

# CHRISTIANITY'S TWO BODIES/MINISTRIES

## AN OPEN LETTER TO A LUCID LAYMAN

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Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Your letter in response to an ordination sermon you heard me preach is equally gospel faithful & logic honoring, with questionings as timeless as your affirmations. I'm responding both personally &, here, impersonally. As for the quoted material below, you will recognize it as yours.

1 We Christians are two-bodied, a physical body now & (Cor.15.44-46) a spiritual body to come. The reverse is true of the church, our Lord's spiritual body, of which the gospel is constitutive. (Luther: "Where the gospel is, there is the church; where the gospel is not, there the church is not." You don't quote Luther, but your letter is in this same spirit.) The church's physical or institutional body is a bodying forth of its spiritual body, the two bodies under the power & direction of the One Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.

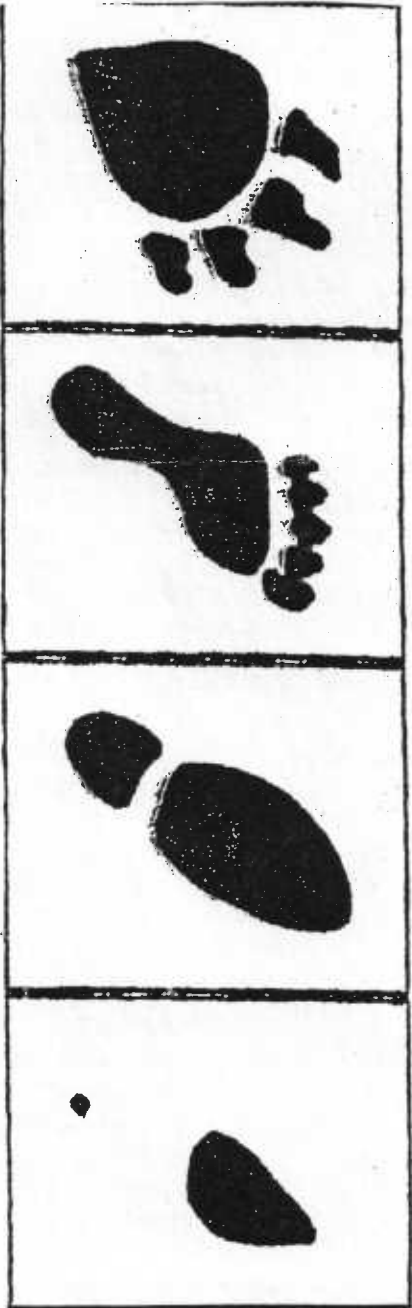
2 As there are two bodies in Christianity, so there are two ministries. In the primary (spiritual) body, every member-believer-Christian is a minister (thus the ecumenical phrase "the ministry of the whole people of God"): in the secondary (institutional-historical-worldly) body, some Christians are selected-trained-examined-ordained as special ministers, & thus termed "selected" or "chosen" (Greek, "clergy").

3 What, then, were the unselected-unchosen to be called? Some antonym was inevitable. "Laity" was a bad choice, but we're stuck with it just as we're stuck with generic "man" for "humanity" (in Greek, "laity" being generic for all God's "people"). My linkage intends (1) to illuminate by showing antonymic origin ("man" as antonym for both "God" & "nature") & (2) to raise the question as to whether both questionable antonyms, ie "man" & "laity," should die. Inclusive language says death to generic "man": "man" should exclude females. Here the linkage breaks. You believe neither "clergy" nor "laity" should continue in usage. Some say "laity" should be returned to its original, etymological meaning: all God's "people." But so to expand "laity" would be a more difficult lexical shift than to shrink "man." My prophecy: Neither shift will occur in the history of the English language unless the current despising of our formative literature is successful. (Yesterday, a friend complained that his son at Notre Dame is studying nonwhite authors instead of Chaucer & Milton. Without direct touch with Chaucer, Shakespeare, KJV, & Milton, a child cannot feel the resonances of "man" vis-a-vis "God" & "nature." Sonic note: Part of the appeal of "MaN" is that it contains two of the four liquids, the others being "L" & "R." Pathos: The current radical-feminist scramble to find a substitute for "wo-MaN.")

