

Theological and Biblical Perspectives on the Laity

by Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr.

Foreword

It is apparent that there is a movement among the baptized, both laity and clergy, to reaffirm the ministry of the laity not only in the church, but especially in their daily lives and work. As Dr. Stuempfle makes clear, the roots of this movement are profoundly scriptural and theological, and his description of the rise and fall of lay ministry throughout the years of the church's history is a fascinating study.

In the closing half of our century many events have shown a growing interest in lay ministry. For example, the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954 sought to articulate the call of God in Christ to the people of God to minister in and for God's world. The council declared, "The fact is that the Church is already in these spheres in the persons of its laity." In addition, the Central Committee made this comment after the assembly: "There is nothing new in this conception....but it is a truth which has been obscured over many periods of the Church's life."

Just as the lay movement was gaining support from the World Council, books concerning the movement began to appear. Hendrick Kraemer's *Theology of the Laity* was a major contribution. *Luther on Vocation*, the English translation of Gustaf Wingren's powerfully supportive work, became available in 1957, and Donald Heiges wrote *The Christian's Calling* the following year. Meanwhile, in Germany the post-war establishment of Evangelical Academies to help people relate their faith to their daily lives and occupations was clearly making a difference. It was at this time, and as a part of this ferment, that the Lutheran Church in America established Faith and Life Institutes. Harold Letts in the Lutheran Church in America, and Loren Halvorsen in the American Lutheran Church, became American Lutheran pioneers of lay ministry. In addition, George McLeod, Mark Gibbs, Ralph Morton, J.A.T. Robinson, Colin Williams, Mark van den Heuvel, and many others from overseas were widely read in the United States, stirring up, in the words of Gibbs and Morton, "God's frozen people." Expectations were running high. A new day was at hand.

If the ministry in daily life movement is to continue to grow and remain effective, it is imperative that we keep checking our theological and biblical perspectives. We must remember that we are baptized, called to be the people of God, the body of Christ, Giving ourselves "for the life of the world."

No one can speak adequately of the church without affirming the role of the laity. A recent ecumenical document asserts that “all members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent.”¹ A denominational study makes the following declaration: “Ministry is God acting through the people of God for the life of the world. We, all of God’s people, are ministers! We, all god’s people, are the Body of Christ in the world.”²

The “all” in those two statements embraces both clergy and laity. This essay, however, will focus in a particular way on the special role of that vast majority among the people of God who are called to ministries other than the public proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. To do so is neither to forget nor to minimize the essential ministry of the clergy. It is, rather, to give visibility to that vast body of Christians through whom the grace and truth of God, proclaimed and served in a special way by the ordained, reach directly into the life of the world.

The Laity in the Early Church

The fact that we find it necessary to single out for special attention a group called “the laity” is in itself significant. The New Testament community would have found such an exercise odd in the extreme. Although there is still a lack of clarity about the kinds of church structures that prevailed in those ancient times, it is generally agreed that in the beginning there was no subspecies “laity” of the genus “Christian.” In fact, to say “laity” (or *laos*, the New Testament word) was to say “Christian.” The two words were, for all practical purposes, synonymous.

Laos was one of the general terms used to designate those who had been incorporated into Christ through baptism. Under this major heading came certain subheadings: apostles, deacons, presbyters, bishops, catechists, et cetera, according to the various offices people held in the church. Some among God’s *laos* were set apart for special functions; others were not. But to hold an office in the church, even that of bishop, did not remove a person from the ranks of the *laos*. It simply meant that you were a member of the *laos* set apart for and engaged in service for the sake of all

One classic New Testament use of the word *laos* is found in 1 Peter 2:9-10:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people.

Many things could be said about this rich passage. Suffice it to note that the Greek behind each appearance of “people” in these verses is *laos*. God’s people, the new race, the royal priesthood, were, without differentiation in regard to office, quite simply the laity.

Alan Richardson provides this summary of the New Testament situation:

Baptism is, as it were, the ordination of a new member of the royal priesthood. It is the making of a layman in the Church of Christ. A layman, in the NT sense, i.e., a member of the *laos*, is certainly not (as he tends to be in modern usage) a church-member who has no ministerial responsibilities, one who has handed over his functions of evangelism and pastoral care to certain professional Christians who are paid to perform them. All the laity..., if we use the term in a

biblical way, are priests and ministers of the Church of Jesus Christ; and ministers of the Church of Jesus Christ; and all the ‘ministers’ are equally ‘laymen’.³

This pristine condition did not last long. We cannot here trace the tedious route by which the church departed from its original understanding of the laity. It is clear, however, that before long the laity began to be defined as a subspecies of the genus “Christian” and were differentiated from another subspecies called “clergy.”

