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The Laity: Wholeness and Renewal in the Church

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WE believe that God is calling the Church to express its mission not only through foreign missionaries sent by the boards, but also through an increasing flow of Christian laymen and women who go out across the world in business, industry, and government, and who do so with a deep conviction that God calls to them to witness for Him in all of life. The Churches should be alive to the strategic importance of the spread of the Gospel by such lay people.¹ In these words Norman Goodall speaks of world mission in a new era. Such words characterize the rising sense of urgency which is gripping the heart of the Church today. T. A. Kantonen, in a recent stimulating study,² refers to a remark by a European professor of theology to the effect that if the stewardship program of the Church is deeply rooted in living theology it may come to have the same significance for the twentieth century that the revival of world missions had for the nineteenth century. One is constrained to add that this must surely be much more than a hope; it is an absolute necessity within evangelical Christianity as it moves out into the increasingly challenging world of our time.

I

The idea of the *wholeness* of the Church has to do with unity considered in a more than merely structural or organizational sense. It has very important functional significance as far as the life, witness and worship of the Church are concerned. This means that wholeness, togetherness, unity, are not terms applicable only to the external relationships between denominations. They refer also to the internal state of each denomination as it understands itself before God and as it lives out His life in its body. More than this, these terms must be seen in their relevance to the specific life which is the story, the day-to-day history of each Christian. The Christian life is a whole, or total affair or it is nothing. The Lordship of Christ means that the things of Christ simply cannot be bottled up, held captive, in a building, a liturgy, a creed; it also means that He as Lord refuses to dwell *within* the human heart. A king does not simply dwell *within*, he rules *from* a certain place. The wholeness of a person is never adequately conveyed when one speaks of his "personality." Man exists in relationships with others and with

1. *Shock and Renewal*, compiled by Keith R. Bridston (N.Y.: Friendship Press), p. 62.

2. T. A. Kantonen, *A Theology for Christian Stewardship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), p. 1.

things beyond himself. To speak, therefore, of man, not man-in-general, but this or that specific individual, we must know him as one who is involved, one who is intricately and inevitably related to his environment, the place where he is. It is very hard to think of someone without thinking also of his or her "place." A person is that "someone" partly because of that very place, moulded by it and in turn, either in joy or in sorrow and hardship, trying to mould it. This fact is pregnant with significance for the communication of the gospel in love. It means that the Church has to seek the man to whom the gospel is brought *within his relationships, his world*. The line of least resistance has been for the Church simply to call people sinners and then to throw the gospel at them.

The Social Gospel enthusiasts of a few decades ago tended to stress adjustments in man's environment. In the intervening years the concept of the Christian life as it pertains to the individual has undergone radical change. Not that it was devoid of specific significance in those days. Man was a soul to be saved, a value to be preserved, or even a body to be bettered. We have come to see that the Christian is a witness to the saving, creative Word of God, a Word that has to do not just with man's "eternal" soul but with all things in heaven and on earth. Undoubtedly the term *witness* is the key category in the Christian ethic, whether the latter is conceived in a personal or social sense. In either case it means a decidedly existential awareness of total involvement in the transforming work of God. It is to know the bearing of the Christian faith on the daily life, internal as well as external. One is appalled to think that there are many people in our churches today who think that Christianity is a kind of leisure activity or interest, to be fitted into one's spare time, something for Sunday, the "day-off"!

The recovery of these implications of the concept of wholeness in connection with the Christian life and the Church is of staggering significance. It is nothing short of revolutionary and it will surely demand a radical rethinking and reconstruction of much that has been taken for granted or glossed over altogether. *The focus of attention upon the laity is one major phase of the resultant quickening*. What is God saying to the Church in our day? A recent statement commended to the Churches by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches makes the indisputable claim "that the whole Church shares Christ's ministry in the world and that the effective exercise of this ministry must largely be by church members, when they are dispersed in the life of the world." The analogy of salt is suggested as helpful in thinking of the life of the Church. It is brought together from all peoples, occupations and groups for worship and for other recognizable "organized activities." It is scattered, like salt, as its members, predominantly its lay members, disperse themselves in the life of the world. This dispersal is an indispensable part of the ministry of the whole Church and the double movement of withdrawal and return, of being assembled and being scattered, is essential to the Church's life.

