

EPHESIANS 4:1-16

THE CHURCH IN ITS UNITY, DIVERSITY AND MATURITY

TERRY VIRGO

SESSION 5 - FUNCTIONING DIVERSITY (Ephesians 4:7-12)

Paul turns from "all of us" to "each of us".

Not lifeless, colourless, uniformity. The Church is a charismatic community.

(A) The giver is the ascended Christ (7-10).

Paul uses Ps 68 - The coming of God to Mount Zion leading captives in his train

Paul interprets this as Christ's ascension above principalities and powers.

Not only receiving gifts, but giving them. (cf Acts 2:23)

Rabbis interpreted it as Moses receiving the law and giving it to Israel.

- Stott "After every conquest in the ancient world there was invariably a receiving of tribute and distributing of largesse. What conquerors took from their captives they gave to their people."
- Lincoln "This underlines the point the writer has already made in 1:22 & 23. God *gives* Christ as head over all to the Church, and it becomes his instrument in carrying out his purposes for the cosmos. Now, the one who has been given to the Church as cosmic Lord, himself gives to the Church to equip it fully for its cosmic task. And to assert that the ministers are gifts of the exalted Christ, rather than merely officers created by the Church, is clearly meant to enhance their significance in the eyes of the readers."

He first "descended" is interpreted three possible ways.

- (i) A descent into Hades.
- (ii) The descent of the Spirit.
- (iii) The descent of the incarnation (most likely interpretation).

NEB "To the lowest level down to the very earth."

Compare John 3:13 "No man has ascended to heaven except him who came down from heaven, even the Son of Man who is in heaven."

John 8:23 "You are from beneath, I am from above."

- Lloyd Jones "What we are dealing with is nothing but a graphic and pictorial manner of describing our Lord's coming down to earth."

(B) The gifts are diverse (v11).

- Lincoln "What does the exalted Christ give to the Church? He gives people, these particular people who proclaim the word and lead. In relation to verses 7 & 8 he gives not just grace to people, but he gives specific people to people."
- Fee "Instead of listing ways that 'grace has been given to *each of us*', he lists some of the gifted people who are themselves gifts to the Church. These ministries empower the whole body to carry out its ministry of building up the body for maturity, soundness, and unity, drawing its life flow from its one head, Christ Jesus."

The universal Church, and local churches in particular, have suffered throughout the centuries by our failure to see the diversity of the gifts given.

Prior to the Reformation each parish church had its priest. Sadly, since the Reformation the pattern has tended to be that each church has its pastor/teacher. There has been a failure to embrace the breadth and diversity of the gifts of the ascended Christ.

I. APOSTLES

1. The inadequacy of the traditional evangelical view.

Many evangelical teachers have supposed that some of the ministries listed in Ephesians 4 were temporary and only existed in the early church, while others were permanent, eg:

- Lloyd Jones "In the first group, the extraordinary and temporary, we have apostles and prophets and evangelists; and in the second permanent group we have pastors and teachers."

Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones argued that apostles must have:-

- (i) seen the risen Lord
- (ii) been called and commissioned to do his work by the risen Lord himself in person.
- (iii) been given a supernatural revelation of the truth
- (iv) been given power to speak not only with authority but infallibility
- (v) power to work miracles.

It is observable that often this position is held in order to protect the authority and infallibility of Scripture and to withstand the concept of apostolic succession as promoted by the Roman Catholic Church.

In responding to this stance it must be made clear that apostles of different status existed in the New Testament (just as prophets of different status appeared in the Old Testament; some who wrote scripture and many who did not.)

- (a) Jesus - the Apostle of our confession (Hebrews 3:1)
- (b) The Twelve
- (c) Others such as Paul and James
- (d) Others such as Barnabas (commissioned and released at same time as Paul)

In Ephesians 4, apostles are not described as those who are witnesses to the *resurrection* but who are gifts of the *ascended* Christ (such as surely Barnabas was, of whom there is no account of his having seen the risen Lord).

- Leon Morris "But 'apostle' does not apply solely to the Twelve. Paul frequently claimed the title for himself, and sometimes in such a way as to show that he saw it as important. But if it is clear that it does not refer solely to the original Twelve, it is not clear exactly who could claim the title nor how apostles were chosen. Barnabas is called an apostle along with Paul (Acts 14:14), and reasoning from the 'we' of 1 Thess 2:7 we probably should include Silvanus."

Other evangelical scholars such as Thomas Schreiner argue for two categories of apostle, some of which were the authentic Twelve plus Paul. The others he describes as 'missionaries' but of course the title 'missionary' sheds no light whatsoever since it is an all-encompassing word to describe modern overseas Christian workers.

Often the traditional view regards the Church as a static institution, not one given to dynamic, ongoing world mission, eg:-

- Lloyd Jones "Thus the evangelist was a man whose office was temporary, and as the churches were established and became more settled, this office likewise disappeared."

2. A growingly popular modern view.

- Wagner "The new apostolic reformation is an extraordinary work of God at the close of the 20th Century, which is, to a significant extent, changing the shape of Protestant Christianity around the world. In virtually every region of the world, these new apostolic churches constitute the fastest growing segment of Christianity."

He adds "...this is the day of the most radical change in the way of doing church since the Protestant Reformation."

In his book *Churchquake!*, C Peter Wagner highlights many distinctive features that he has noticed in churches that relate to apostolic ministry. But in his further book *The New Apostolic Churches*, there seems to be little attempt to rediscover biblical principles of apostolic ministry, but rather to take note of highly successful modern churches who have strong and gifted leaders and some influence beyond their own congregation (including some who would not see themselves as being apostolic or even embracing the place of charismatic gifts in the church today and have no aspiration to plant or lay foundations in churches).

