

The Meaning & Purpose of Ministry

The Gifting of Christ in the Life of the Church

Ephesians 4:11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

(Eph 4:11-16)

What About Bob?

IN HIS ARTICLE TOUCHING on our passage today, Michael Horton asks us to imagine a new Christian to Christ who was converted some place in modern Evangelicalism.

Although he “went forward” to receive Christ only a month ago, Bob, who recently ended his NFL career, has just informed his discipleship group that he is called to the ministry. In fact, next week he will be teaming up with a businessman who has also decided that he is called to the ministry. Together, they will form a sports evangelism team.

A familiar story for those of us raised in evangelical circles, this fictional account illustrates the practical importance of the question, “What is ministry?”¹

Our passage (**Ephesians 4:11-16**) has become a lightning rod of disagreement between two very different ways of viewing church. One vigorously defends **the ancient** idea that “**ministry**” is a formal, technical term reserved for ordained men to publicly carry out the means of grace. The emphasis here is often confined to the vital importance of the corporate worship of God and what God does for his people through it. The other vigorously defends the more **modern** idea that “**everyone is a minister**” and that anything a Christian does should be called “ministry.” The emphasis here is that all Christians exercise their spiritual gifts to the glory of God and the edification of the church. Under this thinking

¹ **Michael S. Horton**, “What About Bob? The Meaning of Ministry in the Reformed Tradition,” *Modern Reformation* 6:2 (March/April 1997): 8. <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/whataboutbob.html>

we see an explosion of things in churches that have become “ministries”: music ministry, youth ministry, senior ministry, family-life ministry, counselling ministry, vacation Bible-school ministry, puppet ministry, dance ministry, and so on. The important thing, for now, in these is that basically **anyone who has a “heart”** for such a ministry is welcome to come and lead it. Hence Horton’s title, “What About Bob?” What is Bob to do if he has a great desire to “minister” to people as a Christian?

Stating the Problem

Difficult Grammar

While we could pursue, as Horton does, questions here about “**calling**” and “**vocation**,” those are not very relevant to our passage. There are a couple of related questions that the passage raises, however. **Vs. 12** is the epicenter of the disagreement. In the ESV it reads, “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...**” The **first** question is, to whom does the work of ministry or

service belong *here*? **Second**, what kind of work is it to which reference is made?²

The problems that have created this disagreement are actually quite complicated. On the surface, they seem to stem from **the text itself**. Again, the ESV says, “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...**” The KJV reads much different, however. “**For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.**” Perhaps you can hear some of the differences, but let’s look at them.

There are **at least three things** going on in these different translations. **The first** concerns the understanding of **the word “ministry”** (*diakonias*). Is Paul talking about some kind of **formal ministry** reserved only for certain people in the church or does it refer to a broader, more **informal** use of the term? In fact, the word can be used in **both ways**, as it is within four verses in **Acts 6:1-4**. It begins by talking about the disciples (that is all the converts of the church) who were increasing in number very quickly. A complaint arose concerning how the widows were being neglected “**in the daily serving** [*diakonia*, fem. sing. noun] **of food**” (NAS). Rather than the Apostles like Peter who had “**neglected the word of**

² **Charles H. Talbert**, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 113.

God” in order to “serve [*diakonein*, pres. act. inf. verb] tables” (2), the church was instructed to assign brothers “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” who would oversee the carrying out of the distribution (3) so that the Apostles could “serve [*diakonia*] the word” (4). Each use of “serve” could be translated as “minister.” The formal use here is the “ministry of the word” by ordained/called Apostles like Peter. The informal use of the word is the ministry of tables that was seemingly being carried out by everyone. There seems to be a second formal use of the word in that the seven chosen became the first “Deacons” of the NT church (Philip, Stephen, etc.; vs. 5). Their job was to formally oversee the informal carrying out of the service in the church. It is pretty obvious how your understanding of this word would color the way you understand the meaning of the verse.

A second problem concerns the word “equip” (*katartismōn*). Notice in the KJV that the word was translated as “perfect.” What is the best way to translate it here? Is there a difference between something like equipping or training vs. the older translations that render it as perfecting or bringing to completion?³ Does it mean to train someone *else*,

³ This includes the Vulgate and Wycliffe’s Middle English, the Syriac Peshitta, and the oldest modern English translations like the Geneva and KJV. See Robert Mayes, “Equipping the Saints”? Why Ephesians 4:11–12 Opposes the Theology and Practice of Lay Ministry,” *Logia*

thereby equipping *them* to do ministry (modern translations). Or does it mean that the ministers themselves bring to completion/perfection/repairing/mending *ala* older translations?

