

CHAPTER SEVEN

How the Body Works

In his letter to the Ephesian Christians, the apostle Paul uses two great figures of speech or word pictures to help us understand the true nature and functioning of the church. The apostle likens the church, first, to a human body of flesh and bones, made up of many members articulated and coordinated together. The apostle likens the church, second, to a building which he describes as growing through the centuries to be a habitation for God through the Spirit.

Is the apostle guilty of mixing his metaphors? Absolutely--much as you and I might if we said, "You buttered your bread, now lie in it!" Buildings don't grow as bodies do--yet I believe Paul has deliberately constructed his word pictures in order to capture and portray for us a vision of the church as something vital, alive, and organic.

When Paul speaks of the church as a body, he makes it clear that no one joins that body except by a new birth, through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other way into this body. Once a person becomes a part of that body, every member has a contribution to make. As each member works at the task God has given him to do, the whole body functions as intended.

When Paul describes the church as a building, he makes it clear that it is a living, growing building. Every Christian is a stone added to that building--a "living stone," as Peter says in his first letter (see 1 Peter 2:5). Each is a vital part of the great temple which the Holy Spirit is building as a habitation for God. We can never understand the church until we grasp that picture.

Many people, seeking to discover God today, say that He is dead. The trouble is, they don't know His present address. They don't know where He lives. But He is very much at home in His body, the building made for Him by the Holy Spirit.

If we think of the church as a body, then Ephesians 4 presents us with an anatomy lesson, a view of the physiology and structure of the body--how the various organs function together, how the parts of the body are coordinated to accomplish the purpose of the body. If we think of the church as a building, then Ephesians 4 shows us the blueprints, the architecture, of the building.

Whether we regard the church as a body or a building, there are four ministries, or functions, within it which are so universally needed and so mutually shared that we must consider them independently from the other gifts which Christ gives to his church. Paul underscores these four particular gifts in verses 11 and 12: "His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ."

These four categories--apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers--are among of the gifts which the risen Lord has imparted to human beings (and which we explored in Chapter 4: "All God's Children Have Gifts"). They constitute what we shall call "support gifts" (as contrasted with the "service" and "sign" gifts previously considered, as found in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12). These four gifts relate to the whole body of Christ, much as the major body systems relate to the physical body.

There are, within the human body, four major systems upon which the entire body is dependent for proper functioning: the skeletal and muscular framework, the nerve system, the digestive system, and the circulatory systems. There are other systems in the body which are not essential for life itself (such as the reproductive system) but these four are. In a most remarkable way they correspond to the four support ministries within the

body of Christ:

1. **"Bones and muscles"**--*the gift of apostles*

First, there is the basic structural system of bones and muscles. This gives the body its fundamental support and makes possible our mobility and activity. We would all be nothing but rolling, shapeless globs of gelatin if it were not for our bones and muscles! This image clearly corresponds to the apostles and their function in the body of Christ. Their work was foundational, skeletal. They formed the basic structure which made the body of Christ assume the particular form it has.

To revert for a moment to the figure of the church as a building, there is a clear word from the apostle Paul concerning the function of the apostles and prophets. In Ephesians 2:10 and 20, he says, "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ, as Paul declared to the Corinthians, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11), and the primary work of an apostle was to declare the whole body of truth concerning Jesus Christ. That is the foundation. What the apostles say about Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church, and what they said about Jesus Christ is recorded for us in the New Testament. That book is written by the apostles and prophets, and the church rests squarely upon that foundation.

How does one get into the church? By believing the truth about Jesus Christ (and believing means more than intellectual assent--it is a commitment of the will as well). It is only as the church rests upon this foundation of the faith, as taught by the apostles, that there is any certainty or strength. Today many are straying from the foundation and as a result they have lost any note of authority or assurance. Merely human view-points or opinions do not change the foundation. Modern knowledge and the discoveries of science will never alter it. Our ultimate concern is what the apostles taught. That is the greatest revelation of reality we possess, "the truth [as it] is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21).

