

Expectations Concerning the Laity in Contemporary Japan

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AS WE APPROACH the year A.D. 2000, Japan marks only 140 years since Protestant Christianity was introduced into the course of its history. By the time the first Protestant missionaries came to Nagasaki and Yokohama in 1859, Western European Christianity had already passed through the Early Church, Middle Ages and Reformation periods of its history and had been instrumental in the freedom and human rights victories accomplished through political revolutions in England, North America and France. Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the United States Navy arrived in Uraga in 1853, ending two hundred years of national isolation; a trade treaty between the two countries was concluded the following year, in 1854. So the introduction of Protestantism into Japan coincides with the beginning of the country's contemporary development. This period clearly made a great impact on Japan's subsequent history.

In this article I would like to direct my attention to Protestant Christianity's mission in Japan as it was advanced mainly by lay Christians.

THE LAITY IN EARLY JAPANESE PROTESTANTISM AND A PERSONAL VISION

In the first stage of Japanese Protestantism, Christians in ministry included not only pastors but also doctors, educators and many women with educational backgrounds in theology. Missionaries James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911) and James Hamilton Ballagh (1832–1920) were doctors who supported themselves through their medical

practices and yet lived as the salt of the earth and ambassadors of the gospel. Through my analysis of the history of Japanese Protestantism and my personal experience as a member of a Christian family, I have been made aware of how important the laity were in the forwarding of Christian mission in this heathen country of Japan.

My father was a Christian layman and I grew up as a fifth-generation Christian. The first Christian in my family lineage was Hiroko Kojima of Nagano Prefecture, who was widowed when she was 45 years old. At the time she lost her son to cholera, his doctor, James H. Ballagh, shared the gospel with her. She was baptized by him in 1881 at Kaigan Church of the Nihon Kirisuto Kōkai (Japan Christian Public Church), which had been founded in 1872. The next year, in 1882, she entered Pierson's Kaisei Bible School for Women, then became a "Bible woman" (minister). She conducted evangelistic work with Louise Henrietta Pierson (1832–1899).

The second- and third-generation Christians in my family worked as lawyers and the fourth-generation Christian was a doctor. They all opened their homes for mission use because they had a deep interest in evangelism. With this family background it is natural that I learned in daily life to recognize the Creator and Triune God, to support both physically and spiritually pastors and others involved in Christian ministry and to feel the need for biblical education. It became clear to me that especially for the heathen country of Japan, ministers and

laypeople must work together to forward the Church's mission. This conviction led to an analysis of the expectations of the laity in Japanese churches as one of my life-long research projects.

I was privileged to be the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship in 1956, which enabled me to study at Wheaton Graduate School of Theology in Illinois. Just at that time "Mobilization Ministry" was a topic of discussion due to the influence of the Buffalo Meeting in 1952 and the Evanston Meeting in 1954. There was a call for a new type of laity, with an emphasis on biblically educated lay theologians who would be able to express their faith while devoting themselves to their work in the secular world. I gained great insight from a book published in 1958 entitled *A Theology of the Laity*, written by Henrick Kraemer. Returning to Japan following my theological education, God led me to be a lay theological educator rather than a woman pastor. It has been 35 years now since I began teaching university-level courses within a department of theology on the History of Christianity and the Theology of Women.

From the standpoint of the history of Christianity and from my experience as a fifth-generation Christian who has served several churches in Japan, I would like to evaluate the laity of churches in Japan, including the position of laywomen in the church. I then want to reflect on an image of the laity for the twenty-first century.

EVALUATION OF THE LAITY IN JAPAN

Priesthood Responsibility and Weak Self-awareness

One fault of Japanese churches is that the purpose of worship services is generally for people to express their religious faithfulness. The church also tends to be a place to satisfy one's inner needs. Believers seek to

fulfill their responsibility in relationships with others in the group rather than by taking their individual responsibility as priests. Why is this?

