

The Abolition of the Laity: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1999.

R. Paul Stevens

Paul Stevens, a Canadian teaching at Regent College, is, along with Australian Robert Banks, perhaps today's leading advocate and practitioner of a theology of the whole people of God. I was tempted to say 'laity' for the sake of brevity, but Stevens has come to believe, since his earlier *Liberating the Laity* (IVP, 1985), that such brevity betrays God's people, hence the title.

Stevens' book is divided into three parts. 'Part I: A People without "Laity and Clergy"' spells out the thesis of the provocative title. Adapting Lincoln's famous 'of, by and for the people' to theology Stevens firstly depicts a non-clerical biblical theology that breaks down many of our crippling dualisms: that between clergy and laity, neither being New Testament terms, and that of gathered and scattered life, Sunday and Monday, each privileging the former part of the pair. He is not anti-clerical, engaging in a contest for church space, as many lay theologies and ministries are, but opens up the whole of everyday life to the whole people of God as a field for ministry and vocation. Secondly, a theology for God's people moves 'beyond unapplied theology'. All theology is meant to be practical theology, not just a Cinderella subject by that name. Stevens seeks to restore the Cinderella to her rightful place if theology is to once again reclaim its integrating role as servant of God's servants. He aims to overcome the split between university and monastery, academy and church, intellect and spirituality, theory and practice so destructive to Christian life. Such a theology by God's people will move beyond academic theology to everyday theology, reflecting on the routines of work, play and family, not just the extremes and edges of life.

Stevens helpfully contrasts the implicit clericalism of the OT where the Spirit came occasionally upon specific prophets, priests and kings with the radical universalising of the Spirit's presence and empowering for all believers as prophets, priests and kings in the NT. Sadly, no sooner was the people of God liberated at Pentecost than the early church fathers disempowered them through a reversion to OT, and pagan sacred and secular models of clerical leadership. Clericalization proceeded apace in what we could call 'the taming of the pew' to be partially turned back by Luther's rediscovery of the 'priesthood of all believers'. However, Protestant focus on soteriology (salvation) not ecclesiology (church), the preacher replacing the priest, minimal structural change, 19th century adoption of the Catholic seminary system, and ordination without equivalent recognition of lay vocation in society, has left the Reformation incomplete.

Stevens recaptures a sense of being one people by transcending the old clerical anti-clerical divide. He goes to the root of the problem by correcting false hierarchical images of God, church and leadership with more trinitarian and communal ones.

Part II 'Summoned and Equipped by God', takes a chapter to look at each of calling, work and ministry. Stevens carefully distinguishes personal (to work, family and civil roles), Christian (to conversion, community and Christ-like character) and human (to communion, community building and co-creativity) vocations in a biblically and pastorally balanced treatment that avoids what Os Guinness (*The Call*) describes as

the Catholic hierarchical heresy of only some Christians, monks and priests, having a Christian or personal calling and the Protestant secularized heresy of calling as just a personal vocation or job.

In 'Doing the Lord's Work' Stevens helpfully looks at historical changes in work before examining God's trinitarian work and then developing criteria for good work that is good for the world, neighbour and us. In examining ministry Stevens typically starts with a biblical overview of ministry or service before setting it in the context of trinitarian service or ministry. 'Jesus, in the Father, through the Spirit' is our model of ministry (p. 142). Stevens sees no biblical warrant for a specific existential call or ordination to professional ministry, stressing instead the congregation's recognition of godly character in leaders. 'Ministry is from God, to God and of God'. It is by the whole people of God, in word and deed, church and world.

Part III 'For the Life of the World', firstly recaptures the biblical doctrine of the prophethood, priesthood and kingship of all believers. Stevens quotes the Hebrews principle 'the deeper we enter into the sanctuary the further we will penetrate the world'. 'Priesthood connotes the interiority of the whole people of God, royalty and prophethood connote the exteriority of every member ministry' (p.176). This corrects both elitist Catholic and Protestant individualised distortions. No individual, except Christ embodies all three perfectly. Nor does any leadership team, although hopefully they will have a balance of these roles and see that all three operate within the church and model how Christians should operate in the world. Stevens cites banking executive Sandra Herron's helpful description of this threefold ministry at work in her industry: 'The prophet helping organizations discover what God intends for them to become, the priest caring for people and serving as a model, and the king acting as a faithful steward of people and resources' (p. 189).

Stevens secondly develops the notion of mission by connecting seeing Christian mission and vocation as the fulfilment of the human vocation to relate to God, people and land. Reorienting the church towards equipping for mission, not only overseas, but in the local community and workplace is essential if we are to finally discard the chains of Christendom. To engage in mission however, will meet resistance from the powers of creation gone their own way, tyrannising over rather than serving humanity. Stevens avoids the extremes of seeing the powers in a secularised way as only social structures or of spiritualising them so they are only seen as angelic or supernatural beings. Again a biblical theology of the powers as created, fallen and redeemed provides the way forward. This enables a discerning, multi-faceted response to supernatural powers and social structures avoiding the extremes of charismania or secular activism. The final victory over the evil powers will also include the transformation of our work or works 'in the Lord' which will not be in vain (1 Cor 15:58), but be purified and made fit for 'a new heavens and new earth'. This gives new significance to those toiling in 'so-called secular work: the arts, education, business and politics' (p. 237). Stevens concludes with an encouragement to live holistically in praise, practice and passion.

I find it difficult to criticise Stevens' *magnum opus* for it is now *the* text on the ministry of God's people, gathered and scattered, Sunday and Monday. It is profoundly biblical, thoroughly trinitarian and eminently practical. It is written with a lifetime's passion and great clarity. Its user and 'lay' friendliness to use that dreaded term, is aided by helpful diagrams and graphs and apt discussion questions. It is ideal for small

group study. The only quibble is perhaps with the title of the English edition which on first hearing has an anti-lay sound which Stevens certainly does not intend. The Abolition of the Clergy or Beyond Clericalism might have been closer to Stevens' intention. Nonetheless, this is a magnificent climax to a lifetime of ministry spent advocating for and equipping the whole people of God for mission and ministry beyond Sunday.

Dr Gordon Preece is Director of the Ridley College Centre of Applied Christian Ethics, University of Melbourne, and author of *The Viability of the Vocation Tradition* and *Changing Work Values*. 1275 words.

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