

## Church Leaders and the Use of Honorific Titles - Darryl M. Erkel

*"But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them" (Jeremiah 45:5)*

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The Lord Jesus, in His condemnation of the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 23, plainly forbids His followers from either giving or receiving honorific titles. Whereas the religious hypocrites love "respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men Rabbi" (v.7), this is not to be the mark of Christ's disciples: "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, *and you are all brothers*. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. *But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted* (vv. 8-12).

Jesus is not denying *functional* differences and roles within the church; nor is He suggesting that it is wrong to term one's *biological* parent "father." Rather, He is prohibiting the use of self-exalting and honorific titles of distinction among those who have chosen to follow Christ. While conferring honorific titles upon prominent religious authorities may be the way of the world, it is not the path that Christ has called us to pursue.

Yet, in spite of the clarity of Jesus' command, Christians have historically ignored His words. We continue, for example, to address our church shepherds as "Reverend," "Doctor," or "Minister" and, unfortunately, far too many of them are glad to receive such flattery and even love to have it so! Commenting on the words of our Lord in Matthew 23, the noted New Testament scholar, R.T. France, has perceptively written:

These verses, while still commenting on the practice of the scribes and Pharisees, are addressed directly to Jesus' disciples, warning them against adopting this status-seeking attitude. "Rabbi" (v.8) and "Master" (v.10) probably act here as synonyms. They are titles *appropriate only to the One Teacher* (v.8), the Christ (v.10), in relation to whom *all His followers stand on an equal footing as "brothers"...* Over against that unique authority His disciples must avoid the use of honorific titles for one another ("Christian rabbinism," Bonnard)--an exhortation which today's church could profitably taken more seriously, not only in relation to formal ecclesiastical titles ("Most Rev.," "my Lord Bishop," etc.), but more significantly in its excessive deference to academic qualifications or to authoritative status in the churches (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985] p.325).

Christian magazines are filled with advertisements for books or products recommended by "Doctor" so-and-so; and churches continue to promote their ministries led by "Reverend" so-and-so. The Christian world, it seems, is consumed with exalted and honorific titles for those in positions of leadership or influence. Some pastors, in fact, are rather offended when their congregational members address them by their first name or simply as "brother." It is thought by many to be disrespectful or unbecoming to address a Christian theologian in any other way than "Doctor" or "Professor."

But we must ask, are such titles necessary for church leaders? Have evangelicals genuinely honored the words of Christ in Matthew 23:8-12 by prefacing the names of their leaders with such flattering titles as "Reverend" or "Senior Pastor"? Church history, according to J.C. Ryle, has all too clearly demonstrated that we have missed the true meaning of Jesus' words:

Happy would it have been for the Church of Christ, if this passage had been more deeply pondered, and the spirit of it more implicitly obeyed. The Pharisees are not the only people who have imposed austerities on others, and affected a sanctity of apparel, and loved the praise of man. The annals of church history show that only too many Christians have walked closely in their steps (*Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, Vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Reprint, 1977] p.299).

Greg Ogden, a writer and church shepherd in Saratoga (CA), states:

I mourn for the church because we seem to display so many of the characteristics that Jesus said, "Not so among you" (Mark 10:43). Shameful arrogance and haughtiness have reached epidemic proportions among church leaders... A direct implication of Jesus' servant stance was His obliteration of titles... We have refused to take Jesus' words at face value. Jesus' obvious intent was to remove any basis for "lording it over" others by dispensing with titles that give people an elevated place in the "pecking order." We all occupy the same level ground at the foot of the one Teacher, Jesus Christ. We are not "great ones" or "lords"... Finally, do not accept the designation "master" or "leader." No human can usurp the position of the head of the body, Christ. Our tendency seems always toward idolatry, to make someone larger than life. Never forget: Jesus alone is Lord (*The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990] p.172,174).

The Son of God "made Himself of no reputation" (Philippians 2:7), yet His servants seem bent on following an opposite course. Christ bids us to learn of Him who was "meek and lowly" (Matthew 11:29), yet His representatives continue to exalt themselves with self-glorifying titles. But someone may ask, what real harm is there in such titles of prominence? Perhaps the following points will help to explain their danger and assist Christians in avoiding them.

