

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON FIFTY-THREE)

“EQUIPPING GOD’S PEOPLE TO DO GOD’S WORK”

EPHESIANS 4:11-13
(KING JAMES VERSION)

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.

12 Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

13 This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

In **Ephesians** chapter 4 and verse 11, Paul identifies the ministry gifts which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to His Body. He writes, “*And he gave some, **apostles**; and some, **prophets**; and some, **evangelists**; and some, **pastors and teachers**.”*

The purpose of the ministry gifts is revealed in verse 12: “*For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*” **The purpose of the ministry gifts, given by our Lord to His Body is to completely outfit them for service.**

What Paul is explaining here is that it is the responsibility of the ministry gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip believers in order for **the believers** to do the work of ministry, so that the body of Christ might be edified. **It is not the responsibility of the ministry gifts to do the work of the ministry.** Their work is to **equip** the believers to do the work of the ministry. And the instrument or tool that is to be used to do the equipping is the Word of God. In **2 Timothy 3:16-17 (New English Translation)**, Paul wrote the following to Timothy, his son in the Gospel: “*Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work*”.

Brothers and sisters, it is not possible for any of us to attain to spiritual maturity and be capable and equipped for every good work, if we despise the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. We would be very foolish and arrogant to depend on our private reading of scripture and any personal, secret revelations that come to us thereby. The source of the edification of the Body of Christ is the preaching and teaching of God’s Word, by God-called, God-gifted men.

John MacArthur, the pastor-teacher of **Grace Community Church**, Sun Valley, California, made the following observations in respect of this verse: “The surest road to a church’s spiritual stagnation, to the pastor’s burnout, or to both is for the pastor to become so engulfed in activities and programs that he has too little time for prayer and the Word. And programs that ‘succeed’ can be even more destructive than those that fail if they are done in the flesh and for human satisfaction rather than the Lord’s glory. It is lack of knowledge of God’s Word and obedience to it (**Hosea 4:6**), not lack of programs and methods that destroy His people. When they fail, it is not because of weak programs but because of weak teaching. The first concern of the leadership of the church should be for the filled seats, not the empty ones. When a young preacher complained to Charles Spurgeon that his own congregation was too small, Spurgeon replied, ‘Well, maybe it is as large as you’d like to give account for in the day of judgment.’ Spiritual growth does not always involve learning something new. Our most important growth, often, is in regard to truth we have already heard but have not fully applied.”

It is important for us to note that Paul does not say that God has given us educators, that they might instruct us. He does not say that God has given us organizers and administrators, that the Body of Christ may be built up. He does not say that God has given us counselors, or psychologists, or fundraisers. In other words, **the edification of the Body of Christ comes from the ministry of believers who are equipped for their tasks by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers**. It is the word of God, and that only, that equips the saints for ministry. Spiritual wholeness comes when the church, both collectively and individually, is in complete conformity to God’s Word. To equip believers to do so is the responsibility of the ministry gifts.

The word “*perfecting*” in the **King James Version**, or “*equip*” in the **New Living Translation**, is the translation of the Greek word, **katartismos**: (**kat-ar-tis-mos**), which may be defined as “a preparing, an equipping.” The word is used of mending, repairing, making whole or perfecting. It means to make something or someone completely adequate or sufficient for something. The basic idea is that of putting a thing into the condition in which it ought to be. The word describes those persons who are complete, capable and proficient in everything they are called to be or do. The word **katartismos**, as it is used here, does not imply sinless perfection. Rather, it refers to the state of being equipped for a delegated task. The meaning of the word is more functional than qualitative.

Paul’s use of the word in the context of the Body of Christ, pictures the complete furnishing of believers so that they might be made ready to fulfill their purpose in the body of Christ, where they have been placed by the Holy Spirit. It follows quite logically that if the “sheep” are not equipped by the shepherds, the Body of Christ will not function to its full potential or capacity, just as human body that is deficient in vital nutrients fails to fulfill its function optimally. If this is an important truth for the temporal, physical body, how much more important is it for the eternal, spiritual body!

In **Matthew 4:21**, we find the first use of the word **katartismos** in the New Testament “*And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them.*” **Katartismos** is translated “*mending*” in this verse. **Ray Stedman** states that it is a special point of interest that this word first appears in the New Testament in connection with the calling of the disciples.

As Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat busily working. What were they doing? They were mending their nets. They were equipping their nets by mending them. They were fixing their nets, making them strong, preparing them for service, getting them ready for action! This implies that one of the roles of the ministry gifts is that of “mending.” The task of the teaching-pastor in particular, is to use the Word of God to mend and restore the sheep so that they will be prepared and ready for action.

