

THE MINISTRY OF THE LAITY WITHIN CONGREGATIONALISM

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I want to reflect on my understanding of lay ministry in Congregational history both past and present, and second, to share my own vision of what lay ministry could become in the days ahead.

Every writer brings to his work certain pre-suppositions and background to their work. I am very much aware of this as I begin this paper, therefore, I want to give some personal history which will help to illuminate my reason for choosing this subject, the perspectives that I bring, and the conclusions that I reach.

In my early youth I had two different religious dynamics at work. My parents were Methodist and, therefore, I was baptized and raised in the Methodist church. However, my grandmother on my mother's side was a member of the Pentecostal Holiness Church. It was in my grandmother's little country church that I first heard a simple gospel message that Jesus died to save me. Even though I was very young, I experienced the same warming of the heart that John Wesley experienced at Aldersgate. More important to our subject, I saw a great amount of laity involvement not only in the running of the church but in worship and outreach.

Later in my life I became active in the Assemblies of God which is very similar to the Pentecostal Holiness Church. I began to attend a local Assembly of God Church while I was attending high school and after graduation enrolled

in one of their Bible colleges where I attended for four years.

I mention this because of the high commitment to lay ministry found in this fellowship and the fact that they have a free church polity similar to ours.

They do have a definite distinction between clergy and laity but the gulf does not seem to be as wide since their criteria for ministers does not include seminary or specialized training. In other words, it was commonly accepted that everyone should be involved in spreading the gospel and, of course, there was great participation in worship. I think the key to this was the fact that their religious experience (including church) was primary and not secondary.

After graduation from Bible college I served for two years as a youth pastor in a Milwaukee church. I enjoyed my work but wanted to be involved with teens who were not involved in any church programs, so I joined the staff of Youth For Christ. I spent seven years in this organization that ministers to high school students.

I mention this ministry because I worked with teens who were turned off by the churches they attended. It's true that I worked with those who were inactive in their churches but I worked with enough teenagers and churches to know that most churches have a difficult time attracting teens. I believe part of the reason is that young people want to be an active part of the church. However, they soon find that the church is a place where you listen to others. The pastor, deacons and S. S. teachers are the experts and they are the learners. I will speak further about this problem later in the paper.

Now I am completing three years of seminary training. During my studies I have served as an associate pastor in a Baptist church and recently as the

interim pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church in Plainfield, Illinois. Each of these experiences gave me further insight into the way people function in a church. I have also had an opportunity to read the various books on church renewal and lay ministry, and perhaps more important, the time to reflect on my past experience as it relates to my future ministry in ~~the~~ Congregational church.

I am new to Congregationalism, therefore I have a limited knowledge of its history and distinctive dynamics. However, I have been closely associated with three N.A. churches during the last four years and I believe I have a good idea how many of our churches function.

It is thru my association with these churches, my studies and past experiences that I write about lay ministry in Congregationalism.

THE CONCEPT OF THE LAITY IN OUR PAST HISTORY

In this section I will attempt to show how the concept of lay ministry has changed since our beginnings in the 17th century. While it is true that there has never been a universally held belief concerning the laity, I believe our present day church polity is vastly removed from our early beginnings.

In Congregationalism we trace our roots back to the Puritan movement in England in the 17th century. At this time there was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the church of England. There seemed to be a desire to purify the church and return to a more simple way of faith.

In the book The Laymen In Christian History, the author states that:

The spiritualist movement had laid great stress on the spiritual priesthood of all believers. Pietism accepted this principle and carried it further in the sense that the laymen was expected to have such a deep and comprehensive knowledge of the truths of the gospel that the great distance between the layman and the pastor with his complete training in theology was notably reduced.¹

Pietism was successful both in raising the esteem in which the laity were held, and also in opening ^{up} ~~out~~ before the layman almost unlimited fields for activity.

