

1-1-1977

## Laity in the Church

Murvyn R. Kentel

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kentel, Murvyn R. (1977) "Laity in the Church," *Consensus*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# LAITY IN THE CHURCH

*Murvyn R. Kentel*

In the life of the Church each age has its distinguishing characteristics. When the history of the second half of the twentieth century is written, one of its more striking marks may be the emergence of the laity into a strong and active role in carrying out the mission of God. There has been a growing consciousness that the laity are the Church and that they need to commit themselves more actively to the cause of Kingdom work.

For too long a time the view has prevailed that the “spiritual” work is in the hands of the “professionals”; the laity are to do the “other” work. Laity are passive spectators; they are to pray, pay and obey.

The rise of clericalism resulted in a definite dichotomy between clergy and laity. The ordained clergy grew to feel that they were the only called and equipped people of God. The laity were put into the background and given the impression that the Church was clergy.

This desperate situation continued for centuries. No significant practical change has been realized even in our day. The reason for this is two-fold. On the one hand, the clergy have not been too anxious to hand over some of the controls to the laity. They don't have full confidence in the laity yet. On the other hand, the laity, who have been called, invited and encouraged to serve,

have generally turned a deaf ear; they are quite satisfied to let the paid professionals serve them, instead of serving with them.

Unless a greater proportion of the laity steps into the forefront of the Church's mission, the Church will be strangled. Unless clericalism steps back, the Church will also be strangled.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Septuagint *laos* is used over 1,500 times in the sense of an ethnic group of the same stock and language and, in particular, of Israel herself. The expression *laos theou* is a technical term for Israel as the chosen people of God. God chose a special people to fulfill His purposes. Old Testament history relates how God helped and aided His people so that they might be the instrument of His universal purposes. God did not choose Israel because of its own qualities and virtues, but rather for "His name's sake" (Deut. 9:4ff). The reason for this choice is to be found in God alone.

Israel is elected not to privilege, but to service. Israel is elected to further God's purpose for the nations.

Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

Parallel to this are the words of the prophet, "but you shall be called the priests of the Lord, men shall speak of you as the ministers of our God" (Isaiah 61:6). These passages are crucial when we speak of the laity in the Church today. God calls Israel. God designates Israel as *laos theou*. God makes a covenant with Israel. All of Israel is a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. All of Israel are "ministers of our God." Thus, Israel is a kingdom set apart to represent God to the world and the needs of the world to God.

This does not mean that God has no interest in the rest of the nations; God has a concern for "all the earth." But Israel was chosen to serve the nations so that they would not have to be rejected by God. All the people of Israel are priests. All members of this kingdom of priests were privileged to draw near to God in dedication, worship, and service, so that they might learn how their mission to the world was to be fulfilled. This privilege belonged to the Lord's people as a corporate body and not to any exclusive class of specialists. The Church in the Old Testament was all the people of God.

With the exception of a minority remnant, Israel did not carry out her responsibility as God wanted it. But whereas Israel failed, God did not. He persisted. At the right time and at the right place He fulfilled and focused the priesthood in Christ. A new and living way was opened up between the world and God. God loved the world. God gave the world His Son. In Christ, God served, suffered and sacrificed. This was a new covenant. A non-professional -- a carpenter -- gave His Body as a single sacrifice. This layman bent to scrub some sweaty feet. He sloshed water on the road-dirty disciples. Then "when He had

washed their feet, and taken His garments, and resumed His place, He said to them . . . 'I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you'" (John 13:15).

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

Central to New Testament theology is the priesthood of our Lord. Yet Christ sacrificed and through His sweat and blood God called into being a new community. A new nation was established which was grounded in Jesus' death. A new people, a new priesthood -- a corporate priesthood -- was established to carry on the action of the one Mediator between God and men.

The concept of priesthood in the New Testament is identical to that of the Old Testament. Old Testament ritualism did demand a human priesthood which the New Testament interpreted as a foreshadow of the priesthood of Christ. But in terms of priesthood belonging to the people of God -- the *laos* -- there is essentially no difference.

The key New Testament text for the role of the laity in the Church today is 1 Peter 2:9. Here we see that God's people are God's "own," God's "chosen ones," God's "called-out ones." This is what the *ekklesia* is all about. As in the Old Testament, the "called-out ones" are priests.

The New Testament priesthood is exercised in relation to the world outside the Church. Its function is to be a priest-nation to the Gentiles.

From 1 Peter 2:5, we see the emphasis on "sacrifice" -- sacrifices which are "acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." These sacrifices are not material, as was the case under the old dispensation, but spiritual. Man is unworthy to bring to God any offering at all, but through Christ a way has been opened to God's presence and the sacrifices of the priesthood may be laid upon God's altar. St. Paul reminds us that they are to be "living" sacrifices (Rom. 12:1).