If pastors and teachers ignore the Word of God, which is the divinely-provided instrument for equipping His saints, then, they should not be surprised if the saints under their care are ineffective in the work of the ministry. That is precisely why so many churches today are little more than spectator arenas where unequipped, unmotivated, uninvolved people sit around, waiting only to be stimulated, entertained and amused.

The Word of God can feed, mend and cleanse, and the teaching-pastor will constantly be using it to do all three. He must diligently seek to teach the whole truth of God. There is, perhaps, no better means of doing so than through the expository preaching of the whole Bible. The expository method of teaching or preaching is to go through a book, or a section of a book of the Bible, seeking to explain and expound the text. Such a method will shield him from the danger, to both himself and the sheep, of concentrating only on his favourite passages and ignoring others which are vitally important for his and his flock’s growth and development.

Unfortunately, in many churches the roles of the pastor and the evangelist have been reversed. The work of evangelism has been exalted over that of pastoral teaching in many churches, due primarily, to our unhealthy pre-occupation with numerical growth. This has effectively deprived churches of the biblical ministry of a pastor and has resulted in a sadly impoverished, untaught, unequipped people.

The saints are to be equipped **to do** “*the work of the ministry.*” It is the responsibility of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for service! It is not the responsibility of the ministry gifts to do the work for the saints. It is their responsibility to prepare the saints to do the work!

Brothers and sisters, does this sound radical? If it does, it is because we have grossly misunderstood the role of the ministry gifts in the church. They are God’s gift to the church for the purpose of perfecting or equipping believers to carry on the work of ministry. Someone has rightly stated that the church is not a spiritual rest home, but a barracks for training soldiers of the cross! Most believers are of the view that it is the job of the pastors to do the work of ministry! Let me state categorically that this is not the will of God. In fact, it is anti-Scripture! God’s design is not for believers to hire a pastor to do the work of the ministry for them. God’s design is for believers to follow the leadership of a God-called, God-gifted pastor as he, by utilizing the instrument of God’s Word, equips them to do the job. It is God’s revealed will for every member of the Body of Christ, not just a few leaders, to carry on the work of the ministry. This is what **1 Peter 4:8-11 (New English Translation)**, clearly indicates:

8 *Above all keep your love for one another fervent, because love covers a multitude of sins.*

9 *Show hospitality to one another without complaining.*

10 *Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of the varied grace of God.*

11 *Whoever speaks, let it be with God's words. Whoever serves, do so with the strength that God supplies, so that in everything God will be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

The members of the church grow by feeding on the Word and ministering to each other.

Tragically, most churches today do not follow this New Testament template for "success." It is common practice to let the pastor do the ministering when his job is actually to train the saints to be the workers, which will make the overall ministry far more effective.

It is vitally important to understand that the bulk of the work in the church is to be accomplished, not by the paid staff but by the men and women who sit in the benches or on chairs on Sunday. They are not there to sit back, relax and be spiritual consumers, but they are to hear, grow and serve! Equipping of the saints is the primary responsibility of the leadership, especially the pastor-teacher. How tragic it is that in most churches the work of God is greatly hindered because the leadership tries to perform the work and doesn't make adequate use of the sheep. **D. L. Moody** hit the nail on the head when he said, "It is better to put ten men to work than to do the work of ten men."

In **1 Corinthians 15:58** Paul wrote, *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."* Paul is describing the spiritual service expected of every believer, not just of church leaders. He says that as believers we can be assured that whatever we do for Christ, in His strength, will not be in vain.

When the ministry gifts equip the saints to do the work of the ministry, the Body of Christ will be edified or built up. It is important for us to note that Paul does not say "for the increasing of the number of persons attending on Sundays!" The critical issue in view here is not the **quantity** of saints in the assembly, but the **quality** of saints in the assembly! The issue is whether or not believers are being equipped for the work of the ministry so that the Body of Christ can be edified. This is God's program for real "church growth." The Body is built up **externally** through evangelism as more believers are added, but the emphasis in this verse is on the Body being built up **internally** as all believers are nurtured and equipped, through the preaching and teaching of the Word to serve effectively in ministry.

Brothers and sisters, is this happening at **The Grace Workshop Ministries**? Are the saints being equipped from the pulpit to do the work of ministry? Have we seen any improvement in the way we are interacting and ministering to each other? Is the Body being edified? If not, why not?

