
Following our GPS: Ministry

Ephesians 4:1-17¹

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What is the primary objective of a grace-enabled Biblical ministry? What is it we are trying to accomplish? How does having a God Positioning System orient ministry and orient you to service God among His people?

In this day when ministry is measured and evaluated by all sorts of human measures and standards, we need to return once again to carefully setting Biblical standards for ourselves. We need God's positioning, directing, guiding system to orient us. We need to get our guidance from Him in His Word. We need to follow the path, the road, the way HE sets out for us. As in many things, this GPS system for the church gives us both specific practice (but not many) and emphasizes principles.

Paul has been orienting us by stressing our Christian identity. He has been telling us who God has said we are. There are both corporate, who we are together, and individual, who we are as persons, aspects. There have been two important prayers: one that we might know and one that we might be strengthened. Paul is now beginning to work out how we become who we are. Since the gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ, are at the core of who we are, then he is going to intertwine those truths with the commands he is about to give. He is not going to let us move on from what He has done (the gospel) and who we are (our identity). Through the rest of the book Paul is going to set the trajectory for becoming who we are along the path of God's grace and commands.

How is a God-focused ministry going to serve people well??

There is a Unity to be Humbly Maintained (v.1-6)

The unity of the true church is to be highly prized.

¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Its Overarching Plea (v.1)

Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...

These brief words are the overarching command that frames the whole of chapters 4-5. This is how we are to live given who we are. This is how we to live, given what God has called us to become. This is the general way our Godward orientation guides and guards us.

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Godliness in a believer is not merely a matter of ethics. It is not merely about following a list of steps of action. That is legalism and moralism. The Bible's response to the constant appeal for, "tell us how" is to tell you "how to think." It is the way we think and live that is worthy of the kind of God who has called or summoned us into His kingdom and family. Godliness is an orientation of the soul that directs the life.

Its Required Practices (v.2-3)

Unity is to be diligently maintained by having a right view of ourselves and valuing the unity in the Spirit. Christians are maintaining unity, not creating it. Our unity exists because of God's grace and saving work.

Maintaining the unity that God has created requires humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance in love. Everyone one of these virtues remind us that we are all in the process of growth and change. No one has arrived. We are all still learning to live out the gospel through grace.

We are to have an eagerness to live in harmony with other Christians. Through the peace that ties, do your best to maintain unity in the Spirit. The primary focus of this is that we live in harmony and peace among ourselves. The church at Ephesus, as did many churches of the first generation, struggled with the division between Jew and Gentile. Paul is calling on them to recognize the work that God has done and the essential oneness of God's people. It is a call to living at peace eagerly seeking to overcome natural divides whatever they may be.

Its Theological Principles (v.4-6)

The unity that is maintained relationally is based on the objective realities of truth.

We have the unity of the Spirit - one body, hope and calling

We have the unity of the Son - one faith, baptism

We have the unity of the Father - over, in and through all

These individual roles are united at the level of essence in the Trinity. So the church is united at the level of being, of spiritual life. The diversities are external and relational and good.

There is a Diversity to be Gratefully Embraced (v.7-10)

Paul turns from showing how our oneness is framed by these great truths to how our diversity is equipped and energized.

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

Its Foundational Principle (v.7)

Each one of us receives enabling grace (gifts) measured out to us by Christ's giving. All are enabled - every believer has some gift or grace or spiritual ability to serve the church. No one is exempt.

Our spiritual ability is a gift - it is given to us; we cannot earn it nor deserve it. It is a stewardship to be cultivated by grace. It is measured out by Christ - it is Christ who decides who gets what. It is a sovereign bestowal to be received with gratitude. You don't choose your giftedness. God has given what He has chosen.

This is fundamental for orienting ministry. Too many people are *trying* to do what they are not equipped to do. Too many people are *not doing* what they are equipped to do. Despite all the talk to the contrary, there is no "test" for spiritual gifts. You simply obey the Lord in all that He commands, then as you do so, He will give you the desire, the opportunity and the ability to express your gift through ministry.

Its Scriptural Parallel (v.8)

Paul uses the language of Psalm 68:18 to summarize the whole Psalm. That whole Psalm depicts a victorious ruler dispensing the gifts to His subjects. This paraphrase shows that it is the resurrected and ascended Lord who bestows these grace abilities to His people. Notice also the kind of connection Paul makes: the reference to the Old Testament is a *therefore*. What Christ has done as a great reality casts its shadow back into this Old Testament Psalm.

