou shouldest ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee; if any be blameless . . . for a bishop must be blameless." (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 rife, yet no one could suppose that teaching was confined to those who were "elders," "husbands of one wife, having their children in subjection with all gravity." This was a needed test for one who was to be a bishop; "for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall

he take care of the Church of God?" (1 Tim. 3:1-7.)

Whatever gifts they had they used, as all did, and thus the apostle directs - "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine (5:17). But they might rule, and rule well, without this.

The meaning of their ordination was just this, that here it was not a question of "gift," but of authority. It was a question of title to take up and look into, often difficult and delicate matters, among people too very likely in no state to submit to what was merely spiritual. The ministrations of gift was another thing, and free, under God, to all.

Thus much, very briefly, as to Scripture-doctrine. Our painful duty is now to put in contrast with it the system I am deprecating, according to which a distinct class are devoted formally to spiritual things, and the people - the laity - are in the same ratio excluded from such occupation. This is true Nicolaitanism, - the "subjection of the people."

Again I say, not only that ministry of the Word is entirely right, but that there are those who have special gift and responsibility (though still not exclusive) to minister it. But priesthood is another thing, and a thing sufficiently distinct to be easily recognized where it is claimed or in fact exists. I am, of course, aware that Protestants in general disclaim any priestly powers for their ministers. I have no wish nor thought of disputing their perfect honesty in this disavowal. They mean that they have no thought of the minister having any authoritative power of absolution; and that they do not make the Lord's table an altar, whereon afresh day after day the perfection of Christ's one offering is denied by countless repetitions. They are right in both respects, but it is scarcely the whole matter. If we look more deeply, we shall find that much of a priestly character may attach where neither of these have the least place.

Priesthood and ministry may be distinguished in this way: Ministry (in the sense we are now considering) is to men; priesthood is to God. The minister brings God's message to the people, - he speaks for Him to them: the priest goes to God for the people, - he speaks in the reverse way, for them to Him. It is surely easy to distinguish these two attitudes.

"Praise and thanksgiving" are spiritual "sacrifices:" they are part of our offering as priests. Put a special class into a place where regularly and officially they act thus for the rest, they are at once in the rank of an intermediate priesthood, - mediators with God for those who are not so near.

The Lord's supper is the most prominent and fullest expression of Christian thankfulness and adoration publicly and stately; but what Protestant minister does not look upon it as his official right to administer this? what "layman" would not shrink from the profanation of administering it? 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 to this they are given over, as it were. They are released from spiritual occupations, to which they are not equal, and to which others give themselves entirely.

But this must evidently go much further. "The priest's lips should keep knowledge." The laity, who have become that by abdicating their priesthood, how should they retain the knowledge belonging to a priestly class? The unspirituality to which they have given themselves up pursues them here. The class whose business it is, become the authorized interpreters of the Word also, for 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 in the fair way of becoming the whole body too.

But it suits people well. Do not mistake me as if I meant that this is all come in as the assumption of a class merely. It is that, no doubt ; but never could this miserable and unscriptural distinction of clergy and laity have obtained so rapidly as it did, and so universally, if every where it had not been found well adapted to the tastes of those even whom it really displaced and degraded. Not alone in Israel, but in christendom also, has it been fulfilled: "The prophets prophecy falsely, and the priests bear rule through their means, and My people love to have it so!" Alas! they did, and they do. As spiritual decline sets in, the heart that is turning to the world barter readily, Esau-like, its spiritual birthright for a mess of pottage. It exchanges thankfully its need of caring too much for spiritual things, with those who will accept the responsibility of this. Worldliness is well covered with a layman's cloak; and as the Church at large dropped out of first love, (as 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 which belonged to Christians. The step taken downward, instead of being retrieved, only made succeeding steps each one easier; until, in less than three hundred years from the beginning, a Jewish priesthood and a ritualistic religion were every-where installed. Only so much the worse, as the precious things of Christianity left their names at least as spoils to the invader, and the shadow became for most the substance itself.

