

The Layman and His Church: A Theological Study

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In H. Richard Niebuhr's book on The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, he says: "Much confusion and uncertainty in theological schools today seems to be due to lack of clarity about the community—the church; about its form and matter, its relations and composition. Without a definition of church it is impossible to define adequately the work of the ministry for which the school is to prepare its students" (17f.). I suggest that the same thing which Niebuhr says here about the dilemma of the clergy and the schools designed to train them applies equally well to the laity. Confusion and uncertainty about anybody's place in the church—be he clergy or layman, or some possible third or fourth alternative (like myself)—is due to lack of clarity about the church. H.H. Walz puts it in the following words: "The question 'what is the laity?' is the question 'what is the church?'"

I sense some of that uncertainty present in the title given to my paper: "The Layman and His Church." The juxtaposition of the two nouns smacks of the organizational age in which we live, analogous to the issue of "Me and My Company," or for those who are teachers, "Me and My School," and almost automatically leads down some path of viewing the bilateral covenant between the two

nouns – what my obligations are to the church, company, school, and then what its obligations are to me.—What I expect of it and what it can justly expect of me. Christian theology may well have something to say about reciprocal obligations between individuals and structured communities, but in the words of St. Peter, that is more in the realm of what Christian theology has to say about “human institutions.” The only way I shall be able to stick to the topic of the LAYMAN AND HIS CHURCH will be to capitalize the possessive adjective HIS. If nothing else, the last papal encyclical should remind us of that: Ecclesiam Suam. (Seine Kirche hat Jesus Christus gegrundet, damit sie gleichzeitig liebevolle Mutter and Ausspenerin (ministra) das Heils fuer alle Menschen sei.) The first and only appropriate possessive relationship to church is that it is Christ’s church. Matthew quotes him as saying at Caesarea Philippi “Upon this rock I will build my church.” But this pushes us back to ecclessiology again: Just what is HIS church to which we would relate the layman?

Another barricade on our path is the essentially negative connotations which the word LAYMAN carries. Even within Protestantism, which as D. D. Williams says: “came into being through a new understanding of what it means to live as a Christian in this world,” i.e., to be a layman, (quoted in Eastwood, p. 64) the prereformation medieval perspective colors the label layman. “A layman is one who can’t...” can’t get up in the pulpit Sunday and preach, can’t perform the churchly acts which marry or bury people; in short, can’t normally practice all those activities which is the common understanding constitute the heart and center of “church work.” While the clergy leadership does the real work of the church, the laity has, as someone has said, but to obey, pray, and (or course) pay.

Ayres uses a contemporary image to describe this essentially

negative notion of the laity. He says the prevailing notion views the “church as housed in a split-level dwelling—the laymen in the cellar with a limited view and the clergy upstairs with all the comforts of home.” (Ministry of the Laity, p. 30)

Much of the so-called “church work” being shouldered by the layman in recent years by virtue of the various lay movements (e.g. LLL) within Christendom has not basically departed from this split-level premise. The basis is the tacit assumption that the clergy really are the church in action and the best the laity can do is to assist that clerical ministry of preaching, teaching, pastoral, and sacramental work (e.g., Lutheran Hour). A predominant emphasis in much of lay evangelism puts the layman to work in getting an unchurched man into the church building so that there he may confront the practicing parish priest and then at that point the real work of the church gets done. What goes on in and around the church building is church work. One might say this is a perversion of the understanding of the church into an “edifice complex.” The ultimate perversion is when the church “plant” is so important that without it we cannot really be HIS church. Even apart from such radical perversion it is the activities in and around the churchly edifice led by the clergy which seem to be the work of the church, and the layman does church work when he assists in the activities at the edifice—usher, elder, treasurer, deacon, Bible class teacher, altar guild, etc.

I’m sure that all of you are aware of the theological shrivelling which such notions represent. Both our Biblical and our confessional heritages stand in vivid contrast to (and therefore judgement of) such emaciated perspectives of the LAYMAN AND HIS CHURCH. Although I do not know what prime movers lie behind this conference today, I can well imagine they also include the dissatisfaction with some elements of the status quo – perhaps even the experience of what Ayres calls the “Layman as

second class citizen in bondage to an overinstitutionalized church.” Perhaps one or the other of you is the man he has in mind when he asks: “How many laymen in the last 10 years have begun to see that their ministry lies in the world and have turned hopefully to their church for help, only to have been sold into slavery for maintenance work or house-keeping duties in an omnivorous institution?” (p. 127)