Its Explanatory Parenthetical (v.9-10)

What is meant by to the lower, earthly regions, literally, "into the lower parts of earth"? Without going into all the exegetical work, let me just say that this could be translated, "Into the lower parts which belong to the earth." This would refer to Christ's death and His burial in the grave. This fits the context best because in His death Christ had victory over sin and redeemed those who would be given as "gifts" to the church.

Christ's ascent above the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe probably refers to His royal relationship with the whole world. A risen King He bestows gifts as He wills because of His work on the cross. This reflects Ephesians 1:23, which speaks of Christ imparting all the fullness of His blessings to the church and to the universe. Christ, who embodies the fullness of the Godhead (Colossians 2:9), fills the universe and is sovereign over it (Colossians 1:18).ⁱ (See Zuck/Walvord)

The giving of gifts to us on earth is just as real as His descent to earth and ascension to heaven. He came down and went up so that the Spirit and His gifts could come down to us. Therefore, the differences and diversities of abilities and perspectives among us should not divide us but should allow us to be more together than we could ever be apart.

There is a Ministry to be Diligently Sustained (v.11-16)

How is this grace enabled and gifted ministry work itself out in practical ministry to people for Christ?

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.

Its Practical Description (v.11-13)

Paul is very clear about how ministry is to work. But, it is a clarity of *principle* not detailed *practice*. I think New Testament writers would be baffled by our thinking of *principles* as not *practical*. (in fact, I think they would have recognized it as being “Roman”),

People - God's Gift to the Church (v.11)

Paul's focus is on these people as gifts to the church as a result of the Lord gifting them. God gave gifts to people (v.7) and then gives gifted people to the church (v.11). He is talking about the people themselves, not the offices. Yes, a couple of these are offices in the church – but he is talking about the people – those apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

Notice that all of these people relate to the Word of God. In the New Testament, they are given to the church to give the Word to the church. The Apostles laid the foundations and gave us the Word.ⁱⁱ The prophets laid the foundations and proclaimed the Word. Prophets now are basically preachers – we proclaim the Word that has already been given. Evangelists are those who focus on preaching the Word to unbelievers – they are gospelers. Modern missionaries are not apostles, they are evangelists.

And we have Shepherds and Teachers. Let me pause here a moment: is this two groups of people or as some teach, one group? Is Paul referring to the shepherds of the church and the teachers in the church or is he referring to Pastor-Teachersⁱⁱⁱ? The discussion is really among those who hold that this sentence is about four offices. Since I don't think that, I am inclined to say that this is two groups of people: by His grace, God gives shepherds and teachers^{iv} to the church. Now, should shepherds teach? Absolutely – in fact, to be qualified to be a shepherd a man must be able to teach. Are there teachers in the church who are not shepherds? Yes. We have many of them and the church always has.

God gives spiritual abilities to people and then gives those spiritually enabled people to the church.

Process - God's Grace in the Church (v.12)

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

The process of ministry development in the church has two components driving toward a single objective.

First, there is the equipping of people by gifted leadership. The leadership equips people in all spheres of life and ministry so that they will be broadly effective in the work of service they themselves are gifted for.

Second, there are the works of service by equipped people. The ministry of the church is carried on by people who have been enabled by the Spirit and equipped by their leaders.

All ministry is driving toward building up (edifying) the church. Now remember, in the Bible, the church is the people of God. The building up of the church is not primarily the organization of churching as we think of it. It is the spiritual growth and maturity of the people gathered in the church. The establishing of a Biblical, effective organization is desirable and will generally happen as people exercise their gifts and abilities.

Now we need to stop and think about this text a bit. Is this what we are doing here? I know that every church feels like this is so - we more so than most. But, we at least have to stop and ask ourselves some questions.

What is the primary objective for the works of service (ministry) we do as a corporate body? Note: I asked what is it, not what ought it to be...

What is the primary objective for each work of service (Bible Education, worship, Counseling, missions, etc.)?

Are the elders being equipped for their work of leading ministry?

Are the elders equipping you theologically and practically for those works of ministry?

Are gifted, able, experienced people equipping people for life, for living in a way that is worthy of our identity and purpose as Christians?

What do you notice about this? What has just been described is *equipping people through training and discipleship*. The practical application of Biblical truth and principles becomes embedded in people through *discipleship*.

Purpose - God's Goal for the Church (v.13)

The word to attain here means to arrive at a destination. It is fitting then for our series. We have a GPS from God that not only gives us how to get there, but also defines the destination. In other words, there are waypoints along the road to being the kind of church and people God wants us to be.

