

What Is Ministry?

Recently I read a modern parable which described churches like old sailing ships, where the captains simply followed the wakes of other ships. Those ships were following other ships, and those ships were following other ships. Almost none of the ships were navigating by the stars, nor had a clear idea of the Destination.

When it comes to the idea of ministry, this is particularly true. Seldom do people stop and ask, 'What does the Bible describe as ministry?' Instead they take it for granted that they know what ministry is, and go on to ask, 'What ministries does this church offer?' They assume that what they have seen or heard about, or experienced elsewhere, constitutes ministry, and assume it must be the same everywhere.

In other words, they do not have a definition of ministry in their minds. I guess if we could extract a definition of ministry from the mind of the average Christian today it would go something like this: Ministry is the organised activities that churches provide to keep their people busy, and to get them involved.

Maybe they don't think of it in those explicit terms, but that's basically the idea. Ministry is seen as a spiritual gym for those who want to work out. Ministry is a spiritual treadmill. You come, do your time, and go home. You didn't change anything, you didn't actually run from point A to point B, you ran on one spot for 30 minutes, but you feel fitter and lighter. So ministry might not actually change the church you are in, or make much discernible difference, but as long as you are doing your time each week, then you are a fit Christian. You secretly commend yourself for being committed, involved. Certainly commitment and involvement are core parts of ministry. But if you don't have a clear understanding of what ministry is, then all your commitment and involvement might be futile.

Also, ministry is seen as a hook to get people to attend more often. The thinking is, if we have ministries, then people will come, because they get to participate.

It is certainly true that people who are involved are more interested. People who have responsibilities will be more faithful. This is a fact, and to a point, it is something that ought to be used in the discipleship of God's people.

But the problem is, once again, we have lost sight of what ministry actually is. We are focused on getting people to come back, getting people to be faithful, getting people to be committed, and we use ministry as the hook. And so, in an ever specialised world, you find ever specialised ministries. Children's ministries, teen ministries, school-leavers ministries, singles ministries, young married ministries, young family ministries, parenting ministries, men's ministries, ladies ministries, sports ministries, hospital ministries, visitation ministries, greeting ministries, divorce recovery ministries, senior citizens ministries; the list could go on.

My point is not that these people or these areas of service do not require ministry – they certainly do. My point is - we haven't stopped to ask, 'What is ministry?' We have simply been producing treadmills of every shape and size, to suit every age, taste and interest.

For us to experience the fullness of what the church is, we must study the blueprint. We must not steer by following people who seem to look confident and perhaps have five thousand following them. We must ask, 'What is church ministry?'

I want to outline it for you from the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:1-17

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ²with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, ³endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. ⁷But to each one of grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore he says:

***"When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men."***

*⁹(Now this, "**He ascended**" – what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?
¹⁰He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)
¹¹And he Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,
¹²for the equipping of the saint for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*

Like nowhere else in the Bible, this passage spells it out in black and white. But the pressure to conform, the pressure to copy makes many desirous to squeeze this passage into their current practice, instead of letting the authority of God's Word shape their approach to ministry. I trust we will allow the Word of God to shape us as a church regarding ministry.

Paul has just finished laying out the believers' blessings in Christ. He has spent three chapters explaining what it means to have been chosen, redeemed sealed, regenerated. He has extolled the wisdom of God in bringing Jew and Gentile together in one body. Three chapters of the believer's privileged position have set things up for three chapters of practical commands. Once you have seen the value of who you are in Christ, you are to then walk worthy of it.

The starting point is church unity in verse 1 to 3.

From that launch pad, Paul begins to talk about ministry. Verses 4 to 16 are a concentrated section on what a local church does. How it works, what part each person is to play.

Before he tells us what ministry is, he is going to tell us how it works. Before he tells you what the machine produces, he is going to tell you what the operating instructions are. Verses 13 to 16 tell us what comes out of the machine when it is working properly. Verses 7 through 12 tell us what is supposed to happen for it to work properly. In verses 7 through 12, we'll see the tools of ministry and the training for ministry. In verses 13 to 16, we'll see the task of ministry.