A third problem is **the grammar** of the verse. Notice the ESV and KJV as I present them below:

to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
for building up the body of Christ (ESV)⁴

for the perfecting of the saints,
for the work of the ministry,
for the edifying of the body of Christ (KJV)⁵

As you can see in the KJV more easily, there are **three clauses** in the verse. One is “**perfecting of the saints,**” the next is “**the work of the ministry,**”⁶ and finally “**the edifying of the**

24:4 (2015): 11. https://www.academia.edu/22760323/Equipping_the_Saints_Why_Ephesians_4_11_12_Opposes_the_Theology_and_Practice_of_Lay_Ministry

⁴ This way of reading the passage was argued by **Markus Barth**, “The Church Without Laymen or Priests,” *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 4-6*, vol. 34A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 477-84.

⁵ Essentially, you can view the difference as basically a drop of a single comma after “saints.” Mayes has a good summary of what this does. “When the comma is in place, pastor (and the other original offices now subsumed into the one pastoral office) are given ‘to equip the saints, for the work of the ministry,’ showing that the task of ‘ministry’ is given to pastors. If the comma is not listed, the work of ‘ministry’ is chiefly for all the saints, and pastors are given to ‘equip’ saints to do this.” Mayes, 8.

⁶ Technically, the definite article “the” is not in the Greek. This is a translation decision.

body.” The question is, **what is the relationship of them to each other?** The disagreement occurs because of the Greek prepositions that begin each clause. The last two (*eis*) are different from the first (*pros*). Even though they can all be translated by the English word “for” (see KJV), they can also have different meanings and hence lead to some radically different interpretations (see ESV).

The two translations are in some ways worlds apart. The older version translates it such that the gifted ones in **vs. 11** are given **for three purposes**. They perfect/equip the saints. They do the work of ministry. They edify the body of Christ. In the newer translations, there is only **one purpose** of these gifted ones. They equip the saints with the result that *the saints* do the ministry. So the question becomes, who does the work of ministry?

As people have asked this question or stated the problem, I have seen it posed in the form of **a potentially subtle and dangerous either/or fallacy**. For example, T. David Gordon, representing the older view says, **“The question stated is whether Eph 4:12 teaches that the ‘ministry’ of the Church is done by the ‘saints’ and whether the only distinc-**

tive role of the officers is to equip the saints for such service.”⁷ Charles Talbert puts it almost the exact same way, even though he takes the other view. “Does the ministry belong to these few gifted individuals or to all the gifted saints?”⁸ Their questions are posed in such a way that Paul seems to be giving a universal principle. Either only officers perform the ministry, or everyone does.

First and foremost, we have to understand *what Ephesians means*. What if it were the case that Ephesians has in mind one of these answers *for its purposes* while the other answer true *in other places*? In other words, what if Paul isn't giving a universal principle here but rather some kind of situational point? In that sense, both could be true, depending upon how we are talking about the question. What if the way the question has been asked has become the problem? In the posing of the question (as these two have), there is little hint that we are only talking about what is said “here” in this passage. Instead, it is assumed this is a universal principle for all times and places. That might be the case, but we can't assume it. We have to argue for it.

⁷ T. David Gordon, “Equipping’ Ministry in Ephesians 4,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:1 (1994): 70.

⁸ Talbert, 114.

Traditions and Agendas

This leads me to consider some of the **more complicated issues** that are contributing to the disagreement. In all honesty, as we will see, the three grammatical points of the verse are all **too vague** to be considered definitive, even though scholars on both sides have tried to argue their point strictly from the grammar. But there are other things that contribute to these disagreements than merely that.

These include our **traditions** (how we have always done things), church **history** (how has the church interpreted this in the past), and **presuppositions**. A traditional supporter makes the point, “**There is more at stake than grammar. It appears to me that what has really made the popular translation so popular is an underlying dogmatic position. To be quite blunt about it, lay people and those who for one reason or another are anti-clerical see here a convenient text to support their point of view.**”⁹ It seems to me that at least some

⁹ **Henry Paul Hamann**, “The Translation of Ephesians 4:12, a Necessary Revision,” *Concordia Journal* 14:1 (1988): 45. **Gordon** (77) makes a similar point. “**The ‘equipping’ view is so contrary to the natural grammar of the passage ... that we cannot account for its popularity on the basis of careful Biblical study. Rather, we must attribute it to the egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, populist Zeitgeist so well documented by Nathan Hatch (The Democratization of American Christianity). This spirit is so pervasive and so impervious to self-criticism that it even projects itself onto others.**”⁹

of these presuppositions are there because of **abuses** to the way *both sides* have carried out their projects.