4 Two factors strengthen your case for dropping both "clergy" & "laity." (1) Church history shows how easy it is for the terms to refer to superior/inferior castes of believers. It happens whenever, & because, the institutional church (the secondary, physical body of Christianity) becomes ascendant over the spiritual church, the church perpetually preaching-&-living the gospel, the church that, overlapping with the secondary body, is Christianity's primary body. This slump into unspirituality, into worldliness, is as perpetual a danger as gravity is to the aging human body. Maybe we should call the former "demonic gravity." (2) The cleric/laic distinction (a) obscures the deeper truth that all Christians are ministers whose ministries the church is to discover & support, & (b) promotes a worldly professionalism in the clergy which (i) seduces the clergy into the illusion that they are "the church" & (ii) provides the laity with a bogus excuse for letting the clergy "do ministry" for them. But all this is not quite pernicious enough to convince me to stop using "clergy" & "laity."

5 Another linkage: The clergy/laity & man/woman distinctions are temporary & on the plane of history. As we are learning that the rigid sexual role-assignments of the past violated the genetic-temperamental makeups (gifts of God!) of millions, so we are learning that the rigid cleric/laic ministry assignments of the past violated the charismatic makeups (spiritual gifts of God!) of millions. Flexible redefinitions in both

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sets are appropriate to the human & Christian realities.

6 "The main task of the church is preaching the gospel, evangelism." "From the pulpit," but "more importantly...by the congruency between [each] member's words and actions...in each aspect of life....The second major task is to provide support and education for itself." The individual gifts of members should be "marshalled to achieve particular objectives, and the selection of those objectives requires [my emphasis] **organization**....Some of the leadership functions are assigned to persons set apart for special service, ie ordained, to fulfil those functions....Organization implies delegation of responsibilities and trust that these responsibilities will be faithfully met....This trust is necessary to maintain cohesion implied in the mission of the church to preach the gospel and gather the believers (Mt.12.20)....Gathering is both gaining members in the local church and strengthening the faith of the members. A strong church that is performing its mission has members who exhibit trust, confidence, and conviction; who are well informed about their faith and their church; and who are able to live their faith. The [my emphasis] **language** used within the church needs to be clear to its members, otherwise it detracts from the cohesion and, eventually, the trust." Here, "laity" & "clergy" are "oxymora," "incompatible with the church which is one although composed of many, and use of the terms constitutes scattering." Here this layman (not, please, "lay person," an ugly & unnecessary cooptation of "laywoman" & "layman"! ) complains that in his denomination, "deacons or elders" are ordained but not considered clergy, though they are as truly set aside in rites that are "of the church, by the church, and for the church."

I've quoted you at length because you say well what should never stop being said no matter what else modifying it may need saying. I must demur at your next statement:

7 "The ordained have no meaning, definition, no office, and no purpose outside the [local] church." (That was my position 1934-39: local-church ordination only, ordination ceasing when one leaves the church that ordained one.) "Clergy" "emphasizes a raising up away from the [local] church," & "laity" lumps all other intra-church ministries as "hardly worthy of differentiation." "Those who have responded to the gospel and become members of a church have responded to God's call and, therefore, the church's call, if in fact the church is the body of Christ. So the difference between the 'ordained' and others is only an office in the organization of the church. When out of office they are merely church members who used to hold office." But since "clergy" is a status that continues to exist after occupancy of a particular office, is not its effect to "put [all] others down"?

Yes, unless by the grace of God it's possible to put some up without putting others down (& M.10 celebrates that possibility & necessity: some are [in another sense] put down, as servants of all). Your universal priesthood is a healthful corrective to clericalism, as your localism is to ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Yet "organization" (your word) cannot be restricted, either biblically or anthropologically, to the local. Churches that are merely local are evanescent, shortlived: they fail of the mutual nurture the NT requires among churches. And church leaders unsubject to quality control by an organization supervening over an individual congregation "go glang aglay," wandering off (& their congregations with them) into amnesias of the never known (to prevent which was the central motive in Harvard's founding, 1636). The churches deserve (yes) clergy they can trust not to be ignorant or (by their peers) unsupervised. Seminary education does not deliver from all ignorance, & few communions have anything like the peer review a (yes) profession needs. But such as the two are, they're better than nothing.