So firstly how ministry works, then what it is.

I. The Tools for Ministry

Let's begin in verses 4-6. Notice the emphasis on the unity we have in Christ. The church is the expression of the absolute oneness we have in our Lord.

Verse 7 now shifts from the group to the individual. It says, but to each one has been given. What has each one been given? Each one of us has been given grace.

What kind of grace is he talking about? He is not talking about saving grace, because he says, each one of us has been given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. In other words, we have been given different amounts of grace.

Another word for an amount of grace given is 'gift'. God gives us what some call spiritual gifts to every believer.

To every believer? Yes, every believer.

1 Peter 4:10 *As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

Romans 12:3 *For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.*

If Jesus is the One who gives these gifts, then you can't boast if you have one, nor can you complain about which one you got. It comes from the all-wise Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:11 *But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.*

We also find verse 16 of this chapter teaching this truth. Notice the words 'every part' and 'every joint'. The body is healthy because every joint supplies what is needed, and every part works its particular share.

The Bible is saying, God gives every believer an amount of grace to accomplish ministry in the body. Not everyone gets the same amount. Not everyone gets the same type of grace.

Just like the parable of the talents, **Matthew 25:15** *And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.*

What this means is that every believer is expected to perform ministry. Every believer is to minister. When you put tools in someone's hands, you expect them to use them. Every believer has some measure of Christ's grace for service.

If you are not ministering, there are two possible reasons:

- a) You are not saved, and therefore have no ability, or
- b) You are disobedient. You rob the body of your grace, and live for self.

Now this grace will mean a number of things.

1) He grants you the desire to minister. When Paul describes a pastor in **I Tim 3**, one of the qualifications is, *"if any man desires the office of an overseer, he desires a good thing."* If God gifts a man to be a pastor, he gives that man a desire to be a pastor. If God gifts you with great mercy on the afflicted, he gives you a great desire to minister those in affliction. If God gifts you with a great enablement to serve, to help, then He grants you the desire to do so. Now that doesn't mean you 'specialise' your

ministry to the neglect of other commands. It simply means you will desire to serve the body in one way more than in others.

2) He grants the ability to minister. How much your spiritual gifts overlap with natural abilities I do not know, but what is clear is that when you minister to the body, this grace will be activated. It will be effective.

3) He grants the opportunity to minister. When you avail yourself to the Lord, God will open your eyes to the many ministry opportunities around you, and will use you.

Part of recognising the opportunity is clearing out the junk of pre-conceived ideas of what ministry is. If your idea of ministry is that it has to be something with a name on it that is very visible – like library ministry, or Sunday School Ministry, or CD ministry, then you will think, there aren't any ministries for you to do. But that's an unbiblical idea of ministry. If you understand what ministry is, you will see the opportunity everywhere.

Now Paul inserts a parenthetical thought here about the value of these gifts in verses 8-10.

Verse 8 is a loose quotation of **Psalm 68:18**. The image is from David's victorious wars. The Lord Jesus is the conquering king. He came down into Satan's domain and plundered it. He set millions upon millions of captives free; people who were chained to sin and Satan. By His victorious death and resurrection, He set free sinners, and led them out of Satan's domain into His kingdom (**Col 1:13**). A conquering king would usually bring back the spoils of war, goods taken from the defeated enemy, and spread them amongst His subjects.

After Christ's great victory, He gave gifts to men – not the spoils of Satan's kingdom, but the promised Holy Spirit, and all the enablement that He gives for ministry.

V 9 – He ascended only because He had first descended (the Incarnation).

V10 – The One who humbled Himself to descend to us, is the one now ascended above all things, to the place of absolute supremacy. He will rule over all.

It is this Christ that has given you these gifts, these tools for ministry.