On one side you have **sacerdotalism** (“priest-craft”) where the priesthood of the believer is effectively destroyed or denied, that under the new covenant there is no such thing as each Christian being a priest in God’s holy temple in any sense. Rome has certainly been guilty of this, but so also have some Reformation groups, at least in emphasis of importance if not also in practice (since punctuation was not original [see below], it is also quite possible that the traditional view grew up around an ecclesiology that had been built up first). If we have a theology that ends up with an actual or functional priestly-class that alone has the right to perform ministry of *any* kind, to interpret God’s word, sometimes even to read it, and you aren’t even allowed to question it, to do all of the building up of the body ... I’m sure you can see what might cause an over-reaction.

On the other side you have anyone who wants to baptize their brother, stand up in a congregation to give an off-the-cuff sermon, ordain themselves, call themselves apostles, and so on.¹⁰ There is often an almost complete disregard for au-

¹⁰ The movie “The Apostle” starring **Robert Duval** is an excellent example.

thority in some of these churches and certainly a lack of respect for officers. Sometimes, you must not even have officers at all because this is contrary to the new covenant in every respect. Hopefully you can feel how this kind of anti-authority, anarchist, libertarian, democratized view of ministry is contrary to much of what is said in the Scripture, let alone the NT.

What I'm going to argue is that **both sides contribute some important things** to this discussion, that both sides are often guilty of talking past one another, that both side could be quite close to each other in practice (at least when we are not talking about the extremes), but that **both sides often miss the point of the text**. My suggestion will be that the traditionalists have the grammar correct. But this has nothing to do with some universal principle being stated here and everything to do with the context. I have a good pastor friend whom I talked to this week tell me that he believes the traditional side probably has it wrong and his reasoning is not the grammar or the meaning of the words but the larger context (especially **4:1-6, 13a, and 16**, see below). I agree with him, to a point. But the larger context, in my view, does not negate what is said in **vv. 11-12**, because of what is said in **13b-15**. It does imply that the non-traditional

side (where every member is a minister in some sense) could be correct in its insistence that every person is in fact a minister *in an informal sense*.

What is at Stake?

Before moving into the discussion, [what is at stake here?](#) I've already mentioned the extremes. What is at stake [could be](#) as serious as ending up with a priestly class of infallible interpreters who are not to be questioned and who domineer over their congregations like tyrants. It could also be as serious as the total loss of any kind of functional hierarchy within the church such that you have no officers, no formal or objective way of controlling what is taught or said in the church, and any kind of doctrinal or ethical chaos is possible. People are prone to extremes.

But we know the Scripture talks about Elders and Deacons as offices, as teachers who are held doubling accountable, and that these are supposed to be good things for the church. We also know that the whole church has been created to be a holy priesthood whose members make up a living temple who are all to offer their bodies as living sacrifices. What is that if not ministry? Given these points of

agreement, it is a more subtle problem, not at the extremes but in the middle, which is where the true danger lies.

The early theme of this chapter was **unity**. We are to act with all **humility, gentleness, with patience, and love-bearing** (**Eph 4:2**), “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (3). This is our very **calling** (1). This is not merely the job of officers of the church, but everyone. These **actions** are **reinforced** by the seven-fold perfect oneness that we have **objectively** in Christ (one: body, spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, Father God). Therefore, **if we condemn each other** over things that we can both agree have valid points yet because of grammar that is more than debatable, then **are we not creating a division** that is precisely the opposite of the entire point of a passage in the first place? Would this not make such disagreements wholly ironic if not possibly even satanic because of their subtle cunning in getting the body of divide over something that is trying to help us not to? That’s what’s at stake: the turning of our text itself on its head in our refusing to obey the earlier part of its chapter. Let’s turn to the text to see if we can figure out what is actually going on.