People in the construction business know that a foundation is of the utmost importance. You do not take risks or shortcuts with a foundation. You lay it squarely, securely, and strongly, for the whole building is going to rest on that foundation and will derive its strength from the character of the foundation. The same is true of the church.

The Lord Jesus made very clear that if a man builds on the wrong foundation, he is in trouble. One man may build his house on the sand and the house may look very beautiful and impressive, but when the storms come, it falls. Another man may build on the rock and his house will stand in the storm. It is the foundation which makes all the difference.

Jesus himself is the one who named the apostles. We have the record in the Gospels of the Lord calling twelve men to be "with him." That was their primary characteristic as apostles, men who had been with Jesus. He sent them out in a specialized ministry. (The word "apostle" means one sent out or one sent forth.) The Twelve had a special commission and a special authority. As you follow their ministry you recognize that they possessed an authoritative word. Wherever they went they spoke with authority. They were impressed with this themselves. They came back to Jesus and told him how they rejoiced to discover that the demons were subject to them. When they spoke the word, they had authority and that word of authority is the special mark of an apostle.

Paul, of course, was a special apostle, chosen by Jesus after His resurrection. He did not obtain his ministry from the Twelve but directly from the Lord himself, though what he taught and preached was in no sense different from what the Twelve proclaimed.

The apostolic gift is still being given today, though in a secondary sense. There is no new truth to be added to the Scriptures. But the body of truth which we now have is to be taken by those who have an apostolic gift and imparted to new churches wherever they may begin. It is part of the apostolic gift to start new churches. We

call those who perform this ministry "church planters" and "pioneer missionaries" today. Throughout the course of church history, there have been many such secondary apostles, including Adoniram Judson in Burma, William Carey in India, and Hudson Taylor in China. These were Christians with the apostolic gift and were made responsible for imparting the whole faith to new churches.

To return to the figure of the body, this apostolic system of truth is the bones and muscles of the church. There is no other line of truth about Jesus Christ. There is no other information which can come to us about Jesus than what the apostles have given. There is nothing else. If there seems to be, as Paul says to the Galatians, "it is another Gospel." It is something different (see Acts 4:12; Gal. 1:7). Here is the skeleton of the body, and upon this the church is built and from this comes its strength.

2. "The nervous system"--*the gift of prophets*

Linked with the skeletal system in the human body is the nervous system. It is the means by which the bones and muscles are stimulated to activity, galvanized into action. The nervous system is the directive system. It is linked directly to the head, and from there it conveys messages to every part of the body. This system corresponds to the work of prophets in the body of Christ.

A prophet is essentially a man who speaks for God, who unfolds the mind of God. In the early church, before the New Testament was written down, prophets spoke directly by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uttering the truths that are now recorded in the New Testament. They unfolded what God taught, and thus the body was motivated, galvanized into activity. Men such as Mark, Luke, James, and Jude were not themselves apostles but they were associated with the apostles in the writing of the New Testament.

The gift of a prophet differs from that of an apostle: The apostle gives an authoritative declaration of the whole body of truth concerning Jesus Christ; but the prophet interprets that authoritative word and explains the truth so that it becomes very clear, vital, and compelling. The very word "prophet" suggests this. It derives from a Greek root which means "to cause to shine," and is linked with the prefix "pro" which means "before." Thus a prophet is one who stands before and causes the word of the apostle to shine.

This meaning of the word "prophet" is fully reflected in Peter's second letter when he says, "We have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19). Paul also says, "He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3).

The church owes much to the ministry of prophets. Not only were parts of the Scriptures given to us by prophets but the great theologians and preachers of the church have been men with prophetic gifts. Men such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and the founders of other denominations have been prophets, and many pastors and Bible teachers today have prophetic gifts. Usually men who speak at conferences are speaking as prophets, making the truth clear, shining, and gripping. They differ from teachers in that the prophet tends more to deal with the great sweeping principles of Scripture and reality, leaving the development of more specific areas to the teacher.