Hendrik Kraemer has pointed out the secular derivation of the words “laity” and “clergy.” In the Graeco-Roman city-state, *laos* referred to the mass of the citizenry, and *kleros* to their magistrates. Analogously in the church, those ordained to special office were “clergy,” while ordinary Christians were lumped together as “laity.” Some of the Latin fathers of the church even referred to the laity as “pebs.” The pressure toward such classification was intensified when under Constantine the clergy were extended certain privileges which the imperial government had previously granted members of the heathen priesthood. By the twelfth century, a lawyer name Gratian could report with neat simplicity that “there are two kinds of Christians.” He meant, of course, clergy and laity. The old word *laos* had lost its generic meaning.

The Laity and the Reformation

Such was the situation inherited by the Reformers. It could be described as the ecclesiology of the “split-level church.” On the ground level, exposed to all the dirt and grime of the world, their salvation always in jeopardy, totally dependent upon ministrations from those above them, were the laity. On the upper level, closer to heaven, infused with special divine grace, Sheltered from the corruptions of the evil world, dispensing their medicine of the sacraments of the laity below, were the clergy. Though the laity were more numerous by far, there was by now no question that they were also the inferior subspecies of the genus “Christian.” A strange structure had risen upon the foundations of the New Testament understanding of the church.

One effect of the movement toward reform was to demolish this “split-level church” and begin construction of what might be called a “ranch-type church.” The Reformation blueprint called for a church in which all Christians lived on one level. Certainly not everyone occupied the same room. There were various “office spaces.” But no one stood higher than any other, either in terms of nearness to God or of shelter from sin. Clergy were to be seen as distinct from the laity only in terms of office and function, not in terms of their standing before God.

Two of Luther’s theological insights have special bearing upon this matter:

1. The universal priesthood of the baptized

Probably no Reformation doctrine has been more tragically misunderstood and misapplied. We constantly look at it through the lens of our modern Western individualistic assumptions. Thus, most church members upon hearing this slogan will say, “Aha! That means I’m my own person before God. No more of this medieval nonsense about a priest who must channel my prayers to God, and God’s grace to me. I can say my own prayers, confess my own sins, and receive in my own heart God’s direct assurance of forgiveness.” The upright Christian, standing as an individual before God, is the model that issues from this understanding. By intensifying self-centered piety and undermining the mutuality so central to life in Christ, this model has worked much mischief in the life of congregations.

Luther, of course, never intended this. Such an individualistic interpretation is actually a negation of the meaning of priesthood. If this is what Luther had meant, he would never have spoken about the “universal *priesthood* of the baptized.”

A priest is by definition a mediator, a go-between, in the relationship between God and humanity. Therefore, when Luther speaks about the “*priesthood* of the baptized,” he is insisting that every Christian fulfills a mediating role between God and neighbor. Far from eliminating priests from the church, Luther multiplied them. He broke up the monopoly which the clergy held on that function, and distributed the work of mediation to *all* members of the body of Christ. “Through baptism,” Luther declared, “*all* of us are consecrated to the priesthood.”⁴

God’s *laos* fulfill their priesthood in a variety of ways. Some — the clergy — are given special offices of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. They are ordained to official, public functions of priesthood in the church. But the laity have their priestly functions, too. According to Luther, they are to pray for each other. They are to listen to their sisters’ and brothers’ confessions of sin and cries of distress. They are to speak God’s cheering word of forgiveness and consolation. They are to be agents of God’s overflowing goodness by ministering to the poor and oppressed. In short, they are to be “little Christs” to each other, subpriests of Jesus, who is the great high priest of all. A contemporary description of the church suggests this mutuality of priesthood; “The church is that community in which one hungry person is always telling another hungry person where to find food.”

The affirmation that all Christians by virtue of their baptism are given a priesthood to their neighbors by no means exhausts the meaning of Luther’s teaching. It must also be said that the church as a community exercises a corporate priesthood on behalf of the world. Just as each one of us stands in a mediating position between God and neighbor, so the whole body of Christ stands in a priestly position between God and the world.