The Five Gifts

We begin with a verse that we discussed last time. It is **vs. 11**. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers ...” This “giving” was at the end of a chiasm that began with the giving of “gifts” (7). Thus, the things mentioned in **vs. 11** are the “gifts” he has in mind in **vs. 7**. This is made clear in **vv. 8-10** with the digression into the OT and Christ’s saving people out of the very pits of hell, a “host of captives” who become gifts that Christ gives to his church.

These “gifts” in vs. 11 are **not things** so much as they are **people**. This list includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. These are people. Sometimes in the NT the writers give **lists of gifts** (especially **Rom 12:6-8**, **1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30**; **1Pe 4:11**). We often call them “**spiritual gifts**” because they are given by the Holy Spirit of Christ. Ephesians 4:11 is one of those lists.

Some of these lists contain at least some of the people-gifts mentioned in Eph 4:11. For example, **1 Corinthians 12:28** mentions “**apostles**” and then “**prophets**” and then “**teachers**.” These are all found in Ephesians 4:11 as well. But in all of the other lists, there are gifts included that cannot be

described as “people.” For example, that same list in Corinthians has “healing” and “administering” and “tongues.” While it is of course true that only people can carry out these gifts, strictly speaking, “administering” is not a person, it is a thing.

Something rarely asked in questions about our passage is **why wouldn't Paul include these other gifts in this list?** Why doesn't he talk about tongues here or mercy or helps or hospitality or giving here? There has to be a reason. The reason has already been explained. Christ rescued *people* from hell, not “things.” He is giving *people* to the church as gifts in this passage. The fact that other gifts are not mentioned here should be a clue as to who it is in mind that is doing the things that follow.

But now, look at this **list of five**. They all have something in common. In fact, they have more than one thing **in common**. **First**, each of these are **speaking gifts** or as my friend called them, “word-gifts.” Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers ... their gifts all center on **the proclamation of the word** in one form or another. Now, there are other “word-gifts” in other lists. For example, there are gifts of tongues or interpretation or encouragement. Can you see why those might not be listed here?

Those are not people, they are things. So again, the **second** thing in common is that these are all people. A third thing is that each of these can be considered **formal offices of the church**. That is not true of any of the other gifts in other lists.

So what might be **the purpose of what I will now call “The Five?”** We have hints already in the letter. He has mentioned “apostles and prophets,” in that same order, twice already. What was the purpose of talking about those earlier? In **Eph 2:20**, they built “**the foundation**” of the living temple. They did this, it explains, in the second mention as they “**revealed**” **the gospel** “**in the Spirit**” (**3:5**). In other words, it was the apostles and prophets who were given the message of Jesus Christ and the insight necessary to know exactly how to deliver it to the very first Christians, thereby establishing the church of Jesus Christ around the entire known world. This is **terribly important**, because it means that their job was to give the foundational doctrine of “the Faith” (**4:5**) that no one was to add or subtract from. For this was the very thing that created the church out of nothing, by the sheer Word of God.

So why add these other three? It is because apostles and prophets are gifts that have **passed away**, at least in the formal sense. What I mean is, while the words “apostle” and “prophet” can both be used *informally* of simply someone who is “sent” or someone who speaks truth, as offices those do not exist any longer. There are no more Apostles because Jesus called each man personally. Of prophets Paul says, “**prophecies ... will pass away**” (1Co 13:8). Their function to confirm the Apostolic message has ceased in this formal official sense.¹¹

But **God has not left his church with nothing**. Jesus has given evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to all subsequent generations of the church. Their task is to “**guard the deposit**” of the “**faith once for all entrusted to the saints,**” the “**foundation which is Jesus Christ**” (1Co 3:11; 1Ti 6:20; 2Ti 1:14; Jude 3) from now until he returns to take his people home. In other words, “evangelists” and “shepherds” and “teachers” are God’s way that the apostolic and prophetic messages of the first century continue.

Evangelists (*euaggelistas*) are those who have a special burden and who are commissioned formally by the church, sent

¹¹ **Sam Waldron** has a good little book on this. See Samuel E. Waldron, *To Be Continued: Are The Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Merrick, NY: Calvary Press, 2005), esp. 21-79.

out to proclaim the gospel to new places. We might also call them missionaries. *Shepherds* (*poimen*), of whom Christ Jesus is the Chief (1Pe 2:25; Ps 23:1), are the overseers of the churches. Bishops/*episkopos* and Elders/*presbuteros* are synonyms; 1Pe 2:25. They lead the sheep, especially (though not exclusively) through word and sacrament. *Teachers* (*didaskalos*) are those with a special ability to convey the truth and give the proper sense of God's word in intelligible ways without compromising the meaning, as Ezra did in his day (Neh 8:8). Each of these, then, are formal, authoritative offices that Jesus has given to the church which have the special function of instructing in essential doctrine, particularly the doctrines of Christ. Though gifts, these gifts are also aided by study and discipline and training, for God uses means even as he gives gifts.