This desire for a return to more lay involvement brought about what historians call the Independent or Free churches. One writer describes the churches in this way:

The situation in the Free churches was notably different from that in the state, or "people's," churches. There, even in earlier times, much greater activity on the part of the lay people had been the rule. Such lay service, however, was

understood not so much as that service that the church is called to render to the world, as that form of activity which is self-evident that every individual Christian must carry on in the world as a testimony to the love of God and the Lordship of Christ.²

It was out of this independent church movement that men arose like Robert Browne. He is the one that we look to for our idea of the gathered church. In this fellowship none is above and none is below, but all are equal in the sight of God and of Christ. It was Robert Browne who said that everyone in the church is made a king and priest and a prophet under Christ. This is why Browne held that the "essence of a minister's claim to office lay not in the imposition of hands in ordination, but in his inward calling by divine providence and his choice by the people of his charge."³

The choice of the pastor was to be by the free election of the people. Ordination was to be by the laying on of hands of the congregation, and not necessarily of those who were already ministers. This ordination was specifically to the care of one congregation, and ordination signified the pastoral relationship between that congregation and the pastor.

In my own mind that was an example of a true and good understanding of the great principle of the priesthood of all believers. Even though this strict independent rule was not continued very long it was the foundation of modern Congregationalism.

When we come to the Savoy Declaration we find that although the pastor and church offices are still elected by the congregation there is an element of separation between them and the ordinary lay person.

The essence of this call of a Pastor, Teacher or Elder unto Office, consists in the election of the church, together with his acceptation of it, and separation by fasting and prayer...the calling of deacons consisteth in the like election and acceptation, with separation by prayer.⁵

Some would see no problem in this because the power structure is still within the local church. I personally see problems with the word separation but I will address this later. I am not saying that separation meant a sharp division like we find in the state churches. The men of Savoy were careful to insure that the "preaching of the word would not be confined to any priestly class but would be accepted as the free gift of God to whomever He should choose to give it."⁶ The framers of the document also said that:

Although it be incumbent on the Pastors and Teachers of the churches to be instant in Preaching the Word, by way of Office; yet the work of Preaching the Word is not so peculiarly confined to them, but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Ghost for it...may publicely, ordinarily and constantly perform it.⁷

I think the polity of Savoy is one of the highlights of Congregational history. I see in their statements a very high view of the lay persons responsibility in ministry.

From Congregationalism in Europe we now move to New England. Once again we see the importance of lay ministry. Harry Butman lifts this up when he says "the emphasis of early Congregationalism on lay preaching (the pilgrims had no settled pastor for eleven years, Elder Brewster being their teacher) and their emphasis on scripture, are tokens of the indebtedness to Lollardry."⁸

What Butman says is true; however, if we look close a distinction is made regarding lay and clergy in this situation. Manfred Kohl points out that:

From the time the Pilgrims reached the new shores, they conducted regular worship services, as had been their custom in Leyden. William Brewster, their ruling elder, preached and taught. He did not, however, administer the sacraments. Their pastor, John Robinson, who had remained in Lollard, stated quite clearly that only a duly ordained minister could administer the sacraments.⁹

Holland

Here we see a very clear distinction between clergy and lay people. An elder was responsible for all but the priestly functions. Again, many do not see a conflict here, but I do.

Since we are focusing on American Congregationalism, I think I will share some of the thoughts that Harold Worthley from the Congregational Christian Society offered as a response to a letter from me regarding the concept of the laity in Congregationalism. In this letter dated May 31, 1977 he writes:

The influx of unlike minded religionists, Baptists and Quakers, made the Puritan leadership sufficiently nervous, precisely because those traditions downgraded the ordained ministry and exalted private revelations. A couple of illustrations: the primitive practice of 'prophesying' (exhorting) by laymen during the church service was quickly curbed; the ruling elder (a lay minister concerned with church discipline) was soon eliminated from the offices of the Congregational churches in all but a few cases. By the end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th, Congregational ministers were becoming 'professionalized,' holding associational gatherings (patterned after the English models) and trying for tighter controls of ecclesiastical affairs.

This does not mean that the consensual role of the laity was lost. There were always deacons and lay officers, and in the churches the laity continued to hold and use its influence and power - socially, economically and ideologically but the gap between clergy and laity was becoming wider.

