
The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON LXXXVII : UNITY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CONGREGATION OF BELIEVERS (4:1-16)

Ephesians 4:12 —

that the sainctes might have all thinges necessarie to worke and minister with all to the edifyinge of the body of christ (Tyndale's New Testament, 1524)

For the repairing of the Saintes, for the woorke of the ministerie, and for the edification of the bodie of Christ, (Geneva Bible, 1599)

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: (King James Version, 1769)
unto the perfecting of the saints, for a work of ministration, for a building up of the body of the Christ, (Young's Literal Translation, 1898)

for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: (Revised Version, 1885)

for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: (American Standard Version, 1901)

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (Revised Standard Version, 1952)

for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, (New King James Version, 1982)

for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; (New American Standard Version, 1995)

to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (New International Version, 2011)

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (English Standard Version, 2011)

πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Stephanus Greek NT, 1550)

πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, (NA28 Greek New Testament)

GENERALLY CLEAR BUT DIFFICULT IN THEIR RELATION TO ONE ANOTHER — *“The purpose of Christ’s gift of office-bearers to the church is now expressed through three prepositional phrases whose surface meanings are on the whole clear but whose interrelationship is difficult.”* [Best, 395] *“Paul next dictated three prepositional phrases whose relationship to the five groups in 4:11 is unclear and whose interpretation has become the subject of sometimes heated debate.”* [Thielman, 277] *“The object with which Christ gave some men as Apostles, and some as prophets, etc., is now stated in a sentence consisting of three clauses. The precise construction and meaning of these clauses are by no means easy to determine. The main difficulty is the relation in which they stand to each other and to the preceding ἔδωκε [edōke, ‘He gave’].”* [Salmond, 330]

“WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE IF THERE’S THREE PHRASES OR TWO?” – THE RISE OF THE DIVISION BETWEEN CLERGY AND LAITY — At first glance some might consider this merely an academic question which makes no difference, but that would be a mistaken attitude. Consider the difference:

‘And He Himself gave some ...

for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry,

for the edifying of the body of Christ,

till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God ...’ (Eph 4:11-13 NKJV)

With the above syntax, Jesus Christ gave ecclesiastical leaders *‘to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry,’* with the saints being the ones doing the work of the ministry. But now consider the same verses if the syntax was just slightly different:

‘And He Himself gave some ...

for the equipping of the saints,

for the work of ministry,

for the edifying of the body of Christ,

till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God ...’ (Eph 4:11-13 NKJV)

Read in such a manner, it is not the saints who do the work of the ministry but the leaders given by Christ. *“[There are some] who takes all of v. 12 to be the duty of the officials. [They argue] in support that a clear distinction is drawn between the ministry and the laity not only in 4.11f but throughout the NT and has no difficulty in pointing to a number of places where the ministry has a special position, e.g. Acts 6.4; 13.2-5; 1 Tim 3.2; 2 Tim 4.1-5; 1 Tim 5.17; Jas 3.1. This is not in dispute. What [they fail] to do is to consider whether there are passages showing non-ministers fulfilling what [they] would term ministerial functions; there are many, e.g. Eph 5.19; Rom 15.14; 1 Cor 14.26; Phil 1.15 (were those who preached so as to cause trouble for Paul officially ‘ordained’ ministers?); Col 3.16; 1 Th 5.11; in every case the church is being built up. [Some lay] too much emphasis on verbal communication as the primary function in service to the church; loving care is equally important. Since [some deride] the understanding of v. 12 given here as too ‘democratic’, it is not unfair to say that [their] view is typical of those who would elevate the ministry into a privileged position. The building up of the body of Christ is not then to be left to the ministry but is the responsibility of all believers. Yet the beginning of the clerical–lay division may be said to appear here.* It is absent from v. 7 and 1 Cor 12.4ff; Rom 12.4ff, and essentially it conflicts with the image of the body of Christ where all members have their special functions. The clerical–lay division is of course found in other parts of the NT, e.g. Heb 13.24, even if at the same time the NT lays strong emphasis on all believers as possessing a ministerial function. The NT in fact lacks any general word for the clerical side of this division showing its relative unimportance within the NT period. All organisations as they develop spontaneously throw up leaders or have within them strong-minded people who take over leadership; division of labour between leaders and led is a perfectly natural development and should not be taken as a sign of a deteriorating theology (early catholicity?).” [Best, 398f] “Reading the verse in this manner is saying Jesus Christ gave ecclesiastical leaders are ‘to equip ... to do the work ... to edify.’ See the difference? In the first example the leaders are to train the laity to minister, in the latter example the leaders themselves are to do the ministering. “The dispute focuses on how the middle phrase, [‘for the work of ministry’], should be understood. The first view takes this phrase as coordinate with the preceding phrase ... which is translated as ‘for the equipping of the saints.’ On this view, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers not only bring the saints to full maturity, but they also do the work of ministry. The second view claims that the phrase [‘for the work of ministry’] fills out the meaning of the term ... translated as ‘preparation’ or ‘equipping.’ The five groups of verse 11, then, prepare or equip the saints ‘for the work of ministry.’ ... *The temperature of the debate begins to rise when interpreters suspect that the exegesis of the text has been driven more by concerns about the structure of the modern church than by dispassionate scholarship. According to this text, who does the work of ministry in today’s church: the officers of the church or the people whom the officers equip?*” [Thielman, 277]

