

“In the Structures of the World” Essay by Mark Gibbs

Gibbs and Vesper Society launched Vesper Exchange in 1970 to offer readers a collection of previously published articles that “explore the frontiers of practical decision-making in today’s world.” The publication also carried specially commissioned articles, called “Vesper Originals.” Gibbs’ essay below was the first of these original articles.

Most of the churches and other religious bodies reckon these days to be concerned about their laity. For one thing we are a little less likely than formerly to accept meekly the traditional patterns of rather docile congregational behavior – “a tacit obligation to turn up, sit up, pay up and shut up,” as one unkind critic has put it. There is now a certain alarm about the future of the institutional churches, and indeed a tendency to belabor the laity for not showing enough “loyalty” or “dedication.” Sometimes, too, there is a proper concern about the failure of many lay people to understand the deep tragedies of poverty, war, and race in the world today. But even now in the 1970s, there is perhaps not enough understanding of the Biblical doctrine of the *laos*, the People of God, as it has been spelled out for us by so many writers of so many denominations in the last half-century. To put it briefly, some religious leaders still assume that the main function of the laity is to support the clergy in maintaining different “church” structures, such as a Methodist congregation, a Jewish synagogue, a Lutheran Society for the Support of This, a Catholic Association for the Prevention of That, and an Inter-Faith Institute for the Study of Something Else. They also assume that, on the whole, they as church leaders have the answers, whether it is a matter of prayer and theology, or whether it is the operation of a church hospital in central Africa. It is for the laity first to learn these answers, and then to pay for the policies which follow from them.

Our First Priority

In fact the main vocation of God’s people is not to build and to support church structures (though some of these may certainly be necessary). It is to find a new style of humanity – in explicitly Christian terms to be the Body of Christ, the intelligent and committed embodiment of Christian love and service – *in the secular structures in which God has placed or will place them*. A professor, a politician, a policeman, a nurse, a janitor is normally already immersed in the environment and structures through which he (or she) is called to serve and witness. A church does not have to make him join new organizations in which he can work out his faith: he is already in them; and the primary function of his church is to offer him opportunities for worship, reflection and education so that he can join in these structures both confidently and critically. Certainly it is useful if Mr. X can serve on some church committees or sing in the choir, or serve on an ecumenical committee to finance an old people’s home. But it is equally important to recognize that Mr. Y may be no less faithful a Christian because he attends a labor union meeting

rather than a church supper, or tries to remedy the weaknesses of the welfare system by working as a government employee or a legislator.

And second: such an understanding of our religious obligations will inevitably lead us into acute controversies and responsible compromises, and there is no avoiding these. It is just not true that the theologians, or the political and economic experts, or anyone else have “all the answers” to today’s problems. Mankind is called to a pilgrimage often through difficult and foggy and swampy territory, and sometimes decisions have to be made by 9 a.m. Monday morning without waiting endlessly for expert opinions. Even when we have dismissed all the simplistic solutions, there will still be some areas of severe disagreement and uncertainty. More than this, even when there is a general consensus as to social and political goals – to end the miseries of hunger, to improve medical services, to reform ghetto schools – and some understanding of the appropriate ways to do this, most men in any kind of major public organization know the bitter truth that they simply cannot achieve all the good things they want to do. They have, somehow, to make responsible political and economic priorities and compromises within the cramped and limited budgets which their masters or the electorate will allow them. And if the freedom to act is limited for decision-makers, how much more trapped in almost intolerable pressures are the little people, the *decision-sufferers*, white or black, American or foreign, young or old.

To Criticize and to Understand

It will be the particular job of *Vesper Exchange* to explore these areas of lay responsibility. Not just to offer polite articles which may outline serious problems, but to do two things more. First: to challenge those who work within the structures of political and industrial and economic life to see where they are, and what these structures are doing, for good and for ill, to them and to other people. And second: to offer some material which may genuinely help them work out their responsible vocation. For, in Walter Lippman’s words, “It is not enough to criticize the official’s policy. We must put ourselves under his skin, for unless we have tried to face up to the facts before him, we have produced nothing but holier-than-thou moralizing.”

Copyright © 1970 Vesper Society