

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Rise of the Anglican Laity to Place and Power.

BY THE REV. CANON HENRY LEWIS, M.A.

(*Concluded.*)

III.

IT was not till 1857 that the English Church took any step to articulate herself formally and authoritatively on the subject of what her lay members can do for her in these modern times. In that year a Committee of the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury presented an elaborate Report on the subject of "Lay Co-operation," and expressed the unanimous opinion that the well-being of the Church depends, under Almighty God, on the mutual good-will and cordial co-operation of its members—clergy and laity. It was late in the day for the Church to say all this; yet it must be remembered that Convocation had only resumed its active functions in 1852—five years before the pronouncement. Nevertheless, it is a reproach on the Church that she should have been so long in making an official utterance on the subject.

In 1861, the birth of the Church Congress as an annual function was a fresh impulse in the now fast-growing institution of the Anglican laity as a serving and even teaching body. Its declared purpose was "to bring together members of the Church of England, and of Churches in communion with her, for free deliberation, and for the exchange of opinion and experience on subjects which affect the practical efficiency of the Church, and the means of defence and extension; also for the encouragement of a general interest in these and kindred subjects among the Clergy and Laity in different parts of the kingdom."

The success of the yearly Church Congress has been continuous. Its usefulness as a means for calling out lay-interest and instructing lay-feeling on behalf of the National Church has been great. As a form of "Church Defence" it has accomplished much, and is capable of doing more.

Following upon the birth of the Church Congress there

came Diocesan Conferences, the purpose of which was mainly to call out and organize lay-help for Church ends. The first Diocesan Conference was held in the Diocese of Ely in 1864. Its example was soon followed by other dioceses. To co-ordinate these, and to secure some unity of action among these, the "Central Council of Diocesan Conferences" was instituted in 1881. Representatives from each Diocesan Conference form this Council.

It cannot be said that Diocesan Conferences have been a success from the lay point of view. They are far less democratic than the Church Congress. The laity have not learned to breathe freely in them. Very little spontaneous lay-speaking is heard in them. The result is, that Diocesan Conferences do not count for much with the outside world in their utterances. They are but little less academic than the ancient, but now feeble, Rural Deanery Chapters.

In 1886 the English Church took another step forward in the work of creating a really free and acting laity. It was the inauguration by both Houses of Convocation for Canterbury on February 16, 1886, of a House of Laymen. No legal status could be given to it. Nevertheless, what the Church could do, she did do. She arranged through the Convocation of Canterbury for the lay-members of Diocesan Conferences to elect from themselves representatives of each diocese throughout the land. Ten members were to be appointed for the Diocese of London, six for each of the Dioceses of Winchester, Rochester, Lichfield, and Worcester, and four for each of the dioceses which remained. Additional members, not exceeding ten, were to be nominated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as president, by whom the House was in all cases to be convened and opened. It was also arranged that the House might be requested to confer with Convocation on such occasions and at such a place as the Archbishop might decide.

When the new House of Laymen came together for its first session on February 16, 1886, Archbishop Benson described

the event as "some initiation of a central organization of lay-power."¹ To him the creation of the new Lay House as an adjunct of Convocation was chiefly due. With true insight into the nature of the times, he had persistently emphasized that what the English Church needed pre-eminently was an awakened, instructed, and enfranchised laity. In his address to the new House he said: "The consultative bodies of laymen, which are now found in all branches of the Anglican Communion, carry us back long ages to the times when, before the Italian Church overrode all such promises, St. Cyprian promised the faithful laity that he would without their assent do nothing. . . . A Church which refers all to primitive standards is well able in the conduct of affairs to pursue primitive principles in forms which our own century can understand and use."

Lord Selborne was elected chairman, and Mr. G. A. Spottiswoode vice-chairman.

From the outset the new House of Laymen, like Convocation itself, has been pronouncedly High Church in its composition and doings. It has, however, done some good work, especially in matters affecting Church Patronage and Clergy Discipline Bills, the collecting of Church statistics, and the like.

The House of Laymen for the Province of York did not come into existence until 1892. Viscount Cross was elected chairman; Lord Halifax, the president of the English Church Union, was made vice-chairman.

Both the Northern and Southern Houses of Laymen have moved hesitatingly since their inauguration. The stiffness of Convocation, which begot them, is upon them, and there seems no likelihood of a more natural spontaneousness ever coming to them until Convocation itself is reformed.

IV.

While all this formal recognition of the rights of the laity to a share in the legislature and administration of the Anglican Church was thus being made, the laity themselves were pressing forward into other departments of the Church's work.

¹ "Life," vol. ii., p. 73.

In 1866, under the sagacious rule of Archbishop Tait—the first Primate of modern times to grasp the importance of an enfranchised laity as a chief factor of progress—the Order of Lay-Readers came into diocesan existence. Rules were drawn up by a meeting of Bishops at Lambeth, and what was already an irregular institution was thus taken under Episcopal direction, and, as far as individual Bishops could do so, was duly authorized.