I think that Japanese people are strongly influenced by their group-oriented culture. According to Ruth Benedict, Japan is a "culture of shame." People defer to one another because it is shameful not to do as others are doing. Mori Arimasa states: "Basically there exists only the second person in the Japanese language, so that it lacks the spirit of the first person which enables one to act according to one's own consciousness." People of Western Europe are surprised, I have heard, when they learn that Japanese people have such a weak spirit of the first person as expressed in the phrase, "I think." Japanese culture develops characteristics of deference, group adaptability and dominance of the majority. During a conversation between Gregory Clerk, president of Tama University, and journalist Colene Bure, a serious question was asked: "Is it all right for the Japanese people to continue as living fossils with a group-oriented mind?" The discussion was closed with the reminder that "child (ko, 子) rearing" is actually "individual (ko, 個) rearing."

Why does Japanese culture create a group-oriented structure? Considering the nature of oriental society, Max Weber, author of *Religious Sociology*, states: "Because of the absence of faith in a transcendent and personal God, people are not conscious of their accountability before the Absolute God, therefore they control themselves by direct contact with each other."

With this structure of consciousness, it is very difficult for Japanese Christians to understand the priesthood responsibility of each layperson. Peter suggests that through life with our High Priest, Jesus Christ, each layperson is a member of the priesthood in Christ (I Peter 2:5,9). Let us remember that the duties that were limited only to the

priesthood in Old Testament times have been given to each and every believer.

Covenantal Responsibility and the Lack of Self-awareness

In Japan the responsibility of an individual in an organization is understood not as a vertical relationship but as a horizontal relationship with others. Regarding this point, church historian Ishihara Ken says that "in Western European society, they have achieved a victory of covenant structure through their long history. By contrast in Japan, the church is simply perceived as a place for worship, and there lacks the awareness of structure with the order of laws."

It is said that by nature the Japanese people lack the sense of a covenant relationship with God, as well as of accountability for an organization called the church. Thus as time passes, many Christians lose the emotional uplift of their initial faith in Christ and gradually stop attending church. This is one of the dishonorable traits of Japanese churches.

For Japanese churches to grow stronger, each believer must be educated and develop an assurance of faith; there is also need for a strategic long-term plan for a division of labor and the appointment of believers to various tasks. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned in his book *In the Life of Fellowship*: "A community which allows anyone with no duty will perish because of it." Even believers sick in bed can fulfill the priesthood duty of praying for the world and for the church.

Correct Evaluation of the Laity's Mission

In the *Epistles to Diognetus*, said to be authored by an unknown Christian, it is written that "Christians who live strongly in persecutions are the power to move history." My father taught me that the powerful testimony of an individual touches the souls of others.

My father, who in 1921 came alone from Okinawa to enter high school, believed in Christ when he heard a lecture by a Christian. This person was a former naval captain, Hatano Sadao, the brother of Dr. Seiichi Hatano. In his lecture Hatano talked about his experience as a Sunday school superintendent. Because he would not participate in the required worship at Shinto shrines, Buddhists took him in and he was criticized in a national newspaper. He was eventually punished and discharged from the navy. My father and three other high school students were deeply touched by his faith and decided to visit his home. He welcomed them warmly, then opened the New Testament and read the Book of Acts, saying, "The Book of Acts is the acts of the Holy Spirit." He shared his experience in the navy and they had fellowship, then prayed and talked together at great length, in tears, about the work of the living Christ. My father later described this encounter by recalling, "We were absorbed with him as with the sound of heavy rain. That was such a precious moment for me to experience the work of the Holy Spirit and of the living God."

During World War II I was a Sunday school student and fifth-generation Christian. Because I refused to worship and clap my hands each morning before the Shinto altar that was set in front of my public school classroom, I was forced to stand at the back of the room during classes. My father encouraged me, saying that I would understand someday. Because of this experience, the subject of Christians and the State became another of my lifelong interests. Although an individual believer may be weak, the refusal to yield to persecution becomes a powerful force that moves history.