**1. The New Testament simply provides no warrant for giving congregational leaders priestly or honorific titles.** Thus, any man who seeks or permits such titles to be given to him violates the express commands of Christ (Matthew 23:8-10) as well as apostolic practice. Alexander Strauch, a writer and shepherd in Littleton (CO), has stated:

The modern array of ecclesiastical titles accompanying the names of Christian leaders--reverend, archbishop, cardinal, pope, primate, metropolitan, canon, curate--is completely missing from the New Testament and would have appalled the apostles and early believers. Although both the Greeks and Jews employed a wealth of titles for their political and religious leaders in order to express their power and authority, the early Christians avoided such titles. The early Christians used *common* and *functional* terms to describe themselves and their relationships. Some of these terms are "brother," "beloved," "fellow-worker," "laborer," "slave," "servant," "prisoner," "fellow-soldier," and "steward." Of course there were prophets, teachers, apostles, evangelists, leaders, elders, and deacons within the first churches, *but these were not used as formal titles for individuals*. All Christians are saints, but there was no "Saint John." All are priests, but there was no "Priest Philip." Some are elders, but there was no "Elder Paul." Some are overseers, but there was no "Overseer John." Some are pastors, but there was not "Pastor James." Some are deacons, but there was no "Deacon Peter." Some are apostles, but there was no "Apostle Andrew." Rather than gaining honor through titles and position, New Testament believers received honor primarily for their service and work (Acts 15:26; Romans 16:1,2,4,12; 1 Corinthians 16:15,16,18; 2 Corinthians 8:18; Philippians 2:29,30; Colossians 1:7; 4:12,13; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:1). The early Christians referred to each other by personal names (Timothy, Paul, Titus), the terms "brother" or "sister," or by

describing an individual's spiritual character or work: "Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5); "Barnabas, a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (Acts 11:24); "Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21:8); "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3); "Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you" (Romans 16:6) (*Biblical Eldership* [Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers/Revised, 1995] pp. 302-303).

Frank A. Viola has, likewise, written:

In keeping with our Lord's command, biblical elders did not permit themselves to be addressed by honorific titles such as "Pastor Bill," "Elder Tom," "Bishop Jake," or "Reverend Sam" (Matthew 23:7-12). Such titles naturally elevate church leaders to a plane above the other brethren in the assembly. Thus, congregations and clergy alike are responsible for creating the current "Christian guruism" that is rampant in the church today wherein religious leaders are recast into spiritual celebrities and lauded with fan club status. By contrast, New Testament leaders were viewed as ordinary brethren and were just as approachable and accessible to the saints as any other believer in the church. For this reason, 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13 exhorts the saints to intimately know their leaders (a near impossible mandate to fulfill in most contemporary churches where the pastor is trained to keep his distance from the people lest he lose his authority). In this regard, the common image of church leaders as "sacred men of the cloth" is utterly foreign to the biblical concept (*Rethinking the Wineskin* [Brandon, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 1997] p.63).

**2. The apostles of Christ employed lowly and unofficial terms when describing themselves or others.** Notice the expressions which Paul, Peter, and John repeatedly chose to use--which tends to argue against any notion of honorific titles:

**Acts 15:23**, "The apostles and elders, *your brothers*."

**1 Corinthians 4:1**, "Let a man regard us in this manner, *as servants of Christ*, and stewards of the mysteries of God."

**2 Corinthians 12:11**, "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, *even though I am a nobody*."

**Ephesians 3:8**, "To me, *the very least of all saints*, this grace was given..."

**1 Thessalonians 3:2**, "And we sent Timothy, *our brother* and God's *fellow worker* in the Gospel of Christ..."

**1 Timothy 1:15-16**, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, *among whom I am foremost of all*. And yet for this reason I found mercy, *in order that in me as the foremost*, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience..."

**1 Peter 5:1**, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, *as your fellow elder*..."

**2 Peter 3:15**, "And regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as our beloved *brother Paul*..."

**Revelation 1:9**, "I, John, *your brother and fellow partaker...*"

In light of these clear passages, should we not, then, heed the practice of our Lord's apostles? "Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us" (Philippians 3:17).

