

Networks



Of Frogs and Lizards

Why more and more of the best ministers are laypeople.

Have you ever noticed how differently frogs and lizards acquire their food? The frog sits and waits for the food to come to him. When an

unlucky insect happens to fly by, he simply sticks out his tongue and reels it in. If the lizard sat around like the frog, however, he'd starve to death. So he goes out into his

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world and hunts.

Now the frog in this analogy is the Vocational Christian Worker. He goes off to seminary, gets a degree and goes on staff somewhere. Before you know it, ministry opportunities are coming to him and he has his hands full. In fact, when big frogs come to town they have to hide in hotel rooms or they'll be swamped.

The lizard, on the other hand, is a layperson. Ministry does not come seeking him out. Instead, he must move around in his environment; assess his sphere of influence; establish friendships; serve people; and, once he has earned the right to be heard, be ready to give an account for the hope that is in him.

I think the main problem today in world evangelization is the under-utilization of the lizard. And a big part of the problem lies with the frog. Let's face it, he has a tendency to steal the show.

What's more, the layperson looks at the Vocational Christian Worker and says to himself, "I can never be as great as that." And he's probably right—as long as he defines the ministry in frog terms!

The lizard needs to know how God can use him as the lizard that he is! And when he catches that vision, when he learns that evangelism is not an event but a process, and when he tastes the joy of seeing a friend find the Savior, he'll never want to give the ministry back to the frog again!

Of course, there was a time when the roles of the institutional church and the laity were not so sharply divided. In his soon-to-be published paper, William Garrison re-examines church history and divides it into three great eras, each reflecting a different church response to the cultural and political conditions of its day.¹

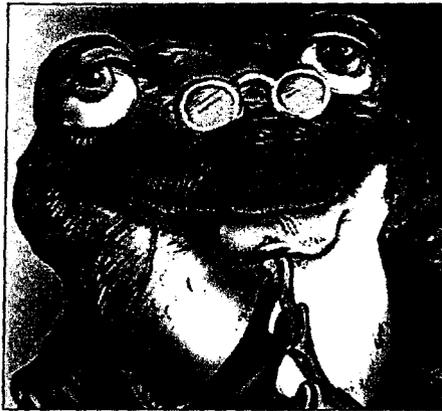
The Ancient or Apostolic Church

In the face of heavy persecution, the ancient church was quickly scattered across the face of the world. By the end of the third century, the Gospel had been spread to over 200 cities.

And yet if you asked, "Who started the church in Phoenicia,

Cyprus and Antioch?" it would be hard to say. Secular historians can't pinpoint any specific leaders. The best they can say is that it had something to do with endless travel along the Roman network of roads.

However, those who understand the working of God would say that it had something to do with ordinary laypeople, just carrying out the command of Paul to Timothy:



"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." 2 Timothy 2:2

This period is now known as the Golden Age of the church, a time when the Gospel spread like a prairie fire throughout the Roman empire.

The Imperial or State Church

The conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. dramatically changed the operating environment of the church. From a group constantly facing the threat of martyrdom, the church became a self-confident institution ready to take over the world on its own terms.

One hundred years later, Augustine's view of the millennium as the time in which the church would conquer the world provided the theological basis for the rise of the Imperial Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire.

This new prominence caused the church to shift its mission away from evangelism and towards the absorption of an empire. It's not surpris-

ing that before long the church started to resemble the secular institutions it had replaced.

Even the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century did little to affect the church's imperial self-image. No sooner did the Protestant Church grow strong enough to assure its own survival than it began to drift towards the Augustinian model of the church and, ultimately, towards the notion of the State Church.

John Wesley and the Liberated Church

Just as the conversion of Constantine signals a shift to the second era of the church, the revivals of John Wesley in mid-eighteenth century England signal a shift to the third era—the one we live in today.

Wesley was denied access to the pulpits of the English state church, so what did he do? He got on his horse and went to the open fields of Bristol and did open-air preaching. When people converted, he put them into specially developed societies which employed methodical follow-up systems, thus gaining the name of "Methodist" for his group.

