

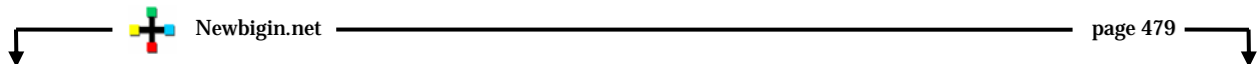


Ministry and Laity

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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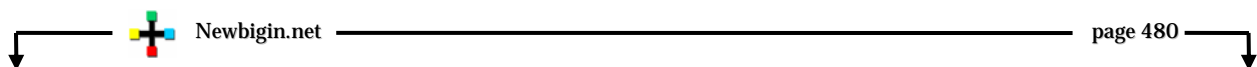
With regard to this subject we must begin by getting a correct understanding of two commonly held practices or viewpoints which are theological traditions of western Christendom, and not rooted in the Bible. For the purposes of our study we must set them aside and go back to the Scriptures.

First is the idea and practice of a trained, paid by the church, professional, managerial class of people in the church, called 'the ministry' or 'the clergy'. This is not something found in the New Testament. Historically it is part of the tradition and church life that has arisen in Christianity when it became the established religion of Western Europe.

(a) It was not so in the New Testament days and in the early centuries. All evidence shows church leaders to have had secular occupations. The New Testament does not teach that there should be or should not be a 'full-time, professional, paid clergy'. It speaks of 'a labourer worthy of his hire' on the one hand, and gives examples of self-supporting apostles and evangelists on the other. The question is left open.

(b) The 'clergy-craft' is not universally practised today. There are churches here and there with self-supporting church leaders and pastors.

(c) It should not be thought that this practice should be a permanent feature of the life of the church. The life and work of the church in its wide variety of situations around the world must have a much more flexible pattern of the ministry if it is to fulfill its calling.



Second is the idea that the work of 'the ministry' belongs to the professional managers of God's grace (clergy) and not to the non-experts (laymen). This again is a non-Biblical tradition of western Christendom. On the contrary the whole body of believers is called 'a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people for God's own possession'. There can be no higher title or position or work

given to any person. In the Bible the ministry has been given to the whole body, not to a class set apart from, or set apart within, that body of believers. This priestly ministry of the whole body on behalf of the world has been tragically lost through the development of the idea of a professional clergy and a non-expert laity.

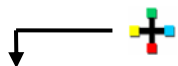
Now, going around these misconceptions, we study the Biblical concept of the ministry and find several features:

(a) Variety

We get in the Epistles a picture of the church as a body in which every member has some ministry to perform and has received a gift appropriate to that ministry. (See Romans 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4, etc.) Some may be more conspicuous or more presentable, but all have a ministry to perform. There are not only 3, or 7 orders or kinds, but great variety. Each gift is given by the Spirit in order that the body might unitedly perform its total ministry to the world.

(b) Some equip others

Among the manifold variety of the whole body there are some called by the Spirit and given the gifts of 'apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers' for the purpose of equipping the body of believers to better perform their ministry. (Eph. 4:1-12 has been mis-translated and misunderstood to mean that the ministry belongs only to those apostles, prophets, *et al.*). Thus these persons have their special function in the total working of the church. This pattern of God-appointed workers who help the others to better perform their tasks has precedence and example in the Bible. There was Jesus choosing and leading disciples. The Lord chose Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles and to found



churches. There is the choosing of elders in the congregations. All believers are not an undifferentiated mass. There is the pattern of a shepherd and sheep, of a steward and the household, of a teacher and disciples.

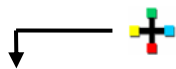
(c) Leaders are to be humble servants

These apostles, prophets, pastors, *et al.*, have instructions and an example from Jesus Christ as to how they are to do their work among others (see John 13 and foot-washing); it is the pattern of humble service, not of Gentile-like authoritative rule; a pattern of re-enacting the self-emptying and dying of the Lord Jesus that the life of Christ may become manifest in others. The life of an apostle is pictured as one who in his own life is reproducing the humiliation, the rejection, the dying of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 3, 4, 5).

(d) Ministers are to help others to minister

It is evident that in the whole body there are some who minister to the others. There is a ministering group in the body distinguished from the others, but not in the sense that there are things they can do which the others cannot do, but in the sense that the things which the ministers do, they do in order that the whole body (or laity) may do them. This is the clue to the Biblical idea of the ministry. Ministers exercise their ministry so that the whole church itself will exercise the ministry. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers perform their ministries within the church in order that the whole body of the church (the laity) may fully perform the like apostolic, prophetic, priestly ministries to the world. Ministers are in the body, not to withhold from laity the ministries, but to help them perform them. It is the principle of the part for the whole. Ministers are not to be the modern type 'Rev. Managers', organizers of nice activities, for laymen to come and attend in church. They should help the members of the church to go out into

their places in the world and there perform the healing, regenerating, teaching, saving, leavening ministries among mankind. Ministers are to be servants of the servants of God.



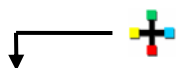
(e) One presides at the Lord's Table, an ordained one

From the New Testament days and on for 14 centuries, the only service on the Lord's Day was the participation in the Lord's Table, the Eucharist. This is the heart and centre of the whole Christian life, the place where believers join together as one body to break the bread and share the cup, to offer up spiritual sacrifices and receive the gifts of God's grace, to become partakers in the dying and rising of Jesus. It is the meeting together of the whole body, not separatist groups. But one person must preside at the Lord's Table. In principle every member of the royal priesthood is competent to preside at the Lord's Table. But for the purpose of keeping order in their worship as a body, it is necessary that they appoint one person to preside, one who is accepted and authorized to do so. And the body meets as a whole to participate in the Eucharist when and where this appointed person indicates. This practice does not give to the leader (bishop or pastor) some kind of magical potency for making the sacrament efficacious, which others do not have. But it is the outworking of the rule of order, of the rule of love among the brethren demonstrated in regulative action. This is necessary for the local group and for the whole body in order to be harmoniously knit together and to move forward without breach of fellowship and unity. From ancient times, this ordering of the life of the church has been a matter of solemn and careful agreement, of order - or, in the modern word, of ordination. This rule of love in order is a fundamental principle in the life of the church, as much so as faith.

The Church in Nepal

In so far as the Church would extend into Nepal along the lines basic to the New Testament pattern, it could be expected that:

- (a) All believers would share, according to the gifts given them by the Holy Spirit, in the manifold and varied ministries in society given to the Church by its Lord.
- (b) Some among the believers would be distinguished from the others because of the gifts and calling of the Holy



Spirit to them to be ministers to the rest so that all can better perform their common ministry.

- (c) In performing their worship, celebration of the Lord's Table, and similar duties in an orderly fashion, certain persons with evident gifts of the Spirit for this purpose will be chosen and appointed to lead and handle these duties in behalf of the body. In other words, there will be appointed leaders, or ordained pastors.
- (d) This ordered ministry and unity shall exist not only in local fellowships of believers (though that is primary), but also across the whole body of believers in the land.
- (e) The primary qualification for ordination of such leaders is the evident presence of the Holy Spirit with them in capacity to lead men to Christ, to build men up in Christ, to teach the things of Christ, and to assist others to perform their ministry in the world. Such qualifications may be in uneducated and even illiterate persons. The Holy Spirit points out the man. Academic training in ministers is a relative matter - depending on the kind of people concerned.

(f) The ordination of a person to the ministry is not essentially the laying on of hands. It is asking God to give the gifts and graces needed for the work, and appointing that person for that work. It is setting things in order.

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