

Sermon 12: Ephesians 4:11-16: Growing the Church with the Word: Part 1

OUTLINE

The offices of the word
The purposes of the word
The goal of the word

INTRODUCTION

I have gone through three paradigm shifts with regards to the gifts of the spirit in my Christian walk. Due to being attracted to the activism and life of the Charismatic church in my earlier years I joined the Charismatic Church at the height of the Toronto blessing. The church I joined was a melting pot of various Pentecostal and Charismatic views, there was no monolithic view held by all. In this first stage, this was the naïve stage of a flat approach where I simply expected everything I saw in the book of Acts to be active today because Jesus promised that those who believe in Him will do greater miracles than He did. I endorsed the Word of Faith ideas; I embraced the New Apostolic Reformation with its emphasis on the need to reinstitute apostles and prophets to see the church grow like it did in the book of acts; there were other ideas floating around where because every Christian could speak in tongues well couldn't every Christian then also heal the sick, cast out demons, prophesy, get words of knowledge and wisdom, etc.? Then I left the Charismatic Church and joined a Baptist church. I still believed that God was powerful and could do all sorts of miracles so I became a sedate continuationist who believed that all the gifts continued, but we would talk about apostle with a small 'a', and prophet with a small 'p', allow for tongues but not for all, I would earnestly desire the greater gifts, thinking this more mature than my earlier ignorant zeal. But all this while I was growing more and more Reformed; and then entered into the third stage where I am at now which is called cessationism. Suddenly, various offices like apostle and prophet became very important and held unique positions in the church and redemptive history. Because of the nature of revelation certain gifts could not continue without challenging the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Activities that are recorded in the book of Acts were suddenly understood to be unique and not normative, recording a turning point in redemptive history and not necessarily casting a mould.

Each of these three views has a different view of how the gifts continue but also a different view on how these gifts function in and grow the church. Ephesians 4 has been talking about our unity which we must maintain, but also the diversity of the gifts that we have been given. Eph. 4:11-16 is critical in terms of spelling out how the gifts grow the church, and that is what we are looking at today.

Here is the big idea of the text that is before us, the Holy Spirit brings about growth in the church through the ministry of the word, it is the ministry of word and Spirit working through the various offices of the church which grow the church and enable them to serve one another with their gifts and grow collectively. So looking at this section under three headings we will look at v11 for the offices of word ministry that the Spirit ministers through. Then in v12-14 we will look at the purposes of the word ministry, the thing they are given to effect. And then in v15-16 where Paul sort of restates what he has said we will see the goal, the goal of all the word ministry is to help the church mature that it might use its gifts that it might mature more and more. The overall picture we want to get is the vital balance between organization and organism, officers and laity, formal gifts and informal

gifts, any view which sacrifices either side of this equation will fall short of the biblical picture of church growth presented in this section.

The offices of the word

V11, 'And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.' Ephesians in its discussion of the gifts feels very different to 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians we have a situation, or a particular shape that Paul is trying to regulate. It is a situation that is divided, and it has divided because of a gracious bestowing of various miraculous gifts which have caused disunity. The way to grow a church in 1 Corinthians sounds like getting tongues with interpretation and prophecy flowing, Ephesians gives a different impression. As we said earlier it is clear that Paul has a very particular emphasis, truth and love growing the body, but that truth coming through the gifts of office to stimulate those other gifts and that love. Paul begins listing five offices, they are all word based gifts, they all bring the word. Technically I believe that Paul is referring to 4 offices; that 'shepherds and teachers' are to be taken together. Calvin and others have taken these to be two separate offices, but as I understand 1 Timothy 3 where every elders must also be able to teach, the emphasis is on shepherding with the word, through the teaching ministry. The elder's authority rests on the clear teaching of the word so that informed consciences can follow the elders in obedience to God's word not their will. Not all elders have need gone to Bible College and have equal ability, teaching is done in many ways in the life of a congregation, but every elder needs to lead using the word. Let's quickly examine each of these offices.

Apostle: the word apostle appears all over the place and has at least 3 meanings in the NT. The basic meaning of the word is to be sent. In one way every Christian is sent John 13:16, and so technically can be called an apostle, but this is not the sense in which Paul means it here because it is clear from 1 Cor. 12:29 that not all are called to be apostles in this sense. The second meaning of the word is when anyone is formally sent as a representative or emissary like Epaphroditus in Phil. 2:25. Once again Paul is referring not to a representative but to the highest office in the church. When Paul lists the official office of an apostle as he does here or in 1 Cor. 12:28 where he says that apostles have been appointed first in the church, he is referring to himself and the other 12 Apostles' of Jesus. An apostle is someone who has seen the Lord resurrected from the dead; and has been handpicked by Christ Himself for this role. Paul had the resurrected Christ appear to him on the Damascus road and appoint him as the apostle to the Gentiles; there is no one who is called in this way today. So those views that believe in an apostolic succession are wrong; those views which believe in a return of the Charismatic office of apostle are wrong; anyone who takes to himself the title of apostle pretending to hold this office which Paul and Peter held is in error. This gift is a gift that comes with authority and the promises of Christ in the upper room to enable miraculous remembrances of His words while alive, and of future things that will be revealed to them. These are those who would be sustained as they delivered God's words like the prophets, and whose writings make up the NT. The apostles or those closely associated with them make up the writings of the NT. For this reason they along with the prophets make up the foundation of the Church, Eph. 2:20.