We will read a lengthy quote from **Ray Stedman** in which he offers a penetrating assessment of how well the church has followed God's design for the building up of the Body of Christ:

"When we compare present-day churches to the original blueprint, it is strikingly apparent that many deviations have been permitted which have been detrimental to the life of the church. Through the centuries, the church gradually turned away from the simple provisions which made it such a powerful and compelling force in its early years, and terrible distortions entered into the church which continue to weaken the church today.

Popular thinking fastened onto the church building - the physical stone-and-glass edifice - as the identifying symbol of the church. Emphasis was placed upon great imposing structures, massive ornate cathedrals with stained glass windows and flying buttresses.

In the beginning, 'working in the church' meant to exercise a gift or perform a ministry anywhere within the far-flung body of Christ - even in a home, out on a mission field, or in a hospital. Gradually, however, 'working in the church' came to mean performing some religious act within a specific building which was called 'the church.'

At the same time, there was a gradual transfer of ministry responsibility from the people (whom we now call the 'laity') to the few pastor-teachers (whom we now call the 'clergy,' a term derived from the Latin **clericus**, meaning a priest. The scriptural concept that every believer is a priest before God was gradually lost, and a special class of super-Christians emerged, who were looked to for practically everything, and who came to be called the 'ministry.' Somehow, the church lost sight of the concept, so clearly stated in **Ephesians 4**, that all Christians are 'in the ministry.' The proper task of the four support ministries we have examined is to train, motivate, and strengthen the people - so-called 'ordinary lay-people' - to do the work of the ministry.

When the ministry was left to the 'professionals,' there was nothing left for the people to do other than come to church and listen. They were told that it was their responsibility to bring the world into the church building to hear the pastor preach the Gospel. Soon, Christianity became little more than a Sunday-morning spectator sport, much like the definition of football: twenty-two men down on the field, desperately in need of rest, and twenty thousand in the grandstands, desperately in need of exercise!

This unbiblical distortion has placed pastors under an unbearable burden. They have proved completely unequal to the task of evangelizing the world, counseling the wounded and brokenhearted, ministering to the poor and needy, relieving the oppressed and afflicted, expounding the Scriptures, and challenging the entrenched forces of evil in an increasingly darkened world. Pastors were never, ever meant to do it all! To even attempt it is to end up frustrated, exhausted, and emotionally drained which, of course, is exactly the state in which you find many pastors today!

Further, this distortion has resulted in a sadly impoverished church which has made little impact on the world and increasingly, withdraws into weakness, irrelevance, and isolation. We desperately need to return to the dynamic of the early church. We can no longer defend our ivy-clad traditions which leave no room for the original, power-packed New Testament strategy. Pastors, particularly, must restore to the people, the ministry which was taken from them with the best of intentions.

The work of the ministry belongs to the entire body of believers, who should be equipped, guided, and encouraged by those who are gifted by God to expound and apply His Word with wisdom and power. The entire body has received gifts from the Spirit, and it is the task of those in the pastoral ministry to encourage the entire body to discover and exercise those gifts. When we rediscover the pattern and strategy of **Ephesians 4**, when we have given all Christians in the body, their God-given role as ministers of God's eternal plan, then, the entire body comes alive with resurrection power.

Lives are changed. Ministries explode. Communities are touched and healed. The church becomes healthy and vital and exciting again.

If we can recapture God's original strategy for the church, then, we will again see churches that are modern extensions of the church of **Acts**. The trademarks of the true, living church of Jesus Christ are boldness, power, transformation, and love, lived out in act after act of Christian service. There is no place in this world more exciting to be than a church that operates as God designed it to!"

In **Ephesians 2:19-22**, Paul wrote the following:

19 *Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;*

20 *And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;*

21 *In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:*

22 *In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*

In **1 Peter 2:5** we read, "*Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*"

Brothers and sisters, we are "*lively*" or living stones being fitted into God's Temple. We, "stones", are often of different sizes, shapes, gifts, personalities and experiences, but every one of us is under the control of the Holy Spirit. If a pianist played a particular note on the piano for an extended period of time, even though the note was pleasant, it would eventually become annoying. But if the pianist played a number of different notes in a harmonious way, we would listen for a long time with growing pleasure. This is because when different notes are being played by the same hands, we have unity in diversity and there is nothing sweeter than that!

We should be thankful that unity does not mean uniformity. We can be united without wearing the same uniform. We can be united even though we are so different. That is what needs to happen in the Body of Christ. This is how we should function. All the different shades of colour, all the different personalities, all the different experiences, all the different gifts, being played by the same hands - the Master's hands. What harmony, what sweetness, what beauty, what blessing, what effectiveness! When we are each operating under the Holy Spirit's power and direction, then, our gifts begin to function. Even though our gifts are different, we are still "*preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*"