Worthey stated that this trend toward professionalism was altered somewhat in the Great Awakening of the 1740's when laymen again became involved in many of the forms of ministry normally done by the clergy.

Before I move on to the way in which we understand the role of the laity in present day Congregationalism, let me summarize what I have been trying to point out in this section. My understanding of our history is that in Lollardy and men like Browne there was a belief that the distinction between clergy and lay people as it was expressed in the Anglican church was wrong. They believed in the "priesthood of all believers." The ministry of the church must be done by all of the people and not just by a paid clergy. This particular view did not really take hold in the Congregational churches but continued in the Anabaptist groups.

As you read the history of Congregationalism you can definitely see a great deal of laity involvement but there is a difference in the kind of involvement as the years pass. In the beginning there was a stress on lay preaching and the deacons and elders had special responsibilities in the spiritual affairs of the church. If I read the historical record properly, lay people began to do less and less of the actual ministry and look to the clergy to do this for them. Another way of explaining this is that lay people were less and less involved in doing the things that a minister does. When this happens the distinction between clergy and lay people is very clear.

THE CONCEPT OF THE LAITY IN CONTEMPORARY CONGREGATIONALISM

My understanding of the laity within present day Congregationalism is limited to my personal observances in the churches that I have been a part of. There are many of our churches that I have never been to or know nothing about. I know that there is great diversity represented by these churches and the involvement of the laity in these churches varies from church to church. Therefore, what I say concerning present day lay involvement will not be true of every church, but I believe that it is true for the great majority of our churches and I would be quick to point out the same could be said of most of Christendom.

I believe that within our N.A. churches there is a complete separation between the tasks of the minister and lay person. The people in the pew are not aware of the Biblical idea of ministry that is possible and expected from them if the church is to be alive and growing. This is unfortunate but what is even more tragic is that they do not understand and participate in the basics of Christianity which are prayer, Bible reading and sharing their faith.

In one church that I attended I noticed that when I attended the worship services and various board meetings, no one prayed but the pastor. If the pastor was not able to attend a meeting then they started without praying. I'm not advocating prayer before every meeting, but I am trying to point out that every Christian ought to be able to say a simple prayer in a small group or even in a worship service. If people do not pray, then how do they nurture or sustain their spiritual life? Now I know some would say that people pray in different ways, but I think that is skirting the issue. Every Christian

should be able to express their thoughts to God in prayer.

The same thing holds true for Biblical study and witness. Every Christian should study and seek to understand the Biblical witness. Ministers do not hold a corner on truth. The scriptures are there for everyone to read and learn from. The same is true when we talk about sharing our faith in the world. Ministers and missionaries are the ones who are expected to carry on a faithful witness in our communities and world.

Once again, I am not arguing that lay persons do not swing a lot of weight in the polity of our churches, but they are not participating in ministry such as preaching, counselling, visiting the sick, etc. Not only do they not participate within the church, they don't participate outside the church either.

Now the question that should be asked is why does this situation exist and what has caused it? The answer to this question is not an easy one. It is a problem that has been addressed at various times throughout the long course of church history. Although the problem is complex I see at least two dynamics at work. First, we have the problems that involve the lay person and, secondly, the problems that involve the clergy.

Too often in Congregational churches the lay person willingly accepts the idea that the minister is the one who does the work of the ministry. Nancy Manser pointed this out in a recent editorial when she said:

The ministers aren't the church. I know what Congregationalists say their emphasis is, but I question its existence in reality.

I see far too much acceptance of the ministry as a cultic function with the laity far too ready to assent to authority, whether the authority use the title of 'The Reverend', 'Bishop', 'Swami', or 'Guru'.

The laity does not see itself for what it is - the people of God, the expression of the church. The laity, in actuality, does not see itself as complimentary with the ministry, with both serving in different functions.¹⁰

Nancy's point can be illustrated very easily by looking at the church profiles that I have been receiving from the various churches that are seeking a pastor. They want a minister to preach, marry, bury, make hospital calls, visit inactive members, and build up the church. I have looked at fifteen different church profiles and not once did I see any mention of the minister being a person who helps others in the task of ministry. The pastor is expected to do the work of ministry instead of facilitating the task through the members.