Prophets: Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 12:28 that prophets come second in the church in terms of authority, only an apostle has greater authority. Eph. 2:20 and Eph. 3:5 have already been written by Paul to indicate their primary role in establishing the foundation of the church, namely the God given message upon which it is built. Eph. 3:4-5, 'When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets

by the Spirit.' Both apostles and prophets were the instruments of God's revelation to the early church. Paul is here talking about the NT prophets not the OT, those who have received along with the apostles an understanding of the NT mystery not formally understood. We do not have any of their writings, though Silas who helped Peter write 1 Peter is called a prophet in Acts 15:32. Like the apostles they are foundational and just as we have no more apostles we have no more prophets. Some have tried to teach that the NT gift of prophecy was of a lower order than the OT and so can be a continuing gift of encouragement which consists in impressions given by God but that can be miscommunicated because God does not 'inspire' them in the same way as the OT prophets. The trouble with this view is that it is speculation and not biblical. It argues for a case not presented in scripture and becomes a case of defending something not warranted by the Bible. If someone were to experience God revealing something to them in a dream or have an overwhelming impression of something they could not naturally know, we happily place this under the category of a supernatural working of God without having to revive the office or gift of the prophet.

Evangelist: this one is tough. Paul is clearly listing these offices from the office with the most authority, to the office with the least. He moves from those who have authority in the universal church, namely apostles and prophets who are the foundation for the whole NT church but the list ends with those who only have authority in their local churches, the pastor-teachers. But above the pastor/elder who would be the highest authority in the local church is the evangelist. This office only appears three times in the NT, Acts 21:8 in reference to the deacon Philip; 2 Tim. 4:5 in reference to Timothy and here. In 1 Cor. 12:28 where the other three gifts are listed as apostle, prophet and teacher, this gift is not mentioned there. What then was an evangelist? The most common tactic is to associate the evangelist with modern examples of those who have been known as evangelists like Billy Graham or George Whitfield and let them define the term, and then we take the second step to say that this gift continues to be practiced in those who are sent by the church in some formal ministry capacity as evangelists or missionaries. I used to read this office this way. But because the evangelist is placed above the pastor in a list that is clearly stressing the proper order of things I have had to reevaluate it.

I think John Owen got it correct when he identified the evangelist as those apostolic representatives in the first century. Think of men like Timothy, and Titus, those who Paul calls his fellow servants in order to gain them a hearing in the various local churches to which they were sent. Titus and Timothy were sent to set things in order in Crete and Ephesus commissioned by the apostle Paul to do all that Paul himself would do if he could. If this is the case, then the formal office of evangelist as I have just defined it no longer exists along with apostles and prophets leaving only pastors as authorities in the church. In other words, there are no longer any universal offices that bear authority in the church only local ones, and the autonomy of the local church is a biblical teaching supported by this. For those who have an Episcopalian form of government, in other words who believe that you can have bishops over a number of churches, they see the evangelist as a prototypical bishop and casting the mold for the role.

Many would fear that by saying this I am undermining the task of evangelizing, but I am not. Every Christian is called to testify to what God has done for them and there will be those who are more proficient at it. If we set anyone apart to do the work of evangelism we would do so without pretending that they are stepping into the office outlined here by Paul.

Pastor-teachers: elder, pastor, teacher, bishop are words which all describe one office what we call elders. The words elder, pastor, teacher and bishop are used interchangeably. Mark Dever writes, 'It is striking that in the New Testament the words "elder," "shepherd" or "pastor," and "bishop" or "overseer" are used interchangeably in the context of the local church office. This is seen most clearly in Acts 20, when Paul meets with the "elders" of the church in Ephesus (v. 17). Several verses later, Paul tells these same elders to keep watch over themselves and over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them "overseers" (another translation for "bishop"). In the very next sentence, he exhorts these elders, these overseers, to "be shepherds [from the same root as 'pastors'] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (v. 28). In the space of twelve verses, the same men are referred to as elders, overseers, and shepherds.'

Likewise as we compare the role of elders with the pastor we see that there is an overlap in functions showing that they are simply synonyms for the same office. The word pastor simply means shepherd and if we look at the instructions to elders you will see the many times that shepherding is the way of stating it. 1 Peter 5:1-4, 'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.'

Likewise in Acts 20:28-30, 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.'

I believe that Paul spoke of pastors, and then added teachers to indicate one of their primary functions as it relates to the overall point he is trying to make here, that the word brings growth.

What I want to end with is just emphasizing again how Paul shows that the growth of the church is facilitated by the organization of the church. Many people are full of the spirit of our age which is suspicious of authority as controlling and structure as limiting the freedom of the Spirit. But Paul is very clearly outlining that the Spirit is working in the church through the offices and not apart from them.

Secondly, these offices are all word based. In our age where we have experienced the Charismatic movement there is a basic assumption that Word and Spirit are separated, that if you emphasize the word you are somehow diminishing or limiting or quenching the Spirit, and this is obviously not the way in which Paul thinks. He teaches that the word is the sword of the Spirit, so if you want the Spirit to work effectively we should use the word for this is the Spirit's own weapon.

Thirdly, spiritual growth is facilitated by learning and thinking. We live in an age that despises the mind that we are told to get out of the mind and into the Spirit. Because Paul distinguishes praying in the Spirit and praying with the understanding it has somehow come to be believed that thinking, theology, study, debate, discernment are all somehow lesser acts of the flesh, and now impulse, feeling, impression, leading, are the ways of true spirituality.

Fourthly, spiritual growth is facilitated through hearing and preaching. There are many trends where people are trying to encourage new techniques and ways to make church fun and exciting. Preaching is seen as a hindrance and not a help to church growth. Preaching is boring. Worship is more important than preaching, dialogue not monologue is the way to

make people feel included, drama and stage productions are the way to draw the crowds, and the content of short preaching should be life lessons and how to guides not deep doctrine or preaching on how you disagree with others, or how they are wrong.

Paul puts all these ideas to bed and shows us that God grows us by the Spirit through the word working through the offices of the church.