A part of this priesthood is the ministry of intercessory prayer. “Christians,” wrote an early church leader, “plead the cause of the human race before the divine clemency.”⁵ In recent decades there has been important and needed stress on the church’s prophetic and activist roles in public life. Christians have learned the necessity of speaking a forthright word of judgment in the face of oppressive powers, and of standing beside the disadvantaged and powerless as their advocates. They have marched with others in the cause of peace, and joined hands with them to advance justice and freedom. Along with these muscular forms of priesthood, the church is called to continue in its hidden task of prayer for the world: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly, and respectable in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Priesthood implies a movement from human beings toward God by way of prayer, and a movement from God toward human beings by way of love. The church as a body and through its individual members offers itself to God as an agent to the world of that grace for which it prays. This is the meaning of preaching and evangelism; of the church’s institutional ministries of mercy; of the struggles to translate love into justice, peace, and freedom; and of the numberless unheralded acts of caring which God’s people perform from day to day. All are elements in the two-way traffic, the continuous ascending and descending of intercession and loving service which constitute the church’s mediating priesthood.

2. *The vocation or calling of the Christian*

Both in the New Testament and in Luther's usage, the word "calling" or vocation"; has a variety of meaning. In 1 Corinthians 7:20, Paul uses its Greek equivalent, *klesis*, in two ways within a single verse: "Let everyone remain in the same calling in which he has been called."

In the first instance, "calling" refers to the human condition — circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free — in which a convert enters the primal address or "call" of the gospel, whereby God liberates persons from all such human distinctions. This is also the force of the word in Ephesians 4:1, where Paul writes, "I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

By the time of the Reformation, this majestic biblical word had been trimmed to very limited proportions. It embraced only those Christians who had found their way into ecclesiastical order or office. Only priests, monks, and nuns had a "calling" or "vocation." No lay person need apply. Again, it was part of Luther's work to recover this New Testament word and restore its full meaning.

Gustav Wingren points out that Luther used the word "vocation" in three ways: (a) to designate the summons which reaches us in the proclamation of the gospel; (b) to refer to the occupation or status of a person in society; and (c) to refer to the call to the office of preacher in the church. Luther used the German word *Beruf* with the same flexibility, although most often to designate a Christian's secular status or occupation. Non-Christians, according to Luther, do not have a *Beruf* (calling); they have only a *Stand* (Station). Christians likewise have a *Stand* as prince, magistrate, cobbler, citizen, husband, wife, or child, but the fact that God has summoned them in the gospel as children and servants transmutes the *Stand* into a *Beruf* through which they serve God by serving their neighbor.⁶

Once again the radical separation between "two kinds of Christians" was overcome. No longer could any special group within the church, namely those set aside for ecclesiastical office, claim a monopoly on the word "vocation." All Christians, whatever their office or status in church or world, lived out their lives under God's call. Further, church offices were not to be thought of as in any way superior to secular offices. Each could equally be the place of service to the neighbor, and thus to God. Luther, I think, would have liked the man who, when asked by a fervid evangelist, "What do you do to serve the Lord?", replied without blinking, "I bake bread." Luther's own way of stating the case was, "The housemaid on her knees scrubbing the floor is doing a work as pleasing in the eyes of Almighty God as the priest on his knees before the altar saying the mass."

The housemaid's work was seen by Luther as holy because God had given her opportunity in her particular place to serve her neighbor — in this case the household in which she was employed. In like manner, the mistress had opportunity to serve the housemaid by dealing with her kindly and justly. Indeed, both were under the necessity of serving each other.

Earthly occupations fall under the category of the law in Luther's bipolar theological scheme. In this realm, certain mutual ministries are virtually forced upon us whether we want to fulfill them or not. The cobbler does not make a good pair of shoes just because he happens to feel like it on a given morning; he knows that his continued livelihood depends on it. Stated in contemporary terms, employers do not pay at least a minimum wage because they are kind; they know they will be hauled into court if they do not. Thus the daily realm with its intricate network of dependencies and accountability forces us into situations in which we are compelled to serve our neighbors, no matter what our disposition toward them

may be. God's calling does not come to us through some inner prompting, but through a concrete set of external demands. Here is Luther's way of putting it:

To use a rough example: If you are a craftsman you will find the Bible placed in your workshop, in your hands, in your heart; it teaches and preaches how you ought to treat your neighbor. Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them. You will not be able to look anywhere where it does not strike your eyes. None of the things with which you deal daily are too trifling to tell you this incessantly, if you are but willing to hear it; and there is no lack of such preaching, for you have as many preachers as there are transactions, commodities, tools, and other implements in your house and estate; and they shout this to your face, "My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his."⁷