If the purpose of this conference is to help us see the layman as a full-fledged citizen in the commonwealth of God called the church – a first-class citizen (since that’s the only citizenship there is in this realm), and if some of the dilemma stems from a specific ecclesiology, then it will take an alternative concept of the church, of HIS church to bring about any valid changes. All the current literature on the role of the laity talks this way. E.g., ER XIII 203ff. (H. I. Walz) “The work of the laity dare not degenerate into busy- work for laymen. It must be the expression of the new understanding of the church itself and of its renewal wrought by the Holy Spirit.” Or again (Ayres, conclusion) “There will never be a widespread ministry of laity until the church changes its direction, turns from preoccupation with self to a concern for the world, offering itself as a servant, an instrument through which God’s love and justice and mercy become operative and visible in the world. This will not happen except as the church is effectively being renewed: for God is calling the church, and each of its members, to be the minister of his purpose in the world. This will mean many changes for the church—changes in attitude, structure, procedure. Above all it will mean a change in its willingness to take risks and to make sacrifices—new wine in new wineskins! All who love the church and appreciate what it has to give will work for change in all aspects of its life.” (132)

I do not want to give the impression that I am making the anti-

institutional critique of the church. The Lutheran tradition has a healthy respect for institutions—for theological reasons. If I had to focus on a central point of criticism of contemporary ecclesiology in our circles it would not be the institutionalism but the forms of gnosticism (ecclesiological docetism) that relegates the church, because it is a “spiritual assembly,” to an Invisible Platonic ideal. (Cf. M. L. “When I have called the church a spiritual assembly, you have insultingly taken me to mean that I would build a church as Plato builds a state that never was” (cited by Rupp, p. 317). An ecclesia abscondita in the Lutheran notion does not mean that the saints are invisible or not in the world but that their holiness is not to be seen in themselves. The moment their holiness becomes visibly attributed to themselves, they cease to be HIS church (become pseu-do-church), for then no longer does the apostolic motto apply:(Col. 3:3) “Your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Cf. Kastwood, p. 4ff.)

It is a covert gnosticism or spiritualism (pneumatism) which is responsible for much of the difficulty in the layman’s having an integral part in the real work of the church. This suggests that the heart of the church’s life and work lies in invisible intangible spiritual realities that are supranatural (which the clergy have been trained to administer) – and since the layman’s life focuses on the visible, tangible, earthly things that are under supranature, and since he has not studied the mysteries at the seminary, therefore he will hardly ever be able to be more than an acolyte to the genuine churchman. The quotation from D. D. Williams cited above [Protestantism came into being through a new understanding of what it means to be a Christian (i.e., a spiritual being) in this world] suggests that the Reformation presents an antidote to any form of gnosticizing about a common human existence that seriously maintains: I’m but a stranger here, heaven is (really) my home. But the N.T. itself is a more

original document for our mining, and since the Reformers maintain they got their ecclesiology from that source, let us turn to it ourselves. Ephesians is especially rich for getting at the facts of HIS church.

Capitalizing the HIS church brings out a focus in N.T. ecclesiology that a member of the church first of all is not related to an it, or to an organization, or even to a number of other members. But he first of all is related to Christ, to the church's Lord. Many of the N.T. picture words make that graphic. Three are prominent in Ephesians.

Body of Christ – the emphasis being that every portion of the body is connected to the head. Temple – what holds up the successive layers of living stones is that they are squared with the cornerstone which holds the whole edifice together. Bride of Christ – who only qualifies as such because of her connection to her husband.

Two considerations are present in these images for the church and Christ. One is the continuing character of the connection (it is not as though he got it started and than retires to let it run on its own steam) – a continuing character that emphasizes connection. This is obvious in the body and marriage image but is also asserted in the edifice illustration in a sort of eerie space-fictionish notion of a live building that grows. The second is the exchange and interchange that whatever applies to the head applies to the body; the possessions of the husband become the possessions of the wife, and what's inscribed on the cornerstone is valid for every other stone in the structure.

If he is God's son, then in His church I am God's own son. If of Christ it is said "In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell," then the destiny of the Christ-connected man is that he too be "filled with all the fullness of God," or again "grow up

to mature manhood; the measure of which is the full stature of Christ Himself” – in short, to grow up to the point where I look exactly like the original son of God, the only-begotten One.