8 Church leaders appear different under different images of the church (cf. Avery Dulles' excellent book). But also: in its secondary body, Christianity is a **religion**, & priestcraft is one dimension of any religion. (It's as a religion that Christianity may have a place for infant baptism, which can have no standing vis-a-vis Christianity as news, "good news" (A-S, "god-spell") to be received & enacted.) **Restorationism**, a nostalgic appeal to return to primitive (ie, the earliest) Christianity, denies that Christianity is a religion (cf. Karl Barth, & thus his opposition to infant baptism). Problem: how to keep the secondary body from betraying-subverting the primary body.

9 What you dream of & pray for is a simple, honest, pure church, & all reformation & reformulation through the ages depends on that dream & that prayer. But there's an irony here: a too pure, uncompromised, unworldly church soon ceases to exist. And if by super-purity a church ceases to exist, has it not betrayed the gospel at the other extreme from the hypocritical, self-serving, world-conformist church? Perhaps not; for on the model of the Resurrection arising from the uncompromising witness that led to the Crucifixion, the former church may experience rebirth, whereas the latter church ought to die & stay dead.

As for the individual Christian, both under- & over-expecting of the actual here-&-now church, the institutional church, betrays the primary church, the body of Christ. You rage against the complaisant conventional Christian (especially clergy in that dismal condition), but are underimpressed with the damage your hypercritical attitude can do.

10 But I can't feel sure-footed in this criticism of you. Perhaps the church is so sick it needs surgical members preaching-living a theology of incarnation inclusive of "total vulnerability. Was the Constantinian alliance a betrayal of the pure essence of Christianity, with religion contributing to society and culture at the risk of its own soul, at the expense of its eternal mission?" That's one of the perpetual questions for self-examination that the church should not try to evade, & Jn. MacManners (ed. of THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY [Ox/90, p.4] asks & expounds it at length. His balancing question (p.5) is, Could "'real Christianity,' uncontaminated by the world,...have survived?" Molten gold, says he, must be carried in iron-&-steel crucibles. The European (Constantinian) church bonded with the people & their institutions & survived in solidarity with them: the Nestorian church, great though became its extent & deep its influence, virtually disappeared because it refused so to bond with the Persian & other peoples. (Eg, the latter insisted on being, as Jesus was, Aramaic-speaking. A good friend of mine was the last remaining Nestorian archbishop, his people have dwindled to a mere 30,000.)

Rein. Niebuhr's category of **irony** (v. both pathos & tragedy) accepted that continuing social realities--the church, the USA--must & do mix idealism & pragmatism. Jn.MacM., p.6: "The contrast between the institution and the ideal has been continually pointed out by preachers from within and anticlericals from without." It's both a cheap shot & an essential reminder of the horror of the Grand Inquisitor, who accuses Jesus of foolishly disturbing folks' spiritual somnolence. P.8: "Only in Europe did Christianity assume the role of moulder of a great civilization, and as Europe expanded, Christianity went with the conquerors to make mass conversions, and with the settlers to occupy vast open spaces. Even so, the point may be conceded to Toynbee, Butterfield, and others: the decline of the social and cultural complex of Christian Europe is the painful beginning of a new opportunity, enabling the true mission of converting the world to begin again, at the point where gregarious conformity ends and individual decision becomes obligatory." The last sentence will please you, as it does me. You & I do not differ on the Faith & the call to evangelism, but only on Christianity as a religion. I am more impressed with the pluses of the Christian religion, & you with the minuses.

11 As a faith, Christianity's believers are, all of them, representatives, witnesses, in "the world," ie beyond the church: as a religion, Christianity's official representatives in church & world are the clergy. The generalization stands even though there are official & unofficial exceptions. In some situations, laity represent the faith & their churches in the world as well as in ecumenical church bodies. And some laity sometimes unofficially represent the faith & their church in the world, as (he tells me) Ken Woodward has been doing in the media, especially television, since the publication of his MAKING SAINTS.

12 The ordination of clergy is by joint action of laity & clergy, so an ordination sermon addresses both & uses the languages of both, carefully translating any technical terms. Eliminate the language of priestcraft, & the tradition goes poof, as it has wherever laicistic sentiments have prevailed. Where the tradition goes pool, the church modulates into some religion other than Christianity. The ordained clergy are the official guards against that modulation, the primary "defenders of the faith."