

“No More Spiritual Babies: The Development of a Strong Laity” Keynote Address by Mark Gibbs

Mark Gibbs delivered the following keynote address to the Lutheran Church in America’s LAOS Theologians’ Colloquium in New York City May 23, 1982.

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here. Both my colleagues in the Audenshaw Foundation and I myself have greatly appreciated the chance to learn from the Lutheran Church in America and its seminaries during my visits over the past few years. It is however with some trepidation that I face the serried ranks of Lutheran scholars here assembled, especially in view of the two special tasks which Nelvin Vos has laid before me.

It is of enormous importance that your church – that every church – develop a strong theology of the *laos*, of the whole People of God (of whom of course one percent are clergy and 99 percent laity). It will be a very great prize if we can understand and put into practice the calling and the potential of this 99 percent laity. Indeed this is, I claim, the key to the effective service and witness and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ for the 21st century. No buildings, no structures, no mergers of churches, no “new church” will be effective without it.

There Has Been Progress

Yes, there has been great progress in recent years. Nelvin Vos requested firstly that I should try to add an *ecumenical dimension* to this colloquium, and I am very happy to respond. I am myself an Anglican, but I am always thankful that I learned to think ecumenically from a very early age. I could never quite accept that God ever reserved all his truth for the inspiration of white male Anglican clergy from Oxford or Canterbury! And we must remember too that Lutherans have not always thought ecumenically in the past. The wonderful fact about the development of the laity in the last thirty years is that it has happened all over the Church of Jesus Christ, and all over the world. From Quakers and Baptists to Roman Catholics. From Boise, Idaho, to Blantyre, Malawi. And this has included both “formal” (church member) Christians and “informal” (less affiliated) Christians. We have all begun to recover the New Testament doctrine of the common calling of all the People of God, to a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), to an adult Christian maturity (Ephesians 4).

- Consider the intense development of a social dimension to the faith of the laity which is represented by the *Sojourners* movement, or by the Reformed traditions of, say, Calvin College.
- The Roman Catholic bishops’ statement about the laity, *Called and Gifted*. Edwina Gateley wrote an article for *Laity Exchange* entitled “The Laity Have Been in Exile.” Yes, and they are now claiming their rightful place in the Catholic Church.

- The Baptist World Alliance (which includes the Southern Baptists) has recently established a world committee on the laity, and George Peck from the Andover-Newton Theological School has reported some extraordinary common thinking at their first meeting in Puerto Rico.

You will know that Audenshaw and Vesper Society are establishing the first Laity Research Center in North America, at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. As we begin to assemble the first materials for this center, from the documents and reports of the last half-century, I am more than ever impressed by the progress made since the Second World War.

Half-Believers In the Laity?

But Nelvin Vos' second instruction to me was that I must be *intellectually fair and honest* in speaking to you tonight. And so I must put it to you that despite these changes and advances, a great many of our church leaders and thinkers, in North America as elsewhere, only half-believe in the vocation of the laity. There is still a great deal of tokenism about this. And such half-believing, such half-hearted assent, is dangerous spiritually, theologically, and intellectually. This colloquium is of course an intellectual event (though I hope this does not mean it will be a dull one!) And I think we must recall tonight that Christian intellectuals must be servant intellectuals, and we must put strenuous efforts into helping our fellow church members and our church institutions to understand the enormous importance and the considerable complexity of a theology of the *laos* and of the laity. I have recently written a short paper, "The Marks of a Seminary That Takes the Laity Seriously," and you will have copies, so that I do not need to go over all the conclusions I came to after visiting some of your seminaries. But let me give you some examples of the thorough and indeed ruthless rethinking which I am convinced we must come to.

(1) All are called?

Do we really believe this, and do our curricula and discussions reflect this belief? The laity, just as much as the ordained? Blue-collar laity, women, young, elderly, illiterate? All gifted? All potential ministers? All to be legitimated and affirmed and supported in their ministries? (And do our liturgies strongly say these things?)

(2) All called for all of our days and years?

We understand – you in the United States particularly understand – the importance of the *Sunday* ministries of the laity; and indeed many parishes and congregations could not survive without them. (But how far are Sunday worship services really a true partnership between the ordained and unordained ministers?) The LAOS movement, especially influenced by the fine work of Bill Diehl, has done much to emphasize the importance of *Monday's* ministries – not only personal integrity at work but also the ministries in the powerful and sometimes corrupt structures of daily life. By no means do all seminary curricula reflect these concerns. And I suspect we are still

further behind in understanding and theologizing about what I have called “*Saturday’s Ministries*” – the involvement of Christians in the structures of leisure – vacations, tourism, entertainments, sports, television.

(3) *Both laity and clergy called?*

Yes, we agree in principle. But it still seems very difficult to foster true and fruitful partnerships between ordained and unordained ministers. Certainly this is often the fault of uncommitted and/or docile laity; but I do not think we have sufficiently examined the psychology of clergy/laity relationships. It is impossible to have a true partnership if one partner (the pastor) always expects to be the senior partner! And if he/she takes an attitude that the laity are normally weak and in need of spiritual strength which he/she must give. Pat Drake of the Alban Institute has written a perceptive article in which she insists “I am not sick!”; and Renae Hyer, the first woman vice-president of the Bank of America and a very faithful Lutheran, wrote a piece for *Laity Exchange* in which she pointed out that her pastor was admirable in helping her when she was down, and needed counseling, but was uneasy with her when she felt “strong” and was enjoying her secular responsibilities. John Bluck, of the World Council of Churches, has pointed out that we have at least some “theologically equipped laypeople who won’t accept pastoral paternalism and intellectual molycoddling.”

How can clergy leaders – from the Pope down – learn to *listen* to laity, and how can clergy accept and encourage the ministries of the laity outside church and parish structures?

(4) *A serious investment in the development of the laity?*

To some extent the question as to whether we shall have a strong, theologically literate laity in the future is now a dollars and cents question. We have had so much talking about the laity. If we are to move beyond amiable rhetoric, we need more of our church budgets allocated for laity development. We need more scholarships for young laity and grants for their self-education (just as we have for clergy). (The United Church of Canada has some excellent schemes here which are worth investigating.) And we need – like our Evangelical friends – to encourage the laity to invest in their own Christian future. Samuel Lipman wrote in a recent issue of *Commentary* about the development of music in the Bay Area: They had the good fortune to find in San Francisco an aristocracy of German Jews, for whom the support of culture was the road to Heaven. If only the Christian laity had such devoted patrons!

The Time Is Critical

I make no apology for cultivating a certain holy impatience about these matters, for in the American churches – and particularly among you Lutherans who are now establishing a New Church – we have opportunities for laity development which may not easily recur again in the next half-century. The days of a mass of sheepish, ethnically motivated laity are fast disappearing. If we do not offer the laity chances for developing a mature faith, and a critical

loyalty to their churches, then in the United States as in Canada and Europe they will quietly “vote with their feet,” and in Hans Küng’s words “... the silent mass withdrawal from the Church will continue.” Yet I am sure that Lutherans, especially, still have a fine chance to lead in the American scene, if only you can work on the right priorities in developing our common vocation – clergy and laity together. I think especially of a proper Christian toughness, and of an understanding of the costs of discipleship in modern America. Our vocation is bound to be – at the least – an uncomfortable one: it has to speak of the Gospel. But we still have a chance to develop an adult, mature, strong, dogged, determined, able laity which “having done all may still stand.” No more sheep, no more spiritual babies, but strong disciples.