WE CANNOT RELY UPON THE PUNCTUATION IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE FOR OUR DETERMINATION

— *“The punctuation in Greek printed texts is of little help since it reflects only the opinion of editors.”* [Best, 397]

‘THE LEADERS TO DO THE MINISTERING’ (THE THREE PHRASES ARE PARALLEL) — here are some thoughts from those who consider v. 12 a reference only to the clergy:

- According to Ernest Best, the view that the three phrases are parallel goes back at least as early as Chrysostom (349-407 AD).
- “There are questions about the syntax of v 12, but its three prepositional phrases most likely describe three aspects of the purpose of such gifts — the equipping of others, service, and the building up of the Church.... Why does the exalted Christ give the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers? Three reasons follow, each of which has a slightly different focus.... *An active role for all believers is safeguarded by vv 7, 16, but the primary context here in v 12 is the function and role of Christ’s specific gifts, the ministers, not that of all the saints.... It is certainly preferable, therefore, to see the three prepositional phrases here as each dependent on the notion of the giving of ministers, and hard to avoid the suspicion that opting for the other view is too often motivated by a zeal to avoid clericalism and to support a ‘democratic’ model of the Church....* [Paul] is taking a general view of all the ministers given by Christ and describes the activity such ministers were intended to perform in three different ways.” [Lincoln, 226, 253f]
- “[Some believe] the three phrases of v. 12 are taken as coordinate and dependent on Christ’s giving. The various ministers of v. 11 have been given ‘for the equipment of the saints’, ‘for the work of ministry’, and ‘for building the body of Christ’. The change of preposition, it is claimed, cannot bear the weight placed on it by the earlier view (and may be simply a stylistic variation), while there are no grammatical or linguistic grounds for making specific links between the first and second phrases. *In response to the charge that this represents a ‘clerically dominated’ interpretation, it is asserted that the active role for all believers is preserved in vv. 7 and 16, while the focus in the context of v. 12 is on the task and function of Christ’s specific gifts, that is, the apostles, prophets, and the like, not all the saints.* On this view, the term translated as ‘preparing,’ or ‘equipping’, is instead taken to signify ‘completion’, and does not need to be supplemented with an additional phrase such as ‘for the work of ministry’. This latter expression is believed to refer to the special ministry of those mentioned in v. 11, not Christian service in general. Those who take this line suspect that the alternative view is motivated by a desire to avoid clericalism and to support a ‘democratic’ model of the church! The difficulties [with this view] are syntactical and contextual. The prepositional change is not finally decisive: syntactically the three phrases could be dependent on the verb ‘he gave’. But if there is a movement from the discussion of the work of the ministers (v. 11) to that of all God’s people between v. 12a and v. 12bc, as we contend, then the change in preposition confirms that movement, and the mention of ‘saints’ in v. 12a underscores it. If the three phrases described activities in which ministers alone were engaged, then one might have expected the term ‘saints’ to appear at the point of change, namely, in v. 12c; instead, it occurs at the conclusion of the first phrase, v. 12a, ‘for equipping the saints.’” [O’Brien,

‘THE LEADERS ARE TO TRAIN THE LAITY SO ALL BELIEVERS DO THE MINISTERING’ (THE THREE PHRASES ARE PROGRESSIVE) — here are some thoughts from those who believe the work of the ministry is to be done by the clergy along with the laity:

