

A soccer goalkeeper in a yellow jersey with red and blue stripes on the sleeves is diving horizontally towards the right, reaching for a soccer ball that is just above the goal line. The background is a blurred stadium setting.

Player or Spectator?

by Jeff Reich

The stadium was packed. The game was in full swing, the soccer ball being kicked with driving intensity. As player Number 16 made his way down field, he gave the ball a powerful kick, trying with all his might to get the ball inside the goal.

To everyone's surprise, the ball veered to the left and went out of bounds. The spectators rose to their feet, their combined voices raising in a crescendo of frustration. One man standing near the edge of the playing field yelled, "Way to go! You really messed up that play! Why didn't you get the ball in the goal?!"

Player Number 16 heard the message from the sidelines. He quickly spotted the man and stalked straight to the fence, stood eye to eye with the rude spectator, and declared, "If you think you can do a better job, then you come out on the field!"

This story rightly exemplifies the situation in many churches today. Here, too, are the players and the spectators. Some are involved, trying to do something, while others sit back, week after week, in the "bleachers" of the church, watching, cheering, and often booing the players. Everyone knows that a spectator is one of the most critical people in the world. He yells at the referee, offers unsolicited advice, or boos loudly when a play goes bad. Needless to say, this was not the way it was in the early Christian church, or the way Jesus intended it to be.

Apostolic Christianity

Jesus came to the unlearned, toiling fishermen of Galilee and said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). They were chosen because they were humble and teachable. The less they had been influenced by the false teachings of their time, the more successfully could Christ instruct and train them for His service. The results were seen in the Apostolic church. After Pentecost these humble workers, being filled with the Holy Spirit, converted thousands in one day by sharing what Christ had done for them. Everyone was a minister, everyone had a work. (See Acts 2.) No one sat on the sidelines as a spectator or armchair coach.

In Revelation, chapters two and three, seven churches are used to symbolically describe seven eras of Christian history. The first was the church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7), which means "desirable." This meaning may well be taken as expressive of the character and condition of the Apostolic church.

During this period of history, the church was a movement of common people who testified for and about Christ. All were empowered by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts (1 Cor-inthians 12:7). Some were granted special gifts (see Ephesians 4:11-13) to train the body of Christ for the work of ministry. One very important point to remember is this: the church at this time had no priesthood, it was a priesthood! (See 1 Peter 2:5, 6 and 3:15). The believers held everything in common (Acts 2:44-46); there was no “class” division. Thus the early church was blessed by rapid growth through the power of the Holy Spirit—every convert was a minister.

The Doctrine of the Nicolaitans

Time passed, and we come to the third church, Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17). This era of church history describes the period of time when Constantine legalized Christianity and thousands of pagans, with their ideologies, flooded into the church. The era ended with the formation of the Papacy. The Revelator points out one of the grievous sins that found its way into the church during this period: “So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.” (Revelation 2:15). Now there has been a lot of speculation as to what the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans” is, but considering what was happening to the church, the following explanation makes sense:



Bronze Statue of Constantine the Great

To those who spoke Greek, there was a great deal of meaning in the word “Nicolaitans.” It means “destruction of people,” or “conquering the people.” The last part of the word (laos) is the Greek word for “the people,” and our term “laity” is derived from it. How were the people during this period of church history going to be conquered? What role did the church play?

Remember that the end of this era was marked by the beginning of the Papacy. A unique division began to develop in the church, which was now becoming a superpower under the direction of the Bishop of Rome, later called the Vicar of Christ. The Pope ruled the church as an ecclesiastical power, with even kings and rulers under his hierarchy. A priestly class was established which had incredible power and influence over the common people, largely because of the superstition and tradition that had flooded into the church. Church growth came more from heathens being converted by the sword, or simply for political gain, than by true evangelism based on an active laity.