But I must return to look more particularly at one feature in this clerisy. I have noted the confounding of ministry and priesthood; the assumption of an official title in spiritual things, of title to administer the Lord's supper, and I might have added also, to baptize. For none of these things can scripture be found 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 ordination means. In the first place, if you look through the New Testament, you will find nothing about ordination to teach or to preach. You find people going about every where freely exercising whatever gift they had; the whole Church was scattered abroad from Jerusalem except the apostles, and they went every where preaching (literally, evangelizing) the Word. The persecution did not ordain them, I suppose. So with Apollos: so with Philip the deacon. There is, in fact, no trace of any thing else. Timothy received a gift of prophecy, by the laying on of Paul's hands with those of the elders; but that was gift, not authorization to use it. So he is bidden to communicate his own knowledge to faithful men, who should be able to teach others also; but there is not a word about ordaining them. The case of elders I have already noticed. That of Paul and Barnabas at Antioch is the most unhappy that can be for the purpose people use it for; for prophets and teachers are made to ordain an apostle, and one who totally disclaims being that. "of men or by man." And there the Holy Ghost (not confers power of ordaining any, but) says, "Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereto I have called them," - a special missionary journey, which it is shown afterward they had fulfilled. (See Acts 8, 11, 13, 18; 1 Tim., etc.)

Now, what means this "ordination"? It means much, you may be sure, or it would not be so zealously contended for as it is. There are, no doubt, two phases of it. In the most extreme, as among Romanists and ritualists, there is claimed for it in the fullest way that it is the conveyance, not merely of authority, but of spiritual power. They assume with all the power of apostles to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of their hands, and here for priesthood in the fullest way. The people of God as such are rejected from the priesthood He has given them, and a special class 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 Church as the channel of all grace. Among Prot-estants, you think perhaps I need not dwell on this; but it is done among some of these also, in words

which to a certain class of them seem strangely to mean nothing, while another class find in them the abundant sanction of their highest pretensions.

Those, on the other hand, who rightly and consistently reject these unchristian assumptions do not pretend indeed to confer any gift in ordination, but only to "recognize" the gift which God has given. But then, after all, this recognition is considered necessary before the person can baptize or administer the Lord's supper, - things which really require no peculiar gift at all. And as to the ministry of the Word, God's gift is made to require human sanction, and is "recognized" on behalf of His people by those who are considered to have a discernment which the people as such have not. Blind themselves or not, these men are to become "leaders of the blind;" else why need others to be eyes for them, while their own souls are taken out of the place of immediate responsibility to God, and made responsible unduly 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 needful recognition. It is well if they are not under the control of their ordainers as to their path of service also, as they generally are.

In principle, this is unfaithfulness to God; for if He has given me gift to use for Him, I am surely unfaithful if I go to any man or body of men to ask their leave to use it. The gift itself carries with it the responsibility of using it, as we have seen. If they say, "But people may make mistakes," I own it thoroughly; but who is to assume my 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; and the man who, if he stood simply upon his own merits, would soon find his true level, has a character conferred upon him by it which the whole weight of the system must sustain. Mistake or not, he is none the less one of the clerical body, - a minister, if he has nothing really to minister. He must be provided for, if only with some less conspicuous place, where souls, dear to God as any, are put under his care, and must be unfed if he cannot feed them.

Do not accuse me of sarcasm; it is the system I am speaking of which is a sarcasm, - a swathing of the body of Christ in bands which hinder the free circulation of the vitalizing blood which should be permeating unrestrictedly the whole of it. Nature itself should rebuke the folly - the enormous inference from such scriptural premises as that apostles and apostolic men "ordained elders"! They must prove that they are either, and (granting them that,) that the Scripture "elder" might be no elder at all, but a young unmarried man just out of his teens, and on the other hand was evangelist, pastor, teacher - all God's various gifts rolled into one. This is the minister (according to the system, indeed, the minister,) - the all in all to the fifty or five hundred souls who are committed to him as "his flock," with which no other has title 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 cannot build them up. Or he is a teacher, sent to a place where there are but a few Christians, and the mass of his congregation unconverted men. There are no conversions, and his presence there (according to the system) keeps away the evangelist who is 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 schismatical and a confusion: the new wine breaks the poor human bottles.