- While some consider this a modern interpretation, according to Ernest Best the view that the three phrases are independent goes back at least as early as Erasmus (1466-1536 AD).
- **“If 12a, 12b, 12c are parallel then it is surprising that v. 12b, the most general of the phrases, does not come first with 12a and 12c developing it.”** [Best, 397f]
- **“To make such a distinction between clergy and laity goes against the thrust of this passage that promotes unity in the body of Christ....** In brief, the point is that the gifted persons listed in verse 11 serve as the foundational gifts that are used for the immediate purpose of preparing all the saints to minister. Thus, every believer must do the work of the ministry. This is certainly supported from the context, for in verse 16 edification requires the work of each individual member and not a select group. The final goal evolves from the last, namely, that the work of the ministry by every believer is to build up the body of Christ.” [Hoehner, 547ff]
- “Until recently the dominant view has been to take the first phrase, ‘for the equipment of the saints’, as directly related to the main verb *he gave* (v. 11), and to express the reason for Christ’s giving these ministers. Then, in line with the change of preposition, the phrase ‘for the work of ministry’ has been understood as subordinate to the first, ‘for the equipment of the saints’, while the next phrase, ‘for building the body of Christ’, is dependent on the previous phrases together (cf. NIV: *to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*). On this view, ministers have been given by Christ to equip believers for the exercise of their gifts (v. 7; cf. v. 16) in Christian service, so that by means of *both* the ministers and the common service of believers the body of Christ may be built. This interpretation, it is claimed, does justice to the change of prepositions in the Greek, to the emphasis in v. 11 on Christ’s giving of ministers, and to the corresponding part which each believer plays in the growth of Christ’s body (v. 16).... **Further, the letter as a whole has emphasized Christ’s riches being received by all the saints (1:3-19; 3:20), while the immediate context of vv. 7-16 is framed by an insistence at the beginning of the paragraph that each believer was given ‘grace’ (v. 7), and at its conclusion that the whole body is growing from the head as each part (v. 16) does its work.** If it is only the leaders of v. 11 who perfect the saints, do the work of ministry, and edify the body of Christ, then this is a departure from Paul’s usual insistence that every member is equipped for ministry. It is better, therefore, to regard those enumerated in v. 11 as helping and directing other members of the church so that all may carry out their several ministries for the good of the whole.” [O’Brien, 301ff]
- **“Westcott’s remarks are particularly instructive: ‘However foreign the idea of the spiritual ministry of all “the saints” is to our mode of thinking,’ he says, ‘it was the life of the apostolic church.’ The idea was perhaps especially foreign to Westcott since he was bishop of Durham when he penned these words.”** [Thielman, 279]
- “The three prepositional phrases in this verse are not coordinate one with another, as might be suggested by the RSV rendering (*for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*); the second and third phrases are dependent on the first, as is indicated by their being introduced by a different preposition from the first.” [Bruce, 349]
- “Do all three phrases describe the leaders, thus giving three purposes for which they were given to the church, or does only the first phrase describe the leaders, with the other two describing the people? To put the question another way, do the leaders do all three tasks or do they equip the people to do the work and building up? An understanding of the relation of clergy and laity is at stake. The NIV has rightly chosen the second option. The emphasis on each person receiving grace for ministry in 4:7 and the parallels in Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 necessitate a focus on the involvement of all the people in the work of the church. furthermore, the emphasis on ‘preparing’ requires a complement. What are God’s people being prepared to do if it is not to serve and build up the body?” [Snodgrass, 204]

THE USE OF TWO DIFFERENT PREPOSITIONS — one of the reasons some do not consider this to refer to the clergy alone is Paul’s use of prepositions:

πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ

[pros ton katartismos ton hagiōn eis ergon diakonias eis oikodomēn tou sōmatos tou Christou]

unto the perfecting of the saints, for a work of ministration, for a building up of the body of the Christ (YLT)

“The change in preposition also militates against taking 12a and 12b together. The change and its position are in fact confirmed by the mention of the saints in 12a.... **Office-bearers then exist to prepare other believers for their service to the whole community; they have an enabling function; the clergy exist to serve the laity.**” [Best, 398] But Stewart Salmond (Greek NT Commentary) cautions against making too much of Paul’s syntax: “*with a view to the full equipment of the saints* — The sentence begins with [‘to, towards’], but the two clauses which follow are introduced each by [‘into’]. **Little can he made, however, of that. The nice distinctions of the classical period were not maintained in later Greek; and, while Paul’s use of prepositions is for the most part remarkably precise, it is his habit to vary them, without any obvious difference in sense.**”