The foregoing sounds very plausible indeed, but how are the laity to be

and to do what is required of them in the world? This is one of the most baffling and urgent problems facing Theological Colleges and Boards of Christian Education. The laity must be prepared for their distinctive ministry. The answer does not lie in finding a simple technique. Neither is it a matter of setting up laymen's organizations to fire new enthusiasms and interests. The lay issue, as H. H. Walz has written,³ is "implicitly a question as to the nature and structure of the Church itself." A theology of the laity is sadly needed. We have had theologies of the ordained ministry, of the Sacraments, of liturgy, of the Word, of the Church, but not really of the laity. We are just nicely beginning our emancipation from the notion that the Church is largely clergy-dominated, existing to throw out life-belts into the world to save the souls of the laity. The position of the laity is now being viewed *positively* as an essential aspect of the nature of the Church itself.

So-called pastoral theology must come in for close scrutiny and analysis. How precisely, is a soul "cured" or "saved"? The answer must find for men and women that companionship of God which goes with them in the ways of their lives in the world. Religious instruction must surely be brought to bear directly upon the multitudinous questions of daily living in this world. It simply is not good enough to "tell about Jesus" or of "what Jesus did."

II

It would be almost useless to mention what actually is taking place among the laity, in order to meet the problem, if we did not see these activities, or experiments (for that is what they are), within the context of some such statement as the foregoing regarding the purpose which has brought them to pass, namely, *the renewal of the Church in our time in its coming to grips with its mission to the world.*

Many of the experiments now under way have as their basic aim the discovery of how to express the faith of the Christian within his daily work. Fortunately, there is a growing body of Christian teaching about work. It must be stressed, however, that the question of Christian vocation is a much larger issue than this. The vocation of the Christian is simply to *be* a Christian, twenty-four hours a day.

Space offers opportunity for but a brief report on a few of the different approaches to the life and work of the laity. Most major denominations are now undertaking the indispensable study required and important committees are at work. Early in the study it became apparent that the Church would have to be disabused of the notion that the term laity has to do with the male sex only. The co-operation of men and women in the Church is basic to wholeness and renewal when inspired and given dynamic motivation by a searching study of the Scriptures.

University Institutes (e.g., the Sociological Institute of the Dutch Reformed Church in Utrecht) are investigating certain phases of con-

3. H. H. Walz, "Lay, Theology of the Laity, Laymen's Work," *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. VI, No. 4 (July, 1954).

temporary life and attempting to see them in the light of the Gospel. Then there are the very important meeting places such as the Evangelical Academies or Lay Training Centres in Europe and America. A recent booklet published by the Department of the Laity of the World Council of Churches is called "Signs of Renewal." It contains up-to-date information on the life of the Lay Institute in Europe. The Protestant Academies of Germany are prominent. Five of these are in the Soviet zone. Every year there are a total of about 700 Academy conferences in Germany and an average of about 60 people take part in each meeting. Three different types of meeting have been evolved. Firstly, there are meetings for occupational groups which bring together people from the same walk of life. Secondly, there are meetings at which general social problems are discussed. Thirdly, there are special conferences for training and meditation in which smaller groups of from 20 to 30 persons are given an intensive introduction to specific subjects. It is one of the basic Academy principles to facilitate an exchange of views, not only between people of the widest range of opinions, but also between Christians and non-Christians. The Academies have succeeded in opening up channels of approach to circles with which the Church had lost all contact. Bible study plays a large part and the assumption is that "Reflection by the man of today on the Word of God must be stripped of the paralysing solemnity which prevents him from reflecting where God invites him to reflect."⁴ The missionary effort of the Protestant Academies "does not use the fishing-rod to extract individual souls from the pond of the world and bring them into a Christian environment. It uses a net which catches 'all sorts and sizes.' These, in the course of time, sort themselves out by means of a genuine attempt to grapple with their intellectual problems. Where the message of the Word of God is linked with a completely open-minded approach to men of this world and to their problems, it should be possible to avoid the Church becoming either secularized and wordly, or on the other hand degenerating into a ghetto of the pious."⁵