The function of the priesthood is, finally, to "declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The priesthood is to be active, not passive or static. Through Christ, God called us out of darkness. We participate in God's act in Christ by giving life and light to others, i.e., to the world. This is the mission of the priesthood, the Church, the community of the faithful, the laity. It is called out of the world and sent back into the world with a mission.

There is no classification of laymen and clergymen in the Church's mission. All are members of the "royal priesthood." The whole Church is a priesthood; every member has a share in priestly service.

The New Testament is rather explicit in viewing Baptism as the means through which people become "people of God." It is at Baptism that we obtain our individual ministry within the total priesthood of the Church of God. One might regard Baptism as the ordination, the laying-on of hands, of a new

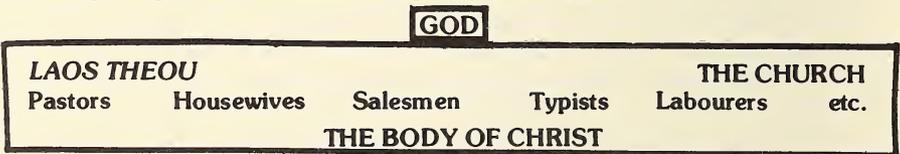
member of the royal priesthood. It is the making of a layman in the Church of Christ.

In the New Testament a layman, i.e., a member of the *laos theou*, is not one who has no "ministerial" responsibility, or who has handed over his functions of the priesthood to a "professional paid priest." All the laity are priests and ministers of the Church of Jesus Christ. All baptized Christians are called to participate in *diakonia*. As one writer on the subject asserts,

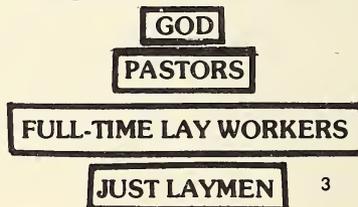
Once a man has been baptized, he is a minister and there is not a thing he can do about it. A man can change his citizenship or renounce it. He cannot change or renounce his ministry, for in Baptism God has acted, and what God has done cannot be undone by man.<sup>1</sup>

Though all Christians are priests, ministers in the New Testament sense, there is a variety of gifted people within the body of Christ. Arnold B. Come, *Agents of Reconciliation*, compares these diverse gifts and services as found in Eph. 4:11, 1 Cor. 12:28, and Rom. 12:6-8. The Ephesians' passage is the only one which mentions pastors and evangelists. But if you parallel it with the other two, then it must be understood in an entirely different light. Paul has in mind the same general structure in the life of the Church. Some kind of service is expected from every single member of the Church. Furthermore, there is no elite category in the spectrum of ministries. Whatever one does is an act of *diakonia* for the benefit of the total body, "for the equipment of the saints for the work of the ministry."<sup>2</sup>

There is a difference in function when we view the role of the pastoral office, but technically, there is no essential distinction. Gibbs and Morton give the true New Testament picture of this by means of a diagram, which puts everyone, including clergy, in a fundamental equality under God.



It is totally unbiblical to diagram a picture of the Church in this way:



Yet, this is the distinction we have made, not only in theory, but also in practice.

A look at priesthood in the Book of Revelation yields three references. In 1:6 and 5:10 the terms "kingdom" and "priests of God" are used. In 20:6 there is

1. Francis O. Ayres, *The Ministry of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 28.  
 2. Arnold B. Come, *Agents of Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 81ff.  
 3. Mark Gibbs and R.T. Morton, *God's Frozen People* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 14.

only a reference to “priests.” These verses re-echo the thought in Ex. 19:6, Is. 61:6 and 1 Peter 2:9. They imply that the Church is a Kingdom, a corporate body, and the individual members are priests. There is no distinction between the various members. The Church, like Israel, is a great sacerdotal society. Its “ministry” is the rightful duty of every baptized “priest”; the “priesthood” is shared by all Christians. Thus, the Book of Revelation very vividly and strongly urges active participation of the laity, not passivism or static spectatoritis.