The Degree of Independence of Japanese Laity

I believe that both men and women should be independent. What does it mean to be

independent? This subject is so broad that it would take a whole thesis to discuss it, so I will only touch on its main essence. Independence is not the superficial financial or social ability to support oneself but rather the unshakable assurance under any circumstance that enables one to declare, "Here I stand." Personality is a Christian-based concept that includes one's self-assurance in relationship to the Absolute God. This concept would not emerge in the horizontal relationship of a group-oriented structure.

Missionaries came at the start of contemporary Japan's development during the early Meiji era, introducing education for character-formation with an emphasis on women. Inazo Nitobe, who appears on the 5000 yen bill, and his wife Mary concentrated their energies on education for character-formation based on the Bible. Nitobe stated: "What the Japanese people lack most is personality. And where there is no personality, there is no responsibility." Is this not true in regard to the issue of Japan's failure to admit its wartime responsibility and today's serious bullying problem?

Tadao Yanibara summarized the issue in *Among Those I Respect*: "What Dr. Nitobe describes as the so-called top-down or vertical relationship means the fellowship between the soul of an individual and God, and the relationship with your neighbor or horizontal relationship shows the social relationship among individuals."

When cultural upbringing causes people to feel uncomfortable unless they are acting in the same way as others around them, I think it will be impossible for them to fulfill their priesthood responsibility in church or in society unless they develop a sense of independence based on the concept of a covenant with God, including an assured vertical (top-down) relationship. More laity are needed who can fulfill their priesthood responsibility as the salt of the earth in Japan's society. How can we become

such assured believers? One way is to learn from the early church's laity.

LAYPEOPLE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Ministers and Laity as Part of the Ecclesia

Generally the term "laity" is used to distinguish believers from pastors and elders. In Japan the term *hirashinto* (common layperson) is comparable to *hirashain* (common clerk), as opposed to an executive in a company. Additionally, the original term for church is *ecclesia*, which means a group of servants whom God has called. However "church" is written in Chinese characters as *kyōkai* (教会), meaning "a place to teach," thus giving the impression that the pastor is the teacher and that laypeople are those who are taught.

All Christians are God's people, the *laos*, "the servants of God" or "the chosen people of God." However, the historical development of ecclesiology under Cyprianus and the doctrine of apostolic succession gave higher authority to pastors. The connection of the ministry with the sacraments created a further distinction between pastors and the common laity, a term that came to mean "untrained" and "those who follow orders completely." The word "laity" in English originated from the term *laos* and developed its current meaning and usage.

Laypeople as Part of the Koinonia in Christ

To the prejudiced ancient world, Paul proclaimed boldly that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female because you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). He emphasized the transcendence of nationality, social class and gender as well as the importance of being individuals, united in Christ. This means that atonement through the blood of Christ gives us the privilege of becoming people within whom the blood

of Christ flows. This is why I think that "becoming one person in Christ" is a more faithful translation than "united one in Christ."

Are we Christians who live in the twentieth century transcending nationality and skin color as an individual person in Christ? I believe it is fair to state that one side effect of the group-oriented mind mentioned earlier is an inability to understand others that manifests itself in criticism of others.

While I was studying abroad 40 years ago, I had a black Christian friend named Judy who used the twenty-four colors in my set of crayons to learn some Japanese. "Red is *aka*; white is *shiro*." Then she came to beige, which in Japanese is called *hadairo*, meaning "skin color." She looked up at me and repeated, "Skin color?" My head began to pound. I had never felt so embarrassed. It has been 40 years since then and most Japanese people think nothing of the skin-color crayons that are still available. We have a long way to go and need to be more considerate. Let us look at the profound meaning of the message of Paul.

The Laity as People of Testimony; Martyrdom and Ministry; Diakonia

Scripture seems to indicate that both men and women in the early church actively testified and were leaders in ministries as laity, lay ministers and lay educators. In his book *A Theology of the Laity* Hendrick Kraemer concludes that many of Paul's fellow workers were devoted laity. Women as well as men were "ministers" (Acts 18:26, 21:9, Rom. 16). He also states that "what the New Testament is dealing with is not office as regulation, but mainly vocation as function." Yasuo Sakakibara in his book *Theory of Women on the Church Board* points out, as does Kraemer, that in New Testament times many believers with spiritual gifts (charisma) were also actively

involved as lay ministers, prophets, teachers and other ministers.