3. "The digestive system"--*the gift of evangelists*

The third support ministry within the body of Christ is the evangelist. He is linked with the work of the pastor-teacher. Evangelists and teaching pastors work together just as the apostles and prophets work together. Evangelists are men and women with a special gift of communicating the Gospel in relevant terms to those who are not yet Christians. Since the evangelist is primarily responsible for the numerical growth of the body of Christ, the ministry of the evangelist corresponds to the digestive system within the human body, taking food which is quite unlike flesh and transforms it into flesh and bones, making it a living part of the body.

All Christians are expected to evangelize, but not all have the gift of an evangelist. Christians are to evangelize as witnesses, but a witness is different from an evangelist. Any individual Christian should be able to explain to others what happened when he or she became a Christian. As the apostle Peter says, a Christian should "always be ready to give ... a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). Witnessing should be as easy

as talking about any other meaningful life experience. If you can talk about how wonderful your husband is, or your wife, or your children or grandchildren, you can witness for Christ. To talk about your Christian experience simply and naturally is Christian witnessing.

But the gift of an evangelist goes further. He knows how to explain the why and how of the great redeeming story of Jesus Christ. He is able to proclaim the truth which results in new birth. He is forever dealing with the truth that God has not left man in a hopeless condition but has made a way--at great and incredible cost to His Son!--by which men and women can be set free from sin and death, and given a new start and a new basis for the battle. That is the work of an evangelist.

The evangelist's task is not to go about denouncing sin, but to point the way out of sin. The evangelist may call people's attention to that which is creating so much misery and heartache in their lives, but his work is not to denounce and condemn sinners. Evangelists are not to thunder away at people, telling them what miserable creatures they are and how God is waiting to strike them with thunderbolts of judgment. He is not to expose the horrors of hellfire and dangle sinners over those fires until they writhe and tremble. That is not the calling of the evangelist!

If the preaching of "fire and brimstone" is ever called for, it is the task of a prophet, not the task of an evangelist. The evangelist's role is to tell people about the overpowering grace of God and the overpowering love of a heavenly Father--a Father who calls men and women back to Himself, offering to set their twisted lives straight through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

Many Christians today possess the gift of an evangelist, both men and women. Evangelism can be done anywhere. It is not restricted to mass meetings, such as in the great Billy Graham crusades, though Dr. Graham's ministry is also true evangelism. The gift of an evangelist can be exercised toward a single individual, as is clear in the book of Acts when Philip the evangelist spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch as he was riding along in a chariot and told him of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

4. "The circulatory system"--*the gift of pastor-teachers*

The fourth great physical system which the body depends upon for life is the circulatory system--the veins and arteries linked to the heart and lungs, which distribute food and oxygen to every part of the body, and take away the accumulated wastes. This corresponds to the work of teaching pastors within the body of Christ, who are there to maintain the life of the body by feeding and cleansing it and preserving its life in vigor and vitality.

The word "pastor" means a shepherd. The pastor is also called in the Scriptures an elder, as well as an overseer or bishop. These last two are the same Greek word, translated in two different ways. "Bishop" is the English translation of episcopus, which literally means an overseer. Elders or bishops were always limited to one locality, one church, in New Testament days. A man who was an elder or pastor in one church was not also an elder in another place.

Nor were these always men who devoted their full time to ministry. Some elders were called ruling elders and were often supported by the church to devote full time to their work, though this was not always the case. There were also others who were elders but were not called ruling elders. These included anyone who did shepherding work within the church. Today, we would see these shepherding elders as Sunday school teachers, home Bible class leaders, and young people's leaders. Many Christians have the gift of pastor-teacher whether they are employed full-time in that capacity or not.

