

# CHURCH REFORM – THE POSITION OF THE LAITY

Church Association Tract 191

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“The Position of the Laity” is a subject which demands the best attention of all who are disposed to take up the great question of Church Reform. What it is now in the Church of England, and what it ought to be, are the two main points which I wish to ventilate and examine.

The gravity of the subject cannot well be overrated. A calm examination of it will be found to expose one of the weakest points in our whole Church system. On no point, if I must speak out my mind, do I see such pressing necessity for a thorough reform.

In opening up this question I am afraid I shall tax the patience of my readers. I must entreat them to bear with me a little, and to mark each step of the argument through which I hope to conduct them. I cannot expect any one to see the mound of traditional rubbish, which now hides the rightful position of lay Churchmen in England, is first cleared away. Let me only assure them, if they will look on while I dig, that we shall find some useful nuggets of truth at the bottom.

(1) Let us begin with a definition. *When we talk of the laity of a Church, what do we mean?* We mean, of course, all within her pale who are not ordained to any ministerial office. We mean the people of the Church, in contradistinction to the *clergy*. How immensely important a body they are, it is needless to say. It would be a waste of time to dwell long on such a point. Without the lay-members a Church can hardly be said to exist. No doubt the old saying is true, “Ubi tres, ibi ecclesia.” But a general without an army, a colonel without a regiment, or a ship-captain without a crew, are not more useless and helpless than a Church consisting of clergy without laity. In the Church of England at any rate there is at present no lack of laymen. There are probably five hundred lay members in proportion to each clergyman. In point of numbers alone, therefore, apart from all other considerations, the laity are a most important part of the Church of England.

(2) Let us next inquire *what was the position of the laity in New Testament Churches*. This is an inquiry which demands special notice, and deserves special attention. I am much mistaken if a close examination of this point will not astonish some people, and make them open their eyes. I can hardly find an instance in God’s Word in which the ministers *alone* are ever called “the Church,” or ever act for the Church without the laity uniting and co-operating in their action. Are the Deacons appointed? The twelve recommend it, “but the multitude” choose. (Acts vi. 5.)—Is a Council held to consider whether the heathen converts should be circumcised? The decision arrived at is said to come from “the Apostles, and elders, and brethren.” (Acts xv. 23.)—Are inspired Epistles written by St. Paul to particular Churches? In eight cases they are addressed to the “Church—the saints—the faithful brethren”—and in only one case (the Epistle to the Philippians) is there any mention of “Bishops and Deacons” in the opening address.—That there was to be a distinct order of men to minister to the Church is, to my eyes, most plainly taught in the New Testament. But that “the Church” in every city or country meant especially *the laity*, and the ministers were only regarded as the “servants of the Church” (2 Cor. iv. 5), seems to me as clear as the sun at noon-day. As for a Church in which the clergy acted alone, settled everything, decided everything, judged everything, and managed everything, and the laity had no voice at all, I cannot find the shadow of such a thing in the Acts or Epistles of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> I trust that Churchmen who remember the Sixth Article of our English Church will not fail to observe this.

(3) Let us now proceed to examine *the present position of the laity in the Church of England*. It is a position which falls very short of the New Testament standard. It is vain to deny that in the actual

working machinery of our Church, in its arrangements, plans, schemes, and normal organization, the lay members have comparatively no place at all! Do the Bishops meet in solemn conclave at Lambeth Palace to consider the state of our Zion? There is no place for the laity.—Does Convocation hold its annual debates? There is no representation of the laity.—Does the Bishop of a diocese make his annual arrangements for the work of his See? He has no council of laymen.—Has a vacant Living or Incumbency to be filled up? The appointment is made without the slightest regard to the opinion of the parishioners. I state simple facts. I defy any one to deny their correctness.

Of course I shall be reminded that the laity are represented in our Church by the churchwardens, who are elected every Easter, and summoned annually to the Visitation of the Archdeacon or Bishop. I have not forgotten this at all. I only ask, in reply, whether churchwardens are not, as a rule, appointed with very little regard to spiritual qualifications? I ask whether their annual attendance at Visitations is not ordinarily a mere ceremony and form? How many churchwardens know anything about a Visitation, except that they go to a certain town, hear a Charge which they often do not understand, dine with the other churchwardens, and then go home.—How many churchwardens accept office with the least idea of taking a constant active interest in all the Church's affairs?—How many of them are expected to know anything about the Church's doctrines, ceremonies, government, difficulties, schemes, or plans?—They are often most excellent fellows, and capable of doing excellent service. But practically little or nothing is expected of them, and little or nothing except secular and financial business is ever given them to do. The man who thinks that the office of churchwarden completely fulfils the New Testament idea of the laity's position in a Church must have taken leave of his common sense. That there are exceptional churchwardens who really do great things for the Church I am well aware. But they are such brilliant exceptions that they only prove the truth of my rule. If all churchwardens would do their duty always, as some churchwardens do their duty sometimes, the Church of England would be a far stronger Church than it is.

