

# Protagonist Corner

*"A Theology By the Laity":  
Confronting the Effects of Exclusive Language*

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The man who walked into my office was well known in the community: president of the city's third largest bank and clerk of Session in his Presbyterian Church. Bill said: "I need you to talk to one of my associates at work." Then he explained how a fellow bank officer had shared with him some ethical problems in his work. As Bill recounted the conversation I could see the wisdom and care with which he had responded to the man, not offering advice but attentively listening, showing genuine interest, occasionally asking a question or clarifying some option.

Bill said: "When we finished talking, the fellow asked me to pray for him. Right there in the office. Well, I didn't feel adequate to do that, but I was caught - so I did." I waited. Bill said, "It was . . . special. The man asked if he could see me again." Then Bill said: "Of course, you're the one he needs to see. I'll ask him to come by."

I said: "Bill, you have used very profitably your gifts - listening, caring, clarifying, praying not as some expert but as a fellow struggler trying to discover God's best. I could not do so well what you are doing. You can identify with his business-related ethical dilemmas. And you have with him an already built bridge of friendship and trust that I do not have."

He said: "Maybe, but this is serious stuff. And you're a minister. I'm just a layman. I'm not the one to do this."

Some psychologists suggest that what we do often grows out of who we are and what we believe we can do grows out of who we believe we are. Our ability grows out of our identity. At times Christians in certain contexts are uncertain of what they can and should do because in those contexts they are uncertain of who they are. What lies behind Bill's remark: "You're a minister. I'm just a layman. I'm not the one to do this."?

Perhaps an unspoken but frequently held assumption that the religious community has two distinct categories: a first string of ordained ministers who are called into the profession and intentionally trained to do what Bill would call "serious ministry," and a second string of laypeople who are enlisted to help the minister do her or his ministry around the edges.<sup>1</sup>

The language of our general culture reinforces these distinctions. The dictionary defines "minister" as "one duly authorized to conduct Christian worship; a priest; a minister." It defines "laity" as "persons who are not ministers," and "layman" as "a person who does not belong to a particular profession or who is not expert in some field; unprofessional." The language definitions of the culture, the culture of the society and often the culture of the

church, thus divide the two categories: ministers and nonministers, professionals and amateurs. Such commonly used language carries the implication that what nonordained do is something other than ministry, somehow an inferior activity. It excludes the majority of Christians from what is generally understood and affirmed as significant ministry.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that we single out a category called "laity" might have seemed odd to the New Testament community. While it is less than clear what kinds of church structures were utilized, it seems fairly certain that no subspecies of "Christian" called "laity" was initially recognized or observed. To be "laity," or *laos*, was to be "Christian," that is, one of that group of people who had been baptized into Christ's church. In the *laos* were different functions (apostles, deacons, presbyters, bishops, teachers, etc.). None of those functions removed a person from membership in the *laos* - the people of God. My friend Bill and the Archbishop of Canterbury would both be seen as fellow members of the *laos*.

Scholars of church history offer various reasons why in succeeding centuries the word *laos* lost its generic meaning and ecclesiology developed first and second class citizens, with clergy not seen as distinct simply in function but in spirituality, authority, and standing before God.<sup>3</sup> The Reformation rediscovery of "the priesthood of all believers" and its broader understanding of "vocation" or "calling by God" to extend beyond ecclesiastical orders was, as we know, a significant theological development. However, theological understanding often runs several laps ahead of its incarnation in the life of the church. Indeed, my conversation with Bill may indicate that we are still struggling to catch up with some rediscoveries of the Reformation.<sup>4</sup>

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In one way, Bill's reluctance to express his gifts of ministry that day in his office came from his uncertainty as to his authority and ability as a layperson, that is, uncertainty as to the "who" of ministry; an issue of identity. In another way, it arose from his uncertainty as to the "where" of ministry; an issue of locality. Like many others, Bill assumed "ministry" happened primarily down at the church. In the terminology of the Presbyterian Book of Order, he was comfortable in the "church gathered" but uncomfortable in the "church scattered."<sup>5</sup> In the context of church school or session meetings he felt fairly confident and comfortable speaking of God, praying, and exploring ethical/relational/personal issues in terms of their religious dimensions.

The Monday-Friday context of his workplace was another ball park; a different game. He felt he had not had much coaching on how to play the game in that arena. The values were different. The language was different. The perceptions were different. He felt he had received adequate religious training to be a faithful disciple in church on Sunday, but little specific equipping to be a faithful disciple in the bank on Monday.<sup>6</sup>

The shape of that Monday-Saturday ministry will to some extent be different for each layperson. So will the issues and questions they encounter in that context. These are among the issues which frequently surface at the Lay Institute of Columbia Seminary as business managers, lawyers, teachers,

salespeople, physicians, scientists, government workers, and persons of other vocations grapple in courses, seminars, and retreats with how to make the faith-work connection between Sundays:

What is a Reformed theology of work? Is all "work" a "calling"? For example, can persuasion to buy things not needed, as in some advertising and some selling, be an authentic Christian vocation/calling?<sup>7</sup>

What is a workable Christian theology of competition?