The ruling elders correspond most closely to the present concept of a pastor, but in the early church there was never a single pastor or elder but always several. They were to serve as teachers and administrators--but they were not to be, as Peter says, "domineering over those in your charge" (1 Pet. 5-3). In other words, they are not to be church bosses. They are not to act as the final authority within the church so that whatever they say goes. Jesus Himself taught this. Mark records that Jesus called the disciples to Him and said, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you" (Mark 10:42,43).

The pastors of the churches are not to exercise their authority as bosses but as examples. When they themselves obey the Word, others will be motivated to follow. But if the teaching pastors do not practice what they preach, they have no other authority. Their authority derives from their spirituality, and if they lose their spirituality they also lose their authority. It is not the office that gives a pastor the right to rule--it is the individual and his gift before God. This question of a pastor's authority is so important and so misunderstood among the churches that I want to take the time here to comment further on how the Scriptures view the matter.

No command structure

Authority among Christians is not derived from the same source as worldly authority, nor is it to be exercised in the same manner. The world's view of authority places men over one another, as in a military command structure, a business executive hierarchy, or a governmental system. This is as it should be. Urged by the competitiveness created by the Fall of the human race, and faced with the rebelliousness and ruthlessness of sinful human nature, the world could not function without the use of command structures and executive decisionmaking.

But as Jesus carefully and clearly stated, "it shall not be so among you." Disciples are always in a different relationship to one another than are the "worldlings," those who are outside of the church. Christians are brothers and sisters, children of one Father and members of one another in the body of Christ. Jesus put it clearly in Matthew 23:8, "You have one teacher, and you are all brethren."

Throughout twenty centuries, the church has virtually ignored these words. Probably with the best of intentions, it has repeatedly borrowed the authority structures of the world, changed the names of executives from kings, generals, captains, presidents, governors, secretaries, heads and chiefs to popes, patriarchs, bishops, stewards, deacons, pastors and elders, and gone merrily on its way, lording it over the brethren and destroying the model of servanthood which our Lord intended.

In most churches today, an unthinking acceptance has been given to the idea that the pastor is the final voice of authority in both doctrine and practice, and that he is the executive officer of the church with respect to administration. But surely, if a pope over the whole church is bad, a pope in every church is no better!

But if the church is not to imitate the world in this matter, what is it to do? Leadership must certainly be exercised within the church and there must be some form of authority. The question is answered in Jesus' words, "You have one teacher." For much too long, churches have behaved as if Jesus were far away in heaven and He has left it up to church leaders to make their own decisions and run their own affairs.

But Jesus left the church with a far different vision of church leadership when He assured the disciples in the Great Commission, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." And in Matthew 18:20, He reiterated, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Clearly this indicates that He is present not only in the church as a whole but in every local church as well. It is Jesus Himself, therefore, who is the ultimate authority within every body of Christians. He is quite prepared to exercise His authority through the instrument He Himself has ordained: the eldership.

The task of the elders is not to run the church themselves but to determine how the Lord in their midst wishes to run his church! Much of this He has already made known through the Scriptures which describe the impartation and exercise of spiritual gifts, and the availability of resurrection power to exercise those gifts. He has also made known through the Scriptures the responsibility of believers to bear one another's burdens, to confess their sins to one another, to teach, admonish, and encourage one another, to hold one another accountable, and to evangelize and serve the needs of a hurting world.

The mind of the Spirit

In the day-to-day decisions which every church faces, elders are to seek and find the mind of the Lord through an uncoerced unanimity, reached after thorough and biblically related discussion. Thus, ultimate authority--even in the practical, day-to-day operation of the church--is vested in the Lord and in no one else.

This is what the book of Acts reveals in its description of the actions of the Holy Spirit who planned, initiated, and ordered the amazingly effective evangelism strategy of the early church (see especially Acts chapters 8 and 13).

The elders of the early church sought the mind of the Spirit and, when the Spirit made His will clear to them, they acted with unity of thought and purpose, as we see in Acts 15:28: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden." The authority, therefore, was not the authority of men but of God, expressed not through men, acting as individuals, but through the collective agreement of men whom the Spirit had led to eldership (see Acts 20:28).

