

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shaping Up the Saints

Throughout the Christian centuries, no principle of church life has proved more revolutionary--and more bitterly fought!--than the declaration of Ephesians 4 that the ultimate work of the church in the world is to be done by the saints--plain, ordinary, Christians--and not by a professional clergy or a few select laymen. We must never lose the impact of the apostle Paul's statement that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers exist "for the equipment of the saints for the work of Christian ministry, for building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12).

Perhaps this can be made clearer if we diagram verses 11 and 12 in the following manner:

Apostles Prophets Evangelists Pastor-Teachers	Do One Thing:	Equip the Saints	Unto	The Word of the Ministry
			Unto	The Building up of the Body of Christ

Note that neither the apostles and prophets nor the evangelists and pastor-teachers are expected to do the work of the ministry! They are not even expected to do the work of building up the body of Christ! Those tasks are to be done only by the people--the ordinary, plain-vanilla Christians we often call "the laity." The four offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher exist for one function and one function only: to equip everyday Christians to do the work God has given them--and gifted them!--to do.

So let's take a closer look at the word "equipping." What does this mean and how is it done? In the original Greek, the word is *katartismos*, from which we get our English word "artisan"--an artist or craftsman, someone who works with his hands to make or build things. It is a special point of interest that this word first appears in the New Testament in connection with the calling of the disciples.

As Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, sitting in a boat busily working. What were they doing? They were mending their nets. The word "mending" is the word translated in Ephesians 4 as "equipping." They were equipping their nets by mending them. They were fixing their nets, making them strong, preparing them for service, getting them ready for action!

Mending the saints

The use of this particular word suggests that the role of the four support gifts within the church is essentially that of mending the saints, preparing them for service, getting them ready for action. This Greek word is also translated as "fitting them out" or "preparing." The Greek authority, J. H. Thayer, says it means "to make one what he ought to be." Perhaps the nearest modern equivalent is "to shape up." The ultimate aim of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor--teachers is the shaping up of the saints to do the work of the ministry.

A moment's thought will make clear that the instrument to be used by the four support gifts in equipping the saints is the word of God. Obviously, all four support ministries relate somehow to that word. The apostles and prophets originated and expounded it. As we have noted, they laid the foundations upon which the whole church must rest. The ministry of the apostles is still available to us through the written New Testament, and

prophets are still given by the Holy Spirit to the churches to unfold the word of the apostles and make it clear and powerful.

Evangelists and pastor-teachers are to proclaim and apply the word. Evangelists move about, some more widely than others, telling the great historic story of what God has done for men and women in Jesus Christ, and describing what will result in the life of anyone who believes this story. Evangelists also have a responsibility to take with them younger Christians who share the gift of an evangelist, and to mentor them and train them in how to proclaim the good news effectively in the power of a risen Lord.

The task of the pastor-teacher is to use the Word of God to cleanse and feed the flock. The early church clearly understood that the word of God was the instrument of growth in the lives of Christians. Paul once spoke to the very elders to whom this Ephesian letter is addressed and said to them, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

And again, at the close of his career, he wrote to his son in the faith, young Timothy, and urged him to teach the inspired Scripture which were given, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. If pastors and teachers ignore the Word, God's divinely-provided instrument of equipping, then they should not be surprised if the saints in their charge are ill-equipped for--and ineffective in--the work of the ministry. That is why so many churches today are little more than spectator arenas where unequipped, unmotivated, uninvolved people sit around, waiting only to be kept amused and occupied.

The whole truth

The teaching of the truth of the Word of God is what Peter calls "feeding the flock of God which is among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). The Word can both feed (Heb. 5:12,13 and 1 Pet. 2:2), and cleanse (John 15:3 and Eph. 5:26), and the true pastor will constantly be using it to do both. He will seek to teach the whole truth of God. There is no better means to do this than through the expository preaching of the whole Bible. The expository method of teaching or preaching is to go through a book, or a section of a book of the Bible, leaving out nothing, commenting on everything, touching it all. That prevents a pastor from only skewing his preaching only to a few favorite "pet passages," and forces that pastor to keep truth in balance.

The prophet Isaiah says that this was the way Scripture was originally given: "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." (Isa. 28:13). You won't find in the Bible a chapter on evil and another on morals and another on baptism and another on marriage. These subjects are all woven together in a delightful sanity of balance. One can never take a sizable section of the word of God and comment on it without presenting truth in balance. It is truth in balance which performs the task of equipping the saints.

