

# **The Origin and Implication of "Clergy" and "Laity"**

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When my wife and I were married in 1970, I was on my way to my first assignment as a 2nd Lieutenant, United States Air Force in the Strategic Air Command. Being an officer, I thought she would be proud of "our" position. After all, "rank has its privileges" was a phrase taught at Officer Training School.

As we started attending a small Church off base in upper Michigan where I was stationed, I noticed she seemed uncomfortable with my rank, as many who attended there were "enlisted" men. Even though this was "off duty" time, and I tried to treat all equally as brothers in Christ, there was no mistaking an artificial barrier between us caused division and a lack of closeness.

But isn't rank "ordained" in the Bible? You know - elders, deacons and bishops - the ordained clergy versus the common lay members or laity. Where do these words, clergy and laity, come from anyway? Are they in the Bible?

This paper is intended to clearly identify the incredible origin of these words and the terrible schism that it has caused in the body.

We begin our investigation with the etymology of "clergy" from Webster's New World dictionary 2nd College Edition 1970.

**cler-gy** (klur'je) *n., pl. -gies* [ME. & OFr. *clergie*, office or dignity of a clergyman < LL. (Ec.) *clericus*: see CLERK] men ordained for religious service, as ministers, priests, rabbis, etc., collectively  
**cleric** (kler' ik) *n.* [LL. (Ec.) *clericus*: see CLERK] a clergyman -- *adj.* relating to a clergyman or the clergy  
**clerk** (klurk; Brit. Klark) *n.* [ME. < OFr. & OE. *clerc*, both < LL. (Ec.) *clericus*, a priest < Gr. *klerikos*, a cleric < *kleros*, lot, inheritance (later, from use in LLX, Deut. 18:2, of the Levites, hence the Christian clergy), orig., a shard used in casting lots < IE. \**klaro-* < base \**kel*, to strike, break, whence OIr. *clar*, a board, tablet. L. *calamitas*, CALAMITY] 1. a layman who has certain minor duties in a church 2. an office worker who keeps records, types letters, does filing, etc. 3. an official in charge of the records, accounts, etc. of a school board, court town, etc. \*4. a hotel employee who keeps the register, assigns guests to rooms, etc. \*5. a person who sells in a store; salesclerk 6. {Archaic} a clergyman & {Archaic} a literate person; scholar --*vt.* \* to work or be employed as a clerk, esp. a salesclerk -- **clerk'ship** *n.*

The Latin derivation was given for the word clergy (clericus), however, it said to see the word "clerk". This word proved more revealing as it gave its derivation from the Greek word "Kleros", meaning lot or inheritance. This was a small broken piece of pottery used to cast lots in looking to God to show his decision or choice in a matter. Oddly enough, Webster's dictionary actually quotes a Bible verse in reference to this Greek word "lot" from the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) - Deut. 18:2. In this particular verse we find Levi had no "lot" when they divided up the Promised Land because "the Eternal" was their lot and they were priests to Him. They were given cities in which to dwell, but no large land portions like the other eleven tribes. They were to receive the tithe from the other tribes who had land given to them by lot for serving as his priests. "Hence the Christian clergy", it is believed, has this continuing "lot" from God to be his priests now, instead of Levi.

But is that what the New Testament scriptures indicate? Heb. 7:12 does say "the priesthood being changed..." Christ was not of Levi and according to verses 26-28, He alone is our High Priest now in an unchangeable priesthood. What is indicated for the rest of the body of believers? Note 1 Pet. 2: 5-10. You are a holy priesthood (vs. 5), a royal priesthood.(vs. 9) " Notice that the verse is in the present tense - "you are", not "you will be", and it is addressed to all believers.

But does the New Testament give any indication of a "lot" belonging to God? (This research was a little more involved due to the bias of past translators to select words that appear to support a hierarchical approach, but with the advent of the personal computer, word search engines can search the NT database for Strong's numbers as well. This can uncover the original intent of the entire body of scriptural evidence and reveal this tendency.) In searching for the Greek word "lot", (kleros- Strong's #2819) we find a discourse by Peter in 1 Pet. 5:1-3 that is very revealing. Note, he is talking to elders, and tells them to "feed the flock of God" taking oversight not because they're forced to or because of money and NOT AS LORDS over God's "LOT"(#2819). Notice how KJV used "heritage" instead of "lot". Why? Because this verse is plainly stating that all believers are "God's lot" (Kleros > clergy), not just the leadership.

