

The Task of Ministry

Ephesians 4:12-16 .. for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³ till 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; ¹⁴ that 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, ¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ -- ¹⁶ from 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.

We have seen the tools for ministry and the training for ministry. We come now to the *task* of ministry.

Notice the middle of verse 12 – ‘*the work of the ministry*,’ and then the ‘*what*’ ministry does – ‘for the *edifying of the body of Christ*.’ Ministry builds up the body of Christ.

Four times in this passage, Paul references the body illustration.

Verse 12, the body of Christ.

Verse 13, the measure of the stature – that is like the height of the body.

Verse 15, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head.

Verse 16, from whom the whole body ...

The key to understanding this passage is going to be to unpack this illustration, and work out what it means to grow or build or edify the body of Christ.

Let me lay it out for you, and then examine it more closely. If the church is a body, then ministry is what a body does to itself to ensure strengthening and growing of that body from infancy to full maturity. Once that body comes to full maturity, it will resemble the one to whom it belongs – Jesus Christ.

It is Christ's body. He is the head. He supplies the growth. He is the standard by which the body is measured.

Verse 16 basically repeats the idea. The body is held together by what each person supplies. As each person does their share; as each person is empowered to be effective, it causes a growth of the whole body. The body is built up in love. That is the big general way of looking at ministry.

The word *until* gives us the finish line. This is what ministry aims at. We keep on with the work of building up the body of Christ, until this mark is reached.

What is the mark?

Until we *all* – not merely individually, but corporately – attain, or arrive at, 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. That sentence is really like a group of steps. One step leads up to the next.

Step 1 of ministry is that we all arrive at a unity. But as we have seen before, unity is not simply friendliness, it is like-mindedness. It is oneness of mind. Ministry aims to achieve a unity of mind regarding the faith and regarding the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Whenever you see 'the faith' it is referring to the whole Christian faith, all the teaching associated with biblical Christianity. Beginning with the Gospel, and working its way out to all the doctrines of

the Bible. Ministry aims to achieve like-mindedness on the faith.

But we can take it a little further.

From Genesis to Revelation, who is the central theme of Scripture? Jesus Christ. Jesus is the centre of our faith. So what we are truly aiming for is to know Christ.

The word for knowledge here in the original is the word for intense knowledge, full knowledge, complete knowledge.

This is the first and elementary aim of ministry – to know Christ in His Word; to make Him known to one another, so that we achieve unity, oneness of mind, as to who Christ is.

So the first way to think about ministry is that it is '*knowing Jesus Christ with other believers*.' It is making Him known to other believers, to gain oneness of mind, a harmony of view, of Jesus Christ.

It doesn't matter how big a church may be or how small it may be. If the members of that church have completely different views of Christ, and what it is to love and serve and worship Him, that ministry is failing.

You could think of step one as being like the nourishment we supply our physical bodies with.

Now if our ministry to one another produces a right view of Christ, it is going to lead to the next step, also in verse 13, '*unto a perfect man*.'

The word 'perfect', in the original, does not mean sinless; it means reaching its designed end. It means coming to completion. To put it simply, it is coming to maturity.

When your body takes food in, it must do something with it – convert it to living tissue or energy. If a ministry takes in the knowledge of Christ, it must have a result. What is that result? It is spiritual maturity.

Maturity is faith and obedience added to time and experience. Actually, Paul helps us understand spiritual maturity by way of a contrast. The contrast is in verse 14.

Ephesians 4:14 *that 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,*

'Children' is contrasted with 'mature man'. Ministry aims at maturing the saints away from the childishness, the gullibility of spiritual immaturity. Because here is the description of spiritual immaturity: 'to be tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine.'

'Tossed to and fro' is one Greek word which means 'to fluctuate; to be here one moment and there the next.' One day you believe this teacher, the next day you believe that; one day the televangelist says you should positively confess your blessings and you are saying "amen"; the next you are at church agreeing that those prosperity teachers are false. You are like Israel before Elijah, limping between two opinions.

'Carried about' suggests that every new idea that blows into the church takes you with it. Laughing in the Spirit – you're there. Prayer of Jabez – you're there. Contemplative prayer – you're there. Emerging church – you're there. This speaker is the new craze – we follow him. This one is all the rage – we follow him.

You are not slicing your way through the winds and the waves, as a boat with its rudder clearly set, on a destination marked out by Scripture, but you are being blown about, tossed about, by deceitful men.