The point is simply this: No one person is the sole expression of the mind of the Spirit; no individual has authority from God to direct the affairs of the church. Whenever a church gathers itself around the unquestioned leadership of a single individual, it ceases to be a church; it becomes a cult. A plurality of elders is necessary as a safeguard to the all-too-human tendency to play God and lord it over other people.

Even when a plurality of elders is established, care must be taken that the church's leaders (who, biblically, are to be seen as servants, not bosses) exercise their authority with humility, not by dominating, controlling, and intimidating others. The influence of a servant-leader is not the power to give orders but the ability to inspire enthusiasm and voluntary cooperation. This is the nature of all authority among Christians--even the authority of the Lord himself! He never forces our obedience, he attracts our devotion and our love--and He does so by awakening in us our gratitude and our responsiveness to His love. "We love him because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

The true authority of elders and other leaders in the church is that of respect, aroused by their own loving and godly example. This is the force of two verses often cited by those who claim a unique authority of pastors over church members. The first is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13: "But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

The key phrase is "and are over you in the Lord," and the Greek word in question is *prohistamenous*. Though this is translated "over you" in both the Revised Standard Version and King James Version, the word itself contains no implication of being over another. The New English Bible more properly renders it, "and in the Lord's fellowship are your leaders and counsellors." The thought in the word is that of "standing before" others, not of "ruling over" them. It is the common word for leadership. In the body of Christ, leaders can lead only if they are able to persuade some to follow.

Another verse used to support command authority is Hebrews 13:17, which the Revised Standard Version renders, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account." The imperative translated "obey" is from the word *peitho*, to persuade. In the middle voice, as used here, Thayer's lexicon gives its meaning as "to suffer one's self to be persuaded." Again there is no thought of a right to command someone against his will. But the clear thrust is that leaders are persuaders whose ability to persuade arises not from a smooth tongue or a dominant personality but from a personal walk which evokes respect.

Why change now?

At this point many may be tempted to say, "What difference does it make? After all, the pattern of command authority is too widely established to alter now. Besides, many churches seem to be doing all right as it is. Why try to change now?"

In response, consider the following:

1. The Bible indicates that any deviation from the divine plan inevitably produces weakness, division, strife, increasing fruitlessness and, ultimately, death. The present low state of many churches is testimony to the effects of ignoring, over a long period of time, God's way of working.

2. A command structure of authority in the church deprives the world of any model or demonstration of a different way of life than the one it already lives by. Worldlings see no difference between the church and the world, so why should they change and believe in Jesus Christ?

3. A command authority inevitably produces resentment, repression, exploitation and, finally, rebellion. Command authority is an expression of law, not grace. The Scriptures assure us that law can never redeem or restore us; by its very nature, the law can only condemn and repress us.

4. The Lord Jesus desires to use the church to show the world a wholly new form of authority which is consistent with grace, not law. But this new form of authority is nullified by the top-down, command-style structure that prevails in today's church. Our dying-to-live Gospel is pronounced D.O.A.--dead on arrival--even before it is proclaimed, because we deny its power with the way we conduct our lives and our church business. As a result, God is robbed of His glory and His image is distorted before the watching world. Nothing could be more serious than this!

Note that each of the four support ministries we are discussing have to do with the Word of God. The first two--apostles and prophets--are concerned with originating and expounding the Word, while the last two--evangelists and pastor-teachers--are concerned with applying the Word to individual lives. The evangelist deals with the beginning of Christian life while the teaching pastor is involved with the development and growth of that life. Evangelists are much like obstetricians, helping to bring new Christians into the world. Teaching pastors are like pediatricians, seeing that these Christians have a healthy spiritual "diet," that their "diseases" receive proper attention, and that they get plenty of spiritual "fresh air" and "exercise."