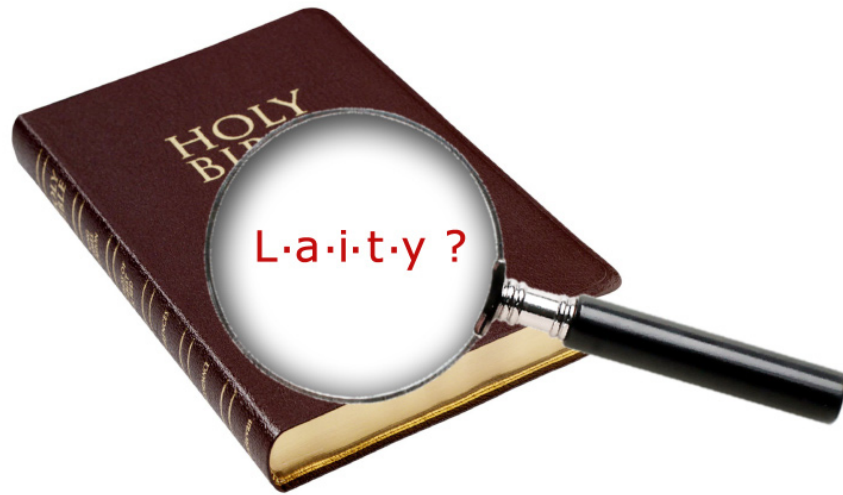
The most significant transformation at this time was the division created between clergy and laity. The priest, when addressing the congregation, ascended a staircase in the magnificently ornate church, to stand, as it were, between God and the people. He, as priest, was supposedly closer to God than the common people. The laity were pushed down and suppressed. Their main functions were to pay, pray, and obey! They were effectively sidelined. Could the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans” have been symbolic of the rise of a clergy class that subjugated and controlled the laity? I believe so.

Why would Christ hate the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans?” Because it was not after the order He had established, as seen in the Apostolic church. The true church was not to have a priesthood, it was a priesthood. By separating the church into a clergy/laity arrangement, the spread of the gospel was hindered. By sheer logistics, the clergy could not accomplish effective evangelism. But this specially chosen class also perverted the real concept of ministry, leaving the masses with the understanding that they simply were not qualified for spiritual matters. Thus the church was deprived of the very work that was entrusted to it. Institutionalism took the place of a living, active church body in which the members were empowered by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of ministry.

Are Laymen Really Idiots?

If you look in the Bible you will not find the terms “clergy” or “laity.” The history of the word “laity” is very interesting, and a simple study of it will convince one why Christ hates this “doctrine of the Nicolaitans.”

There are two facets to this term, the first being the Greek *lo laos*, meaning “the people of God.” *Lo laos* is the proper definition for all Christians, since they are “the people of God.”



The second definition, the more common, the root of which reaches back to the historical reality of the church of Pergamos, comes from the dictionary: “Those who are not members of a professional or specialized group.” According to this definition, someone who ministers in religious things, must be “professional or specialized.”¹

Historically, the distinction between laymen and clergy was really an attempt to dumb down the common people to the point where they would feel unqualified to work in the areas of religious things. Does “dumb down,” sound too strong? Are laymen really idiots? Maybe so, when you consider the historical fact that the Greek word *idiotes*, the root word of our common word, “idiot,” means “a private person or layman!” The Webster’s II University Dictionary states: “The development of the pejorative sense of idiot occurred in Ancient Greek, although the meaning ‘a mentally deficient person’ is a more modern refinement. . . . The use of *idiotes* was extended to other parts of opposites such as layman/professional, laymen/priest, common person/distinguished person, and an unskilled worker/craftsman. In general, a person of no special status, knowledge, or skill was an *idiotes*.”²

Are the “people of God” really idiots, having no special status, knowledge, or skill? Hardly! According to the Word of God all of “the people of God” have been called (1 Corinthians 7:17), have been ordained (John 16:1), and have been commissioned (Mark 15:16). “Christ’s followers have been redeemed for service. Our Lord teaches us that the true object of life is ministry.”³ This ministry is not solely for a clergy class, but rather for the whole body of Christ. By looking at history, one can see why Christ hates this doctrine of the Nico-laitans — it limits the work, growth, and spiritual condition of the Church.