## LUTHER AND THE CONFESSIONS

Speaking on New Testament priests Luther says:

A priest must be born, not made. He is not ordained; he is created. He is born of the water and the Spirit in the washing of regeneration. Therefore, all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians; and accursed be the statement that a priest is something different from a Christian.<sup>4</sup>

Luther says further:

In the New Testament the Holy Spirit carefully avoids giving the name “Sacerdos,” priest, to any of the apostles or to any other office. Rather he applies this name to the baptized, or Christians, as their birthright and hereditary name from Baptism. For in Baptism none of us is born an apostle, preacher, teacher, pastor, but there all of us are born solely priests.<sup>5</sup>

The Apology of The Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, discusses the number and use of the Sacraments. In reference to priesthood, there is a strong insistence on the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as taught in Hebrews, and on the fact that there is no need of a priesthood like the Levitical under the old dispensation. No reference is made to the “universal priesthood of believers.” The word “priest” is used in the context of the priestcraft present in the church of that day or what we today understand by the term “called and ordained minister of the word.” The article makes statements like, “The Ministry of the Word has God’s command and promise -- God approves this ministry . . . the Church has the command to appoint ministers.” There does not seem to be even an allusion to the place of the laity. But one can make a case for the laity’s place -- other than financial and moral support of the “professionals” -- by asking, “What does the word ‘ministry’ really imply” It is “service”; it is *diakonia*. This implies lay-ministry which, in turn, calls for much more than “an assistant to the clergy, or primarily a maintenance man in the institutional church.”<sup>6</sup> The problem as we see it today comes in the term “ordination” but this is what caused the dichotomy between clergy and laity in the first place.

Article XXIV of the Apology deals similarly with the priesthood of Christ, as confirmed in the Book of Hebrews. No human mediator is required. Through

4. Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says*, Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 1139.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1140.

6. Ayres, p. 50.

the ministry of the Spirit, through Word and Sacrament, the sacrifice of Christ is applied to the sinner and appropriated by faith. Again there is no specific reference to the role of the laity as priests.

A further reference in the Confessions ought to be noted. In the Smalcald Articles, under the "Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops," Luther speaks about the bishop's authority to ordain. Then he proceeds to show that ordination administered by a pastor in his own church is also valid by divine law and that the authority of the public ministry really belongs to the Church as a whole.

For wherever the Church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists. Therefore it is necessary for the Church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers. This right is a gift given exclusively to the church, and no human authority can take it away from the Church. It is as Paul testified to the Ephesians when he says: "When he ascended on high he gave gifts to men" (Eph. 4:8, 11, 12). He enumerates pastors and teachers among the gifts belonging exclusively to the church, and he adds that they are given for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ. Where the true church is, therefore, the right of electing and ordaining ministers must of necessity also be. So in a case of necessity even a layman absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another. It is like the example which Augustine relates of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen), and the latter, after his Baptism, absolved the former. Here the words of Christ apply which testify that the keys were given to the church and not merely to certain persons: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Finally, this is confirmed by the declaration of Peter, "You are a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). These words apply to the true church which since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of electing and ordaining ministers.<sup>7</sup>

The term "Church" here means the "Company of Believers." 1 Peter 2:9 is quoted to support the fact that the Church, the *laos theou*, clergy and laity together, has the priesthood.

Perhaps the one thing that would trouble us in this passage is the statement, "In a case of necessity even a layman absolves, and becomes the minister and pastor of another." The general feeling in our church today would be: That's okay on a person-to-person basis, but it wouldn't be proper on a layman-to-congregation basis.

On the other hand, it seems rather odd that a layman can exercise his priesthood only in a case of emergency. (I'm not thinking here of an emergency Baptism.) This would equate to a fire hose, or an engine or truck in a fire hall. There are many instances in which congregations have set apart certain laymen from their midst to assist the pastor in worship services and in the administration of the Lord's Supper, or to conduct services in the absence of the pastor. This includes speaking the words of absolution. In such cases the layman repeats the words, "I, a called . . . servant," and omits the words "and ordained." Perhaps this practice stems from the above-quoted passage from the

---

7. Theodore G. Tappert, Translator and editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 331.

Smalcald Articles. Yet this passage is very direct in its reference to the priesthood, namely that it belongs to the whole Church, and only the Church.

## TIME FOR RENEWAL

We know and recognize that if our church today confines ministry to what our pastors do, it is hopelessly inadequate for the demands of the times. The Church needs renewal. It needs reformation. It is not a matter of saying: Let's go back to the Reformation of the 16th century. It is a matter of saying: There is a crying need to complete the Reformation. Francis Ayres maintains that the renewal of the Church will take place in and through the development of a ministry of the laity.