In this way of thinking about them, the focus is now on *the office, not on the person*. This is important because Paul is not saying that there is anything special about the people in the lists that differs from other people, for we have all been given the gift of grace (Eph 4:7). He is not distinguishing between first class Christians and those who have to ride coach. He is not saying that your goal is to ride shotgun or else get stuck on the back of the bus. He is not mentioning

these as the gifts to which all others fall short. He is not telling you that every Christian falls into one of these five categories nor that every Christian is supposed to seek one of them. No, there are other gifts and each Christian has at least one of them. But this list is specific and intentionally is *not focused* on everyone in the body.

The Giving of the Five

This leads us naturally to consider **what God gave *these gifts for***. Again, **vs. 12** says that he gave them “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up the body of Christ...**” We’ve looked at the problems in the verse already. This translation by the ESV understands these offices as being given to the church *so that* everyone else can be equipped for the work of ministry. It uses the word “**equip**” rather than something like “**perfect**.” And, it clearly implies that the ministry in mind in vs. 12 is informal rather than formal. But again, there is a completely different way to look at it such that it is actually the five offices that carry out the perfecting/equipping of the saints, the work of ministry, and the building up of the body. Which is correct?

What I'm going to suggest is that **one of the views is correct here, but that this does not mean we have a universal principle going on.** In other words, while Paul is talking about here about The Five doing three things including "ministry," this does not mean he does not believe that there is no sense in which "ministry" belongs to rest of the body.¹² That just isn't his purpose *here*. He isn't talking about other gifts here. He does that elsewhere. He has another purpose *here*.

Turning to the **three grammatical problems**, I want to begin by saying that I think none of them is conclusive. Technically speaking, **the preposition problem** can be taken either way.¹³ However, I will note that it seems to me that if you take the modern route, as the ESV does, you end up with a serious *theological* problem. The problem is not that

¹² As Gombis rightly notes, "There is no thought here of an exclusion of lay people from participating in some way in the building up of the church, especially since lay believers' active roles are spoken of in vv. 7 and 16, but it is the church leaders that are mainly in view in the present passage" (Gombis, *Dissertation*, n. 76, p. 129-30).

¹³ Compare Gordon (69-77) or Lincoln (253-54) with Talbert (113-114) or Mayes (9). Mayes has a good summary. "While the comma makes a good historical argument as to how Ephesians 4:12 was understood until the mid-twentieth century, it is not thorough enough. Exegetes must ask whether St. Paul *intended* a comma or not. The problem is that the earliest complete editions of the New Testament books are preserved on uncial manuscripts (that is, ones which used only capital letters with no spacing between words and no punctuation). It saved on material to write on, but it does not show Paul's original intent in Ephesians 4:12 regarding that particular comma. Punctuation came in later versions. That means the comma argument rests on thin ice. The lack of punctuation in the earliest manuscripts makes it doubtful if Paul's original intent about this comma can be determined." Mayes, 9.

laity do not in fact have some kind of informal “ministry,” but that the “ministers” have *no* ministry! What do I mean?

In the ESV, The Five “equip *the saints* for the work of ministry?” Few would actually say that the Five are not doing ministry as they equip the rest to also do ministry. That would be absurdly unbiblical. Yet, that is how the translation reads. The Five are “equipping” *others* to do “ministry.” If you wanted to imply that both are doing ministry, then it should have said, “to minister to the saints so that they can also do work of ministry.” But that, of course, would be totally unfaithful to the meaning of “equip.” This is the subtlety of problem.

In fact, this logic is working itself out in nearly every nook and cranny of Christianity today. Here’s an example of a job description that came up near the top of the google image search for something called an “Executive Pastor” (a very common “job” in today’s church).

ABC Community Church

Job Title	Executive Pastor
Position reports to:	Senior Pastor
Salary range:	\$XX,000 – \$XX,000
Employment status:	Full-Time/Exempt

Position Overview

Responsible for member spiritual development and pastoral oversight of adults, youth and children church members.