Yes, the first definition, “*lo laos*,” is the best, since this term for laymen is simply, “the people of

of God,” which includes both pastor and any church member. We are all laymen in this sense—even a pastor who performs ministry is simply acting in the role of the laity—of which they are a vital part. Ministry has been committed to all “the people of God”—right? And it is not the domain of only the privileged few whom we call “clergy.”

A Change Began

The Reformation introduced a radical change in the laity/clergy relationship. Martin Luther taught and wrote on “The Priesthood of All Believers,” and “Every Man a Priest in Christ.” These ideas were shocking to many, and far from the deeply rooted traditions of Catholicism. And yet it was only the beginning of a lay revival which sprang up in the Protestant Reformation. Each successive Reformer brought out the responsibilities that rested upon the laity to be involved in ministry. Such was seen in the bold leap of forming missionary societies and the placement of missionaries in foreign countries.

Adventism and The Reformation

Seventh-day Adventism contributed an important part to the Protestant Reformation by going even farther in breaking down the wall between clergy and laity. Even after the Adventist Church organized in 1863, we still continued on a different plane than other churches. It was our practice not to place pastors over churches, but rather to teach the churches how to take care of themselves, while nearly all of the pastors worked as evangelists in new fields. They went out into the communities and raised up believers. The church members not only took care of their own church services, but were active in outreach, giving Bible studies, distributing literature door to door, praying with the sick, sending letters to friends, visiting neighbors, etc.



What were the results of this work by Adventists from the 1850's to the early 1900's? We were the fastest growing Protestant denomination in the world! Think about it. Our present worldwide denomination was started and established by a group of on-fire laymen! Doesn't this tell us something about following the Apostolic concept of Church and ministry? Other churches began coming to us, asking our secret of church growth! In fact, an article from the Seventh-day Baptist Sabbath Record of December 28, 1908, plainly reveals the secret of our success: “All Seventh-day Adventist clergymen are missionaries—not located pastors—and are busy preaching, teaching, and organizing churches the world over.” While at the same time the laymen were also missionaries in their homes, businesses, and communities.

In March, 1912, at the Ministerial Institute in Los Angeles, California, A. G. Daniells, then General Conference President, made this assessment of the relationship between laity and clergy in Adventism:

“We have not settled our ministers over churches as pastors to any large extent. In some of the very large churches we have elected pastors, but as a rule we have held ourselves ready for field service, evangelistic work, and our brethren and sisters have held themselves ready to maintain their church services and carry forward their church work without settled pastors. And I hope this will never cease

to be the order of affairs in this denomination; for when we cease our forward movement and begin to settle over our churches, to stay by them, and do their thinking and their praying and their work that is to be done, then our churches will begin to weaken, and to lose their life and spirit, and become paralyzed and fossilized and our work will be on the retreat.”

And what is the condition of the church today, especially in Western countries where we now have located pastors? Compare this with the Philippines, for instance, or some other country where one pastor serves 12 churches or more—the churches are growing quickly due to active laity.

As early as 1901, Ellen White began to see a change coming about in our churches. She gave these strong words of warning:

“The ministers are hovering over churches, which know the truth, while thousands are perishing out of Christ. If the proper instruction were given, if the proper methods were followed, every church member would do his work as a member of the body. . . . They should be taught that unless they can stand alone, without a minister, they need to be converted anew, and baptized anew. They need to be born again.”⁴



Ellen G. White

“Those who are not called to go to foreign countries have a work to do in their own borders, to keep up the interest in their churches by well-directed effort, that they may be spiritual and self-sacrificing, and by their means and earnest prayers may aid those who enter new and difficult fields. Ministers should not do work that belongs to the laymen, thus wearying themselves, and preventing others from doing their duty. They should teach the members how to work in the church and community, to build up the church, to make the prayer-meeting interesting, and to train for missionaries youth of ability. The members of the church should cooperate actively with the ministers, making the section of country around them their field of missionary labor.”⁵

Institutionalizing Church

It should be understood that in God’s plan there is a place for a pastor, as he has been invested with the responsibility of teaching the body of the Church how to be involved in ministry (Ephesians 4:11-13). He is no closer to God because of his position than any church members who have given their lives to Christ. In the truest sense of the word, he is a layman who has been called to a special position of trust in the church.

