

The Fullness of Christ:

**Paul's Revolutionary Vision
of Universal Ministry**

John Howard Yoder

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The Fullness of Christ
Paul's Revolutionary Vision of Universal Ministry
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Foreword

This small book is being made available, in part, because of the work of the Planning Committee for the Believers' Church Conference on Ministry (Bethany Theological Seminary, Oak Brook, Illinois, September 2-5, 1987). As the committee sought a way to open the discussion at that conference it seemed clear that the most blunt and challenging resource available would be a twenty-year-old text published in an obscure pamphlet series long out of print.

Making this material available posed at least three problems. The first was the normal logistic challenge of publishing. We commend the energy and creativity of Brethren Press, especially its Editorial Director, David Eller, for accelerating editing and production procedures to make the text available in less than nine months.

The second challenge was the etiquette, or rather modesty, of John Howard Yoder, Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame, who for a quarter century has been co-convenor of the Committee on Continuing Conversations. This ad hoc group facilitates the planning of Believers' Church Conferences and has made Yoder's role at past conferences more that of moderator than spokesman. The Bethany conference planners prevailed upon the author to override his concerns about a possible conflict of interest, and accept the role of presenting a major paper at the conference, for which this book's availability is a valuable resource.

The third challenge is that the text is dated, not in the sense that the significance of the topic has changed materially, but in that the illustrations and interlocutors

are from the literature of the 1960s. The desire to publish rapidly prevented a fresh literature review. Such a review, however, would have changed the author's perspective little since the theme of a "universal ministry" is perennial. The conversation in the World Council of Churches periodical *Laity* ended when its publication ceased. This was before the earlier version of the present text was published in *Concern* (1969). These same themes have continued to circulate through the years with only the names and constituencies changing. Thus we thought it better to publish, with modest revisions, a little known but classic statement than ask Professor Yoder to begin again.

We commend, therefore, this provocative interpretation of Christian ministry to a new generation of readers. It is particularly timely, given the revival of interest in the topic caused by the recent publication of the ecumenical document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

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Preface

The ground floor of this text, in its earlier informally published form,¹ was a distillation from and conversation with literature produced by the intellectual ferment of 1955–1970. That was a pioneering time, in terms of:

- conversations structured ecumenically, especially in the contexts of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches (separate agencies, both world wide, which merged in 1961).
- a first serious accounting for the impact of the threefold disestablishment of the Church:
 - in the North Atlantic world, through the rise of secularism;
 - in eastern Europe, through the rise of socialist governments;
 - in most of the rest of the world, through the presence of minority churches.
- growing readiness to read the New Testament data objectively, otherwise than as warrants for the leadership patterns of one or the other of the separate denominations.

The main lines of my presentation are all present in that literature, especially the texts of McKenzie, Knox, Schweitzer. (See *Sources*, p. 106).

¹Most fully presented in *Concern* #17 (Scottsdale, PA: 1969) pp. 33–93. The nucleus of the material had first been presented under the heading: “The One and the Many” to a gathering of the InterSeminary Movement at The Ecumenical Institute, Evanston, IL, March 4, 1961.

There need be no apology for reproducing this material with only modest rewriting nearly two decades later. The quantity, the thoroughness, and the originality of that conversation have not been equalled since the early 1970s. Ecumenical conversations on ministry have since moved to other priorities.

1

The Universality of the Religious Specialist

There are few more reliable constants running through all human society than the special place every human community makes for the professional religionist.¹ We may consult comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, or psychology. We may measure institutions in society from the outside, or we may describe "roles" and "images" from the inside. We may consult the prescriptive or the descriptive sources; the report is always the same. Every society, every religion, even the pluralistic and the "secular" civilization makes a place for the religionist. The basic cultural-anthropological parallel is all the more striking in view of the great variety of superficial differences.