Principal Accountabilities

- Supports senior pastor by implementing strategies and goals as determined by the board.
- Collaborates with leadership to develop and implement plans for the spiritual development of member adults, youth and children.
- Works with leadership to develop programs for adults, youth and children.
- Develops pastoral care program to ensure members have pastoral support for weddings, funerals and personal counseling needs.
- Collaborates with service team to ensure that weekly services and all church events support the mission and vision of the church.
- Oversees special events and church productions to maintain focus on church mission and member development.
- Addresses pastoral issues with members, employees and volunteers.
- Collaborates with community leaders regarding ministry support of community projects.
- Serves as after-hour pastoral support for church members.
- Ensures fiscal responsibility and adheres to departmental budget.

This is a fairly typical way of thinking about it. **The problem is not** that these are bad things. They can actually be good and even necessary. The problem is that this is **not the job of a pastor/teacher/evangelist**. It might fit the job description of a deacon, but they aren't calling this person a deacon.

What this does is confuse at the core the formal ministry with the informal ministry, word and sacrament with the exercise of the spiritual gifts of the rest of the body. It flattens everything out. Effectively what you end up with **in everyone being a minister** is that **no one actually does the**

formal ministry of the church correctly. There is no such thing as formal ministry! The Gospel gets lost in favor of things people do to help one another. Because that's the job of the new-fangled "pastor." They have no time to study God's word! And why should they? That's not their job.

This is why we have an epidemic in the church of burnt-out pastors. They are doing what they are not called to do, lasting less than two years on average in a local church and four years on average in the ministry altogether. This is why we have entire bodies not being built up, which as we will see in a moment, is the whole point of this text! And this is why the body itself is not carrying out its gifts as it could and should be, because doing gifts out of fear or obligation or threat or necessity is legalism, the opposite of what The Five are to be proclaiming to the saints.

Second, the word "ministry" can have two senses: formal and informal, official and unofficial. Saints can do "ministry" that differs from that of The Five. It is admitted by almost everyone taking the older view that the word here can in fact simply mean "service." Unfortunately, because this is so often taken as a principle rather than a situational text, what they give with their right hand they sometimes take away with their left, and you can end up (logically if

not practically) with the informal meaning becoming totally irrelevant in the rest of the church. The priesthood of the believer and their exercising gifts in the temple of Jesus is destroyed. *All* that matters is word and sacrament.

But again, I think we can choose here. In the definitive study on the meaning of this word, John Collins¹⁴ has shown that it can have different sense. It can literally mean “**waiting on tables.**” But it can also mean “**the conveying of messages – i.e. carrying a ‘word’ from one person to another.**”¹⁵ But that’s exactly what The Five do. That’s the single greatest common denominator about them. They convey messages. That’s the whole reason Paul chose them. Therefore, it would seem that Paul is using the word in its technical sense.

¹⁴ **John N. Collins**, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ **Lionel Windsor**, “Tend My Sheep: The Word of God and Pastoral Ministry,” 7. <http://www.lionelwindsor.net/wordpress/wp-content/2016/09/Windsor-Pages-from-9781906327446-txt.pdf>.

Mayes writes, “Collins shows that **διακονία** is a term used to depict the service that is done by a representative of a higher authority, such as by a prime minister or a governmental servant who answers to the head of state. Paul, Timothy, Silas, and the pastors described in the New Testament represent Christ and answer to him as well (see 1Cor 4:1-4). Collins’s research shows that **διακονία** is not a term that can be used to describe the understanding of ministry that is derived from a body of believers “from below” and collectively transferred to one to do publicly. His research is important for understanding Ephesians 4:12.” It is not clear to me that Mayes has dealt well enough with the implications here that all Christians are now seated in heavenly places and are all part of the new covenant temple as a priesthood of believers in this comment. He mentions the existence of the latter but does not deal with it. He is a very conservative Lutheran.

Finally, the word “equip” can also be translated as “complete/perfect.” Again, by itself, both are true. But the context seems to be definitive. As it says in vs. 13 are all “attaining” something. What we are attaining is “mature manhood” and “the fulness of Christ.” This would seem to be exactly what is conveyed by the older (and universal) translation of “perfect” or “complete.” But the word “equip,” at least by itself, does not convey that nearly as well. Only in the larger context of the prepositions and idea of “ministry” would it do that as the saints built up the body. However, I’ve already dealt with how those do not seem likely.