Speaking of Lay Training in Scotland, T. Ralph Morton makes the observation⁶ that "we have come to accept the fact that there are two classes in the Church—the clergy and the laity. *We have made the Church clerical in a way unknown to the Reformers*: and that not so much by altering our idea of the ministry, as by accepting a quite new idea of the place of the church-member. And theology has become the preserve of the minister. No longer do we have the lawyer, the soldier and the poet interested and engaged in theology, as in the seventeenth century." Morton continues: "The Church finds it very difficult to realize that it is confronted by a quite new problem: that it has to deal with a laity unknown in the post-Reformation centuries whose needs cannot be met in exclusively

4. Hans-Reudi Weber (Ed.), *Signs of Renewal* (Geneva, Switzerland: Department of the Laity, World Council of Churches, 1956), p. 9.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

ecclesiastical ways." The Iona Community and the Scottish Christian Industrial Order are trying to meet the situation. Certain sensitive if not prophetic souls in Scotland seem to be aware that some new pattern of congregational life has to be found.

"Kerk en Wereld" is the name of a well-known lay institute in Holland. It came out of the Nazi occupation. It was found that a living Church does not mean only preaching ministers but also, and above all, living laymen, *lidmaten* (members of the body). The Dutch Reformed Church has defined the task of the Institute as to "support and lead the re-Christianization of the Dutch nation." Correspondence courses are widely used in the training of Church members. Lessons are written in the style of personal conversation and have an evangelistic appeal. Each lesson ends with a couple of questions requiring a personal answer. Answers are returned weekly and sent back corrected. This course aims not just to train individuals, but also to form evangelistic teams, hence students in the same town are encouraged to study together, and they become evangelistic cells.

In Switzerland the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey is well known. For seven years it was directed by H. Kraemer who used the striking phrase: "The laymen are the frozen assets of the Church."

An important point to be noted regarding many of the Lay Institutes in Europe is that, generally speaking, the work is not just carried on as another organized effort within the Churches. The focus of the work is more or less outside the traditional parish pattern. Whether this kind of approach in North America would be fruitful or not remains to be seen. A few scattered efforts here and there indicate a measure of success in this country.

III

"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, in the relationships 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."⁷ Hans-Reudi Weber⁸ asks whether this last sentence is really true? Is it realistic? Are the Church-members in fact present in the world as the "laity," that is as the *laos*, the "people of God"? Is it not rather true that laymen and laywomen become gradually absorbed by the world because they conform to the spirit, the criteria and the hopes of the world? Do not most Church-members live a schizophrenic life, having two different sets of ethics, one for their private Sunday life and the other for their behaviour in the work-a-day world? Indeed, may we not ask to what degree the activities of the Churches *prepare their members for, or divert them from, their ministry in the world?*

⁷ *Report of Section VI, Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Evanston, 1954.*

⁸ *Signs of Renewal, p. 59.*

One of the great tasks of the Church is surely "to listen to its members speaking of their trials and difficulties, hopes and fears, opportunities and needs, and even simply about the facts of life in the world."⁹ Modern man has been described as the man with no vocation. Meaninglessness is his problem. Often he feels that he has been "pitchforked into existence" without knowing why. It is a day of opportunity for the Church: "I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest" (John 4:35, R.S.V.). The teaching Church must become a listening Church. How can this be brought about? One thing at least is certain. Christians will be unable to listen to one another unless and until they know how to listen to the Word of God.

This paper has sought to do no more than lead up to this question. Further discussion is necessary and contributions from laymen and professional theologians on this topic will be most welcome.

9. *The Ministry of the Laity in the World*, 1956 Statement of the Department on the Laity, World Council of Churches.