Of course I shall be reminded again that lay Churchmen occupy a prominent place in Church Congresses and Conferences, and fill a very useful position on the Committees of religious Societies. I am quite aware of this, but it is entirely beside the question. All these are purely *voluntary* agencies, which form no part of the Church's authorized and normal machinery. It is the organized system of the Church that I am looking at, and not the gratuitous service of exceptional lay volunteers.

But some one, again, will remind me that the House of Commons represents the laity of the Church of England. Surely the less we say about that the better! The man who talks in this way must be a second Rip Van Winkle, and has been asleep for two hundred years. We are not living in 1685 but in 1892. The pleasant old theory that Church and State are co-extensive and identical has long since vanished into thin air, and is a thing of the past. The House of Commons is a powerful body, no doubt, and "monarch of all it surveys." But it is no longer an assembly of none but "Churchmen." Moreover, it is notorious that there is no subject the House of Commons cares so little to discuss as religion, and that there are no religious interests which fare so badly in its hands as those of the Church of England!

With every desire to make the best of our Church and its constitution, I cannot avoid the conclusion that in the matter of the laity its system is at present defective and infra-scriptural. I cannot reconcile the position of the English lay Episcopalian in 1892 with that of his brother in any apostolic Church eighteen centuries ago. I cannot make the two things square. To my eyes, it seems that in the regular working of the Church of England almost everything is left in the hands of the clergy, and hardly anything is assigned to the laity! The clergy settle every thing. The clergy manage everything! The clergy arrange everything! The laity are practically allowed neither voice, nor place, nor opinion, nor power, and must accept whatever the clergy decide for them. In all this there is no intentional slight. Not the smallest reflection is implied on the trustworthiness and ability

of the laity. But from one cause or another they are left out in the cold, passive recipients and not active members in a huge ecclesiastical corporation; sleeping partners and not working agents in an unwieldy and ill-managed concern. In short, in the normal action of the Church of England, lay Churchmen have been left on a siding. Like soldiers not wanted, they have fallen out of the ranks, retired to the rear, and sunk out of sight.

(4) Now, what is *the true cause of this anomalous state of things*? It is one which may easily be detected. The position of the English laity is neither more nor less than a rag and remnant of Popery. It is part of that “*damnosa haereditas*” which Rome has bequeathed to our Church, and which has never been completely purged away. Our Reformers themselves were not perfect men, and the characteristic jealousy of Queen Elizabeth prevented their perfecting the work of the English Reformation. Among other blots which they left on the face of our Church I must sorrowfully admit that neglect of the interests of the laity was not the least one. To make the clergy mediators between Christ and man,—to exalt them far above the laity, and put all ecclesiastical power into their hands,—to clothe them with sacerdotal authority, and regard them as infallible guides in all Church matters,—this has always been an essential element of the Popish system. This element our Reformers, no doubt, ought to have corrected by giving more power to the laity, as John Knox did in Scotland. They omitted to do so, either from having been originally brought up under the Romish system, or from want of time, or from want of Royal permission. The unhappy fruit of the omission has been that gradually the chief authority in our Church matters has fallen almost entirely into the hands of the clergy, and the laity have been left without their due rights and powers. The effect at the present day is that the English laity are far below the position they ought to occupy, and the English clergy are far above theirs. Both parties, in short, are in the wrong place.

(5) What are *the consequences of this unsatisfactory state of things*? They are precisely what might be expected—evil and only evil. Departure from the mind of God, even in the least things, is always sure to bear bitter fruit. Lifted above their due position, the English clergy have always been inclined to sacerdotalism, priestism, self-conceit, and an overweening estimate of their own privileges and powers. Fallen below their due position, the English laity, with occasional brilliant exceptions, have taken little interest in Church matters, and have been too ready to leave everything ecclesiastical to be managed by the clergy. In the meantime, for three centuries the Church of England has suffered great and almost irremediable damage.