In 1897-98 the Convocation of Canterbury decided that a new kind of lay-agent, who was described as a trained lay-evangelist, was necessary for the Church's needs. Three years later, in 1891, Bishop Temple called this new lay-agent into being. He described the class as Diocesan Readers, to distinguish them from Parochial Readers. Their area of service is the diocese. They are licensed to preach in churches at services other than Morning and Evening Prayer; they wear a surplice and a badge.

The present Bishop of Worcester, Dr. Yeatman Biggs, in his book, "Lay Work and the Office of Reader," chap. v., points out that notwithstanding all the movement and actual provision for using lay-help in the public ministrations of the Church, the Order of Lay-Readers has still to be authoritatively taken into the constitution of the Church as a defined and regulated office. This feeling found expression in 1903, when the Lower House of Canterbury requested the Archbishop to appoint a committee to consider and report on the question of restoring an Order of Readers, or Sub-deacons, in the Church. We have already referred to the report presented by this committee. The committee were unable to recommend the restoration of any of the Church's ancient minor orders. They saw serious legal and administrative difficulties in the way. They were "strongly in favour of extending and regulating the office of reader, including under that title the offices of evangelist and catechist, as more primitive, general, and permanent than those offices which are connected with the particular period of Church life in which the minor orders were created."¹

¹ P. 51 of the Committee's Report.

The Lower House of Canterbury agreed on July 5, 1904, to accept the main idea of the Report, and passed resolutions in which its recommendations for the admission and regulation of lay-readers were set forth.

Thus far has the Church of England reached in the matter of lay-agency in her public ministrations. No less than 3,365 lay-readers¹ are already at work in her parishes and dioceses. Convocation has taken official cognizance of them. The Bishops, as individuals, are welcoming them and gladly using them ; and yet the Church has still to take these 3,365 lay-readers into full legal connection with her constitution, and to acknowledge to the world that she holds them as one of her "Orders."

It is an unsatisfactory condition of things. The Bishop of Worcester, Dr. Yeatman Biggs, cools his impatience by suggesting that the delay will bring maturer wisdom and safer methods. And yet he thinks that the time has come "for some provincial measure, which will help men to understand what a reader is ; preventing the assumption of the title by those who are not qualified, and presently enabling the readers themselves to get into touch with one another, and to gain dignity and self-respect as they appreciate more and more a corporate relationship."²

To all this it may be added that among the 3,365 lay-readers there is no uniformity of system or even of management. In the London diocese the management is in the hands of a "Readers' Board," presided over by a Suffragan Bishop. In other dioceses the Bishop deals with his lay-readers directly. Uncertainty, too, exists even among the clergy as to what a reader may do or may not do. Finally, in no diocese can a lay-reader or trained evangelist feel that he is commissioned by the English Church. His authority at most amounts only to what an individual Bishop can give him. Still, although the 3,365 lay-

¹ "Official Year-Book of the Church of England for 1909."

² "Lay Work and the Office of Reader," p. 50.

readers in the Anglican Church are as yet but an irregular force in the army of the Church's public ministers, it is a force which is doing a big work now, and one which is likely to affect the fortunes of the National Church in the near future. For Church defence against Disestablishment the force of 3,365 lay-readers in these days of democracy is more qualified than the clergy. They could certainly be made powerful advocates for dealing with the Church's lay (political) masters; and in the event of Disestablishment ever taking place, the service which these lay-preachers could render in evacuated country cures would be enormous. Certainly "the factor of progress" is to a large extent with the Church's lay-readers. The true policy, therefore, seems to be to increase such agents, and to make them a constitutional and more and more used part of her system.

V.

A further movement for rallying and organizing the forces of lay life in England's national Church calls for notice.

We have seen how laymen have come into their own as fellow-counsellors, and legislators, and even teachers, with Bishops and clergy. We have now to see how these same enfranchised laymen are being taught to pray and to work for the Church as a living and serving whole.

A vast number of the laity do pray and do work; but it is as members of their local congregations. A considerable proportion of these pray and work as members of some missionary society whose operations, it may be, are world-wide. For these the Church of England may well be thankful.

But in the times that now are, and for those that are coming, something more is needed. The Church of England requires, and is already asking for the enthusiasm of men who bind themselves to pray for her every day, as the Jew prayed for his Jerusalem, and to work for her, as men must work for one whom they love with supreme affection.

The special means by which the Church is making this appeal is a Society—the Church of England Men's Society.

It was set going in 1890 by that strong leader of men, Bishop Temple. It has since been developed and made attractive by that other men's man, the present Archbishop of York, Dr. Lang. The latter has defined the object of the Society as being "to create in parish, town, district, and diocese strong centres of men, pledged to active service in and through the Church, and to bind them together in one comradeship." Its members, who must be communicants, and also its associates, who do not fulfil this condition, all bind themselves to accept and hold a simple rule of life, which is "to pray daily, and to do something to help forward the work of the Church." "No special prayers are enjoined, but all are to be men who pray. No special kind of service is defined; but all are to be men who work."