Changes are needed in the direction, structure, and daily life of congregations. The first step in renewal of the Church is to encourage as many laymen as possible to see themselves as ministers.<sup>8</sup>

By far, the majority of the laity still thinks of itself as assistant to the pastors in the mission of the Church. The lay persons see their Christian duty limited to being helpers in the institutional structure of the Church, with no awareness that they are the Church within the world. If we see the Church as a living community in participation with Christ, then we must recognize the laity as vital, mature "priests" in this society. As long as we regard the laity as immature, they will remain immature. They need to be instructed, but they also need to instruct. As Howard Grimes observes:

Any re-thinking of the nature of the Church which takes into full account the laity must be matched by the willingness of the laity to assume intelligently and zealously their full responsibility as participant servants among the people of God.<sup>9</sup>

The Church simply cannot fulfill her commission from Christ without the cooperation and participation of the Church, the laity. What is needed more than anything else today is that the laity be the Church out in the world. They are doing a fine job of being the Church within the confines of the "Church." They would likely do an even better job if we'd let them. But daily witness to the world is the crux of the problem. To be "priests" on the job is where the "rubber hits the road." Of course, before they can be apostles for Christ, they must be convinced that they are disciples of Christ.

The renewal of the Church not only calls for a re-examination of its structure, the renewal of the Church calls for a rebirth of itself -- rebirth of the laity in terms of commitment, concern, and mission. If the laity can execute its priesthood only and especially in a case of emergency, they had better begin now. For the whole Church and the entire world are in a state of emergency. Further, the Church exists for the world and not for itself. Only then is it the Church. Although Congar still opts for the hierarchy and claims that the laity will always be subordinate, he nevertheless admits:

The laity are the Church and they make the Church. They have a function in the world and in the Church which no one else can fill. This function is

---

8. Ayres, p. 20.

9. Howard Grimes, *The Rebirth of the Laity* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 74.

necessary to the Church's mission. The community of the faithful is needed in the world, to extend the living organism, the Church.<sup>10</sup>

The Church needs renewal. It needs change. How drastic or radical a change is demanded today, I am not prepared to say. There are those who opt for the weakening of clericalism or even the elimination of the clergy. I would rather suggest the strengthening of laicism.

There are those who suggest that ordination, which created the distinction originally, should be re-examined. I'm not so sure the laity have a hang-up with this. I'm not so sure "ordination" in our church today creates a hesitancy on the part of the laity to be "priests" in the full sense of the word. Frankly, I believe the "pastoral office" is here to stay. The problem has been that the "office" has assumed too much or has been delegated with too much by those who should be rightfully functioning as "priests." A renewal will come if laity:

- a) Become subjects and agents, not passive objects.
- b) Be spearheads of the Church and not hesitant rearwards.
- c) Be responsible partners in the Church's vocation.
- d) Realize they are as vital to the Church as breathing to the body.
- e) Recognize that they are the dispersion (*diaspora*) of the Church in the world.<sup>11</sup>

When this is really spelled out in practice, the pastoral office will not be eliminated, but rather enhanced.

## THE LAITY AND THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

It may appear to be somewhat contradictory to suggest that the titles, "laity" and "clergy" should be eliminated, and then speak of the relationship of the one to the other. It may seem contradictory to concur with many others who have written on this subject, that the New Testament knows of no distinction between clergy and laity, and then want to discuss the "pastoral" ministry in the New Testament. But the point under discussion here is not so much the insistence that New Testament theology allows for such a special "pastoral" ministry, but rather the function of this ministry; it is as a function that the New Testament insists on such a special ministry. Even in the Old Testament there would have been no Israel if there had not been special ministries. The three functions of prophet, priest and king are combined in men like Abraham, Moses, and Samuel.

The New Testament portrays Christ as the "Great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20), "The Good Shepherd" (John 10:11), "The Shepherd and Bishop of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25), "The Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), etc. The Church is apostolic, sent by God to bear witness to the world. But within this apostolic body a particular apostolic ministry, consisting of those chosen to bear rule over the churches and to exercise pastoral oversight, is present (1 Tim. 3:1). The very conception of Israel or the Church as a flock involves the institution of pastoral rule and oversight. The flock must have shepherds who rule it and feed it under

10. Yves M.J. Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1959), p. 430.

11. Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 95.

the ultimate supervision of the Chief Shepherd Himself. The term "Chief Shepherd" implies a pastoral ministry of under-shepherds who are commissioned to exercise a particular office within the flock of Christ. The name that was commonly applied to this special office was *episkopos*.

St. Peter enjoins upon the presbyters in 1 Peter 5:1-3. "Tend the flock . . . exercise oversight . . . don't lord it over them . . . be examples to the flock." This clearly attests to the existence of a pastoral ministry, which is an instrument of the ministry of Christ Himself as Chief Shepherd, within the Church or the flock of God. To the "pastor" is assigned a share in the ministry of Christ in His Church. This is the office of "oversight" or pastoral rule; his role is the faithful discharge of this office, which will bring due reward at the *parousia* of the Chief Shepherd. His privilege is to have a part in the ministry of Him Who is Himself the Shepherd and Bishop of the flock. Thus, the shepherd-bishop-pastor feeds that portion of the flock which is committed to his care. He bears the shepherd's staff, the symbol of his pastoral rule. The "rod and staff" in the hand of the shepherd (pastor) are for the disciplining as well as for the protecting and guiding of the flock (1 Tim. 3:4ff).