Seldom considered, seldom consulted, seldom trusted with power, seldom invested with authority, the English lay Churchman, as a rule, is ignorant, indifferent, or apathetic about Church questions. How few laymen know anything about Church work in their own diocese! How few care one jot for Convocation! How few could tell you, if their lives depended on it, who are the Proctors of their diocese! How few understand the meaning of the great doctrinal controversies by which their Church is almost rent asunder! How few exhibit as much personal interest or anxiety about them, as a Roman spectator would exhibit about the fight of a couple of gladiators in the arena of the Coliseum! How few could tell you anything more than this, “that there is some squabble among the parsons; and they don’t pretend to understand it!”—This is a melancholy picture; but I fear it is a sadly correct one. And yet who can wonder? The English laity have never yet had their rightful position in the management of the Church of England.

You may lay it down as an infallible rule, that the best way to make a man feel an interest in a business is to make him a “part of the concern.” The rule applies to ecclesiastical corporations as well as to commercial ones. The Scotch Presbyterians, the English Nonconformists, the American Episcopalians, the Colonial Episcopalians, all realize the importance of this principle, and take care to carry it out. The Church of England alone has lost sight of this principle altogether. The laity have never been properly employed, or trusted, or considered, or called forward, or consulted, or placed in position, or armed with authority, as they ought to have been. The consequence is that, as a body, they neither know, nor care, nor feel, nor understand, nor think, nor read, nor exercise

their minds, nor trouble their heads much, about Church affairs. The system under which this state of things has grown up is a gigantic mistake. The sooner it is cut up by the roots and turned upside down the better. If we want to remove one grand cause of our Church's present weakness we must completely alter the position of the laity. On this point, if on no other, there is great need of Church Reform.

But what is the reform that is needed? Grant for a moment that we have at length discovered that our lay Churchmen are not in their rightful position.—What is the remedy for the evil? What is the change that is required? What ought to be done?

The answers that some men make to these questions are so puerile, weak, and inadequate, that I am almost ashamed to name them. They tell us coolly that the laity may become lay agents and Scripture-readers—may even exhort and give little addresses—may teach Sunday schools and be parochial visitors—may manage reformatories and Houses of refuge—may attend Committees, and superintend Church finance! My reply is that all such suggestions are ridiculously below the mark, and show woeful ignorance of the Church's need. I marvel that sensible men can have the face to make them. Oh, mighty condescension! Oh, wondrous liberality! We will let laymen do rough work which could not be done at all without them, and which they have no need to ask the clergy's leave to do! If this is all that people mean when they talk of enlisting "lay co-operation" I am sorry for them. Such doctoring will not heal the wounds of our Zion. Such reforms will not win back the lukewarm sympathies of our laity, and make them the right arm of the Church of England.

The reform I plead for in the position of our laity is something far deeper, higher, wider, broader, more thorough, and more complete. I plead for the general recognition of the mighty principle that *nothing ought to be done in the Church without the laity*, in things great or in things small. I plead that the laity ought to have a part, and voice, and hand, and vote, in everything that the Church says and does, except ordaining and ministering in the congregation. I plead that the voice of the Church of England ought to be not merely the voice of the Bishops and Presbyters, but the voice of the Laity as well, and that no Church action should ever be taken, and no expression of Church opinion ever put forth, in which the laity have not an equal share with the clergy. Such a reform would be a return to New Testament principles. Such a reform would increase a hundredfold the strength of the Church of England.

(1) In my opinion *No English Convocation ought ever to be sanctioned without an equal representation of the laity*. The existing Convocations of Canterbury and York sometimes discuss measures of self-reform. They may spare themselves the trouble of incubation unless they are prepared to throw open their doors, and admit to their councils the laity. No mere clerical Parliament, however rich in Deans, Archdeacons, Canons, and parochial Clergy, will ever possess the country's confidence, or be regarded with much interest, or command much attention. The laity must have a voice and place in Convocation, if the laity are to care for Convocation's proceedings. Once let them in, and recognise their title to sit on equal terms with the clergy, and Convocation debates would soon be diligently studied, and become a different thing. A well-selected body of sensible lay Churchmen would never allow long speeches about the "reserved sacrament," or let union with decayed and unsound Churches be discussed, while Protestant Nonconformists were completely ignored.

(2) In my opinion, *No Diocese ought to be governed by a Bishop alone, without the aid of a Lay Privy Council*. The advice of three or four wise independent laymen who knew the ins and outs of the district, and were familiar with public opinion, would be an incalculable gain to any Bishop. They would prevent his making many mistakes. They would encourage him to act boldly when there was need for decided action.—At present Bishops are at a terrible disadvantage. They are like men up in a balloon, and see things on the earth very indistinctly. They are obliged to glean information from chaplains, secretaries, archdeacons, and rural deans, and have often immense difficulty in discovering facts and truth. What a blessing it would be to them to have three or four

independent lay councillors, who would tell them things as they really are! The Peterborough “cobwebs to catch Calvinists,”—the Ripon attempts, in poor Dr. Longley’s days, to ostracize an unhappy curate for holding Evangelical views of baptism,—and above all the Gorham case, would probably never have been heard of, if in each diocese the Bishop had been continually advised by a council of sensible laymen.