Affiliation with Christ in His church does more than just work out my own individual theological destiny, but what applies to HIM also applies to me in terms of His messianic mission. The work of the church is the continued work of Him WHOSE church it is, and He in turn is but the realization of the eternal purpose of God the Father, expressed in the opening paragraph of Ephesians as follows: “the mystery of God’s will, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things on earth.” The reconnection of disconnected creation is the grand finale of God’s plan for His world, and the “redemption through HIS blood” is the uncanny and surprising (mystery) source of the “Immeasurably great power” it takes to bring off this reunification, a “sneak preview” of which was given in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ.

The place of the church in this economy of God is expressed in chap. 3:10: “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers.” Just what the apostle had in mind with “principalities and powers” is a bit difficult to determine, but there is no question that for him they represent disconnected creation, segments of heaven and earth that continue to exist “without access to the Father,” an access that comes “through our faith in Him (Christ Jesus our Lord).”

The task of continuing and completing the reconnection of creation with its Creator is not to be viewed as picking up a “neutral” electrical cord and plugging it back into the wall-socket source of power. Disconnected creation has an inverted vitality of its own. In Christ’s own biography it took the blood

of Christ to bring those who were once far off near to God. It took the Cross to bring the hostility to an end. The renegade creatures of the Creator although “dead through trespasses and sins,” maintain a lively fraternity as “sons of disobedience, as children of wrath,” animated by an alternate dynamo which is here called “flesh” and then labelled again with an anti-gnostic twist as the “desires of body and mind.” The reconnection of alienated creation is not blowing God’s own pneuma back into collapsed balloons but is more like taking the dead creature who somehow survives, and recreating him brand new. “Even when we were dead through trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ.” Twice in the loaded chapter two of Ephesians this reconnecting action is spoken of as creation: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.” “Christ” “in His flesh” has abolished the hostilities that separate Jew from Gentile and both from God “that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two.”

The paradigm for the reconnection of alien creation is the biography of Christ, death and resurrection – not just any old death and resurrection, but death and resurrection “together with Christ.” This is the weird and mysterious wisdom of God which the church is now commissioned to make known to the principalities and powers. By seeing redemption and the work of the church in the categories of uniting all things in heaven and earth through Christ back to the Creator the apostle is already setting the stage for every church member’s full involvement in the “work of the church,” whether he is a “professional” churchman or not. For everyone of us, clergy or layman has equal contact with creation – temporally we each encounter 24 hours of it every day; spatially we each are in contact with 360 degree worth all the time. So it comes as no surprise that when the “professional” church workers are treated in chapter four, they are not given the primary assignment to complete the

reconnecting of creation to its Creator. Instead what we would call the laity are given this task. Listen to 4:11 ff. "And Christ's gifts (to the church) were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry, to wit, building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Did you catch that: It's not the clergy (apostles, pastors, etc.) who are to carry out the ministry – not the ministers – but the common saints whom the professionals are supposed to equip – but to equip so that they can perform the ministry. This is building up the expanding and growing organism of creation recreated and reconnected to God, i.e., the body of Christ. For the entire remainder of the epistle (one half of it) the apostle discusses this "work of the ministry" and never refers to the "pros" again but spells it out in terms of the lay saints, in their everyday lives living and talking as though they really did believe "the truth is in Jesus," and therefore they "truthed" it (the Greek makes an interesting verb with this noun) with their neighbor in terms of this truth, just as they "truthed" it with God and "truthed" it in their relationship to their own selves – that the mystery of the Gospel is the resurrecting power of God gloriously at work down here on the ground in those who trust it.

The word laity comes into our language by derivation from a good Biblical word, laos, the people (generally the technical term for God's people), in contrast to other peoples who are technically the nations. Although it was later church theologians who contrasted the laicos with the sacerdos, the N.T. interestingly enough does not. In fact when the N.T. does use the word priest and priesthood (which it does sparingly) it

applies the priestly vocabulary to the entire churchly people. All of which is to indicate that although there were different tasks recognized within the church in the N.T. era, there were no two classes of membership – no pros and amateurs. There was only one kind of membership, full-fledged and first class, which enabled and commissioned that member to be a full-time churchman and a full-time minister in reconciling and reconnecting the world to God.

Membership in this priestly community comes by affiliation with the one great High Priest, Jesus Christ, and that affiliation comes by Baptism, which concretely connects men to Christ's priestly work of sacrificial reconciliation and makes them subordinate priests in the ministry of Christ's priestly people. Luther states this in unmistakable terms: "The fact is that our baptism consecrates us all without exception, and makes us all priests." And again: "Everyone who has been baptized may claim that he has already been consecrated priest, bishop, or pope, even though it is not seemly for any particular person arbitrarily to exercise the office" (Eastwood, p. 20).

