

# The Laymen's Role in Renewal

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The rapid changes which have taken place in the last twenty years demand that the church, along with secular institutions, re-examine its nature and redevelop its strategy to fulfill its function. The world is characterized by skepticism concerning the historic faith of the church, by a secularization in which the church is no longer asked for answers, and by a mobility of the population which creates continual changes in the congregation; yet the church, having an obsolete image of itself, does not accommodate change. Each of these barriers to ministry can be met and dealt with by recognizing the Church as the People of God, and rediscovering the role of the laity as bearers of Christ into the world.

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD

One of the basic heresies within the church is the split-level nature of its fellowship. We have inherited and sanctioned the split-level nature of the fellowship of the People of God, an image which is neither biblically rooted nor currently relevant.

We suffer today from a heritage from the Middle Ages, when the priest was the center of the church. In that medieval context the ordained man was superior in knowledge, faced a higher moral demand, presumably sustained a superior relationship with God, and was the central authority in the church. This image is both heretical and irrelevant.

In the Reformation era, the preacher of the Word unconsciously slipped into the role of the medieval priest. The preacher was the person

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who had specialized training, and it was quite easy to assume that he lived a stricter moral life and sustained a more intimate relationship with God than did members of the congregation. What the medieval priest was in the Middle Ages, the preacher became during and after the Reformation. The Christian Church *must* recover from this heresy.

There is no difference in the moral demand placed upon the clergy from that placed on the laity, no closer relationship with God for ministers, no reason why the minister of today should know more than the laity. Therefore, there is no reason why the minister should stand as supreme authority over the People of God.

There is a pathway to recovery of the biblical image of the People of God. The clergyman has his witness primarily within the fellowship, while the layman has his witness in the world. The pulpit of the layman may be his place on the assembly line.

The layman must recognize the dignity that has been invested in the People of God and discover and extend his witness for Jesus Christ into every dimension of life. He must recognize that he too is a minister of Christ. The layman can initiate, cultivate, and extend the spirit of renewal among the People of God. Finally, the layman must recognize himself as the bearer of Christ in the world.

The clergyman must recognize that he is also of the People of God, but that he is not in a superior position because of his calling, training or ministerial ordination. He is a participant in the fellowship, with primary responsibility for the ministry of the Word and sacraments and for the training of the laity to live as Christians in the world.

If this new image of ministry is to be recovered in the church, both clergy and laity must walk the pathway of repentance, often a painful experience, but an act which can open the door to a new form of ministry and relevance.

First, the layman must repent of his willingness to exalt the clergy to a superior position. He has been more comfortable to be inferior—to live with laxity and let the professional assume the responsibility for the People of God. He must repent of this sin.

Further, the layman must find a place of commitment. A secular, culture-conditioned churchman with only a vague Christian sense of the reality of God in his personal life, will find a call to Christian involvement both repulsive and terrifying. He must therefore find commitment which opens his life to the presence of God, so that the divine invasion becomes authentic, personal and transforming.

Finally, the layman must become involved with Christ in a disciplined life. He must discover the orbits of prayer, fellowship, witness and personal growth. But this is not enough; he must open himself to all the

dimensions of life and interpret the meaning of his personal commitment to Christ in all the relationships of his secular existence.

The way of recovery for the clergyman is similar. He must repent of his false sense of superiority, any smugness derived from his position, his willingness to be placed on a pedestal, and his voracious appetite for acceptance and praise. He must repent because this image is false and because the church today can no longer afford him in this posture.

Second, the clergyman must recognize the laity as the People of God. He must recognize that laymen are not inferior or subservient to either the minister or the institution, but that they share equally in the fellowship of Christ.

Finally, the clergyman, with a true sense of self-acceptance, must seek in dialogue with the laity a new image of himself. Probably the greatest crisis facing the ordained ministry today is the crisis of identity. Who is the minister? What is his role in the church and in the world? This identity cannot be discovered in retirement to a study; only as the minister enters into dialogue with the laity can he discover the full meaning of the People of God. This discovery is not a new theory; it is a new relationship which must be learned in experience. Such a discovery can result in a new zeal in preaching, a new sense of co-ministry, and a new form of relevance.

### THE LAITY AS WITNESSES

Reverend Claxton Monro, minister of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, declared that the New Testament church was characterized by a *charismatic* movement of the Holy Spirit, which means that the Spirit confronted, converted, and changed men in the depths of their lives and formed of them a redeeming fellowship. Through this fellowship the living Lord continued His life in the world.

