

A TRANSLATION, ANOTHER CONTROVERSY, AND GIFTS

Ephesians 4:7-16 has three big interpretive issues, two of which we've already considered. For the sake of review, the first issue concerns the meaning of Christ descending to and ascending from the "lower regions" (4:9-10). We saw that this is a reference to His state of humiliation and exaltation, that is, His descent to earth and ascent from earth. The second interpretive issue concerns the quotation of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8. The Psalm says that God *received* gifts among men, yet Paul says that God *gave* gifts to men. We noted that there was no contradiction between the two especially because the Psalm, at its conclusion (68:35), points out that God does give gifts to His people. In short, Paul seems to be quoting the entire message of the Psalm, not simply verse 18 verbatim.

The third interpretive issue concerns the **translation** of Ephesians 4:12. After stating five Word-based gifts God has given His church (4:11), Paul uses three prepositions to state what seem to be three distinct purposes of ordained ministry: *to* equip, *for* ministry, *for* building up. How one translates this verse determines how one thinks of the relationship between the ordained ministry (pastors) and the non-ordained body of Christ (the laity or members). Were we to delineate the two options, they would like this:

OPTION ONE: pastors were given

1. to equip the saints
2. for the work of ministry
3. to build up the body of Christ

or

OPTION TWO: pastors were given

1. to equip the saints so the saints share in the work of ministry [and this two-pronged equipping by the ministers and working by the saints] builds up the body of Christ

In other words, does the pastor alone do the work of ministry? Or do all members, in some sense, share in the work of ministry (although they're not ministers) after being equipped to carry out their gifts? For many years, I believed option one was the biblical view. After many months of studying Ephesians in the context of God's Word, however, I believe option two is what Ephesians 4:12 teaches, and is more faithful to the context of this passage and the epistle.

The **controversy** surrounding how one translates the text arises because of what the text might be saying. There are two extremes in the controversy. The one extreme holds to a radical view of option one called *clericalism* (clericalism comes from "clergy" which is another word for minister). In this extreme, the pastor alone does ministry since the pastor alone is the minister. The pastor has been called to equip the saints, to minister, and to build up the body. Clericalism believes in a rigid hierarchy with the pastor on top and everyone else at the bottom. The members, or laity, are passive recipients of the instruction of the Word.

The other extreme holds to a radical view of option two called *anti-clericalism*. In this extreme, there is no distinction between the minister and the laity. Rather, a tyrannical egalitarianism (that is, everyone is thought to be equal in every sense of the word) dominates such that everyone is called a minister. This view, also called the "every-member-ministry" view, every member of the church has a formal ministry from God which they are called to exercise.

One of life's greatest difficulties is holding two seemingly opposing things in tension. God made us for resolution, but we often seek a cheap resolution that errs on one of two (or multiple) sides. Ephesians 4:12-16 teaches neither clericalism, anti-clericalism, or a weird mixture of the two. What it does teach is that in the body of Christ, every Christian has been given **grace and gifts** (4:7) to build up the body of Christ by doing important functions and tasks within the body, thus ensuring that every part works properly within the body (4:16). This includes pastors. Pastors have been gifted by God. But what exactly is their gift? It is to equip the saints to share in the work of ministry with their own gifts. Pastors are called to facilitate, lead, direct the body of Christ so that the body of Christ would grow up. Pastors are not to stunt or retard the growth of the body by doing everything, nor are they to sit back and lead from behind by doing nothing. Their particular calling, as found in 4:12ff, is to so preach and teach the Word of God that the members of Christ's body would leave spiritual immaturity behind, become stable in God's truth, and grow up into full Christ-likeness. Inherent to this growth is equipping the saints to use the gifts Christ has given them as members of His church. Here's the bottom line: a church where each member is not using his or her gifts for the glory of God, under the direction of the ministry of the Word, and for the edification of fellow believers is a church that is neither growing nor maturing.



Grace Reformed Church of Jersey City