(3) In my opinion *No parochial clergyman ought ever to attempt the management of his parish or congregation without constantly consulting the laity.* If he does not like to have anything so stiff and formal-sounding as a “parochial council,” let him at any rate often confer with his churchwardens and leading communicants about his work. Especially let him do nothing in the way of changing times and modes of worship, nothing in the matter of new ceremonials, new decorations, new gestures, new postures, without first taking counsel with his lay-people. The church is theirs, and not his; he is their servant, and they are not his: they have surely a right to be consulted. Who can tell the amount of offence that might be prevented if clergymen always acted in this way? No people, I believe, are more reasonable than lay Churchmen, if they are only approached and treated in a reasonable way. Above all, let every parochial Incumbent make a point of teaching every communicant that he is an integral part of the Church of England, and is bound to do all that he can for its welfare. On this point, I grieve to say, the Methodists and Dissenters beat Churchmen hollow. With them every new member is a new home missionary in their cause. Never will things go well with the Church of England until every individual member realizes that he has a duty to do to his Church, and keeps that duty continually in view.

(4) In my opinion *No appointment to a living or cure of souls ought ever to be made without allowing the laity a voice in the matter.* This is a strong opinion, I know; but it is one which I have deliberately formed. Our present system is a total mistake, and a grievous abuse. Clergymen are constantly thrust upon unwilling parishes and disgusted congregations, who are entirely unfit for their position. The parishioners are consequently driven away from church, and the Establishment suffers irreparable damage. It is high time to give up this system. Let every patron be required to send the name of the clergyman whom he wishes to nominate to a vacant living, to the churchwardens, one month before he presents the name to the Bishop. Let the name of the proposed new incumbent be publicly read out in church, and affixed to the church doors, on four Sundays consecutively, and let any one be invited to object if he can. Let the objector be obliged to satisfy the Bishop and his Council that there are good reasons, whether doctrinal or practical, for his objections, and let the Bishop and his Council have power, if satisfied, to refuse the patron’s nominee. Of course such a safeguard as this might often be ineffectual. The parishioners may pay no more attention to a “si quis” about the appointment of a new parson than they do to a “si quis” about the squire’s foxhunting son, who proposes to be ordained and to change a red coat for a black one. The objections to the nominee may often be frivolous or incapable of proof. But at any rate *a principle* would be established. The laity of a parish could no longer complain that they are perpetually handed over to new parsons without having the slightest voice in the transaction. One right the laity possess, I remind them, which I heartily wish they would exercise more frequently than they do. They may effectually prevent young men being ordained who are unfit for orders, by objecting when the “si quis” is read. Well would it be for the Church of England if the laity in this matter would always do their duty!

(5) In my opinion *No system of ecclesiastical discipline ought ever to be sanctioned which does not give a principal place to the laity.* I say a “principal place,” and I say it purposely. Changes are said to be impending over our ecclesiastical Courts. We are promised new Courts of law in which remedies are to be cheap expeditious, and accessible to all. I earnestly trust that these changes may not dangle before our eyes for years, and then be dropped altogether. I hope the day may come when every unsound or immoral bishop, priest, or deacon shall be amenable to ecclesiastical courts at the instance of any three trustworthy laymen. But the main point I contend for is that in any event laymen alone should be the judges of our ecclesiastical courts, and bishops and clergy should only be summoned as assessors. With all my heart I protest against trying

ecclesiastical suits before clerical judges. The very last thing that we clergy possess is a judicial mind. We are constantly saying our say in our pulpits without being contradicted, and insensibly we become very incapable of seeing both sides of a question. From exclusively clerical tribunals may the Church of England ever be delivered! If unfortunate clerical transgressors are prosecuted, may they ever fall into the hands of lay judges, and not into the hands of bishops and clergy! Personally and individually they may be excellent men. But in the nature of things they are not fit to be judges. Let that work be handed over to the laity, with the one provision that in difficult doctrinal cases they may call in the help of expert theological assessors.

Such are the reforms I suggest in the position of lay Churchmen. They are no doubt very wide, very sweeping, and very thorough. But I have yet to learn that they are not most desirable in the abstract, and imperatively required by the times. They will bring down on me a host of objectors. For this I am quite prepared.

(a) "Sacriligious reform!" some will cry. They think it downright wicked to let the laity have anything to do with spiritual matters. They wish them to be nothing but Gibeonites, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the clergy. They babble away about Dathan and Abiram, and Uzzah putting his hand to the ark, and Uzziah taking on himself to burn incense.