This centrality of Baptism, so difficult for us to appreciate even when we have grasped it intellectually, not only consists in its being the divine act of initiation into the life of God and of incorporation into this reconnected and reconnecting community, but it also is a resource (if not the resource) for shaping and structuring the entire role of the LAYMAN AND HIS CHURCH.

Anton Fridrichsen in commenting on Romans 6 says that the baptized man "does not stand alone; he is a member of the body and shares all with it. As he receives all through to congregation, so he is responsible to it for all he is and all he has. Not for so much as a moment can he fence off, as his private concern, any aspect of his life. He no longer lives

himself...The new manner of life is wholly the consequence of baptism. It is not a question of working out for oneself an ideally ethical personality, but rather of entering wholeheartedly into the new order of life, in which the believer becomes a member through baptism. The early Christian ethics was through and through – in principle and practice – a baptism-ethics.” (This Is the Church, p. 59)

The locus classicus for the N.T. treatment of the priestly community in connection with Baptism is I Peter. “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; ONCE YOU HAD NOT RECEIVED MERCY, BUT NOW YOU HAVE RECEIVED MERCY.”

The whole purpose of being called God’s priestly people is not the status it confers, but the task to which it commissions us. In Baptism God calls us His own sons. And the vitality of this calling activity of God brings previously nonexistent reality into existence: YOU HAVE BEEN BORN ANEW THROUGH THE LIVING AND ABIDING WORD OF GOD. The commission that comes from this calling is also labeled a calling. Several times Peter refers to it with the phrase: FOR TO THIS YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED (2:21; 3:9). The priestly people of God are the called ones calling the as yet uncalled, the light calling to the darkness, the God’s people calling the no-people. Calling them not merely to come over here and join us who are on the inside but addressing them with that declaration of God’s wondrous deeds which not only informs of the new possibility but actually effects it. As Peter has said in 1:23ff., that “living and abiding Word of God through which you have been born anew is the Good News which was preached to you.”

Peter has one very interesting way of expressing this. In 3:9 he says: DO NOT RETURN EVIL FOR EVIL OR CURSE FOR CURSE, BUT ON THE CONTRARY BLESS, FOR TO THIS YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED. The world of the “no-people” (unconnected creation) operates in large measure with evil for evil, curse for curse, and therefore much of its life is just one damn thing (literally) after another. But the calling of the priestly people of God is to reverse the curse, to uncurse the world, and to repeal Gen.3:17 in all places where that curse is still operative. The world is uncursed when it is on the receiving end of God’s mercy, and the agents for the mercy are of course the people who themselves have received it. Those who are in the best tactical position for such uncursing of the world are clearly the common Christians who live and work in the normal structures of society, which Peter (2.13) labels as human institutions, and within which he admonishes us “to live as servants of God.” Even though we may at first be scandalized by Peter’s wholesale acceptance of the given institutions and chafe even more at his repeated “be subject, be submissive, be submissive,” his point of departure is that the already existing institutions of society: marriage, government, family, even the slavemaster structure, are viable channels for getting on with the uncursing work because they bring me into face to face contact with other human beings. They eliminate the task of my first finding someone to whom I can be a blessing, but confront me with people, to be sure in radically different contexts – spouse, parents, children, governmental official, employer, employee – right now and challenge me to be God’s priestly man, literally a churchman, “uncursing” that particular piece of creation. It seems that Peter sees the normal secular institutions of society as the most normal channel for this central work of the church. There is no compelling need for setting up other institutions, not even ecclesiastical ones, synods, dioceses (perhaps even congregations are not necessary), for getting specific church work done. Which is but another way

of saying that the laity are the church and already have a wealth of “institutions” available for exercising their churchmanship.

The viability of the secular institutions as channels for the full exercise of the Christian life and ministry is asserted with passion in the Reformation. Article 16 of the C.A. (written incidentally by a layman) asserts that “evangelicam perfectionem” takes place in the “Staatsordnung und weltlichem Regiment,” when I live out my vocation(s) “in the fear of God and in faith,” My vocation(s) (the job I do for a living, the responsibilities to family, colleagues, neighborhood – in short everywhere that God is calling me via some given societal structure to be a blessing to particular people), these vocations are the spheres of my particular life of blessing and holiness. They are indeed secular affairs (de rebus civilibus) – holding civil office, passing judgments and punishments according to existing laws, buying and selling, holding property, taking oaths, contracting marriage – but the very “Gospel” that makes me a member of God’s people “requires that all these be kept as valid institutions of God (wahrhaftige Gottesordnungen) and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in these stations of life.” The holiness and blessing which both Peter and Melancthon envision is not something separate from the secular but in action within the secular when that actor is living on and by “received mercy.”