Can we not assume that our Risen Lord Himself implied a pastoral ministry when He spoke to Peter saying, "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep" (John 21:15-17)? It is therefore especially noteworthy to find Peter urging his fellow presbyters to "tend the flock of God . . . exercising the oversight" (1 Peter 5:1) realizing, no doubt, the high seriousness with which the office was regarded in the apostolic Church. To this we must also add the testimony of St. Paul, "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the Church of God, which He has purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). One should note that during apostolic days, "elders" and "bishops" appeared to be two different names for the same office. In the absence of an apostle, pastoral rule of the local churches was delegated to them.

The New Testament views the pastoral ministry as vital and necessary, but as part of the total priesthood. This was Luther's contention. Luther gave support to the office of the ministry in spite of the fact that it was being abused in his day. Our Confessions likewise uphold the pastoral office (Cf. Apology, Article XIII).

The need today is to re-think our false notions regarding the "function" of the pastor. In discussing the relationship between pastor and people, William Danker states,

While there is a biblical office of proclaiming the Gospel in preached Word and Sacrament, all Christians are called to witness as God's Apostles. The layman is not to be an assistant pastor, but the pastor is an assistant layman. He is an enabler, a facilitator, a playing coach. But he is not necessarily the star.<sup>12</sup>

Richard Caemmerer expresses a similar view:

The pastor is not to be thought of as a spearhead which the people of the congregation thrust by a long shaft into one another and into the community, but he is a man with a fork which has as many tines as there are people of God to whom he ministers, and he is thrusting the fork into the community.<sup>13</sup>

The "pastoral" office will always exist. Regardless of how active the "laity"

12. William Danker, *Two Worlds or None* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 34.

13. Richard R. Caemmerer, *The Pastor at Work* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 11.

become, there will never come a time when the pastoral office will cease to be. Laity in our church want a pastor. They recognize pastors to be God-appointed leaders “who watch over your souls . . . and who will have to give account” (Heb. 13:17). Laity in our church clamor for direction and help and look to the pastor for this. There is need for both, pastor and people. They also need each other if the Church is to perform her mission in the world. Pastor and people should complete each other and together constitute the whole. Pastors should work with the laity, not for them. They should complement and supplement, but not substitute. They are to train and equip for service. They do not do the work but see to it that it gets done. The pastor is there to show enthusiasm, stimulate, guide, clarify, heal and to demand, if necessary. Only then can there be a proper relationship between laity and clergy.

If the lay people look upon their pastor as their inspirer, informer, trainer, equipper, enabler, overseer, and not as their “Joe-boy” and “Jack-of-all-trades,” then a proper relationship will exist. Then pastors assume their proper place and with God’s help, properly fulfill it in our church today. Pastor and laity alike must recognize that the pastor is not to perform like a gladiator before spectators but to help equip every person for his ministry.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, if pastors are ready to accept what lay people do, they will be prevented from underestimating their abilities and under-training them for service. Someone has said, “It is better for a pastor to ‘lose’ time helping a lay person fill a certain responsibility than it is for him to ‘save’ time by doing it himself.” When a proper relationship between laity and clergy is really spelled out in practice, the pastoral office will not be eliminated, it will be enhanced.

## CONCLUSION

Unless some radical re-thinking, re-action, and re-formation takes place soon, the parish may perish. The Church of Jesus Christ will never perish. But the Lutheran Church, which is just a small sector of the Church universal, needs to become more alive through the activity of the laity. There are many ways in which the laity in our church is actively cooperating and participating. Yet this is often only in the context of the local congregation where it becomes a case of the church really only serving itself. We need to equip and arouse the laity to a greater extent to really be the Church in the world of daily life and work. People need to a greater extent to be what they are, i.e., “people of God,” “Priests” of God, on a mission for God. The time has come when the laity must let go of the “clerical apron strings” and be what God, by virtue of their Baptism, has called them to be. As His people, they have a vital role, not only within the boundaries of their church building and denominational community, but also and above all in their fields of labour, in the world into which God has placed them.

---

14. R. Eugene Sterner, *You Have a Ministry: Christian Laymen are Called to Serve* (Anderson: Ind.: Warner Press, 1963), p. 85.