These gifts were purchased at the price of His Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Ascension. They come from the one who is the all in all. Don't take them lightly. Ministry is not like your son's Saturday soccer team. It is not like a hobby, or a fraternity, or a recreational club. Ministry is something that was bought with the blood of Christ, and it is to be taken deadly seriously. It cost Him all, who are we to let those gifts lie dormant or unused.

These gifts were purchased for the purpose of Christ's own glory. He is to be the all in all. Notice v13 as well. It is ultimately for the fullness and glory of Christ that we have been given these gifts.

II. The Training for Ministry

In verse 11, Paul picks up his original thought. Jesus supplied gifts to the church. Jesus supplied tools to the church.

Now amongst these gifts, Jesus has also supplied some gifted men. Verse 11 lists four types. The last two are actually one category in the original language – pastor-teacher.

These four types of men were given by Jesus, according to verse 12, for the equipping of the saints. Why did Jesus give apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers? He gave them for the equipping of the saints.

Equipping means training which results in complete preparedness. It means these men increase your effectiveness; they increase your ability to minister.

In other words, not only does Jesus supply every Christian with grace to minister, He supplies you with trainers who teach, coach, oversee, lead and train you in ministry. Jesus gives you the tools, and gives you the training.

What are the four men here, and how do they train you to minister?

Firstly we read of apostles.

The apostles were unique men. They were chosen by Christ personally. They had witnessed the risen Christ. Their number was twelve exactly, - matching the twelve tribes of Israel with Paul the apostle born out of time. They had unique authority in the churches. They received special revelation. One of the ways New Testament books were regarded as inspired was if it was written by an apostle. They had special miraculous powers. They have a unique reward in heaven.

Do we have apostles today? No. These were unique men.

The prophets were similarly unique. They received special revelation directly from God. They could foretell what God revealed of the future, and forth-tell what God directed them to say. God spoke directly to and through the prophets.

Now what does the Bible say about the apostles and the prophets in this very same epistle?

Ephesians 2:19-21 *Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,*

They laid the foundation of the church. Not only because they began the first churches and trained the first leaders, but mainly because they gave us the New Testament.

Ephesians 3:5 *which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:*

How could we minister without the local church? How could we minister without the Bible. They have provided the Gospel and the New Testament's guidance as to how to minister. This is the foundation which they laid which enables us to minister.

Now with the New Testament in our hands, what does the evangelist do?

He preaches the Gospel, and from his converts, he plants a church. The evangelist is the church planter. He sows seed, he waters. He establishes New Testament churches along the lines of the New Testament given by the apostles and prophets.

If your gift is a seed, then the evangelist clears the land so that it can be planted. Ministry happens in a

local church; and the evangelists build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets and set one up.

And then, guess who comes in after him? The pastor-teacher comes in. In fact, as we study the rest of the New Testament, more than one pastor-teacher. The Bible teaches the wisdom of having a plurality of leaders that hold one another accountable, share the load, and bring their various abilities to the leadership of the church.

The pastor-teacher waters that seed. He comes in to coach and train, and mentor and shape and mould the saints as they minister to one another.

Primarily, how does a pastor do that?

1 Timothy 4:6 *If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.*

1 Timothy 4:13-16 *Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. ¹⁴ Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. ¹⁵ Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. ¹⁶ Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.*

1 Timothy 5:1 *Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.*

2 Timothy 2:15 *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:24-25 *And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, ²⁵ in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,*

2 Timothy 3:16-17 *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 4:1-2 *I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ² Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*

He does it by teaching the Word of God. His primary ministry must be to make known to the saints what God requires, so that they can perform that ministry better. He lays out what God wants in a local church – the unity, the purity, the one another ministry, the ministry towards the lost and the unsaved.

His primary ministry is not mainly visitation, it is not mainly evangelism, nor is it mainly personal exhortation; though it will include all those things. It is mainly using the Word of God to equip you to do the ministry.

