

## EVERY MEMBER IS CALLED TO SERVE

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In Paul's crowning letter to the Ephesians, he tells his beloved readers that—although they are not *saved* by “good works”—

We are his [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10)

“Good works,” writes one commentator, “are God's design for his new creation, and flow from his gracious salvation as its consequence or fruit.”<sup>1</sup>

Ephesians 4:1–16 is one of the most important passages in the New Testament, revealing the divine master plan for unifying, protecting, maturing, and growing the body of Christ. Paul declares that Christ gives every individual believer a special enabling grace to serve and build up the body of Christ:

But grace was given to *each one of us* according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (Eph. 4:7–8; italics added)

The ascended Christ gives grace “to each one” of his followers. No one is left out. Neither are the church's officials the only recipients of Christ's gracious gifts.

But there is more. From heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, the exalted, victorious Christ

Gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:11–12)

According to the divine blueprint for the Church, Christ gave gifted leaders and teachers<sup>2</sup> to his people (here called “saints”), for the express purpose of equipping, preparing, and training them “for the work of ministry.”<sup>3</sup> The phrase “the work of ministry [*diakonia*]” can also be translated “the work of service” (as it is in the NIV, NASB, and REB). This service encompasses all aspects of building up one another in the body of Christ.

This ministry or service is not solely the responsibility of the elders and deacons, but of the whole body of Christ. The body's growth to maturity and Christlikeness (v. 13) depends on all its members building up one another in love. As one scholar so aptly puts it, “The functioning of the body requires, and is *equally* dependent on, those who are not leaders.”<sup>4</sup>

Gifted “shepherds and teachers” who do not actively and deliberately work at equipping their brothers and sisters for their task of building up the body of Christ, fail both the body of Christ and their Lord.

In Ephesians 4:16 Paul concludes by saying that the body of Christ (just like the physical body) is healthy and growing only “when each part is working properly.” When *all* the members of the body are working, the body grows “so that it builds itself up in love.” What a marvelous plan Christ has designed for his Church!

What Paul wrote to the Ephesians was not an isolated teaching, but a fundamental Christian doctrine on the healthy functioning of the body of Christ. In fact, while living in Ephesus, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth reminding them of the wide diversity of “gifts,” “services,” and “activities” that God has designed for the healthy functioning of the body of Christ:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service [*diakonia*], but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all *in everyone*. *To each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to *each one individually* as he wills. (1 Cor. 12:4–7, 11; italics added)

At the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul exhorts *all his readers*—not just the leaders and teachers—to abound fully “in the work of the Lord”:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord *your labor* is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:58; italics added)

All Christians are called to “work” and “labor” for the Lord. All are to “strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Cor. 14:12). All believers are charged with serving one another.

Again, to the Christians in Rome, Paul emphasizes the oneness of the body of Christ and the rich diversity of functions and gifts within the one body, the local church:

For as in one body we have *many members*, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. (Rom. 12:4–6)

Moreover, to *all the Christians* in Rome (not some clergy) Paul writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present *your bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1; see also v. 11)

## **Every Member Ministry**

The apostle Peter shares with Paul the same theology of Christian ministry:

As *each* has received a gift, use it to *serve one another*, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:10–11; italics added)

Each believer “has received a gift” and is responsible to use that gift “to serve one another,” in order to be a “good steward” of God’s gracious gift.

The biblical model for the Church is sometimes called “every-member ministry of the body of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> This means that God expects all his people to be engaged in Christian service, to live a lifestyle zealous for good works,<sup>6</sup> to bear much fruit for God, and to be radically committed to the common good of the body of Christ:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good . . . that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor. 12:7, 25–26)

The Church is pictured by Paul as both the body of Christ, in which every member is inhabited by the Holy Spirit, and also the family of God, in which all are real brothers and sisters loving and caring for one another. This explains why, when Paul writes to his churches, he insists that the whole body is to be responsible for its community life. This is not just the responsibility of church elders and deacons.

From the perspective of the entire New Testament, every single member of God's household is responsible for encouraging, praying for, exhorting, serving, admonishing, teaching, building up, caring for, loving one another, and bearing "one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).<sup>7</sup> The Christian community is truly a "one-anothering community," each member building up one another and bearing "one another's burdens."

## A Serious Principle to Consider

The principle of every-member ministry really does matter. Christians who choose to be spectators, only attending a one-hour church service on Sunday mornings, are not walking in the "good works" God has prepared for them (Eph. 2:10). Christians who are waiting to be served, rather than serving others, have reversed God's design for the family of believers. They are not working to build up the body of Christ. They are not bearing precious fruit for their Lord. And they are not walking worthy of their high calling in Christ. Instead, they are walking in disobedience and hindering the spiritual growth of the body of Christ and its witness to the watching world. It is a serious matter when those who profess to follow Christ refuse to serve Christ and his blood-bought people.

I have elaborated on the teaching of every member ministry because we need to keep this doctrine firmly in mind when we are defining deacons. "The work of service" is not a special diaconal office. Nor is it exclusively the work of the deacons. It is the responsibility of all the saints. Moreover, this doctrine is eminently practical and should be taught more consistently in our churches.

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<sup>1</sup>Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 180.

<sup>2</sup>All five gifted persons in verse 11 teach. The shepherd gift includes leading and feeding.

<sup>3</sup>Most commentators today support the translation that the saints do "the work of ministry," and that the gifted teachers of the Word equip and prepare the saints for the work of ministry: See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Ronald Y. K. Fung, "Ministry in the New Testament," *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed., D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, CCEC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013); Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Andrew D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 136.

<sup>5</sup>John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007), 76.

<sup>6</sup>Matt. 5:16; Rom. 12:11; 15:2; 1 Cor. 12:6–7, 25; 15:58; 2 Cor. 9:8; Gal. 5:13; 6:2, 9–10; Eph. 2:10; 4:12, 16; Col. 1:10; 3:24; 1 Thess. 5:11, 15; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10, 16, 25; 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:21; 3:17; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14; Heb. 6:10–11; 9:14; 10:24–25; 13:16, 21; 1 Peter 4:10–11.

<sup>7</sup>Rom. 15:2, 14; 1 Cor. 12:25; Gal. 5:13; Gal. 6:2; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:24–25; James 5:16; 1 Peter 4:10; 1 John 4:7.