The business of preaching is, as someone has well put it, "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." The truth is very comforting and enlightening, but it also ought to get under our collars, and into our hearts, and disturb us greatly at times. Only the Word of God can do this.

It is the pounding of the hammer of the Word which finally pulverizes the granite hardness of our rationalizing, self-deceptive hearts, making us yield to what God is saying to us. It is the truth, driven home by a heart made earnest in prayer, that melts, softens, and heals hearts, causing individuals to grow in grace and power. Only the Word of God can teach a new Christian the difference between flashy, dedicated, zeal operating in the suave power of the flesh, and the quiet commitment of a Spirit-filled life which faithfully obeys God whether anyone sees and applauds or not.

Unfortunately, in many churches (and particularly American churches), there has come a strange reversal of roles between the pastor and the evangelist. This has effectively deprived churches of the biblical ministry of a pastor and has resulted in a sadly impoverished, untaught, unequipped people. The work of evangelism has been exalted over that of pastoral teaching in many American churches. How did this come about?

In frontier America, the role of evangelist was greatly admired and respected. So pastors of frontier churches

began to see their role as that of an evangelist, whose task was to declare the initial truths of Christianity and win as many to Christ as possible. They began to evangelize in their pulpits, priding themselves on their faithfulness to their calling in proclaiming the Gospel fearlessly, Sunday after Sunday. As a result, it became the task of the people to bring others into the church to hear the pastor evangelize. In time, however, fewer and fewer unchurched people came into the church. Finally, the pastor was left to evangelize the evangelized--week after week after week!

Since the saints were not led on into deeper and clearer understanding of the great provisions of life and power available to them through the Spirit, they grew dull and bored with the Gospel which they heard every week. They soon fell into apathy, criticism, quarreling, bickering, divisions and schisms, and eventually into dissolute living and the double standards of hypocrisy.

When this occurred, the rate of conversions dropped off alarmingly, and an evangelist was usually brought in to correct this. The visiting evangelist, however, frequently found that the people were in no spiritual condition to undertake evangelism, and so he had to take a week or so of special meetings with the congregation and become a pastor to them, teaching them enough spiritual life that they could aid him in the subsequent outreach meetings. Thus the modern revivalist was born. The annual "revival" became the shot in the arm upon which most churches depended for any degree of advance or witness.

Naturally this picture is somewhat overdrawn, and the situation just described was not true everywhere, nor always to the same degree. There have always been strong churches where the pastor has faithfully taught and applied the Scriptures, and where Christians have demonstrated a quality of life which has made their community sit up and take notice.

Obviously, I would never wish to downgrade the splendid work of evangelism which has gone on for many decades in certain great preaching centers. Thousands have found spiritual rebirth and have gone further and deeper into the truths of Scripture, becoming effective, ministering Christians. Unfortunately, however, the good is all too often the enemy of the best. When the pastor becomes an evangelist and the evangelist is forced to assume the role of pastor, neither is performing his proper function within the body. Neither is using his gifts as God planned, and the whole body suffers as a result.

There are, of course, individuals who have both the gifts of an evangelist and a pastor. These people are responsible to use both gifts in their ministries. But they should clearly understand that one gift is exercised toward Christians while the other is directed to reaching nonChristians. One is best performed in a meeting of Christians, while the other is best taken outside the church, to the marketplaces and neighborhoods where the worldlings gather.

In all the years I pastored Peninsula Bible Church, we never held an evangelistic meeting in the church. You might think, "Well, I guess it was a very static church. Without evangelistic meetings, there wouldn't be too many new converts at PBC!" But in that, you would be very mistaken! Even without evangelistic meetings, PBC experienced a continual, steady stream of new converts coming into the church for instruction and development in the Christian life. Where, then, did evangelism take place at PBC? Evangelism occurred in the homes of members, in public halls, over the backyard fence, on the school campuses, and wherever a hearing for the Gospel could be obtained.