The first waypoint is *a unified body of doctrine* - held and lived by all

The second waypoint is *an intimate knowledge of Christ* - a vital, true and real relationship

The destination is *a maturity measured by Christ* - standard of maturity set by Jesus

All this is an expression of the fullness of Christ in our truth, experience and maturity.

Its Maturing Design (v.14-15)

What is the reason for the equipping of Biblical ministry?

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,

In the sphere of love, we are to be:

Growing from Infancy to Maturity

This is a huge goal all through the Bible for God's people. We must be becoming mature. Yet, I find all too often Christians are childish, self-centered and infantile. If we are carrying on the equipping and doing of Biblical ministry, then we can expect that people will begin to grow up. And we are to grow up in all aspects so that it is a well-rounded, full maturity.

Moving from Vulnerability to Error to Speaking Truth in Love

Immaturity as believers makes us vulnerable to the ever-shifting and deceptive presentations of error. We will be unstable and susceptible to being tricked by men who have crafted their error to look like truth. Now, we are wide-open, not just to error that comes from within the church, but to the prevailing *zeitgeist* of our time and cultures.

This growing up process is not just a matter of absorbing truth, but also being able to articulate it in love. And this is a huge challenge. Many of you are becoming satisfied in that you are ever learning more truth. Beloved, we must press on in our growing up until we can express that truth with conviction and Christian grace.

One writer helpfully pointed out, "As the church moves towards this final maturity it graduates from infancy and instability of [incomplete] doctrine and inadequate experience of Christ." (F.F. Bruce)

There is much here for mature, Christian reflection:

Error causes instability: instability exposes us to error.

Error is normally subtle and skillfully crafted.

Most modern error are old heresies in new words or formulations.

People who cannot articulate what they believe (in varying degrees) are going to closed to new Biblical ideas and open to old heresies - that is to say, they are going to be immature.

Its Spiritual Dynamic (v.16)

What spiritual dynamic is driving all this?

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.

Body life. Look carefully at how the analogy expresses the following truths:

Each member is fitted into the Body for their role.

Each member must do their part and carry out their role.

When both of the above are true, then the Body is building up itself in love. One way of showing sacrificial love is to serve in the Body using the spiritual gifts and enablements God has given you.

Reflect and Respond

Stott reminds us that maintaining our spiritual unity depends on four essential truths.^{vi} [p.147]

1. It depends on the *charity* of our character and conduct (verse 2)
2. It arises from the *unity* of our God (verses 3–6)
3. It is enriched by the *diversity* of our gifts (verses 7–12)
4. It demands the *maturity* of our growth (verses 13–16)

God has uniquely equipped the church by giving spiritual gifts to the whole body, then giving uniquely gifted people to the church to equip the saints to carry out their ministry,

Maturity is measured objectively by what we know of Christ and subjectively by how we walk with Christ.

The church will only truly grow as each member is strengthened and works together within the Body by the grace flowing from Christ.

A Biblically equipped ministry will focus on Christ. In the modern era of emphasizing the Holy Spirit, we must remember that the Spirit has come to testify, not of Himself, but of Christ. May Christ have the preeminence in this ministry.

ⁱ Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985, [Online] Available: Logos Library System.

ⁱⁱ There are no more Apostles today in the strict New Testament sense of a man called by God, who has seen the Lord face to face and through whom the Lord gave His Word – the 11 disciples and Paul. Today, we have missionaries who go to do pioneer evangelism in unreached people groups or basic building up of newly established churches. These are ones sent (apostles) but not as Word givers but as Word declarers.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an example of a position different from mine that is argued for by a well-known Bible Teacher, look at John MacArthur's commentary on Ephesians or his little booklet on *Elders*.

^{iv} The grammatical argument for this being Pastor-Teacher uses the Granville-Sharpe rule. Unfortunately, for those relying on the Granville-Sharpe rule, one of the rules is that the nouns cannot be plural. Singular nouns preceded by a single definitive article connected by an "and" may both refer to the same thing – there can be hyphenated. But here both words are plural: shepherds and teachers so they are more likely referring to two different groups. It seems to me that for those arguing this, the conclusion was reached first and the arguments are lined up to get there. Some have pointed out that there are as many exceptions to the Granville-Sharpe rule as there are examples of it. See *Exegetical Fallacies*, D.A. Carson, p. 81.

^v Bruce, F.F., *The International Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House) 1986, p. 1436.

^{vi} Stott, John R. W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979.