One of the greatest drawbacks to the idea of the clergy/laity relationship is that of institutionalizing ministry. If people are taught to think that they are merely laymen (in the “idiot” sense of the word), then ministry is only for a trained and specialized class. We see this throughout most churches. A few years ago my wife was told by a person in a church that she was not really qualified to teach cooking classes, since she did not have a degree!

Ministry does not require possession of degrees or extraordinary training. It is not, in and of itself, going out and giving Bibles studies, visiting the sick, or handing out literature. Yes, one is involved in ministry when doing these things, but that is only a small part of the picture. Ministry is simply

A WAY OF LIFE! Ministry is also dedicating one's life to Christ in the morning, patiently teaching a wayward child, building relationships with those we work with, or fixing a flat tire for someone stranded along the road. Life is ministry and all of us are involved in one way or another, because each of us has INFLUENCE. The question is, How are we using this influence? What kind of ministers are we?

I meet numbers of people who are discouraged because they feel they are doing nothing for the advancement of Christ's kingdom. This discouragement comes, from a large degree, because of the emphasis placed on institutional ministry. Some say, "I can't go to a mission field, work at a ministry like Laymen Ministries, or work at an institutional organization, so I must be of no use." This whole concept is wrong. God has redeemed us for the purpose of ministry, and if He paid for that redemption with the life of His own dear Son, is He not going to give us the opportunity to do that for which He redeemed us? Of course He is! We have just been looking at things the wrong way.

If people are really converted, they will be involved in full-time ministry, in the truest sense of the word, by being helpful, thoughtful and kind. By using every opportunity to share a word with a person about what Christ has done for them. The demoniacs whom Christ healed never had the opportunity, as did the disciples, to sit at the feet of Jesus day after day to learn of Him. But they could do one thing. They could share with others what Christ had done in their lives. And when Christ returned to that region, what did He find? Hundreds ready to receive Him because of the testimonies of these converted men. Is it any different with us? Shouldn't we be able to share Christ as they did?

Latter Rain—Someday?

Many dream about the time when the Holy Spirit will be poured out in great measure, but meanwhile sit idly on the sidelines, thinking that someday it will happen. It will never happen until laymen realize their God-given duty to be ministers today, using present opportunities and abilities. It is only through exercising faith that opportunities and growth will increase and greater portions of the Holy Spirit will be entrusted. If there was ever a time for laymen to rise to the challenge before us, it is now.

Where ever you are, what is the theme of your conversation? Do you fall into the sometimes low and crude conversation of those around you? Or do you steer the minds of people higher? Do you criticize from the sidelines without the real knowledge of what it means to be involved, like the soccer spectator, or are you in the game? Tomorrow, as you go about your duties, remember: You are a minister ordained by God. How can you use present opportunities to minister more effectively—to reflect the One whom you love? This is ministry and you are His minister.

"It is not the ministers alone, but the laymen, who are not contributing all that they can to persuade men, by precept and example, to accept the saving grace of Christ. With skill and tact, with wisdom received from above, they should persuade men to behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. When the hearts of the believers are warm with the love for God, they will do a continual work for Jesus. They will manifest the meekness of Christ, and display a steadfast purpose that will not fail nor be discouraged. God will use humble men to do His work; for there is a large vineyard calling for laborers. 'Why stand ye here all the day idle?'"⁶

Endnotes

1 Webster's II University Dictionary.

2 Ibid.

3 Christ's Object Lessons, p. 326.

4 General Conference Bulletin, April 12, 1901, p. 204.

5 Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, Oct. 12, 1886, p. 9.

6 Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, July 21, 1896.