Especially is this his way with those of kindred meaning and followed by the same case.” [Salmond, 330]

GOOD SUMMARY STATEMENT — “But in what relation do these clauses stand to each other and to the [‘giving’]? ... The proper construction ... is the simplest. It takes the sentence to be dependent as a whole on the [‘giving’], and understands the three clauses as successive, the first looking to the second, the second to the third, the third forming the climax and expressing the ultimate object of the giving on the part of the ascended Christ. Thus the sense becomes — ‘Christ gave some men as Apostles, some as prophets, etc., with a view to the full equipment of the saints for the work of ministration or service they have each to do in order to the building up of the body of Christ’. The building up of the Church — that is the great aim and final object; to that every believer has his contribution to make and to qualify all for this is the purpose of Christ in giving ‘Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers’. In this way each clause fits in naturally with the next, and the ultimate object is expressed last.... *These are the terms which convey the ruling idea, viz., that each member gets the gift of grace, and each has his part to do towards that upbuilding of the Church which is the great object of Christ’s bestowments; and these Apostles, prophets, etc., are the means provided by Christ whereby all the members shall be made capable of performing their several parts in order that at last the whole Church may be built up in its completeness as the body of Christ.*” [Salmond, 331]

WHAT ARE WE TO TAKE AWAY FROM PAUL’S TEACHING? — Forgive the long quote but I thought these practical comments too good to ignore:

“The responsibility of the individual. — *In far too many churches people come, listen to a preacher, and do little else. No wonder the charge has been made that the body of Christ seems to have one big mouth and many little ears! But that is not how Paul viewed the church. While it is true that some have a special responsibility to teach and preach, Paul stresses that every Christian is responsible to build up the church. We have all received grace for ministry and must live worthy of our calling. We are all expected to work to strengthen the church, and only as each person fulfills his or her calling is the church truly strong.*

“Those with special responsibilities to teach and preach are to equip others to serve, not do the service for them, and these people are not set in a separate category or given tasks that others are prohibited from doing. We must value the service of everyone in the church, and ordinary Christians must accept their responsibility and seek to fulfill their calling....

“In Ephesians 4:11 certain leaders are viewed as gifts to the church, but actually this is true of all Christians. All have received grace and have a responsibility to build up the church. As the Spirit works through each person for the good of the community, each person is a gift to the church. We would do well to have less concern about identifying gifts and more concern about being a gift, that is, about how the Spirit functions through us to strengthen the body....

“The body of Christ does not have two classes of members — clergy and laity — or two sets of expectations. Everyone has the same task of building up the body, even though responsibilities vary. Certainly some tasks are more appropriate to pastors and require professional expertise, but even with those tasks pastors should include and train church members. Ministry is the only profession that retains nothing to itself, gives away all its knowledge free, and invites those served to do the same work....

“The work of the leaders. — *Application of this text also requires that we take more seriously the work of Christian leaders. The clergy cannot possibly do all that is necessary for building up and caring for the body. Our present practice has made ministry an impossible burden. We expect both too much and the wrong kinds of things from pastors, much of which should be done by other church members. Pastors are not hired to do the ministry, but to prepare the people to work, and pastors must be the first to expect work from parishioners. We must also stop viewing pastors as masters of ceremonies who conduct services for others to watch. Abraham Heschel complained of people who pray by proxy, letting their leaders do their praying. Worship has not occurred if people only watch someone else do it. Pastors lead in worship, but worship only occurs if the inner beings of the people are engaged, strengthened, and involved...*

“What we should expect from clergy we rarely receive — the communication of God’s Word to elicit and enlist the souls of people. That is exactly what Paul does in Ephesians: He focuses on the gospel and its effect. Many pastors get involved in all sorts of other activities and do not develop their knowledge and ability to explain the Word. Respect for pastors is low. Often they are no longer perceived to be leaders, for their expertise is not obvious. Pastors must be experts in the gospel — the broadest subject in the world — and its application to life, beginning with themselves. They need to train their people biblically. Without it, it is no surprise that so many have been duped by flashy televangelists. A pastor’s job is to help people be productive with their own Christian work and service.” [Snodgrass, 212f, 224f]