For all this the system is responsible. The exclusive ministry of one man or of a number of men in a congregation has no shred of Scripture to support it; while the ordination, as we have seen is the attempt to confine all ministry to a certain class, and make it rest on human authorization rather than on divine gift, the people, Christ's sheep, being denied their competency to hear His voice. The inevitable tendency is, to

fix upon the man the attention which should be devoted to the word he brings. The question is, Is he accredited? If he speak truly is subordinated to the question, Is he ordained? or, perhaps I should say; his orthodoxy is settled already for them by the fact of his ordination.

Paul, an apostle, not of men, nor by man, could not have been, upon this plan, received. There were apostles before him, and he neither went up to them nor got any thing from them. If there were a succession, he was a break in the succession. And what he did he did designedly, to show that his gospel was not after man (Gal. 1:11), and that it might not rest upon the authority of man. Nay, if he himself preached a different gospel from that he had preached, (for there was not another,) - yea, or 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 au-thority 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, of course, know: I trusted another," will not save you from the ditch.

But the unspiritual and unlearned layman, how can he pretend to equal knowledge with the educated and accredited minister devoted to spiritual things? In point of fact, in general he does not. He yields to the one who should know better; and practically the minister's teaching largely supplants the authority of the Word of God. Not that certainty, indeed, is thus attained. He cannot conceal it from himself that people differ - wise and good and learned and accredited as they may be. But here the devil steps in, and, if God has allowed men's "authorities" to get into a Babel of confusion, as they have, suggests to the unwary soul that the confusion must be the result of the obscurity of Scripture, whereas they have got into it by disregarding Scripture.

But this is every where! Opinion, not faith; - 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 opposite to you.

Need I show you how infidelity thrives upon this? how Satan rejoices when for the simple and emphatic "Yea" of the divine voice he succeeds in substituting the Yea and Nay of a host of jarring commentators? Think you can fight the Lord's battles with the rush of human opinion instead of "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God"? Think you "Thus saith John Calvin, or John Wesley," will meet Satan as satisfactorily as "Thus saith the Lord"?

Who can deny that such thoughts are abroad, and in no wise confined to papists or ritualists? The tendency, alas! is, in the heart of unbelief ever departing from the living God, - as near to His own to-day as at any time through the centuries His Church has traveled on, as competent to instruct as ever, as ready to fulfill the word, "He that will do His will shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God." The "eyes are of the heart," and not the head. He has hidden from wise and prudent what He reveals to babes. The school of God is more effectual than all colleges combined, and here layman and cleric are equal: "he that is spiritual discerneth all things," and he alone. Substitute for spirituality there is none: unspirituality the Spirit of God alone can remedy. Ordination, such as practiced, is rather a sanction put upon it, - an attempt to manifest what is the manifestation of the Spirit, or not His work at all, and to provide leaders for the blind, whom with all their care they cannot insure not being blind also.

Before I close, I must say a few words about "succession." An ordination which pretends to be derived from the apostles must needs be (to be consistent,) a successional one. Who can confer authority (and in the least and lowest theories of ordination authority is conferred, as to baptize, and to administer the Lord's supper,) but one himself authorized for this very purpose? You must, therefore, have a chain of ordained men, lineally succeeding one another. Apostolic succession is as necessary on the presbyterian as on the episcopalian plan. John Wesley, as his warrant for ordaining, fell back upon the essential oneness of bishop and presbyter. Nay, presbyterians will urge against episcopalians the ease of maintaining succession in this way. I have nothing to do with this: I only insist that succession is needed.