In the twentieth century we face a totally different set of circumstances. Vocation is no longer a category preempted for the exclusive use of the clergy. Our problem today is not so much the secularization of vocation for a few, but its secularization for all. vocation usually means, quite simply, one's job. We speak of vocational counseling, vocational schools, or vocational rehabilitation without conscious reference to the vertical dimension which informed Luther's understanding of the Christian's calling. For him, the little sphere of daily work and duty was located within the immense horizon of God's overarching command and promise. Our question today is whether we can help persons in the complex, technological, often depersonalized milieu of work to see their jobs or professions as their calling under God. a number of years ago, J. H. Oldham put it this way;

Can the Christian politician, administrator, business manager, technician, scientist or manual work find a Christian meaning in the choices which he makes and the acts which he performs in his daily occupation or has all this nothing to do with his real Christian life? Can he serve God in these professions or, if he wants to be a Christian in the full sense, must he become a missionary or enter the cloister?⁸

In a sense we have come full circle. Once more, in terms of daily work and divine call, "What God has joined together, humankind has put asunder." It is a fact that the Reformation churches have never realized in *practical* terms what Luther and others articulated in *theological* terms. For large numbers of church members, "calling" is still a word reserved for those entering the ministry of Word and sacrament. "Ministry" itself is a word which too frequently designates only a specialized ecclesiastical profession rather than a task for the whole people of God. It is difficult to argue with Hendrik Kraemer's contention that the practical result of the revolutionary ecclesiology of the Reformers has been the exchange of a "priest-ridden" church for a "preacher-ridden" church in which the laity are seen mainly as passive recipients of a Word proclaimed and taught. "The laity," he writes, "although in a setting different from that before the Reformation, remained as of old, *objects*, and in no sense became *subjects*."⁹

Kraemer, when writing those words, had mainly the European church situation in view. Certain adjustments need to be made when his analysis is applied to the American scene. Here in North America, many laity are indeed active subjects in the church's life. Often, however, that activity has been confined to the ecclesiastical premises. The laity have formed a "Department of the Interior" in the church's life. They have functioned more in terms of service within the institution than of conscious ministry in and through their secular pursuits.

The Laity in the Church Today

We must now take note of an outburst of thought and experimentation concerning the laity which coincided roughly with the close of World War II. Out of the ashes of disillusion and destruction in Europe there emerged what has sometimes been described as the “lay renaissance.” European church leaders, shaken by what the war had revealed about the weakness of the church, but fired by a vision of what the church could be, struggled to give expression to the New Testament understanding of the church as the whole people of God engaged in a mission to the world. American who visited centers where pioneering efforts were being made, returned home with enthusiastic reports of “signs of renewal” or of “a new springtime” in the church. It may be that such appraisals were too optimistic. Nevertheless, the theological impulses which were at the source of that resurgence continue to inform the church’s efforts toward “the recovery of the laity.” Leaders in this recovery have consistently spoken of their work in terms of three theological principles:

1. *Reaffirmation of God’s love for the world*

The doctrine of creation has been given new prominence. The church is learning again what it means to confess with the psalmist, “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof: the world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1). We are being taught to read aright John’s capsule of the gospel: “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son” (John 3:16). As has been noted, that verse does not read, “God so loved the *church*,” as we so often seem to be saying by our preoccupation with matters ecclesiastical to the neglect or even rejection of matters economic, political, and cultural. Cameron Hall, an American pioneer in the lay movement, once complained about the way the average congregation gives the world “the silent treatment.” An examination of the list of coming events in the typical congregational bulletin suggests by what it omits that the laity come to Sunday worship and to weekday meetings with nothing but “churchy” concerns on their minds. It is as though they were expected to deposit all the “worldly” concerns of their workaday lives at the door, much as patrons of the old frontier saloons were requested to check their guns.

But clearly, from the biblical perspective any division between sacred and secular is purely arbitrary; and any division between sacred and secular to the *detriment of the latter* is heretical. The world, it has been said, is God’s “first love.” When God created the heavens and the earth and all within them, God surveyed them and declared them “very good.” And when humankind, the crown of God’s creation, proceeded to turn the garden into a jungle, a “second Adam to the fight, and to the rescue came.” The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The Incarnation means that this secular, worldly life of ours is the chosen habitation for the reality of God. God came among us as a Jewish peasant girl’s child whose adult life was spent mainly as a village carpenter. A New Testament scholar once provided a vivid sketch of what that might have meant:

He was...an ordinary worker in wood...a simple, country working man...He knew both the work and the worries of a laboring man’s life, the terror of war, the pinch of poverty, the haunting fear of unemployment, the long anxiety of years of drought, the grim specter of famine, the insolence of the wealthy employer, the callous heartlessness of the successful merchant. His living was earned by hard, rough labor with the simplest and crudest of tools.¹¹

It wasn’t this author’s point, but it can be ours, that the mode of the *Incarnation affirms this world*. The mundane realm in which men and women run computers, empty bedpans, cook meals, plough fields, sell cars, engineer roads, file papers, et cetera, is the arena of God’s unceasing activity, and thus the locus of our service to God.