Well! I reply, look at the Irish Church, and learn wisdom. If Disestablishment comes, you will be obliged to cast yourselves on the aid of the laity, whether you like it or not. Even if it does not come, you will never be really strong, unless you place the laity in their rightful position. As to the vague talk about sacrilege, it is all nonsense. Touch the idea with the Ithuriel spear of Scripture, and it will vanish away.

(b) But "it is a dangerous reform," some men will cry. "The laity will take the reins into their hands, and lord it over the consciences of the clergy." Such fears are simply ridiculous. There is far more real danger in letting the laity sit idle, and giving them no active interest in the Church's affairs. I have a better opinion of the laity than these alarmists have. The new ecclesiastical machinery may work awkwardly at first, like a new steam-engine, when its joints are stiff, and its bearings hot. The laity may kick over the traces at first a little, and not understand what they have to do. But give them time, give them time. Show them that you trust them, and make them see what is wanted, and I have no doubt the laity would soon settle down in their place, and work with a will.

(c) "But it is a useless reform," some men will finally cry. "The laity are unfit to advise Bishops, or sit in Convocation, or take part in Ruri-Decanal Synods, or give an opinion about the fitness of Incumbents." I do not believe it for one moment. The lay members of our Church may not be critics of Greek or Hebrew, or deep theologians, compared to many of the clergy. But many of them have quite as much grace, and quite as much knowledge of the English Bible. Above all, they have, as a rule, much more *common sense* than the clergy. No man can be ignorant of that who knows how our best laymen conduct themselves on the committees of our great religious Societies. The observation of Lord Clarendon about the clerical body is alas! only too true. After long experience, he declared his conviction that "clergymen understand the least, and take the worst measure of human affairs of all mankind that can write or read."

I fear, if he lived in the present day, he would not give us, as a body, a much better character. Nothing, I firmly believe, would be such an advantage to the Church as to leaven all its action with a judicious mixture of the lay element. The true cause of half the Church's mistakes in these latter days is the absence of the laity from their rightful place.

I must leave my subject here. Two points alone I have purposely left untouched. I have not room to enter into them fully, and I shall therefore dismiss them with a very few words.

I have said nothing about *the sale of Livings*. I hold that it deserves unmitigated condemnation. A system by which a cure of souls can be sold like a flock of sheep or a drove of pigs, is simply a disgrace to the Church which tolerates it, and to the country in which it takes place. It ought to be clean swept away. The heaviest penalty ought to be imposed on every one who has anything to do with it, either directly or indirectly, either as principal or agent. Let all alike, buyers, sellers, vendors, purchasers, clergymen, patron, and lawyer, be severely punished if detected. The thing is an offence in God's sight, and a blot on the character of the Church of England.

I have said nothing about *Diocesan Synods and Conferences*. So long as our dioceses are as large as they are, they are open to grave objections. If collective, and including all the clergy of a diocese, and an equal number of laity, they become such enormous assemblies that nothing can be done. If elective, and formed by representatives from each Rural Deanery, they may kindle a party spirit throughout every diocese, and light fires that can never be quenched. To talk of them as a panacea for all the evils of the day is simply ridiculous. The moment Diocesan Synods and Conferences begin to do much more than talk, they are in imminent danger of causing schisms and divisions between diocese and diocese all over the land. To expect any great result from them, until there is a properly constructed synodical body for the whole Church, is foolish and absurd. After Disestablishment a system of diocesan synods would be necessary and useful. Before Disestablishment, and especially while our dioceses are undivided, they can do little.

I lay down my pen with a deep feeling that I have only touched the surface of my subject. In the whole field of "Church Reform" I know no point of such real importance as that which I have tried to handle in this paper. If the lay members of the Church of England would only open their eyes, understand their rightful position, and do their duty, there is no saying what good might be done to our Zion. So long as the laity leave everything to the clergy, I have little hope for the Establishment. Once let the laity see, and assert their position, and by God's blessing, it might be "life from the dead."

End notes:

- 1) The Epistles to the Seven Churches in Revelation, which the Lord Jesus commands St. John to write to "the angel" of each Church, do not appear to me to form any exception to the statement here made.
  - (1) It is by no means certain that "the angel" of each Church stands for its chief minister. Many think that he is an allegorical personification of the whole body addressed,—like "the virgin of the daughter of Zion," and the "Bride the Lamb's wife."
  - (2) It is not safe to draw lessons about the ministerial office, or the constitution Church, from a book so eminently figurative and symbolical as Revelation.