It seems to me that if there is one area that is most in need of theological elucidation for the sake of the LAYMAN AND HIS CHURCH, it is the area of the theological realities implicit in what most of us consider to be nonreligious matters: those matters that are clearly distinct and separate from what normally goes on down at the church edifice either on Sunday or on weekdays. Lutheran theology has traditionally had quite a bit

to say on this subject under the rubric of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, God's two regimes; C.A. 16 is one manifestation of that. A recent French R.C. work in this direction bears the title "Theology of Terrestrial Realities." Since the laity know these terrestrial realities better than anybody else (at least as terrestrial reality), they will have to take a creative hand in working out such a theology not just for themselves, but for the entire church. In other words, if there is one thing that a more highly educated laity ought to be doing in the church and for the church it is studying theology: continuing the Melanchthonian tradition of not merely amateur interest in the subject but intelligent study and production. That reverses the title of our symposium to being "The Professionally Trained Laity's Responsibility for Its (in this case) Lutheran Church." But if you are the church and it is HIS church, then such a reversal is inevitable. A few concluding words on "The Work of the Ministry":

The ministry of the church to which every baptized churchman is called is labeled diakonia service, aid, in the N.T. The Lord of the church saw His own mission as that of one who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). "Jesus made serving basic to being His disciple. This service was defined as placing the entire self, through death if need be, at the disposal of Christ and of the fellowman....The service that is rendered in this diakonia is simply help for the other person. Thus it often denotes provision for physical need....But it is likewise the word for the act of aiding the life in Christ. The N.T. employs the term "service" to denote the help which a Christian renders by virtue of his being a Christian, ...all Christians share in the labor of this service, and it is that which marks them as being different from the men who are not the disciples of Christ," those who are not His church. (RRC, p. 54f)

The intended recipient of this ministry is the world. The members of the church do indeed exercise ministry try toward fellow members in the process of building-up “skinny” Christians into Christ-sized saints, but the central focus of the church’s ministry in God’s economy is that it “make known the manifold wisdom of God” to the unconnected principalities and powers. It may well that if we have difficulty in executing this central focus of our ministry toward those segments of creation which are not connected to Christ, we will also be doing poorly with those who are already connected, but instead delegating even that “ministry to fellow Christians” to the professional ministers.

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If the church exists for anybody, it exists for those who do not (yet) belong to it, even though (as a WCC study group was recently forced to conclude) “The present church structure is geared almost exclusively to the private needs of its members.” (Cf. the annual budget of any congregation.) Nevertheless the decisive word from Christ about His church is: “As the Father sent Me, so send I you.” If we are the church, then we are God’s “sent ones.” Too long have we operated – consciously or unconsciously – with the otherwise valid notion of the church as the gathered community, forgetting (or perhaps unaware) that this is an eschatological image for the church at the end of time when the harvest is gathered by God’s own in-gatherers. Until the second coming the church of Christ is God’s dispersed community, God’s diaspora (aliens and exiles, says St. Peter), dispersed like salt into all possible places of the life of the world. Church is the salt of the earth, God’s salt in terrestrial reality. Not only is salt useless when it loses its salinity; it is also useless when it stays in the saltshaker. Without dispersion, no savor.

It is this notion of the church which pops up in much of the

current ecumenical literature on the church and her mission. Missions are not one of the multitude of churchly chores that God's people dare not forget, but as Hendrik Kramer says: The church is mission, and therefore she has missions. Church is mission, God's missile into God's mischievous world. So also Kramer can say, the church is ministry (diakonia, servanthship) and therefore she has ministries. And both of these, mission and ministry, are grounded in the sent and in the diakonos character of Christ Himself – "as the Father sent Me – sent as the Suffering Servant to be sacrificed for the world – so send I you."

The subsequent program of this symposium promises to show us some places where the laity might be the sent servants to uncurse and reconnect creation and to bring terrestrial realities into contact with the living God.

In the year 1520 Luther made an "Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation for the Amelioration of the State of Christendom." In a letter to his friend Amadorf he indicated the perspective he had in mind with this document, to wit, "whether God wills to help his church through the laity because the clergy can't or won't." The professionally trained laity of the church of the 20th century is surely the nobility within Christendom today, whether God wills to help HIS church through the laity at this time, insofar as The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is HIS church, will be shown in large measure in the personal biographies of us who are here this weekend.

Edward H. Schroeder

[TheLaymanandHisChurch \(PDF\)](#)