Acts 15:23 ("The apostles and elders, *your brothers*") is particularly interesting since, in an official decree that was to be sent to all the churches, the apostles and elders simply referred to themselves as "your brothers." It contained no honorific titles or hierarchical expressions; only the phrase, "your brothers." Thus, the apostles and elders are brethren writing to fellow brethren. The Lutheran Bible commentator, R.C.H. Lenski, writes: "'The apostles and the elders' write for themselves and for the entire church but as 'brethren.' Some texts have 'and the brethren,' referring to the congregation, but this reading lacks attestation. The apposition 'brethren' is highly significant in this communication. The apostles and the elders of Jerusalem speak to the Gentile Christians *only as brethren and not as superiors...* Brethren salute brethren. The communication is fraternal and asks to be accepted as such and as such alone" (*The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961] p.621).

Another significant passage is 1 Peter 5:1 ("Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, *as your fellow elder*"). Here was Peter's great opportunity to use an exalted title for himself (e.g., "Senior Pastor," "Chief Elder," "Bishop of Rome"), but chooses not to. Instead, he simply refers to himself as "your fellow elder." Such terminology, as Peter H. Davids points out, is "consistent with the tendency among the early leaders to avoid the use of exalted titles such as were used about them in the second century" (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle of Peter* [Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1990] p.176).

**It is important to emphasize that such terms as "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" are *functional* terms, and were never intended to serve as formal titles. In other words, the terminology is *descriptive* of one's *task*; they help to picture a church leader's *function* or may even denote one's spiritual maturity as in the term "elder." Thus, it is just as foolish and unnecessary to speak of "Pastor Bob" as it is to speak of one who possesses the gift or function of hospitality as "Hospitality Harry"; or one who has the gift of mercy as "Mercy Mary"; or one who has the gift of giving as "Giving George."**

**3. Honorific titles feed the pride of men.** It tends to inflate one's ego, thus provoking church leaders to think more highly of themselves than they should (Romans 12:3). Let's face it: we all struggle with sin and pride; but why compound that struggle by exalting oneself with special titles which have no basis in the New Testament? While seeing nothing inherently wrong with titles per se, even Craig L. Blomberg, associate professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, is compelled to recognize its dangers:

But one wonders how often these titles are used without implying unbiblical ideas about a greater worth or value of the individuals to whom they are assigned. One similarly wonders for how long the recipients of such forms of address can resist an unbiblical pride from all the plaudits. It is probably best to abolish most uses of such titles and look for equalizing terms that show that we are all related as family to one Heavenly Father (God) and one teacher (Christ)... In American Christian circles perhaps the best goal is to strive for the intimacy that simply makes addressing one another on a first-name basis natural (*The New American Commentary: Matthew*, Vol. 22 [Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992] p.343).

**4. Honorific titles, contrary to what many ecclesiastical authorities would assert, are a form of self-promotion.** In fact, some men employ the title "Doctor" for the express purpose of making their opinions or books carry greater authority than they actually do. We tend to assume that the man with an earned doctorate is an "expert," whose words are beyond question. But no man's opinions should be accepted merely because he has a Th.D. or Ph.D. behind his name. Every doctrine or human opinion is to be tested by the rule of Scripture (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Revelation 2:2), not one's educational achievements.

If we were to look at degrees only, we might also conclude that the apostles of our Lord were not particularly trustworthy, since none of them (except Paul) had any recognizable formal training: "Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were *uneducated* and *untrained* men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Moreover, "teachers amongst the Lord's people do not need titles granted by men as a sign of theological authority to teach; authority and ability to teach in spiritual things come from the Lord through the Holy Spirit, and not through the schools of men. Such titles, both then and now, distract from the preeminence of Christ over all those who are brethren in the family of God... We are all brethren and we are all servants (*diakonos*); this excludes self-exaltation. God reverses what man would esteem" (J. Heading, *Ritchie New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* [Scotland: John Ritchie, LTD., 1984] pp. 307-308).