In churches in Japan, there has been an increase in the number of lay witnesses to the Christian faith. They serve not only as believers but also as lay leaders, ministers and theological educators in churches as well as in society. I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that laypeople can replace pastors. I believe that church order should be followed and that pastors are called by God (Eph. 4:11). Laypeople, therefore, should not mistakenly think that there is no difference between the duties of pastors and the responsibilities of the laity. Christianity can only make significant advances when pastors and laypeople work together as two front wheels of a vehicle, as they did during the time of the early church.

We cannot ignore the work of lay ministers who were called as co-workers during the period Paul was involved in his tent-making ministry in New Testament times. Those called co-workers were Urbannus (Rom. 16:9); Timothy (Rom. 16:21); Apollos (I Cor. 3:9); Titus (II Cor. 8:23); Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25); Aristarchus, Mark, Justus (Col. 4:10-11); Philemon (Phi. 1); Demas, Luke (Phi. 24); Euodia, Syntheche (Phil. 4:2-3); Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3).

I especially want to highlight the fact that women as well as men were called co-workers. While they were in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila studied theology with Paul for a year and a half (Acts 18). This couple started a house church immediately after moving to Ephesus (I Cor. 16:19), then later in Rome started yet another house church (Rom. 16:5). For some reason the theologian Apollos came to Ephesus from far away Alexandria, the center of Hellenistic culture where theological debates took place and where the Septuagint was completed (Acts 18:24-26). Even at this time, "they took him aside and explained accurately the way of God" rather than teaching him in public. In order to preach the way of

God, an appropriate education is required. I would imagine that both Priscilla and Aquila studied well.

Although Paul lived in a world of male domination over women, in his letters he wrote Priscilla, the wife's name, first. He showed by this special attention how he valued her faith. Only in his letter to the church in Corinth at the time of upheaval in social matters did Paul mention Aquila, the husband's name, first (I Cor. 16:19). Neither Priscilla nor Aquila were pastors but they devoted themselves to evangelism through preaching the gospel. They ministered as cross-cultural, lay missionaries in the Greek world of Corinth, the Asian world of Ephesus and the Latin world of Rome.

In the time of Paul, women were recognized as women disciples (Tabitha, in Acts 9:36), women prophets and women leaders, called women stewards. What especially touches me is Paul's recommendation of Pheobe to the church in Rome: "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me" (Rom. 16:2). In the ancient world where the status of women was not acknowledged, how challenged the Christians in Rome must have felt regarding Priscilla (since Paul encouraged her just as he would have a man), and how strengthened Pheobe must have been by such a wonderful recommendation from Paul.

Two-thirds of the members of Japanese churches are women. I hope that more women will receive training in theology, the Bible and the history of Christianity so that they can become living testimonies to the gospel and be properly recognized. Moreover I believe it would be beneficial if more men, like Paul, supported and encouraged the work of women. The women who make up two-thirds of the Christian population in Japan are just common laypeople.

I believe that mission in the twenty-first century will be blessed and make great advances if lay leaders who function as co-workers, as they did in the early church, are understood and given appropriate responsibility in the church today.

THE IMAGE OF LAITY NEEDED BY JAPANESE CHURCHES

"Here I Stand"

A person with an attitude of perseverance will face many difficulties in Japan's group-oriented society, especially as it is so easy to defer to powerful figures. However, we are taught that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7), so each Christian needs to grow as an independent layperson in the Lord through acknowledgment of the Absolute One who reigns above.

The term "character-formation" commonly used in education originated as a Christian concept. As mentioned earlier, Nitobe Inazo describes it as the recovered vertical relationship with God and a new creation of personality. "Personality" is the expression he uses to explain a "recovered fellowship with God." For the people in Western Europe, where the basic understanding of an individual is grounded in a relationship with the Absolute God, it is very difficult to understand the Japanese concept of personality, which lacks a sense of the Absolute. I feel that Japanese Christians are responsible for demonstrating to the world their individual personalities and identities as well as for placing themselves in relationship with the Absolute God.