The constitution of the Society is equally simple. "The normal unit is the parochial branch, under the leadership of the incumbent." Parochial branches combine to form a district or diocesan division. Delegates are sent once a year to a Conference, which is "the supreme body as regards all questions concerning the movement as a whole, and which is becoming a real Parliament of the 'working men' of the Church of England." The number of branches is now 3,087. The membership has reached the large figure of 90,000 men. Truly we can say that the Anglican Church has at last adapted herself to the democratic feeling and movement of the age. And she has done it without sacrifice of principle or the employment of unworthy methods. While Nonconformity, in its eagerness to win the manhood of the nation, has not hesitated to use the free and easy method of the "Pleasant Sunday Afternoon" type of worship—a method which necessarily surrendered much of the dignity and spirituality of the old normal Church ways of the Wesleyans and other religious bodies—the Church of England has found a means by which to rouse labouring men to come and be sharers in her problems and advocates of her cause. And this, too, without the humiliation of giving prizes for attendance and the pain of having to provide entertainments in order to advertise and to draw.

VI.

We now come to the most recent effort of the English Church to secure for her laity a full partnership with Bishops and clergy in all that concerns her life, and teaching, and work. We refer to the establishment of the Representative Church Council.

The idea and its embodiment are the outcome of the Church's troubles in the present Education controversy.

On November 5 and 6, 1901, all the four Houses of the two Convocations and the two Houses of Laymen held a joint meeting at the Church House, Westminster, to discuss the situation, and to arrive at some common policy for the defence of the Church's day-schools. The experiment was repeated in July, 1902, and again in July, 1903. Its success was such that on the latter occasion it was resolved that the joint meeting of the two Convocations should be made a permanent institution, under the name of the Representative Church Council. The scheme was sanctioned by each House of each Convocation, sitting apart and acting independently. In November, 1905, the new Council formally adopted a Constitution—a set of Standing Orders for the conduct of its business—and also a scheme for the representation of the laity. Under its Constitution the Council consists of all the Houses of the two Convocations. It therefore represents Convocation in General Assembly, and provides a ready means for united counsel and action. Great care has been taken to safeguard the unity of the whole in the proceedings of the component parts of the Council. Equal precautions have been made for preventing any invasion by the Council upon the office and work of the Episcopate. The duties and privileges of Convocation have also been kept apart. Except in matters of procedure, a decision of the Council, before it can become authoritative, is to be made up of the assent of each of its three Houses, sitting separately. No statement purporting to declare the doctrine of the Church on any question of theology is to be

issued by the Council. And yet, as Mr. Chancellor P. V. Smith points out: "The Council may freely discuss and pass resolutions upon questions of doctrine and discipline, with this important proviso, viz., that any projected legislative measure touching doctrinal formulæ, or the service or the ceremonies of the Church, or the administration of the Church, shall be initiated in the House of Bishops, and shall be discussed by each House sitting separately; and the Council shall either accept or reject the measure in the terms in which it is finally proposed by the House of Bishops, after that House has received and considered the report of each separate discussion."¹ Thus, from first to last the Bishops have chief, though not all, control over the pronouncements of the Council. They initiate the discussions. They determine in what final shape the Council shall pronounce its collective "Yes" or "No" upon any point of doctrine, or discipline, or ceremonies, or administration of the Church.

The arrangement is a wise one. It is also a liberal one as far as the laity are concerned. If the Bishops are still to be regarded as judges and administrators in the Church's affairs, the laity, no less than the clergy, are now to be in a very real sense assessors.

At the first meeting of the new Representative Church Council in 1903 the momentous question of obtaining legal status and force for its constitution was discussed. It was resolved that no action be taken until the Council had shaped and consolidated itself on a voluntary basis into working order. The question is still waiting for that settlement which Parliament alone can give. When it comes before the House of Commons the real difficulties will begin. They will arise, not so much in what the Council asks to be enabled to legally do, as in the methods which are to be employed to shut out all non-confirmed members of Church of England congregations from even the right to vote at elections to the Representative Church Council. That only the confirmed should be allowed

¹ "The Church Handbook," p. 100.

to serve on the Council is reasonable enough. But that the baptized and habitual worshippers in our churches, who are not confirmed, should be refused the right to vote at elections to the Council, this seems to us unreasonable. It is inconsistent also, for unconfirmed members of Anglican congregations are often appointed to do the important work of churchwardens and sidesmen. We may be sure that Parliament will have something to say on this point when its sanction to the new scheme is sought.

VII.

Our task is finished. The story we have told began at a time in the eighteenth century, when the Anglican Church had no laity as a conscious and acting body of Christian life and thought. It ends in this twentieth century, at a moment when the Anglican Church has committed herself, for better or for worse, to a laity so conscious of itself, so organized in its powers, so instructed in its duties, and so enfranchised in its rights, that its equal in these particulars is not to be found in the whole range of past history. Compared with the position of the laity in the Roman and Greek Churches, the present position of the laity in the Anglican Church may seem hazardous to that Church. When, however, examination is made of the things contemplated, or at least suggested, by the New Testament conception of the Christian Church, then what we see to-day of the status and serving of the Anglican laity makes us feel that they are natural, and therefore hopeful.