To return to the word picture of the church as a building, the evangelist is the quarryman who digs out the rock, cuts it loose from quarystone, and hews it to a rough approximation of its ultimate size. The pastor-teacher is the stone mason who shapes the rock, fitting it into the building in its proper place according to the blueprint of the great architect.

When we compare present-day churches to the original blueprint, it is strikingly apparent that many deviations have been permitted which have been detrimental to the life of the church. Through the centuries, the church gradually turned away from the simple provisions which made it such a powerful and compelling force in its early years, and terrible distortions entered into the church which continue to weaken the church today. Popular thinking fastened onto the church building--the physical stone-and-glass edifice--as the identifying symbol of the church. Emphasis was placed upon great imposing structures, massive ornate cathedrals with stained glass windows and flying buttresses.

In the beginning, "working in the church" meant to exercise a gift or perform a ministry anywhere within the far-flung body of Christ--even in a home, out on a mission field, or in a hospital. Gradually, however, "working in the church" came to mean performing some religious act within a specific building which was called "the church."

At the same time, there was a gradual transfer of ministry responsibility from the people (whom we now call the "laity") to the few pastor-teachers (whom we now call the "clergy," a term derived from the Latin clericus, meaning a priest. The scriptural concept that every believer is a priest before God was gradually lost, and a special class of super-Christians emerged who were looked to for practically everything, and who came to be called the "ministry." Somehow, the church lost sight of the concept, so clearly stated in Ephesians 4, that all Christians are "in the ministry." The proper task of the four support ministries we have examined is to train, motivate, and strengthen the people--so-called "ordinary laypeople"--to do the work of the ministry.

When the ministry was left to the "professionals," there was nothing left for the people to do other than come to church and listen. They were told that it was their responsibility to bring the world into the church building to hear the pastor preach the Gospel. Soon Christianity became little more than a Sunday-morning spectator

sport, much like the definition of football: twenty-two men down on the field, desperately in need of rest, and twenty thousand in the grandstands, desperately in need of exercise!

This unbiblical distortion has placed pastors under an unbearable burden. They have proved completely unequal to the task of evangelizing the world, counseling the wounded and brokenhearted, ministering to the poor and needy, relieving the oppressed and afflicted, expounding the Scriptures, and challenging the entrenched forces of evil in an increasingly darkened world. Pastors were never, ever meant to do it all! To even attempt it is to end up frustrated, exhausted, and emotionally drained--which, of course, is exactly the state in which you find many pastors today!

Further, this distortion has resulted in a sadly impoverished church which has made little impact on the world and increasingly withdraws into weakness, irrelevance, and isolation. We desperately need to return to the dynamic of the early church. We can no longer defend our ivy-clad traditions which leave no room for the original, power-packed New Testament strategy. Pastors, particularly, must restore to the people the ministry which was taken from them with the best of intentions.

The work of the ministry belongs to the entire body of believers, who should be equipped, guided, and encouraged by those who are gifted by God to expound and apply His Word with wisdom and power. The entire body has received gifts from the Spirit, and it is the task of those in the pastoral ministry to encourage the entire body to discover and exercise those gifts. When we rediscover the pattern and strategy of Ephesians 4, when we have given all Christians in the body their God-given role as ministers of God's eternal plan, then the entire body comes alive with resurrection power. Lives are changed. Ministries explode. Communities are touched and healed. The church becomes healthy and vital and exciting again.

If we can recapture God's original strategy for the church, then we will again see churches that are modern extensions of the church of Acts. The trademarks of the true, living church of Jesus Christ are boldness, power, transformation, and love, lived out in act after act of Christian service. There is no place in this world more exciting to be than a church that operates as God designed it to!

In the next chapter, we will see how all the members of the body of Christ can be "shaped up" to do the ministry of the church.

[Body Life](#), [Table of Contents](#) | [Next Chapter](#) | [The Ray Stedman Library Index Page](#) | [Biography of Ray Stedman](#) | [Peninsula Bible Church](#)

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