There are some people who have a sense of commitment but they still see ministry only within the institution. Here again Manser points out that:

What I see now in churches is that lay involvement often is within the church. The question has to be asked whether the involvement is from a theological, faith base or more from habit, or being volunteers to keep the institution afloat.¹¹

Because lay people do not have a theological, faith base, they do not see the true nature of the church or their role in its ongoing reality. They don't know why it's there or what they are supposed to do.

The emphasis in the Congregational way has always been on the congregation and their responsibility to be a minister. And yet, how tragically we fail to live this obligation of the Congregational way. We were all meant to be pastors, and our deacons to be 'under-shepherds' with the minister, yet most Congregational people do not seem to realize that this is part of their duty and privilege as Congregational Christians.¹²

Another aspect of this problem is the way in which pastors view themselves and their ministry. Too often men and women enter the ministry because of certain ego needs. They feel inferior or have ego needs that can only be met within a Congregational setting. I believe the need to be

important or the feelings in inferiority are behind things like "clerical collars", "robes", and titles like "Reverend." There is nothing Biblical about these things and I believe they serve as divisive elements in this issue.

An even bigger problem has to do with ordination. In my mind this is the greatest single contributing factor in the separating of clergy and laity. My problem is not with ordination per se but what it means to the people in the pew. Ideally, ordination is the recognition that God has called and gifted this person for a particular task within the church. In our early history the minister was "raised up" from among the people and ordained by them. He was seen as one of the people but with certain gifts that fitted him for the role of pastor. He was not above the people but served along side them. I believe he was chosen by the people in order to get away from any kind of identification with apostolic succession, etc.

In modern Congregationalism ministers are still ordained within the local church, but the majority of the people in the pew see this ceremony as a setting apart or separation of an individual from themselves. They see in the act of ordination some kind of mystical element in which the person being ordained receives some kind of infusion of spiritual power that now enables them to perform the priestly duties of marrying, burying, and serving communion.

In every one of the church profiles they were looking for someone who had been ordained. What does this mean? Are they looking for someone who has been affirmed to have certain gifts of ministry or are they looking for someone who has been given certain powers thru the magical act of ordination. If you do not believe this, then why is it that those who lay their hands on the heads

of those being ordained are always ministers? You could also talk with the people in the congregation about their view of the minister. Ask them why they don't feel qualified to preach, serve communion, baptize, or visit the sick in the hospital. Many would say that they lack the training but if they were honest it would be because they don't believe they have been "called", or "ordained" or given the special powers that these tasks require.

I blame ministers for perpetuating this myth year after year. If ministers would be honest and admit that there is nothing magical in ordination and that they are no "holier" or better than anyone else we would see a great change in our churches.

Young people especially are able to see through this hypocrisy and institution. They are not content to sit back and do nothing while the minister prays for them and worships for them. They do not want religious performances. They want to be involved in the doing of ministry.

The question I keep asking myself is in what way is our present concept of ministry different than the church of England in the 17th century? I can see that our polity is different but what about the role of the minister? It's true that he or she is chosen by the people but is their function any different in our churches as compared to theirs or any other denomination? Is the role of the lay person any different? It's true that the laity in our churches have more political power and are expected to do more tasks but do they have real pastoral duties? Do they see themselves as co-workers with the pastor in ministry to fellow human beings?

As I reflect on this paper I think the real tragedy is that a paper like this has to be written. To talk about a distinction between clergy and laity is an indictment against our modern church life. The very fact of the words

"clergy" and "laity" are proof that people see a radical difference between the two. The title of this paper should be "The Ministry of the Christians Within the Congregational Church" or something similar.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I am aware that it is very easy to criticize. It is easy to point out faults. What is difficult is giving answers or solutions to the problems that I have discussed in this paper. Before I offer some suggestions, I want to point out that my criticisms of Congregationalism have been given as one who is within the family. I am a Congregationalist by choice and I will be serving a Congregational church in the near future. I do not speak as an outsider but as one who is intimately involved in our fellowship's ministry and life. I write about the problems because I see the great potential that exists within our fellowship and my heart yearns to see people within our churches experience the joy that comes from ministry to the needs of others.