Perhaps one reason why some pastors feel compelled to preface their names with a degree or honorific title, is because they have an inferiority complex or are ineffective in gaining respect in ways that are more servant-oriented. It's also important to note that many clergymen have pursued a career in pastoral ministry for reasons less than the glory of God. Far too many are seeking the honor and recognition of men, rather than the honor of Christ (John 5:44; Galatians 1:10). The use of self-glorifying titles only helps to attract such kind.

One common argument used to support honorific titles is that the man who has earned a doctorate in theology worked hard for it and, thus, is entitled to display his accomplishments. But so has the man who has earned a Master of Divinity degree or even a Bachelor of Arts! Should we, then, continually refer to such persons as "Master of Divinity Dave" or "Bachelor of Arts Bill"? If not, why should we continue to employ the title "Doctor" before one's name?

We remind the reader as well that Jesus clearly forbid such titles of distinction among His followers in Matthew 23:8-12. Any person, therefore, who seeks to justify the use of honorific titles must ultimately answer to Jesus Himself. It might also be interesting to note that "Rabbi," as used during the time of Jesus, was employed "much as 'Doctor' is today. In fact, the Latin equivalent of rabbi comes from *docere*, which means to teach and is the term from which the English word *doctor* is derived" (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16-23* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1988] p.366).

Another argument used to justify honorific titles is that they are a means of expressing respect to church leaders. The early Christians, however, were still able to express their esteem toward each other without having to resort to special titles (Philippians 2:25-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17).

**5. Honorific titles draw unnecessary attention to oneself.** The man who uses them is subtly telling others that he is someone important and worthy of their respect. Although he may never admit to it, the

great day of judgment promises to disclose his true motivation and inner-secrets (Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:5).

**6. Honorific titles detract from the glory that rightfully belongs to Christ alone.** Such titles of distinction as "Reverend" (meaning, "he who is to be revered") not only esteem persons higher than is humanly permissible, but it intrudes in a realm that is not rightfully theirs. We would be wise to listen to the counsel of J.C. Ryle:

But still we must be very careful that we do not insensibly give to ministers a place and an honor which do not belong to them. We must never allow them to come between ourselves and Christ. The very best are not infallible. They are not priests who can atone for us. They are not mediators who can undertake to manage our soul's affairs with God. They are men of like passions with ourselves, needing the same cleansing blood, and the same renewing Spirit, set apart to a high and holy calling, but still after all only men. Let us never forget these things. Such cautions are always useful. Human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister, than an invisible Christ (*Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, Vol. 1, pp. 299-300).

Many churches in our day refer to their most gifted or experienced leader as "Senior Pastor." However, the only "Senior Pastor" that the New Testament speaks of is Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:3). He alone is "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20; cf. John 10:11, 14, 16; Ephesians 5:23). Those who serve in a leadership function within the local church are undershepherds. They are called to be humble servants of the sheep (1 Corinthians 3:5; 4:1; 2 Corinthians 4:5), not lords who reign over their fiefdom (1 Peter 5:3). Thus, it is quite arrogant to take on the lofty title of "Senior Pastor" when Scripture reserves this for Christ alone! Even the apostle Peter merely referred to himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Peter 5:1). The Christian apologist, J.P. Moreland, has said it well:

The local church in the New Testament contained a plurality of elders (see Acts 14:23, 20:28; Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 13:17). *The New Testament knows nothing about a senior pastor. In my opinion, the emergence of the senior pastor in the local church is one of the factors that has most significantly undermined the development of healthy churches...* Given these facts, the senior pastor model actually produces a codependence that often feeds the egos of senior pastors while allowing the parishioners to remain passive. None of this is intentional, but the effects are still real. The senior pastor model tends to create a situation in which we identify the church as "Pastor Smith's church" and parishioners come to support *his* ministry. If a visitor asks where the minister is, instead of pointing to the entire congregation (as the New Testament would indicate, since we are all ministers of the New Covenant), we actually point to Pastor Smith... *The local church should be led and taught by a plurality of voices called elders, and these voices should be equal... No one person has enough gifts, perspective, and maturity to be given the opportunity disproportionately to shape the personality and texture of a local church.* If Christ is actually the head of the church, our church structures ought to reflect that fact, and a group of undershepherds, not a senior pastor, should collectively seek His guidance in leading the congregation (*Love Your God With All Your Mind* [Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing, 1997] pp. 190-191).