Every meeting held in the church building at PBC has been aimed at the instruction, training, or worship of Christians together. Our entire Sunday school is set up to equip the saints, of all ages, to do the work of the ministry. The work of expounding and applying the Scriptures begins with the pulpit and is continued in every class, in every gathering, and in many of the homes of Christians. Stress is laid upon confronting life as it is really lived in the trenches of life, so that the insights of Scripture can be applied to real situations, and so that believers can discover how to draw upon the resurrection power of an everpresent Lord. Christians are taught to welcome contact with the world but to live distinctive lives in the midst of it, "sheep in the midst of wolves," as Jesus put it.

Certainly the primary responsibility for effective Christian training lies with those within the church who have the gift of pastor-teacher. Ideally this would include all the ruling elders, plus Sunday school teachers, young

people's leaders, home Bible class teachers, small group leaders, and the like. They share together the responsibility of growing in the knowledge of the Word of God and of learning to impart it so as to instruct, admonish, rebuke, exhort, and encourage those who are under their care.

Little tin gods

The Scriptures also tell us the kind of heart and attitude which pastors are to have as they work to "shape up the saints" for ministry. If that phrase, "shaping up the saints," conveys to you an image of a church drill sergeant, thundering, growling, and barking at his people, then you have the wrong idea! Pastors are not to be tyrants or bosses--even though, as we survey the ecclesiastical landscape, we can see more than a few such pastors around!

There was just such a first century "church boss" mentioned in the apostle John's third letter. His name was Diotrephes, and he was described as a man "who loves to have the preeminence" in the church (3 John 1:9). In today's church, "bosses" like Diotrephes can be found among both pastors and laypeople--and both are equally destructive to the life, spirit, and vitality of a church.

The apostle Peter writes to certain pastors (or elders) as being himself "a fellow elder with you," and he exhorts them: "I urge you then to see that your 'flock of God' is properly fed and cared for. Accept the responsibility of looking after them willingly and not because you feel you can't get out of it, doing your work not for what you can make, but because you are really concerned for their well being. You should aim not at being 'little tin gods' but as examples of Christian living in the eyes of the flock committed to your charge" (1 Pet. 5:2,3, Phillips).

"Little tin gods" is a colorful modern expression for the Greek, "not as lords over God's heritage." The RSV renders it "not as domineering over those in your charge."

You can see that the Peter speaking here is quite different from the brash disciple of the Gospels. Here, chastened and humbled, he seeks to fulfill the commission the Lord Jesus gave him after the resurrection when He asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" and three times gave him the command, "Feed my sheep." Peter has now learned that the task of the shepherd is to feed the sheep--not to fleece them! He has learned to be a servant and not a lord over God's people.

These words are not to be taken lightly. Every pastor, especially, must heed these words. Church leaders must ever remember that they are not called to be bosses. They are but instruments, servants, and examples. Once again, Jesus said, "When the good shepherd puts forth his sheep, he goes before them" (see John 10:4). That is, he does everything first. He leads his sheep by doing everything first. No teacher has the right to teach whose life does not exemplify his teaching. If he tries to say one thing and be another, the Chief Shepherd will suddenly pull the rug from under him and his ministry will be despised.

Again, the ministry of shepherding and teaching must be done without desiring personal glory. How well pastors know that right here is where the full force of temptation to pride can strike! There is something very pleasing to the ego to stand in front of others and have every eye fastened on you and every ear open to what you have to say. It is terribly easy to begin to crave that feeling and to find subtle ways of nurturing and encouraging it.

As a pastor I must confess that I had to stop the practice of going to the door after a service and greeting people as they went out. I found that when I did it regularly, it fed my ego in such a way that I had a terrible battle with pride. People were saying nice things to me and I found myself loving to hear them. It is very easy for a pastor or teacher to perform his ministry for hidden reasons of personal prestige or glory.

Pastors love to be regarded as dedicated, mature Christians. They easily succumb to such thinking as, "I've sacrificed so much time and money to fulfill my calling. Maybe I really do deserve all this attention and praise! After all, haven't I been faithful to God's call on my life? Haven't I done a good job of serving these people and God? Hey, I must be a pretty good guy!"

Of course, no pastor would ever say so publicly. But it is often evident in the hurt feelings they display when something doesn't go their way, or in their desire to quit if they haven't been sufficiently appreciated and applauded. You can see it in the little jabs of jealous cattiness and pettiness which one pastor will sometimes display toward another pastor's ministry. You can sense it in the sarcasm you'll often hear in a pastor's personal speech, and in the false modesty that is often displayed in the pulpit.

