



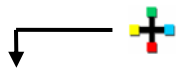
The Christian Layman in the world and in the Church

1952

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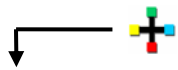
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The word 'Layman' has had an extraordinary history. Its basic meaning is 'one of the People' - by which is meant that People of whom it is said in the Scriptures 'Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood; a holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light: which in time past were not a people but are now the people of God'. To be a 'layman' is to possess this, the greatest of all privileges. But the Church, which coined this great word, also taught the world to debase it. When I venture to discuss a legal question with a lawyer, I preface my remarks by saying, 'Of course, I am only a layman in these matters'. The word has come to mean, in common speech, an ignoramus, an outsider. How has this amazing degeneration taken place?

The answer to that question would take us deep into the history of Christianity. It would require us to trace the process by which - in spite of many vigorous counter-movements - the Church has been clericalized and professionalized. Without undertaking that study we can yet recognize the results of the process. 'The Church' is identified in men's minds with its paid ministers. The function of the main body of members is practically reduced to that of hearing, believing, and obeying. When men say 'The Church should go into educational work', they mean that the Church as an organized body should employ and pay teachers. But if thousands of Church members are teaching in the schools of the nation that is not regarded as 'Church work', we have largely lost the great Biblical conception of the Church as the Body of Christ through whose entire membership the Lord wills to do His will in the world. When we speak of the Church's evangelistic force, we generally mean its force of paid evangelists. But that is a caricature of the truth. The Church's evangelistic force is - or ought to be - its entire membership, nothing less. We speak of 'the laity' as though it were a sort of passive (or troublesome) body which 'the Church' has to deal with. We forget that the Church is the laity, the People of God, and that the Christian layman in his office, field or factory is precisely the Church's frontline soldier in her engagement with the world.

In many ways and along many channels the Church in our day is learning afresh these half-forgotten truths about its own nature. We may here distinguish two main directions in which

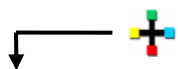


we are learning. Firstly, there is the renewed effort, discernible in very many Churches, to train and equip the whole membership for the manifold forms of ministry which the life of the Church requires. In many parts of India, and in very many different traditions, Christian laymen are being trained and helped to take their part in evangelistic work and the preaching of the Word, and in the shepherding of congregations - especially in the villages. We are increasingly learning, from many widely differing experiences, that it is wrong to suppose the Church must depend entirely upon a paid ministry, and that it is of vital importance to devote much more of our total strength to training our members for voluntary work in evangelism, youth work, Sunday School work, and pastoral work of many kinds. This process must go on with greatly increased rapidity if we are to meet the challenge of this hour.

But there is, secondly, another way - not so often understood or followed - in which the Church has to rediscover its character as the Body of Christ in the world. It is about this that, I want especially to write. The point is succinctly put in an article in a recent number of the French *Revue de l'Evangelisation*. The writer, after speaking in general of the Christian conceptions of ministry and vocation, goes on: 'The layman is the minister, the ambassador of Christ, in his office, his class-room, his farm. His mission is. not simply to make known Jesus Christ to all those with whom he comes in contact, but still more *to show how a servant of Jesus Christ understands and exercises the job of which he has charge. That is his chief job in the Church.*' In other words, it is on the Christian layman in his job, from Monday to Saturday, that the responsibility rests for 'seeing that - so far as in him lies - the will of Christ is done here on earth. That is his first task as a member of the Church.

Once this point has been made, it seems obvious. But it is extraordinarily rare to find it really understood. To quote an illustration used by Archbishop William Temple, a farmer who farms his land well but neglects to say his prayers will be certainly condemned by Christians as failing in his duty. But a farmer who says his prayers, and allows weeds, bad drainage, or soil erosion to spoil his land, is failing in his primary duty as a churchman. His primary ministry in the total life of the Body of Christ is to care rightly for the land entrusted to him. If he fails there; he fails in his primary Christian task.

That is to put the point sharply, but negatively. Positively we have to recover the vivid sense of the Church as the body

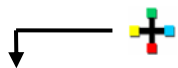


through which God wills to do His will in the world, gathering together and summing up all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). The heart of the Church's life is at that place where Christ Himself gives His own life to it in the word and sacraments of His Gospel. Those who are called within the Church to be the ministers of word and sacraments are thus in a very special way responsible for the very heart and soul of the Church's life. But the Church's *work in the world* is work which professional ministers cannot do; it is the work of countless Christian laymen in all their varied daily tasks serving Christ in their daily work.

In recent years Christians in many countries have been awaking to the fact that the Church was not helping her members to fulfill this, their primary function. In certain matters - prayer, worship, Christian training, and the conduct of family and personal relationships - the Church is constantly guiding its members as to how they should act. But as to how a Christian should act in his business, in politics, in professional life, the Churches have had almost nothing to say. Each man has been largely left to find his own way. If you ask for books on how a Christian should conduct a Sunday School you will find plenty. But if you ask for guidance to a Christian banker, or a Christian lawyer, or a Christian farmer as to 'how a servant of Jesus Christ understands and exercises these jobs', you will find almost nothing. For all the vast and varied warfare of the Church in the world, she has left her members largely to fend for themselves.