3. An attempt to find a biblical perspective.

(A) Clearly the Twelve were unique.

They constituted the foundations of the universal church (Revelation 21:14).

The number 12 was not coincidental - they gave definition and identity to the newly defined people of God (as described in Ephesians 2 & 3).

The thousands converted on the Day of Pentecost were 'added' to the foundation that they provided. They devoted themselves to their teaching (Acts 2:42).

(B) A Transition from the Original Jerusalem Base.

When Philip inaugurated an evangelistic breakthrough in Samaria, the apostles Peter and John were quick to visit and help establish another company of believers, not content to simply take note of an evangelistic event (Acts 8).

(C) Further Growth.

When the church at Antioch came to birth through the evangelism of scattered believers, Barnabas was sent from the Jerusalem apostolic base (though at that time was not called an apostle).

(D) Paul's Apostolic Work.

In Acts 13 Barnabas and Saul are called by the Holy Spirit to be set apart for apostolic work, from which time they were called apostles (Acts 14:14).

(E) Ongoing Apostolic Labours.

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul claimed that he had 'laid a foundation'. This was an 'apostolic task' accomplished in a local town far from Jerusalem and long after the original church had been established.

In Romans 15:20 Paul aspired to preach the gospel where Christ was not already named - 'that I might not build on another man's foundation'.

Here again, 'foundation laying' is a dynamic concept in a local church setting accomplished by 'another man'. Paul acknowledges the right of other men to lay foundations who were also presumably apostolic.

Surely apostolic ministry does not have to be evaluated only from the point of view of scripture writing and infallibility (N.B. Paul withstood Peter who was 'clearly in the wrong' -

Galatians 2:11 NIV). Paul and Barnabas have a strong contention. No one seemed to be infallible simply because they were apostolic.

World mission was inaugurated by evangelism and church planting. Local church foundations have to be laid. It is the apostolic task to do this, whether the apostle gets there first or (as in Acts 8 & 13) if the apostle or apostolic delegate arrives later.

The word 'missionary' obscures rather than clarifies, since it does not honour biblical definitions and categories. A modern missionary may be an agricultural worker, a nurse, a school teacher, a Bible translator, or a literature distributor (all very worthwhile and wonderful ministries). They may even be an evangelist or an apostle.

It is vital that these categories are clarified for the sake of world mission - it is not merely an academic matter. We are called to world evangelism. (We are also called to change the expression of Christianity throughout the world.) The biblical method is planting vibrant churches (e.g. 1 Thess 1:5-8) which benefit from all of the Ephesians 4 ministries.

II. **PROPHETS**

(A) God's people have always been 'prophetic'.

Abraham, the first man whom God called, is also called a prophet, i.e. a man with supernatural revelation (Genesis 20:7).

Moses is also called a prophet (Hosea 12:13).

(B) Different kinds of prophets.

Prophets of immediate significance, e.g. Elijah, Micaiah.

Prophets of long term insight - Daniel.

Prophets with mysterious visions and a vast panorama - Ezekiel.

Prophets with detailed insight to a personal situation - Nathan.

Some wrote canonical books but most did not.

In their diversity they are all called prophets. What they have in common is the revelatory and immediate aspect of their insights and words (in contrast to the teacher, such as Ezra, who studied the previously revealed and recorded Word and taught it).

(C) The New Testament, rooted as it is in the Old Testament, builds on this background without further definition.

We should benefit from those who receive such revelation, as in the New Testament where Agabus is seen to function in similar fashion to Old Testament prophets, and Judas and Silas who 'strengthen the brothers with many words'. (ESV) (Not 'with lengthy messages' - as in NASB)

III. **EVANGELISTS**

Apart from here the word only occurs as describing Philip in Acts 21:8, and as a commission to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:5.

It is impossible to be certain or dogmatic about their sphere or role, but surely the modern style of an evangelist who sets up his 'organisation' is foreign to the atmosphere of the New Testament where everything flows out from and into local churches.

- Eadie "In one sense apostles and prophets were evangelists, for they all preached the same holy evangel. But this official title implies something special in their function, inasmuch as they are distinguished also from 'teachers'. These gossellers may have been auxiliaries of the apostles, not endowed as they were, but furnished with clear perceptions of saving truth, and possessed of wondrous power in recommending it to others. Passing from place to place with the wondrous story of salvation and the Cross, they pressed Christ on men's acceptance, their hands being freed all the while from matters of detail in reference to organisation, ritual and discipline."

IV. PASTORS/TEACHERS

There is much debate as to whether this constitutes one or two ministries.

Each of the previous ministries is introduced by the definite article which is repeated before 'pastors' but omitted before 'teachers'.

- Stott "It is clear that 'pastors' (that is, 'shepherds'), who are called to 'tend' God's flock, do so in particular by 'feeding it' i.e. by teaching." (John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2)

As we shall see in our next study the role of all of these gifted people is to 'equip the saints for the work of ministry'.

Whether we regard these as four or five gifts it is of great importance that each of them is operating in church life and that we are not guilty of maintaining mere institutionalism.

- Stott "The New Testament never contemplates the grotesque situation in which the church commissions and authorises people to exercise a ministry for which they lack both the divine call and the divine equipment."

We must 'pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' (Luke 10:2 ESV)