Curiously, it is rare to see discussion of what follows brought into this. Scholars seem myopically obsessed with vs. 12 and fail to pay attention to the rest of the unit of thought. Even in English, it is clear that vs. 12 doesn’t end until vs. 14. What does that say?

I’ve already mentioned some of this. “... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (13). My friend told me that the focus of *the whole passage* is the unity of the body and working together to reach maturity. Clearly that is present. We are all to “attain the unity” spoken of earlier, and this isn’t only the

job of one person or even only the job of the word and sacrament ministry of the Five (which seems to be what some want to argue).

This is Paul's whole point in **1 Corinthians 12-14**. We are one body made up of many parts and we all have different gifts that serve their own unique place in the diversity of the body. None is more or less important. They are different and used in different ways within the body to achieve the goal of unity. I would say that when you carry out your gifting duties in the body of Christ that you are performing "ministry" in that informal sense. I have no problem using that language. The Bible clearly uses it (as we have seen).

Honestly, this is the same way our passage also concludes. "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (**Eph 4:15-16**). This is identical theologically to **1 Corinthians 12** and **Romans 12**. The body is growing up together into the head, that is Christ. Thus, those who take the modern translation do have the broader theological point

behind them, generally speaking. It's just that this is not generally speaking. Paul isn't talking about that in vv. 11-15a. He has something else in mind.

Verse 15 begins with “truth.” This is a continuation of something begun in vs. 13, our unity is “of the faith.” As we saw earlier with “one Faith” (4:5), this does not refer to a personal faith in Jesus. It refers to our collective Faith about Jesus—what we confess. We are reaching a unity of our beliefs about Jesus here. Hence, the next phrase, “and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” What is happening in vs. 12 is clearly related to speech and knowledge about Christ.

Technically speaking, the gift of giving (let's say you love to give your money to the church) does not directly do anything to help reach unity of the Faith. Neither does having someone over to your house (the gift of hospitality). Hopefully, in the course of exercising those gifts, they contribute to that end. But the gifts themselves are not those “word-gifts” we spoke of earlier. That's why they are not listed here as they are in other places. But when you teach a group of people about what Ephesians means by opening it up, looking at the meaning, understanding the context, and discovering Christ in it, then this is directly what Paul is talking

about here. That's what the Five do that the other gifts do not. And this is the Reformed "means of grace."

It is this unity of The Faith and knowledge of the Son of God that then leads us to "mature manhood" to the measure of the stature of the "fullness of Christ." Hence the word is not "equipping" but "completion." In other words, it is through coming to a unity of who Christ is in our collective thinking that we end up acting as we should. This is the same pattern we see in the Epistle, itself written by someone who had one of these five gifts (Apostle). First you learn who Christ is together. Then you go out and behave as you are. That's what he is saying here. But here is another caveat. Reaching mature manhood is not confined merely to head knowledge. Thus, I would think that the acting out in gentleness and love to help us together reach unity is still in mind. In other words, the theology of "equipping," that is to the end that the church would exercise its gifts and in love acts as one, is in fact here.

But back to the point. Vs. 14 Paul adds, "... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph 4:14). Here, being "children" is contrasted with the previous "mature

manhood” and “the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Being a child here means that you are tossed to and fro by three tsunami waves. Those waves are “every wind of doctrine,” “human cunning,” and “crafty deceitful schemes.”

Being tossed to and fro. “What this means is that whenever some teaching is proposed, the person concerned starts to doubt sincere and true doctrine; whenever something new comes along, he hesitates about the truth and calls it into question.” (Erasmus Sarcerius, *Annotations on Ephesians*).

Every wind of doctrine. It seems to me that first tsunami refers to evil spirits. This is because he uses the word “wind” (*anemos*). While not the same word for “spirit” (*pneuma*), which demons and principalities are, the idea is nevertheless clearly related. In Mesopotamian texts you have ‘good winds’ and ‘evil wind,’ the latter being exemplified by a group of seven evil spirits deemed responsible for a variety of human afflictions and miseries. Similarly, Egyptian texts associate diseases with wind-born evil spirits.¹⁶ And the Scripture, of course, talks about evil spirit-winds all the time. Thus, Paul talks about people devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons (1Ti 4:1). In the

¹⁶ P. K. McCarter, “Evil Spirit of God,” ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999): 319.

text, this includes forbidding marriage and requiring abstinence from foods, and so on. In other words, legalism.