What, if any, are the parameters of a professional ambition consistent with the Christian faith? Is it right to bargain for and take the highest possible salary when it far exceeds one's needs? Does the fact that the marketplace uses salary level as the indicia of self-worth influence the answer? Should it? Is there a Christian theology of "enough"?

In what ways and to what extent can the Bible be a useful resource for integrating one's faith and one's Monday-Friday work? For example, are the principles of the Sermon on The Mount applicable in a competitive marketplace? Can they be? Were they intended to be?

How does Jesus' notion of "servanthood" fit into an environment of competition for promotions and a larger share of the marketplace pie?

These questions are profoundly theological, and yet such questions are, I believe, rarely engaged effectively in preaching and teaching within the church. I suggest two reasons. First, they are extremely difficult and complex and so do not easily yield themselves to a traditional twenty minute sermon or to a forty minute church school class that has general focus. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the persons with the theological insight and practical experience necessary to engage such issues effectively are ordinarily not ministers who are clergy (like me) looking in on such issues from the outside but rather ministers who are laity operating Monday-Friday within the nitty-gritty context where such issues arise. They are the ministers most able to bring biblical, theological understanding to these nonchurch arenas where ethical dilemmas, corporate tensions, and constant compromises are items on the daily agenda.

In these vast arenas of life we need not only a theology of the laity and for the laity. We need also a theology by the laity. Such theology will emerge only as laypersons are given structured, ongoing contexts in which to pursue biblical and theological education with the express intention to equip them for ministry in all the significant contexts of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

I asked a group of Presbyterian laity to describe their most important responsibility as church members. One replied: "Our responsibility is to support our minister in his ministry." "No," I said, "his responsibility is to support you in yours."

## NOTES

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of historical reasons behind this clergy-lay differential, see Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power* (Stanford, Cal.: Standard University Press, 1969). Also *The Ministry In Historical Perspective*, ed. R. Niebuhr and D. Williams (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), and Alexandre Faivre, *The Emergence of The Laity In The Early Church*, trans. David Smith (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Harris in *The Laity In Ministry*, ed. G. Peck and J.S. Hoffman (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984), suggests that the clergy-lay inference of "higher" and "lower" present in our linguistic images (one is, for example, "elevated" or "admitted" to the clerical state but "reduced" or "demitted" to the lay) creates a subordinate status for nonordained persons which limits the vision of the church. Perhaps the analogy to the unconscious limiting effect of exclusive language historically on women or black persons is not farfetched at this point.

<sup>3</sup> Even after more than two decades, two of the most thoughtful, thorough theological discussions of this development remain Kraemer, *A Theology of The Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), and Yves Congar, *Lay People In The Church* (London: G. Chapman, 1965). Hans Kung entered the conversation with *Why Priests?* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1972) in which he questions the validity of the special place given priests/clergy through the ritual of apostolic succession. Several more recent books written in a popular style are now available. For a partial bibliography see *The Laity In Ministry*, 173-174.

<sup>4</sup> Hendrik Kraemer in *A Theology of The Laity* suggests that the *de facto* consequence of the Reformer's revolutionary ecclesiology has often been simply the exchange of "priest-ridden" church for a "preacher-ridden" church, with laity, as in pre-Reformation days, remaining as "objects" who passively receive the Word preached and taught by the "subjects." Calvin's marks of the true church as preaching, sacraments, and discipline seem to perpetuate the higher role of clergy. The *Confession of 1967* provides a broader, more inclusive understanding of the church's nature. A casual survey of main line Presbyterian laypeople will reveal that many are unaware that the church's constitution expressly identifies them as ministers and affirms their baptism as a commission to that ministry. See, for example, *Book of Order* Sections G-5.0102 ("Membership As Ministry"); G-6.0105 ("Called To Ministry"); G-3.0200 ("[Baptism] heralds a new participation in the ministry of Christ for all who are baptized").

<sup>5</sup> "As the covenant community gathers to worship God through the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments, so it disperses to serve God in the world." Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order*, Sec. S-6.0500.

<sup>6</sup> Whether or not justified, I have found this to be a frequent perception of laity. One wonders if theological seminaries focus too heavily on equipping clergy-ministers to equip laity-ministers for ministry in the faith community gathered to the prejudice of equipping them to equip laity-ministers for ministry in the faith community scattered.

<sup>7</sup> Relatively little material is available on the theology of work. Some basic material includes Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958); Dorteia Solle, *To Work and To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); John Raines, *Modern Work and Human Meaning* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Helpful resources for such a class or group include *Monday's Ministries*, ed. Nelvin Vos (Philadelphia: Parish Life Press, 1979), and William E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991). The Task Force on Issues of Vocations and Problems of Work In The United States has prepared an extensive resource paper, *Challenges In The Workplace* (Louisville: Publication Service, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1990).