Wesley went about the ministry without worrying about the institutional church. That is, he didn't let the goals of the institutional church stop him from preaching the Gospel. He was liberated from the notion that God's grace could only be channeled through institutions and their liturgies. Wesley is the forerunner of a church that would see leaders serve Christ and His body in non-sectarian ways never before seen in history.

The church of this third era is creative, resourceful, and pragmatic in its desire to fulfill the Great Commission in the face of a fast-paced, more urbanized and ever-changing society.

We see it in the 19th century with the formation of organizations like the Clapham Sect, and in lay leaders like Wilberforce, Raikes, Booth and John Song. We see it in the model for nonsectarian missions set up by a shoe cobbler named William Carey, missionary to India.

In the 20th century, we have witnessed the proliferation of parachurch organizations that have mobilized the laity to a degree never before realized.

Finally, we even see it during the last 20 years in the incredible rise of the Charismatic church, a movement which has infused new application into the concept of the priesthood of the believer.

In the United States, more than 100 lay affinity groups representing everyone from doctors and lawyers to hard hats and truckers have organized for the purpose of witnessing for Christ within their professions.

J. Christy Wilson observes in his book, *Tentmakers*, that God is returning us to lay evangelism methods that prevailed during the apostolic era. Wilson's thought is supported by missionary researchers who say that by the year 2000, fully 83% of the world's non-Christian population will reside in 120 nations closed to traditional missionary methods. Since the Bible states that no national government can come into existence unless established by God, then it must be God who is orchestrating a major departure from traditional methods of evangelism and a turning towards methods that will of necessity feature a strong lay or tentmaker participation.

Take mainland China, for example. In the late 1940's, an estimated 5 million believers suddenly lost all of their vocational Christian workers when the Communist government expelled all foreign missionaries and imprisoned church pastors and leaders. The church in China became the object of an intense effort to destroy it. Yet today, conservative estimates number the church in excess of 50 million, a tenfold increase.

What happened? It must have something to do with the ordinary layperson left behind, faithfully sharing the hope that was within him.

To sum up, in this third era God is raising up a laity that refuses to be limited to the confines of an institutional church and whose ministry refuses to be counted, created or con-

trolled. The prominence of the laity is clearly the distinguishing mark of the third era.

However, it is sad to say that the institutional church does not always respond well to the layperson's new role. To quote Dr. William Lawrence of Dallas Theological Seminary:

"There is this very subtle mentality that exists everywhere, that for ministry to be legitimate you need to get it



down to the church house. It's better there because that's where it belongs."

In this third era of the church, that kind of thinking is an anachronism. Nowadays, if ministry belongs anywhere, it belongs in the marketplace.

The institutional church can respond in one of three ways to the new role of the laity: they can fight it, deny it, or help it.

If they choose to fight it, they are risking what Gamaliel warned about in Acts 6—they might find themselves opposing God Himself.

If they deny it, they will worsen what Engel & Norton calls a worldwide "effectiveness crisis" in the church. And when the church is confronted with ineffectiveness, there is a temptation to plunge people into theological squabbles or rally them around some effort to Christianize society instead of working to depopulate hell and populate Heaven. To deny this role for the laity is to deny a role that is already 200 years old.

But what if they choose to help? Then the institutional church must become a Servant Church—equipping laypeople to do their own ministry instead of using laypeople to do the

work of the institution.

At the International Conference for Itinerant Evangelists in Amsterdam, 1986, Stephen Olford declared that the days of mass evangelism are over. Perhaps what he meant was that the job of world evangelization is more and more becoming a lizard's job.

- After all, the lizard represents the church's contact point with the world as he lives and works in it.

- He understands it and is familiar with its ways.

- When he is differentiated by his faith, the world takes note.

- Most importantly, lizards go where frogs can't. While nations may close their doors to Vocational Christian Workers, they will never be able to keep the lizard out.

As Solomon observes in Proverbs 30:28, the lizard may seem like an insignificant creature, yet he is found everywhere—even in the palaces of kings. ■ —Lee Yih

Mr. Yih is a stock broker from Hong Kong. "Of Frogs and Lizards" is a condensation of a paper delivered to the Lausanne II Conference on evangelism in Manila last July.

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