I think the real key to a renewal of the laity within our churches is our pastors. They are the ones who are going to have to address this issue and begin to bring about some changes. I think the most important thing that they have to do is to change their own thinking about the nature and purpose of the pastoral ministry. Pastors must realize that they are called to be enablers of those they serve. They are not above or below, but equal. They must be willing to serve without the titles or "Reverend" and "Dr." and the recognition that comes with these titles. They are going to have to do away with clerical collars, robes or anything that separates them from the people.

In this regard they are going to have to rethink the whole matter of ordination. If ordination is to continue, the meaning must be explained. It would also be helpful to have special services in which officers and teachers of the church were recognized and prayed for. There should also be times when the whole congregation participates in such a function. By doing this, people would see that ordination of ministers, deacons, or themselves is an act of dedication and commitment on the part of those being ordained and a recognition of gifts and responsibility by those who ordain.

Those in preaching and teaching responsibilities must look closely at what the scriptures teach concerning this vital topic and then share this with their congregations. I think that unless people understand the Biblical basis for the 'priesthood of all believers' they will not change. It is argued that simply changing the structures somewhat will not be enough. I agree with that argument. I believe Come is right when he says that:

If the mere word 'laity' is preserved at all in our ecclesiastical terminology, all the traditional distinctions between clergy and laity will reassert themselves. Simply a greater emphasis on the importance of the laity will not prepare the church for a new understanding of its mission of reconciliation. The very term 'laity' inevitably implies the existence of a clergy, a superior clerical class of Christians. It also specifically denotes, in contemporary language, a class of uninformed and therefore irresponsible people. They act as passive objects, rather than act as responsible and effective agents. The church is now ready for, and its God-given mission now demands, the complete abandonment of the clergy-laity distinction.¹³

If this was done it would have implications for both pastor and people. Pastors would have to call forth and allow the gifts of his people to function. He would have to realize that some of the people in the congregation could perhaps teach or counsel better than him. This should not be resented but rejoiced in.

The people then would have to be committed to the 'work' of ministry. They would have to become involved in ministry and not just passive observers of the pastor and church officers. They would have to be willing to share the responsibility that comes from becoming a minister of the body of Christ which is the church.

The specific way that all of this is to be worked out is the task of each local church. The people within the local church are the only ones that are aware of the unique dynamics that are at work within the congregation. They are the only ones who can determine the changes that must be made.

I believe that the unique polity of Congregationalism lends itself to ministry that is done by the people in cooperation with the pastor. Our churches are free from denominational expectations and restrictions. We are free to serve in whatever way we deem best.

If we will work toward the elimination of a distinction between clergy and lay people, I think we will find that the people in our churches will find a new sense of purpose and meaning and they in turn will go forth to bring the good news of Christ and His kingdom to our needy world.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Stephen Neill and Hans Weber Ed., The Laymen In Christian History, (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1963), p. 169.

² Ibid., p. 183.

³ Williston Walker, The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 14.

⁴ Neill & Webber, op. cit., p. 202, 203.

⁵ Walker, op. cit., p. 405.

⁶ Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., The Congregational Way of Life, Prentice-Hall, Inc: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1960), p. 32.

⁷ Walker, op. cit., p. 405.

⁸ Harry R. Butman, The Lord's Free People, Swannet Press: Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, 1968), p. 17.

⁹ Manfred W. Kohl, Congregationalism In America, (Congregational Press: Oak Creek, Wisconsin, 1977), p. 12.

¹⁰ Nancy Manser, "Editorial", The Congregationalist, Feb.-March 1978, Vol. 138, Number 2, p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹² Rouner, op. cit., p. 159.

¹³ Arnold B. Goss, Agents of Reconciliation, (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1960), p. 99.