But then, mark the result. It is a thing apart alike from spirituality and from truth even. A Romish priest may have it as well as any; and indeed through the gutter of Rome most of that we have around us must necessarily have come down. Impiety and impurity do not in the least invalidate Christ's commission. The teacher of false doctrine may be as well His messenger as the teacher of truth. Nay, the possession of the truth, with gift to minister it and godliness combined, are actually no part of the credentials of the true ambassador. He may have all these and be none; he may want them all and be truly one nevertheless.

Who can believe such doctrine? Can He who is truth accredit error? - the righteous One unrighteousness? It is impossible. This ecclesiasticism violates every principle of morality, and hardens the conscience that has to do with it. For why need we be careful for truth if He is not? and how can He send messengers that He would not have to be believed? His own test of a true witness fails; for "he that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory; but he that seeketh his glory that 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 ye not believe Me?" was His own appeal.

No: to state this principle is to condemn it. He who foresaw and predicted the failure of what should have been the bright and evident witness of His truth and grace, could not ordain a succession of teachers for it who should carry His commission unforfeitable by whatever failure! Before apostles had left the earth, the house of God had become as a "great house," and it was necessary to separate from vessels to dishonor in it, He who bade His apostle to instruct another 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 alien from all this, as His ministers, and having His commission in spite of all. And thus notably, in the second epistle to Timothy, in which this is said, there is no longer, as in the first, any talk of elders or of ordained men. It is "faithful men" "who are wanted, not for ordination, but for the deposit of the truth committed to Timothy: "The things which thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou 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 sanction to a Romish priesthood or a Protestant hierarchy fails alike upon the same ground, for as to this they are upon the same ground. Alas! Nicolaitanism is no past thing - no obscure doc-trine of past ages, but a wide-spread and gigantic system of error, fruitful in evil results. Error is long-lived, though mortal. Reverence it not for its gray hairs, and follow not with a multitude to do evil. With cause does the Lord say in this case, "Which thing I hate." If He does, shall we be afraid to have fellowship with Him? That there are good men entangled in it, all must admit. There are godly men, and true ministers, ignorantly wearing the livery of men. May God deliver them! may they cast aside their fetters and be free! May they rise up to the true dignity of their calling, responsible to God, and walking before Him alone!

On the other hand, beloved brethren, 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 as really ministers as they are all 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. Nay, 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 in a napkin upon that account: it would be mere unfaithfulness and unbelief.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Brethren 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, which if we but come to 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 this abundance, and the responsibility of the possession of 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 ministered unto, but to minister"? Oh for unofficial ministry - the overflowing of full hearts into empty ones, so many as there are around us! How we should rejoice, in a scene of want and misery and sin, to find perpetual opportunity to show the competency of Christ's fullness to meet and minister to every form of it.

Official ministry is practical independence of the Spirit of God. It is to decide that such a vessel shall overflow though at the time, it may be, practically empty; and, on the other hand, that such another shall not overflow, however full He may have filled it up. It proposes, in the face of Him who has come down in Christ's absence to be the Guardian of His people, to provide for order and for edification, not by spiritual power, but by legislation. It would provide for 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 sanctions and perpetuates unspirituality, instead of condemning or avoiding it.

It is quite true that in God's mode of treating it the failure in man's part may become more evident externally; for He cares little for a correct outside when the heart is nevertheless not right with Him, and He knows well that ability to maintain a correct outside may in fact prevent a truthful judgment of what is our real condition before Him. Men would have upbraided Peter with his attempt to walk upon those waves which made his little faith so manifest. The Lord would only rebuke the littleness of the faith which made him fail. And man still and ever would propose the boat as the remedy for failure, instead of the strength of the Lord's support, which He made Peter prove. Yet, after all, the boat confessedly may fail, - winds and waves may overthrow it: but "the Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters - yea, than the mighty waves of the sea." Through 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 own that we have failed! Let us act as if we really trusted Him.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/fw-grant/nicolaitanism-the-rise-and-growth-of-the-clergy/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net