You might well remember at the end of the book of John how Christ tells Peter three times to "feed" or "shepherd" my sheep. Notice then how Peter in verse 4 of I Peter 5 mentions that they (the elders) were to be an example to the flock, not its' "lord". They would then receive a crown from the "Chief Shepherd" when He shall appear. This is also a clear statement that Christ alone is the "Chief Shepherd" or as could be alternately translated "Pastor General".

Let's consider the term "lay" member. Webster's gives the following:

**Lay** *adj.* [ME. *lai* < OFr. <LL. (Ec.) *laicus*, lay, not priestly < Gr. *laikos* < *laos*, the people] 1. of or consisting of the laity, or ordinary people, as distinguished from the clergy...

It is in scripture? First, in checking its definition, we find it is derived according to Webster's from the Greek word *laos*, (Strong's # 2992) which means "people". Yet the definition states "ordinary" people as distinguished from the "clergy". The question is, are we not all the people (laity) of God? (including elders) I Pet. 2:10. The use of this word in its present context is necessitated by the restriction of the "lot" (clergy) to the leadership only: a Catholic invention!

This has nothing to do with God setting overseers in a congregation selected from among elders who fit the requirements. (I Tim. 3) It has everything to do with "lording it over".

This is a radical departure from the current religious view of who is among the clergy. But it is the original view of scripture. And that is even admitted by those in the largest segment of traditional Christendom who invented the word in the first place. Note the following article from the Catholic encyclopedia:

# The Catholic Encyclopedia

<http://www.knight.org/advent/cathen/04049b.htm>

## Cleric

A person who has been legitimately received into the ranks of the clergy. By clergy in the strict sense is meant the entire ecclesiastical hierarchy. Consequently a cleric is one who belongs in some sense to the hierarchy. For this it is necessary that he have received at least the tonsure (see TONSURE). The clergy by Divine right form an order or state which is essentially distinct from that of the laity. (Conc. Trid., Sess. XXIV, De sac. ord., can. i, 6.) Christ did not commit the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments to the faithful in general, but to certain carefully defined persons as the Apostles and seventy-two Disciples. They also received the power of governing the flocks; which power is represented by the Keys, a well-known Oriental symbol for authority. That the distinction between clergy and laity was recognized in New Testament times is plain from St. Paul's statement that the bishops have been placed by the Holy Ghost to rule the Church (Acts, xx, 28), for the right to rule implies a correlative obligation to obey. Presbyters are continually distinguished from the laity throughout the Pauline Epistles.

(to feed)

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The word *cleric* (Lat., *clericus* from *clerus*) is derived from the Greek *kleros*, a "lot". In the Septuagint, this word is used in the literal sense quite frequently, though not in its later technical sense. In the First Epistle of St. Peter (v, 3) it is applied to entire body of the faithful. The use of the word in its present restricted meaning occurs, however, as early as the third century It is found in Tertullian (De idol., c. viii), Origen (Hom. in Jer., xi, 3) and Clement of Alexandria (Quis dives salvetur, c. xlii) in this sense. It is not easy to determine exactly how the word came to have its present determinate meaning. The "Pontificale Romanum" refers to clerics as being those whose "lot" is the Lord Himself, and St. Jerome explicitly derives the name from that fact. These statements do not give us, however, the steps by which *kleros*, "lot" became "clergy" or "cleric". Probably the best suggested explanation is, that from lot or portion, it came to mean a particular lot or office assigned to some one, and finally the person himself possessing the lot or office.

First note the restriction of the "Great Commission" to the hierarchy's leadership: "feed" is changed to "rule" (Acts 20:28) Then note that the second paragraph on the derivation of the word

states that it "applied to the entire body of the faithful". Finally note that the present restricted meaning didn't occur until the third century.

Now if Tertullian or Origen or Clement rank high on your list of doctrinal authorities then I suppose you might well accept their altered view of clergy as "rulers of the flock" rather than the entire "lot" itself being all believers.

As to "lording it over" God's lot, did Christ have anything specific to say about those aspiring to leadership? In reference note Luke 22:24 - 26. In response to their strife over who would be greatest Christ responded: "kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship. **BUT IT SHALL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU**. He who is greatest let him **BE AS THE YOUNGER** and he who governs as he who serves".

How does a "younger" person act? Do they insist on titles? Do they interrupt or dominate a conversation? Do they expect respect? Note that the word "serves" at the end of that verse (Strong's #1247) is the word we derive "deacon" from. And literally means "a domestic or servant- one who would wait on guests". That is where our word "minister" comes from. But is that how you see the leadership in the churches act?