This stands in stark contrast to the way many people view ministry today. They believe the pastor is the one who does the ministry. He is a paid, professional, minister. In their minds, he is paid to produce an interesting, lively, and stimulating talk every Sunday, amongst other things. So, they come, settle down into their chairs, and wait to see how he will perform. Some Sundays they feel they could say, “Bravo!

Encore!” Other Sundays, they feel a little let down with his performance.

When the pastor is a gifted, eloquent, superb communicator, the church may boom in attendance. People may flock to hear the golden-tongued preacher every Sunday. And, if he is humble and preaching the Word, so be it. But for many, they are simply there to see the monkey dance every Sunday.

The equivalent would be to hire a personal trainer at a local gym, arrive with your exercise clothes on, and then watch with interest as the trainer performs all the exercises. After an hour of watching him work out and demonstrate, you shake his hand, smile, and go home, and return the following day to do the same thing again.

For others, the pastor-teacher is the provider of ministry. Whether it is the sick who need to be visited, absentees who need to be phoned, unsaved relatives who need to be evangelised, church business meetings that must be administered, church buildings to be overseen – it comes back to him. After all, what do we pay him for?

And as the man increasingly wilts under the strain of doing most of the ministry in a church, the church wonders why he seems discouraged, weak, and his sermons rather bland. Answer – instead of training the saints to do the ministry, he is trying to do it for them.

I am glad to say, that quite early on in my ministry, I made this decision. Actually, it is a decision I continue to make. If there was ministry that needed to be done, I would make it known to the saints. But if no one else did it, I would not try to do it all myself. I would allow God's people to spot the need, and lovingly step up to the plate.

I don't always get it right. I am tempted to do it all. I sometimes fear what man may say if I don't do a ministry they have given to me. Maybe they will say I don't care about people, or I am not involved. But I know the way to a healthy body of believers is not by being an Olympic Christian, doing every ministry, but by being a trainer, an equipper, a spiritual leader that will strengthen ‘one-another’ ministry in this church.

After all, what will be stronger? Two pastors trying to undertake all the ministries, or eighty members each performing their ministries?

Here is the implication of what this passage is teaching:

Firstly, your primary ministry is in the local church. Spiritual gifts are to be used in the local church. While God no doubt has things for you to do elsewhere; he has unsaved people you should evangelise, there are other believers you can bless, your primary ministry is going to be in the local body of believers God places you in.

God does not supply evangelists and pastor-teachers for para-church ministries. He supplies them for the local church. That is where God wants you to focus your ministry.

Your ministry thrives to the degree that you allow the ministry of the pastor-teacher in your life. God has given you a gift, and He has provided people who can shape and mould and train you in the use of your gifts. If you never take up membership in church, you signal your desire to remain independent. If you absent yourself from the preaching of the Word, you cut off your chances of growing your ministry. If you never ask for ministry in the form of counselling, time, prayer, you will

lack and lose out. If you do not take counsel when it is given, you may harm yourself and make shipwreck of your ministry.

Notice three commands God gives believers regarding the ministry of evangelists and pastor-teachers.

Hebrews 13:7 *Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.*

Consider who they are and what they say. They are modelling a lifestyle. Think about it. Think about its effects.

Hebrews 13:17 *Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*

Submit to them insofar as they bring you the Word and wisdom of God. They are shepherds appointed to lead and feed, to guard and warn.

As a pastor I try not to give counsel lightly. At the same time, I trust when I do give it, it will not be taken that way.

Hebrews 13:24 *Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints.*

The word for greet means more than ‘say hello’. It means to cherish, to welcome, to wish well, to be fond of. It suggests more than a cordial, distant relationship; it means a kind, warm, joyful relationship which anticipates meeting.

I am thankful when families teach their children a cordial, respectful and happy relationship with the elders of the church. That kind of attitude stays with people. They learn to cherish the ministry of elders, and absorb it to the full.

You have these tools, you have this training; what then is the task of ministry? That is what we will examine next.