Human cunning. The next one refers to human teachers. “The nature and habit of false teachers, who make people uncertain and disloyal by their tricks, cleverness and deceit and who take them on long intellectual detours, not in order to bring them to the truth but in order to take them away from it. You have examples of this in every heretic and corrupter of sincere doctrine” (Erasmus Sarcerius, *Annotations on Ephesians*).

Deceitful schemes. The point of the last tsunami is that the plotting and scheming of heavenly or earthly is to take you away from the truth, but to do so in such a way that it causes you to question God’s word. This is the exact ploy used in the Garden by the devil and again in the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. It especially takes the Scripture and uses it for its own evil purposes. Those purposes take you away from Jesus Christ to anything and everything but him in his glory as Savior and King and Warrior and Redeemer.

As you can now see clearly, the purpose of this part of the passage, the main part of our text today, is to explain why the five gifts have been given to the church. It is clearly

not the realm of the gifts of something like [service](#) or [miracles](#) to keep people from being tossed to and fro by heresies. It is the job of the Five to help the body reach maturity in its understanding of Christ. They are not to become CEOs of a church corporation, counselors in a private practice, cheerleaders of a religious team, or as someone has said, “If [the Five is simply to prepare the saints to do works of practical service] their primary functions ... may appropriately be called ‘community organizers,’ ‘enablers,’ ‘facilitators,’ ... or whatever the current rage is.”¹⁷ Jesse Jackson and Jeremiah Wright may like that, and it isn’t hard to see the tremendous damage this has done in turning those places into nothing but political activist centers. Biblically speaking, these are those who minister law and gospel to souls through word and sacrament.

This is in fact [so that the gospel might do its work](#), so that the people might learn to exercise their gifts as opposed to not exercise them at all in some kind of antinomian free-for-all in the body that runs roughshod over one another, and not out of a sense of legalism where you have to force people to want to exercise their gifts out of some kind of guilt or shame. This is so that Christ might have all the glory

¹⁷ [Philip J. Secker](#), “Ephesians 4:11-12 Reconsidered,” *Logia* 5/2 (1996): 61.

rather than us. This is how our practical unity is accomplished, and it is all the gift of Christ to his church. It may be the case that a pastor is gifted in counseling or finances or cheering others on. Not all pastors are the same, and they can use other talents in the church just like anyone else can, so long as it is clearly understood that this is not their calling in formal ministry. It would only be their calling informally, as a fellow member of the body. It is not *their* sole responsibility to do these other things just because they get paid. We have got to reverse this whole idea that pastors are professionals, as John Piper reminds us in his book of the same title.¹⁸ That is one of the greatest errors corrupting the church in our day.

CONCLUSION

As Paul has begun his second half of Ephesians, he has now pointed out our responsibility to be as we are, to act as Christ has made us. Jesus has given his church all that she needs to carry out this responsibility. **If you are Bob**, your mission is to help the whole body be joined together—in *the*

¹⁸ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002).

church. If you are called to formal ministry, that is something that comes from both inside of you and outside in the form of the church recognizing that gifting. If you feel led to help people in the world outside of the church, that's called a vocation (calling). God approves of it because it is good, not because it has to have a "ministry" label slapped onto it. But inside of the church, you are all called to use your gifts *even if you are not a minister*. In the meantime, the pastor/elder position is to teach you about Christ so that you might stand firm in the face of great temptations to go to someone else. As we do, the many parts become one whole. The fingers and toes, the head and the heart, the eyes and the ears all become equipped through the right knowledge of who Christ Jesus is as the Lord and King, Savior and Divine Warrior, Redeemer and Victor, Alpha and Omega.

We do this so that we might **proclaim Christ's victory over the powers**, the very same powers that teach us other Christ's, other churches, other purposes, other gods, and therefore bring great division among us. It is he and not us that makes each part work properly. It is he who grows the body so that it builds itself up in love. All of it is the work of Christ. Then, and only through mystical union as the body is living in the head, it becomes the work of his saints, all to

the praise of his glorious grace. Therefore, you must be **deadly serious** about disregarding the unity of the church for the sake of your point of view, especially over disputable matters, thereby missing the whole point of the unity, the whole point of the proclamation, thus flipping on its head the very mission of the church. Is that not part of the very kind of teaching that Paul warns against here?

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