In a parallel account in John 13, we find Christ "after supper" trying to demonstrate this kind of servant leadership. Notice Peter's reaction. "You're going to wash my feet?" What a shock that must have been. Christ was the leader. Peter thought he should be washing His feet. They were expecting a strong political leader to throw off the Roman oppression and "restore the kingdom to Israel". (Acts 1:6) But that's not the kind of leadership Christ wants. That's not what our training is all about; developing humility and patience is. It is rare to see those attitudes displayed by a "clergy versus laity" mentality - an "I out rank you" mentality of the sort displayed by the "sons of thunder". (Luke 9:54)

What is the "fruit" of this approach to leadership? **DIVISION**

Note Paul's discourse to the Corinthians on the body in I Cor. 12:12. There is one body but many members. The head can't be arrogant to the feet that support it. (vs. 21) In fact, more honor should be given to the less honorable members. Why? So that there won't be **SCHISM** (division) in the body. (Vs. 25) The simple fact of human nature is "Pride of Position" causes division.

A fact of leadership any farmer can tell you is that you don't drive sheep (or goats, etc.) with a whip. You gently lead them. You draw them to you with life-giving nourishment - lush pasture, plenty of water. Flocks in narrow enclosures, tightly fenced in easily become sick. A pastor or minister is to be a helper of our joy not a ruler of our faith. (II Cor. 1:24)

And notice again in I Cor. 12 that diverse gifts are given to all, not just "ordained" leaders. For those who think verse 28 is a "rank list", then why is governments next to last? (What rank is miracles or tongues anyway?) The one gift that we should "covet" is the subject of the next chapter - godly love. Love isn't puffed up, proud, or arrogant, it's humble and patient.

The bible does talk about leaders, and "ruling well", but it does not divide the leadership into a complex system of rank, and then divide it from the body. There were "overseers" (bishops-episkopos) selected from the elders (presbyters) in a local congregation, and even that done by vote! (Note the derivation of the word "ordained" in Acts 14:23, Strong's # 5500 - "to raise the hand")

"Deacons" (Strong's # 1249) means simply "minister" or "servant". Those selected in Acts 6 were to "minister" tables for widows (true religion!) so that the twelve would not have to leave "ministering" the word, and at that, they were selected by the brethren.

"Elders who rule (Strong's # 4291: preside over) well are worthy of double honor especially those who labor in word and doctrine." (1Tim. 5:17) Notice however that this implies elders who labor in other areas i.e., tables, etc., but none the less elders and ministers.

The bible isn't specific about the form and administration of "Godly" government. For those who believe that "Jethro's" advice to Moses in Ex. 18:21-24 is the "Godly" form: a pyramid of "rulers of 1000's, 100's, 50's & 10's; please note in just a few short years it failed miserably! Moses states; "I'm not able to bear it!" (Num 11:11-15) , whereas Jethro said " If you do this... you will be able to bear it." (Ex 18:23) Notice why it failed: "and God so commands you.." Moses never asked God! He simply "heeded the voice of his father in law." Also note God's solution: Num.11:16-17 "Gather (not appoint) to me 70 elders (already known to be such) and I will take of the spirit upon you and I will put the same upon them." This is the all-important factor of God's Holy Spirit guiding his leaders: it's what makes "Godly " government work!

The system of captains of 1000's, 100's, 50's etc. is the way the Kings of the Gentiles exercise their governments and lordship. You can note God's view of that in 1Sam. 8, where Israel wanted a king like all the other nations. God told Samuel to warn them (vs.12): "He will appoint Captains of 1000's & 50's.... and when you cry out because of your king The Eternal won't hear you!" Worldly Kings exercise lordship: setting up hierarchies of rank and delegating authority. God's true leaders serve!

This is the subject of "administrations" and "operations" discussed in 1 Cor. 12, and worthy of a separate study of its own. Please note though, that this is talking about the use of "spiritual gifts" to serve in the body, and God does the placing or setting. (Vs. 28) Suffice it to say that the basic description of God's government in the bible is found in 1 Cor. 11:13 - " the head of every man is Christ ". We need to learn to submit to one another in humility, (Eph. 5:21) and that is impossible for those who are "rank" oriented, who love preeminence. (3 John 1:9)

We are all part of the same body. My head doesn't "outrank" me, it's part of me. If it were divided from me, I would be dead. And I certainly hope it wouldn't think familiarity with the rest of my body might somehow give that contempt for it. Let's expose "rank" for what it is **RANK!** And realize from where the "clergy versus laity" mentality comes: **THE ADVERSARY.**