This living presence of Christ was the focal point of power in the first century church.

In the Middle Ages, according to Claxton Monro, the church lost its charismatic nature and became an institution, and the focal point of power became institutional. Actually, this means that ministers of the church—the authoritative dispensers of the sacraments—became the focal point of power.

In the Reformation the focal point of power shifted from the church as an institution to the Word of God—and to the proclaimer of the Word of God—the preacher. Consequently, the Reformed Church has placed the focal point of power in the preaching of the Word. This brings us to Claxton Monro's amazing and exciting discovery. The focal point of power today must be a witnessing laity, for nothing less than this can overcome

the skepticism of the world, can penetrate the secular situation, can help man recover from the clergy-laity dichotomy.

Before laymen can be effective witnesses, they must walk the way of recovery through repentance, commitment and involvement. The layman must learn to witness first in the church, where he identifies with the fellowship in which Jesus Christ is present and active; he is accepted as a person; he is able to speak in a sympathetic group.

But witnessing within the church is not sufficient. The layman must interpret the meaning of his experience in Christ and the tradition of Christ in which he has been nurtured so that commitment is relevant to his home, his vocation and his secular responsibilities—politics, race relations, housing, poverty. The process for both the layman and the church will be long and hard. The layman will have increased difficulties in learning to witness in the secular structure, even as the church struggles to prepare him for his vital witness in the world.

If a witnessing laity is the focal point of power, then opportunity must be given for this new form of power to spread renewal from one church to another—the precise emphasis of the Lay Witness Mission. Surely in the future vitally committed laymen will sense the call of Christ into this type of ministry. Not only will we have Lay Witnesses and Lay Coordinators of missions, but we will be developing Lay Teachers, Lay Counselors and Lay Directors of Renewal. This program does not threaten the clergyman but rather calls upon him to coordinate and utilize all available resources to make the church sensitive to vital issues.

As we take seriously a witnessing laity, we need to look beyond present images and goals, envisioning a city-wide impactation. Impactation is “impact for action.” When the impact of the presence of Jesus Christ comes into the total life of a city, a new form of action in secular structures is discernible. This vision calls for thousands of laymen to saturate every secular club and organization in a given city with a Christian witness. Through the utilization of mass media, an entire city can be confronted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, thus breaking down men’s reticence to speak of Christ and creating a form of preliminary evangelism to nurture a proper situation in which the church can fulfill its mission in the secular world.

### THE LAITY AS LEADERS

The voice of the laity which is being lifted in the church must be heard both by the lay leaders and the ordained clergy. Pressured by continuous demands, increased responsibilities and internal pressures, the minister is often unable to hear what the laity is saying. Many clergymen feel they are being unmercifully criticized by the laity for doing an inferior

job, when actually they are incapable of meeting the multitudinous demands placed upon them. But if the clergyman can begin listening and responding to the real needs the laity is voicing, the two groups can become "partners in ministry." There will then emerge a new functional concept of the church and a new concept of ministry which will be relevant and effective. If the clergy will hear, and if the laity will speak, the dialogue offers hope for lasting renewal.

In addition to the local church leadership, the administrators of the institutional church must recognize the voice of the laity. Their voice is not one of destruction; it is an urgent cry for help coupled with a desire to participate in the total ministry of Christ. Can it be possible that the voice of the laity is really the voice of God, calling the Church to a new sense of servanthood and a new concern for involvement in the world?

The laity can be the spearhead of renewal within the local church. Lay Witness Missions have shown that vital laymen challenge other laymen to commit their lives to Christ and to enter into a vital fellowship with each other in an unsurpassed manner. In the fellowship of small groups, where prayer, faith and personal needs are shared, laymen are bearers of renewal. As renewed laymen assume new places of responsibility in the church they scatter these sparks of renewal throughout the entire life of the congregation.

The laity can be infectious bearers of the spirit of renewal from one section of the nation to another. This realization has been one of the greatest insights discovered in the Lay Witness movement. Committed laymen from Alabama, Florida, and Georgia have gone to Washington—Minnesota—Michigan—California—to tell their personal story of Jesus Christ. Where these committed laymen have gone, there has come a new sense of Christ in the lives of many. These assertions have been documented by hundreds of witnesses.