I once heard of a congregation which gave its pastor a medal for humility--but they took it away because he wore it! Humility is a tricky commodity: The moment you realize you have it, it's gone!

To get attention

One further thing can be said about the ministry of equipping the saints through the exposition of the Word of God. Paul describes his own ministry in these terms: "Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). The process Paul followed in shaping up the saints was first to warn them and then to teach them. Teaching alone--the imparting of biblically correct doctrine--is not enough. It must be preceded by the ministry of *warning*.

You might say, "Warning? Before teaching? That doesn't seem right!" Well, it didn't seem right to me either, the first time I deeply considered this verse in Colossians. Surely, we should teach first, and then, if the teaching is not received, it is appropriate to warn of the results of neglecting that teaching. But when I looked more closely at the original word translated "warning," I found that it is the Greek word for "mind" combined with the verb "to put." It means to put in mind or to call attention to something. It indicates that the first task of a teacher or pastor is to *capture the attention and interest of his hearers*.

There is a well-worn (and perhaps even musty) story about an grizzly old mule-skinner who wanted to train his mule. The first thing he did was pick up a big board and hit the mule a resounding wallop between the ears. As the mule staggered to its knees, a horrified bystander ran up and said, "That's no way to treat an animal! Why did you do that?"

"If you're gonna teach a mule," said the mule-skinner, "you first gotta get his undivided attention."

That's exactly what the apostle suggests our first task is in teaching the Word: get the listener's undivided attention, awaken his or her interest, excite his or her enthusiasm. But I hasten to add: Don't use a board! The people in your church are not mules!

When Paul went to Athens to preach to the sophisticated Greeks (see Acts 17), he didn't begin by climbing Mars Hill and declaring, "Ladies and gentlemen of Athens, I have come to speak to you about the moral superiority of Christianity to paganism!" Yes, that was the subject of his address--but he didn't begin that way! It would have turned off his hearers.

Instead, Paul thought carefully about how to reach his hearers. He put himself in their shoes, and tried to see life from their perspective. He first walked through the city, soaking up perceptions and gaining an understanding of Athenian culture and values. Then, when he got up to speak to the people of Athens, he began by affirming them. "You people of Athens are certainly very religious," he said. "As I have walked around this city, I have seen altars everywhere. I even found one erected to an Unknown God, which clearly indicates there is something about God which you don't yet know and that is what I have come to talk to you about" (Acts 17:22-23, author's paraphrase.)

Now Paul had their attention! He "put them in mind" of what he wanted to announce. He demonstrated that the key to effective teaching and communication is to first awaken interest and arouse attention.

One of the most amazing illustrations of the power of the ministry of equipping the saints is recorded in Acts 19. There Luke describes the ministry of Paul in the city of Ephesus--the very city to which Paul writes his letter describing the functioning of the church and the ministry of the saints. In Ephesus, says Acts 19:8-10, Paul "entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God; but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way [that is, the Christian faith]

before the congregation, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years."

Some ancient manuscripts of this passage in Acts read a little differently: "taking the disciples with him, he argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus, from the fifth hour to the tenth." That would mean that Paul taught these new Christians for five hours a day, every day, for two years. That adds up to some 3,650 hours of teaching. Is it any wonder that the tenth verse concludes, "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

In other words, during Paul's two years in Ephesus, everyone who lived in the Roman province of Asia (of which Ephesus was the capital) heard the Gospel! They didn't all believe, of course, but they all heard. Did Paul reach all of those thousands of people by himself? Of course not! He remained in Ephesus, teaching five hours a day. But the people he taught, the multitudes of common ordinary "saints" who learned from Paul day by day, then fanned out from Ephesus in the normal pursuit of their business. These tradespeople, merchants, farmers, and city officials who were evangelized and disciplined by Paul went out along the highways and into the countryside of Asia, not as missionaries but as ordinary laypeople. They exercised their spiritual gifts with such quiet but irresistible power--resurrection power!--that the whole province was stirred by the amazing news of the Gospel! Many responded, were baptized, and then placed themselves under the teaching of the apostle Paul.

That is how the Gospel spread. That is how the first century world was turned upside down by the early church. That is how the church grew--not by simple addition, but by multiplication, by compounding, by orders of magnitude.

That is the kind of transforming power the church can wield once again--if we are willing to return to the biblical pattern, and to return the ministry of the church to the saints.

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