A. How this man (only very rarely is it a woman) becomes qualified may vary widely, on the surface:

- he may have received a special education or initiation;
- he may have been born into a priestly family;
- he may have been chosen by lot or by oracle;
- he may have been equipped by a sacramental action;
- he may demonstrate exceptional "charismatic" capacities;
- he may be authorized by someone qualified to assign that status.

Yet in every case there is a constancy. He disposes of a unique quality, which he usually possesses for life, which alone qualifies him for his function, and beside which the mass of the people are identifiable negatively as “lay,” that is, as non-bearers of this special quality. Normally one such person is needed per social group (even in a small village or congregation) and seldom is a second one desirable (team ministries in mammoth parishes do not constitute a significant exception to this rule). One person per place is enough to do what the society needs him to do.

B. The public performance identifying his office may vary widely, on the surface:

- in Catholicism he renews the miracle of the sacrament;
- in magisterial Protestantism he proclaims the Word as true teaching;
- in revivalism he moves his hearers to repentance and commitment;
- in Pealeism or Shullerism he encourages people to be happy;
- in suburbia he counsels them to be authentic.

But in every case it is what only he can do right, and it is that function around which that special action happens which those people think of as “church.”

C. It is, in fact, his presence which is the presence of the church; he is the definition (sociologically) of the church. This is the rationale of the worker-priest movement; where the sacramental man is present, the church is present. Where he is absent, the church is not engaged; this is why the YMCA and the Evangelical Alliance never qualified as “ecumenical movements”—this is why “faith mission” agencies are not recognized as legitimate “church” action—because the clergy were not in control.

Their presence changes the character of a civil rights march or a PTA meeting.

Over against the religious specialist the "laity" can be defined only negatively, as those not "set apart," the consumers to be served, the public to be mobilized.

D. Despite the outward importance of his liturgical service, what the religionist's presence means to the individual and the society, and the reason he is given his status, is perhaps more basically the "blessing" he brings to life.

He may center a society's consecrated concern on the cycle of the year's fruitfulness:

- equinox and solstice;
- seedtime and harvest;
- winter and Easter.

This cycle of nature, blessing fields and fisheries and flocks, has been carried over into the "liturgical year," whose cultural origins lie more in nature than in holy history (sun symbols at the winter solstice, fertility symbols for Easter).

He may be encountered at the landmarks of the individual's life:

- puberty (confirmation or baptism);
- marriage;
- parenthood (baptism or "presentation");
- death.

He may be expected to stand by especially in crisis and catastrophe:

- accident;
- sickness;
- drought or storm; earthquake or volcanic destruction;
- war.

He may by his withdrawal from the ordinary functions of life represent a living link with the invisible realm:

- as a celibate;
- as a living moral example of exceptional sobriety and humility, sometimes of poverty, including his wife and children.

He will probably be held responsible to teach to youth by teaching, exhortation, scolding, and example, the moral values to which that society gives lip service.

Whatever be the mix of these various dimensions, in all of them the clergyman mediates between the common life and the realm of the “invisible” or the “spiritual,” or perhaps (in secular society) the “moral” dimensions of reality, which one needs to lean on especially at those critical points in life.

E. No society balks at paying what his services cost.² In simple societies he may farm or hunt like his neighbors, but even then they often owe him something for his services. He may live poorly on the fringes of the economy, but then his poverty is recognized as especially meritorious, and gives him a claim on everyone’s hospitality and generosity. In our entertainment oriented culture it is fitting that he be generously rewarded.

In a developed society this makes him the employee of the powers that be: of

- the patron-lord of the medieval village;
- the king in Europe from Charlemagne to 1918;
- the deacons in a Southern Baptist congregation;
- the businesses that give clergy discounts and the states which give tax exemption;
- the military services, schools, and hospitals which maintain chaplaincies.

Or he may even become one of the powers himself:

- the bishop-prince of medieval Europe;
- the shaman-chief of some African and Indian tribes;
- the priest-king of ancient Egypt;