## THE LAITY AS CULTIVATORS OF NEW LIFE

Ten years ago, Dr. Robert Coleman, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, shared an unforgettable concept when he said: "It is our responsibility to win men to Jesus Christ—then to demonstrate through fellowship with these persons what it means to be a Christian. When they are settled in their commitment, teach them how to relate another person to Christ. And finally, we must entrust to them the responsibility of keeping this process going."

This pattern is discernible in the ministry of Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, Christ

- confronted men with Himself.
- called them to be His disciples.
- formed this disciple band into a small group fellowship.
- demonstrated to them who He was and what He could do in human lives.
- taught them the meaning of His person and mission.
- sent them forth to perpetuate this in the lives of others.
- committed the responsibility to them.

This same pattern can be discovered in the ministry of Peter in the first half of the Book of Acts; it is repeated in the ministry of Paul to the young congregations. The basic idea is commendable to every lay person and clergyman as an approach to the ministry: confront, challenge, relate, demonstrate, teach, and commission. The layman is a full member of the fellowship of the People of God and in every sense is responsible for the cultivation and spread of that fellowship. The clergyman cannot assume this total responsibility.

Every member of the church must assume a pastoral role. A Christian man must become Christ to the neighbor. Through him Jesus Christ comes alive for those other persons to whom he relates.

First, the laity will recognize those persons in whom God is acting within the fellowship, and will personally relate to them. This is the initial stage of relating a man to God through Jesus Christ.

The second stage is to bring those who have been awakened by the Spirit of God into a fellowship group which offers love and freedom. Some who have never had a conscious, personal awareness of God can be helped by exposure to vital Christians in a group.

The layman must be prepared to participate in every human need of his brother. Never should he separate the "human" and the "spiritual."

Next, it is the responsibility of the layman acting in a pastoral role to teach his fellow Christian not only the meaning of Christian faith, but what it means to be a Christian involved in the life of the church and the life of the world. A person, acting responsibly, is superior to an impersonal committee.

After the layman shares with his fellow Christian all that he knows about Christ and Christian involvement, he must then commit to this fellow Christian the responsibility of extending, enlarging, and enriching the fellowship of Jesus Christ within the church. This is truly exercising the "pastorhood" of believers. But the role of the growing witness must go further than the church; it must also penetrate the world as members of the laity recognize themselves to be Christ's secular ministers.

## THE LAITY AS SECULAR MINISTERS

While emphasizing the necessity of the laity to be ministers within the fellowship of the church, and to assist both in the cultivation and development of new life, the major role of the laity today is to be *Christ's secular ministers*.

In the modern world comment has been incessant about the church's involvement in the world. "We must go out" is a phrase frequently heard. This is true because of the nature of the church and its situation in history, but is it not absurd to urge the church to get into the world? Where is the church if it is not already in the world? The church is in the world through the laity. The great responsibility is to recognize that we *are* the Church in the world! We must be frankly and *self-consciously* the People of God in the world—not just secular citizens of a secular community.

If the Christian Church is to take its secular ministry seriously, then it must be an inclusive church. Inclusive means the church must include not only all races and cultures, but must include persons from every social, cultural, and economic stratum of life. One reason for an emphasis on the inclusive nature of the Church is to provide an inclusive witness. For example, there is as much need for the street sweeper and the maid to be a part of the Christian fellowship as for the bank president or the airline pilot to be members. Unless all are included there will be some dimensions of life that will be devoid of a witness. Such an inclusive fellowship is dependent upon the redeeming work of Jesus Christ because there is no possible way of unity apart from His Lordship. Each person has different motives, desires, anxieties and needs, but Christ is the answer to life, and in Him can be found a unity which enables Christians to share a common ministry in the world.

As Christ's secular ministers, we must recognize ourselves as the People of God while in the world. In addition to recognizing ourselves as the Church, we must recognize the presence of God. He is not only in the Church—He is in the world! He is not only the Saviour of men through the Church—He is the Creator of life in the world. He has forsaken neither! He is renewing the church to be the servant of the world. In both the church and in the world we are personally related to God.

## CONCLUSION

It is essential for the layman to recover his role as the bearer, instrument and developer of renewal within the Church. He is of the

People of God. He is effective as a witness, Christ-bearer, leader and cultivator of new life, and he is supremely called in this modern day to be Christ's secular minister.