Nitobe devoted his life to introducing this theory of personality and to establishing it deeply in Japan. His wife Mary was a faithful Christian from the United States. Both of them were instruments of God used as lay educators and as the salt of the earth in Japan as well as in other countries.

Two Parallel Wheels: Pastors and Laity

During the development of contemporary Japan, pastors had professional careers instead of working only in churches. James Ballagh, who led to Christ the first Christian in my family lineage, Hiroko Kojima, was a doctor. Increasing the number of believers who are trained spiritually as well as theologically will enable the laity to become a driving force in mission in Japan.

In *A Theology of the Laity* Hendrick Kraemer clearly states that whether one is called to be a pastor or to serve as a layperson, one is to be a devoted minister. I think that mission will advance only when pastors and lay ministers function as co-workers together.

While I was teaching at a well-known university, I accepted an invitation to take a position at a small evangelical school. I was first involved in the establishment of a junior college, which later developed into a four-year university. Dealing with the Ministry of Education was a very difficult task. As a result of a long debate that lasted several years, the school finally received full accreditation from the government as a four-year, interdenominational and evangelical university with two divisions, Theological Studies and International Christian Studies, within a single Department of Theology. The vision of training lay Christians became a reality, at least in terms of a structure with the educational philosophy of training students in a single Department of Theology that offers theological education for future pastors and ministers as well as for those who will live in society as the salt of the earth.

I believe that the major issue we will have to face in the future is how laypeople with a theological education will maintain their identity in Japanese society, where pastors and ministers are the only Christians considered to be in full-time Christian service. When the laity as such increase in

numbers and serve as ministers with a parallel-wheel function, Japanese churches will grow rapidly.

It was 37 years ago that I sought God's guidance when deciding whether to become a woman pastor or a theological educator. God led me to choose the latter. I have been challenged greatly as a woman in the last 30 years, and I have learned a great deal as a theological educator. I continue to pray for more laywomen whose work will glorify God.

A Theory of the Laity Based on Biblical Partnership

Biblical partnership is described as the relationship between Christ and the Church (ecclesia). When men and women serve each other in homes, churches and society the way Christ serves the Father and the Church serves Christ, their partnership is empowered.

Women in Japan are in a very uncertain position. A comparison of words used to describe men and women reveals several pairs of corresponding terms: *onna* (女) or *josei* (女性) [woman] and *otoko* (男) or *dansei* (男性) [man]; *tsuma* (妻) [wife] and *otto* (夫) [husband]; *shukujo* (淑女) [lady] and *shinshi* (紳士) [gentleman]. However, there is no equivalent term for men that corresponds to the word *fujin* (婦人), nor is there a suitable English translation for it. When I traced the historical background of the term *fujin*, I learned that the word *fu* (婦) was created when the household system was established in Japan. The Chinese character *fu* means a woman holding a broomstick.

In the Greek New Testament, all the terms for *onna*, *fujin* and *tsuma* are the same word, so the task of translation into Japanese has to be done very carefully. For example, what does it mean in I Corinthians 14:34 that "women (*tsuma*, *fujin*, *onna*) are to remain silent in the church"? The Kōgo (古語 - 1955) and Shinkyōdō (新共同 - 1987)

translations use the term *fujin*. The initial version of the *Shinkai* (新改 - 1965) translation used the word *onna*, then changed it to *tsuma*. I feel that the translation of *tsuma* (wife) best clarifies the meaning in Japanese culture. How difficult it is to touch the hearts of people with biblical truth, especially in this passage referring to women!

Original Theory of the Laity in Japanese Culture

It is necessary not only to learn from the famous scholars of Western European countries but also, as Japanese, to produce our own original theory of the laity. The former chairperson of the World Evangelical Fellowship, Dr. Bruce Nicolls, once stated in a lecture that "it is also important to change the culture of Japan," which greatly impressed me. I would like to suggest that we must be the laity who bear the responsibility for establishing a Japanese Protestant culture, all the while being eager to build the church.

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