The effort to meet these needs must include at least three strands closely woven together:

1. A corporate effort of responsible study by Christian laymen in the same profession, with a view to clarifying the real moral and spiritual issues which confront the Christians in those professions today. Without this study, the Christian message will remain unrelated to the greater part of the working lives of those who hear it. The Christian businessman, for example, confronted with the Sermon on the Mount will naturally ask: 'How can I apply this in the world of business, whose whole structure is based on competition?' And without an answer he will be irresistibly tempted either to say 'A Christian cannot remain in business', and leave it for some 'safe' profession, or (more probably) to settle down into a sort of double standard - Christian ethics to rule private life and the 'rules of business' to rule his business life. In both cases he has failed as a Christian. The truth is that in every profession and in every situation there is at any moment *some* issue which is really open, *some* point at which

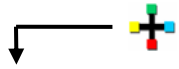


influence can effectively be for those on the side of God's laws or against them. *That* is the place where the Christian must act. He cannot abolish the competitive system overnight; but he can do something, can fight for, and mobilize others to fight for, the thing (however small) which is now possible. What that thing is, the clergyman or the professor of Christian ethics cannot tell him. It can only be discerned by the Christians in that profession themselves, with all the expert help they can get, and with a deep sense of obligation to obey whatever light God gives them, meeting together to find out that God wants them to do.

2. Secondly we need what may be called a theology of secular work. The preceding paragraph has really raised the issue already. If, I cannot immediately apply the Sermon on the Mount to my profession, ought I to continue in that profession? And if not, is there any secular work which I can do in which I can apply the Sermon on the Mount. This well-known and often painful dilemma arises from the lack of a true understanding of what we may call the dynamic of the Gospel in the secular world. To, put it in another way, we need so to understand the Gospel that the Christian laymen can know its full power to sustain him in his daily work, and can play his full part in the secular world without either running away from real duties for fear of compromising his principles, or acquiescing in preventable evils because they appear to be part of the structure of the secular world. For the recovery of this understanding we need the corporate thinking of trained theologians and laymen in different walks of life.

3. Thirdly we need a practical rediscovery of the fellowship of the Church as the body of Christ's witnesses and soldiers in the secular world. We need such a recovery of real congregational life that all the lay members will be able to bring to the Church meeting the problems and perplexities of their daily witness and warfare, and go back into each week's work with the assurance that the whole body is behind them, and with the fresh insight and courage which comes when difficulties are talked and prayed over by Christian brothers together. We need such a growingly articulate

body of common conviction about the present tasks of the Christians in the world that Christian pastors in their preaching will not be confined only to speaking about personal and family life, but will be able boldly and relevantly to declare God's will in regard to the secular work of the members - where He will be able to convict of sin not only the farmer who fails to say his prayers but also the farmer who fails to protect his land from erosion. And we need patterns of corporate worship which will contribute



man's daily work to their prayers, and make 'Divine Service' the true centre and interpretation of all daily work.

An increasing body of Christians in many lands has been labouring in these directions in recent years. Several of the European countries have witnessed a remarkable growth of Laymen's movements seeking to guide and strengthen the witness of the Christian in his job. Dr H. Kraemer, who has taken a leading part in these movements, visited India a year ago, and with his help some small meetings of laymen were held. This year it is planned to hold more and larger meetings. The programme as at present planned is as follows:

Kodaikanal Ashram.

May 7-11. Conference of Christian Lawyers.

May 14-21. General Laymen's conference.

May 21-28. Conference of Christian Engineers.

Bangalore:

May 30-June 6. General Laymen's conference.

June 6-13. Conference of Christians in business.

Programmes for these meetings have been drafted and preliminary papers are being prepared. The basis of all of them will be Bible Study, and all who come will be invited to contribute their thought and experience to the common task.

It is very much to be hoped that laymen throughout the Church will try to find time to take part in these meetings. If we are to make progress we need a great effort of corporate thinking. In this matter there are no experts. We are all beginners and no one need feel that he has nothing to contribute.

It is also hoped that a number of clergymen will find it possible to join these meetings. On the one hand they can make an essential contribution through their knowledge of the Bible and of the fundamental nature of the Church. On the other hand the renewal of the Church which we look for cannot take place unless the clergy are willing to hear what laymen have to say and to share with them in the travail of corporate thinking and praying. The rediscovery in practice of what it means to belong to the People of God must involve also a deep-going and costly renewal of the ministry of the word and sacraments by which the whole body is nourished and sustained.

All who are interested are asked to write to *Mr Rajiah D. Paul, I.C.S. (Retired), 'Detroit', Wellington Bazaar, P.O., Nilgiris*, from whom they will receive detailed information about the above conferences.

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