Maturity can smell a rat. Maturity can smell when the faith, the knowledge of Jesus Christ is being tampered with. This is what ministry does. It saturates one another with the knowledge of Christ until we become experienced in it, mature in it, and can tell truth from error.

Paul uses very strong terms for false teachers – they are cheaters, swindlers, who cleverly plan their trickery, their false doctrine. False teachers sugarcoat their error to make it acceptable.

By contrast, mature churches speak the truth in love. Love without truth is hypocrisy. Truth without love is brutality. True ministries speak the truth out of a heart of love to cause the saints to mature in their faith. And that is what verse 15 says it will do – it will cause the body to grow up into Him who is the head.

That leads us to the third thing about ministry, seen in verse 12.

He says that when we come to maturity, we will come to a measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That is saying mature Christians and mature churches are growing up into the very fullness of Jesus Christ Himself.

The food is the knowledge of Christ, the growth is the maturity with that knowledge, but the end result is conformity to the character of Christ.

Now, when will that happen perfectly? It will happen on the day of resurrection, when Christ presents to Himself a glorious church without spot or wrinkle. But until then, our goal is to know Him, so as to mature, so as to grow up to be like Him.

When I was growing up my father would mark on the wall my brother's height and my height. My brother's height was always the mark to reach. So this body illustration suggests Jesus Christ's mark has been placed. We are now to aim to grow up to that mark, to become like Him.

When Christians have the right view of Christ, what will happen? They will become like Christ by the Holy Spirit. The more they conform to the full knowledge of Jesus Christ, the more they are conformed into His image.

Ministry is not only 'oneness of mind', it is a transformation of character.

Notice that, twice in this passage, it is mentioned that the body does this to itself in love. Love motivates this ministry. We love Christ, and we love one another, and we desire to see Him known and experienced in one another.

Recently, I heard of a church who had appointed a Recreation Pastor. This fulltime, paid, pastor had the job of organising fun and recreational activities for the congregation. Now certainly they had a lot more reasons to explain the appointment of such a position, but I ask you, does recreation pastor sound like the goal of ministry seen in this verse?

That is the blueprint. Ministry is *together gaining the knowledge of the Son of God*, and, as we mature in that knowledge, becoming more and more like Him individually and corporately. That's ministry. Ministry is whatever you do to, or for, the Body to help this to happen.

Let me make some applications.

1. If ministry is helping other believers to know Christ, mature in that knowledge and become like Him, there is always ministry opportunity. As long as there is more than one believer in the room, you have ministry. In other words, if you are thinking of ministry as something which has a name and is advertised in the church bulletin every week, and gives an annual report at the AGM, and elects a leader every year, then you are going to feel that ministry is like finding a job in the church. And if all the 'official' posts are filled, then you feel like you are unemployed. But ministry is not filling a position. It is not running on that treadmill or just keeping busy. It is helping other believers see Christ and grow into His image.

2. If ministry is helping other believers know Christ, and grow up into Him, then we should judge ministries by that standard. Does this ministry ultimately enable more Christ-likeness? Now there are many, many things that believers do which are not direct disseminations of knowledge of Christ, but they aid it, e.g. sound system, serving coffee and tea. Nevertheless, this is what ministry aims at. If a ministry does not accomplish this, why should we do it? Why should we include it if it does not make this possible? Should we include it because other churches have always done it; because believers expect it; because 'that's how it's done'?

We do not create ministries for their own sake. We do not set up ministries to hook people. Ministries develop when believers see an important way of enabling greater Christ-likeness in each other.

3. If ministry is the use of your spiritual gifts to provoke other believers to be more like Jesus Christ, then that must be how you direct your efforts. You do not have to do a 'spiritual gifts inventory'; you simply need to desire to love one another, and deliberately push one another towards Christ.

Now, when you have got used to steering your ship by the wake of other ships, it can seem rather odd if you don't see ministry as specialised spiritual treadmills for the differing tastes of the saints. People might look at us oddly if we say we don't have a 'youth ministry'. Do we minister to our youth? We'd better! You might be more comfortable when the church is like a big supermarket – young singles, aisle 17; golden oldies, aisle 8. Perhaps you need to stop thinking in terms of ministries, plural, and think instead in terms of *ministry*. We all are part of the ministry to the saints. That ministry is provoking one another to Christ-likeness. As you seek to do that in love, God is going to activate your spiritual gifts and give you enabling grace to do just that.