**7. Honorific titles tend to attract carnal and power-seeking men to positions of church leadership.** As pointed out earlier, if our churches continue to give to their leaders lofty and self-glorifying titles of distinction, we will continue to attract a large percentage of men seeking prestige, recognition, and power. *This is not meant to suggest that every church leader who employs an honorific title is necessarily seeking*

*to have his ego stroked or possesses less than genuine motives, but only that far too many fall into this category. Some are simply naive as to the dangers and implications of their lofty titles.*

Let's face it: if you set up a religious clerical system that promotes power, prestige, and self-exaltation (as opposed to the humble servant-model of Jesus presented in Mark 10:35-45 and John 13:3-17), such a system will repeatedly attract men seeking such power and prestige. This is one of the major reasons why our churches have historically had the wrong kind of men in positions of leadership. But, we must ask, what kind of men would be attracted to church leadership if they were told they will be servants, not lords; not titled; probably not salaried (Acts 20:33-35); not the sole preacher/teacher (Acts 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:17); an equipper, not a shining superstar; and only one amongst a plurality of other leaders (Acts 14:23; Hebrews 13:17)? Only the most dedicated, humble, and self-sacrificing would be desirous of such a noble task! And, yet, these are the very kind of men that Christ wants to shepherd His sheep--and who are often most lacking in our churches. Greg Ogden writes:

We get the kind of leaders we deserve. It often seems that the world's view of greatness is the standard we use when we select our leaders. We have allowed arrogant, unaccountable, and self-professed channels of the Spirit to shoot off like loose cannon. We sometimes have a penchant in the Christian community for holding up the proud and arrogant as our ideal because "they get the job done." Using the world's view of power, we want leaders to exercise influence, work their way into positions of power, and throw their weight around. We therefore get what we ourselves honor--Christian leaders who act like potentates rather than self-sacrificing servants of Jesus Christ. Our actions show that we do not believe that real power is expressed through servanthood that leads to a cross. The Church Growth Movement has identified strong pastoral leadership as a key ingredient in the growth of a congregation. I will grant that leaders must lead. But what gets passed off as leadership often has no resemblance to servant leadership as modeled and taught by our Lord... Our natural tendency is to concentrate power at the top, but Jesus modeled and taught a different way of life (*The New Reformation*, pp. 172-173).

#### **8. Honorific titles tend to promote an elitist attitude and authoritarian forms of church leadership.**

Even the best of men can find self-glorifying titles intoxicating and begin to form lofty opinions of themselves. Within time, they begin to look upon their congregational members as mere "common folks"; an ignorant mass of "laity" who desperately need their wisdom and insight (John 7:49; 9:34).

Church leaders, however, must never give themselves the airs of stuffy, official, and fussy "ministers" as is common among many claiming to be pastors in our day. Instead, their behavior and attitude should conform to the words of Paul in Romans 12:16, "Do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly" and in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." The 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, warned his pastoral students of the danger of ministerial pride:

My brethren, be not priests yourselves. It is very possible to give yourselves the airs of hierarchs, even though you are avowedly nothing more than Nonconformist pastors. There is a style of dress--the affectation of it is not praiseworthy. There is a style of language--the imitation of it is not commendable. There is an assumption of superiority, looking down upon the common people as mere laity; this piece of pompousness is ridiculous. Avoid the way of certain clerics who seem intent on making their people feel that a minister is a dignified individual, and that the rest of the members of the church should hardly venture

to differ from him. Say what we like about all believers in Christ being a generation of priests, we still find vain fellows among us who would be thought of as possessors of a mystic specialty. Our office, as pastors, deserves to be respected, and will be if properly carried out; but I have observed that some who are very anxious to magnify their office, really try to magnify themselves (*An All-Round Ministry* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960] pp. 371-372).

**9. Honorific titles help to perpetuate the "clergy-laity" division.** While it is common for people to speak of church leaders as the "clergy" and the rest of God's people as the "laity," the New Testament never divides the body of Christ into two classes known as "clergy" and "laity."