2. *The church's mission to the world*

Paul Minear, in his study *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, examines more than eighty word pictures by which the first Christian communities attempted to articulate their sense of who they were. It is a striking fact that the majority of the images are extroverted — oriented outward. Among the examples are salt, light, leaven, and vine. Each fulfills itself only by expending itself: salt in seasoning or preserving; light in illuminating or warming; leaven in raising the dough; the vine in producing grapes.

Although we need not belabor the point, it is clear from a biblical perspective that the church exists not for its own sake but for the world's sake, or, better yet, for the sake of God's mission in and to the world. In Hendrik Kraemer's words; "The church is not an end in itself, but a means to an end."¹² That is to say, the church is not terminal in God's purpose, but instrumental.

God's purpose, the author of Ephesians tells us, was "set forth in Christ" (Eph. 1:9). Jesus was, as some have called him, "the man for others." That description is surely not all the church needs to say about him, but it does underscore the fact that from its beginning to its end, Jesus' earthly life opened outward. Nothing was withheld. He gave himself away — to the poor, the lonely, the outcast, and finally to all the world on the Cross. Therefore, a community which uses "body of Christ" as one of its primary self-images can be nothing less than the "church for others."

No one know better than those who stand close to the center of the church's life how tragically we who constitute Christ's body in the world have betrayed our true identity. Congregations which never look beyond their own walls, and institutions and agencies which appear obsessed with self-preservation are all too familiar. Yet, one of the lasting deposits of the movements of renewal in our time has been the planting of a restless conscience within the church. It is becoming harder for us to settle into comfortable, narcissistic postures. There are too many voices in the present and from the recent past reminding us that God has called the church as servant in and for the world. This leads directly to the third principle which has informed the work of those who have been leaders in the "lay renaissance."

3. *The laity are the spearhead of the church's mission in and for the world*

The clergy are not that spearhead. Their normal occupational habitat is within the church. Their essential work is "inside the camp," teaching, preaching, administering the sacraments, and engaging in other related activities. It is uncharacteristic of them to be professionally engaged in secular pursuits in the workday world. "Worker priests" will continue to be rare.

For the unordained (again with minor exceptions for a relatively small number of professional church workers) the situation is the reverse. Their habitat is more completely the secular world. They work there. They play there. They live in neighborhoods and apartment complexes with all sorts and conditions of people with whom they join in a wide variety of endeavors. They are the natural bridge by which a movement moves from the sanctuary to the street. They are the profane (literally *pro-fanus*: "in front of the temple") Christians. They are Christ's many-membered body in touch at this moment in history with the world that God loves. They stand, without the need for an extra step, at what Simone Weil has called "the intersection between everything that is Christianity and everything that is not Christianity."¹³ Their ministry at this crowded crossing is to represent (literally, to *re-present*) Christ through their ordinary lives to the world he seeks to redeem. Thus, though their ministry takes a different form, the laity have both a sacramental and a witnessing ministry along with that of their ordained sisters and brothers who stand in the pulpit and preside at font and altar.

This perspective is expressed in a report on the laity presented to the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954. That report, now three decades old, still stands as a benchmark for the churches as they seek ways of liberating all of God's people for their mission and ministry in the world:

The time has come to make the ministry of the laity explicit, visible and active in the world. The real battles of the faith today are being fought in factories, shops, offices, and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in the press, radio and television, the relationship of nations. Very often it is said that the church should "go into these spheres"; but the fact is, that the church is already in these spheres in the persons of its laity.¹⁴

Endnotes

1. "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," *Faith and Order Paper No. 111* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. 20.
2. "God's People in Ministry," *Report to the 1984 Convention of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Division for Professional Leadership, 1984), p. 3.
3. Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958), pp. 301-302.
4. Martin Luther, "An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility," *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), p. 66.
5. Quoted by Geoffrey Wainwright in *Doxology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 255.
6. Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), pp. 1-2.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
8. J.H. Oldham, *Work in Modern Society* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), p. 46.
9. Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), pp. 61-68.
10. Hymn source unknown.
11. Chester C. McCown, *The Genesis of the Social Gospel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), p. 34.
12. Kraemer, p. 87.
13. Simone Weil, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1951), p. 76.
14. *Evanston Speaks*, (New York: World Council of Churches, 1955), pp. 64-65.

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