The root meaning of *kleros*, from which we get our word "clergy," is "inheritance" or "lot" and refers to the believer's inheritance in Christ, not to a special class of ministers. The word *laos*, from which we get our word "laity," refers to all of a group; in some cases, it specifically denotes the people of God. Thus, all believers in Christ are part of the *laos* (or "laity"), including pastors! Every believer is a minister and priest before God with authority to do the work of ministry (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6). The New Testament never confines "ministry" to a select few.

Clericalism has done much to harm and weaken the body of Christ. It clearly divides the Christian brotherhood; it hinders the saints from behaving like the ministers they are; it obscures, if not annuls, the essential oneness of the people of God; and it exalts the pride of church leaders by conferring upon them special titles and privileges. Howard Snyder, a prolific author on the subject of church renewal, has stated:

The New Testament simply does not speak of two classes of Christians--"minister" and "laymen"--as we do today. According to the Bible, the people (*laos*, "laity") of God comprise all Christians, and all Christians through the exercise of spiritual gifts have some "work of ministry." So if we wish to be biblical, we will have to say that all Christians are laymen (God's people) and all are ministers. The clergy-laity dichotomy is unbiblical and therefore invalid. It grew up as an accident of church history and actually marked a drift away from biblical faithfulness. A professional, distinct priesthood did exist in Old Testament days. But in the New Testament this priesthood is replaced by two truths: Jesus Christ is our great high priest, and the Church is a kingdom of priests (Hebrews 4:14; 8:1; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6). The New Testament doctrine of ministry rests therefore not on the clergy-laity distinction but on the twin and complementary pillars of the priesthood of all believers and the gifts of the Spirit. Today, four centuries after the Reformation, the full implications of this Protestant affirmation have yet to be worked out. The clergy-laity dichotomy is a direct carry-over from pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism and a throwback to the Old Testament priesthood. It is one of the principle obstacles to the Church effectively being God's agent of the Kingdom today because it creates the false idea that only "holy men," namely, ordained ministers, are really qualified and responsible for leadership and significant ministry. In the New Testament there are functional distinctions between various kinds of ministries but no hierarchical division between clergy and laity (*The Community of the King* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977] pp. 94-95).

### **What Can Church Leaders Do to Help Correct This Problem?**

1. They must humble themselves and begin to view their ministry in terms of servanthood, not lordship (Mark 10:35-45; 1 Peter 5:3).
2. They must remove all clerical titles and gowns (Matthew 23:8-12). The saints must be taught to refer to their leader(s) as "brother" or by one's first name.



3. They must return ministry to the people of God, seeing them as full partners in the task of building up the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-14; 14:12,26; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Peter 4:10-11).
4. We are in dire need of language reform. The terms that we use for ourselves ("layman") and those used to describe our leaders ("Reverend," "Minister") are very important since, not only do they convey our thinking on such fundamental issues as the nature of the church and how local church leadership should be structured, but the use of unbiblical or improper terms may help to stunt the growth of Christ's body. As Alexander Strauch has wisely stated:

It is critically important for Christians today to understand that the language we use to describe our church leaders has the power to accurately reflect biblical thinking and practice or, conversely, to lead us far away from the true Church of Jesus Christ and into the false church... In the end, every local church is responsible to teach its people the meaning of the terms it uses to describe its spiritual leaders, whether it be elders, overseers, ministers, preachers, or pastors. Biblically sensitive church leaders will insist that the terminology they use represents, as accurately as possible, the original biblical terms and concepts of a New Testament eldership. False teachers have had their greatest triumphs when they redefine biblical words in a way that is contrary to the original meaning... Much of our church vocabulary is unscriptural and terribly misleading. Words such as *clergyman*, *layman*, *reverend*, *minister*, *priest*, *bishop*, *ordained*, and *ministerial* convey ideas contrary to what Jesus Christ and His apostles taught. Such terminology misrepresents the true nature of apostolic Christianity and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recapture it. As a result, most of our churches are in desperate need of language reform (*Biblical Eldership*, pp. 32-34).

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