

The Church's Building and Maintenance Service

by Ray C. Stedman

Our subject is the building and maintenance service of the church. If you are a bit surprised by that title, let me reassure you: We shall not be talking about the janitorial service. The odd title is an attempt to focus your attention on the words of Ephesians 4, Verse 11, which mark the divine program for coordinating, developing and articulating the gifts and activities of the members of the body of Christ to make it an effective instrument in human society. The church can never be any more than a rather pious, harmless group of religious people until it returns to this divine program and becomes what God intended it to be. When it does, it will become a disturbing element in society, a revolutionary ferment that will make the most powerful impact that can be made upon any community.

In Verse 11, the Apostle Paul says concerning Jesus Christ,

... his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ. {Eph 4:11-12 RSV}

We have seen that Paul uses two great figures for the church in this letter to the Ephesians. First, he likens it to a body, a human body of flesh and bones, articulated and coordinated, made up of many members. He also likens it to a building, which has been growing through the centuries, as a habitation for God. At times he seems to mix his metaphors together. He talks about a building growing, but buildings don't grow – bodies do. But he is so anxious to make this truth clear that his language becomes a bit mixed. Perhaps he does it deliberately in order that we might capture the thought of something living, a living body, a living

building. We sometimes mix metaphors like that, like saying, "You buttered your bread, now lie in it." Or, "You've made your bed, now eat it."

We have seen that you don't become a member of the body of Christ by joining a church. You become a member by being born again by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other way into this body. Once in, every member has a contribution to make, and, as each member works at what God has given him or her to do, the whole body functions. When Paul describes it as a building, he makes clear it is a living, growing building. Every Christian is a stone added to that building, a living stone, as Peter says in his letter. Each is a vital part in the great temple the Holy Spirit is building as a habitation of God.

We can never understand the church unless we understand that truth. The church is where God dwells, where he is at work today. That is why many people, seeking to discover God in the universe, say he is dead. The trouble is, they do not have his address; they don't know where he lives. But he is very much at work through his body, the building made for him by the Holy Spirit. If we think of the church as a body, then, in this passage in Ephesians 4, we are studying the physiology of that body – how the organs operate, how the body works together, how it is coordinated to do one single thing. If we think of the church as a building, then we are studying the blueprints, the architecture of it, the plan of the designer.

But whether the church is regarded as a body or a building, there are four functions within it which are so universally needed and so mutually shared that we must consider them independently from the other gifts that Christ gives to his people. These four functions are called here, "apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers." These gifts constitute what we usually call *the ministry*,

or more horribly, *the clergy*. Both terms, of course, are wrong. The whole church is in the *ministry*, as you can see from this very verse. These four functions exist for the equipping of the saints “unto the work of the ministry,” therefore, every Christian is in the ministry. This has nothing to do with full-time, part-time or any other relationship to time. We are all called to the work of the ministry, and, therefore, it is improper to designate this group as the ministry, although it is commonly done. It is even worse to call them *the clergy*, for that word comes from the Latin *clericus*, which means “a priest.” Again, every believer is to be a priest in the church of Jesus Christ. Some scholars feel the term derives ultimately from the Greek word, “to be heir,” as if the clergy had some special privilege in the body of Christ that no one else had. But this is a total misunderstanding of the Scriptures. The clergy are no better than anyone else in the body of Christ; they are ordinary Christians with a specialized task, that’s all. They have no greater privileges and no greater authority, as individuals within the body of Christ, than any other Christians. In fact, they do not exist as a separate group. These four functions cannot properly classify themselves as a particular group different from the rest of Christians.

The newspapers recently carried the suggestion of a minister, or clergyman, that a union be formed of clergymen. That is a far cry from the New Testament. There is no place for a union of clergymen within the New Testament. They do not exist as a group but as individuals, gifted and placed within the body, to perform a particular function that is necessary for its growth and life and movement.

In a previous message, I suggested that these four functions correspond rather roughly to the systems of our physical body:

1. There is, first, the structural system of the body – the bones and the muscle forming a skeleton that makes it possible for us to move and walk and act. This corresponds to the apostles and their function in the body of Christ. They lay the foundation. They build the basic structure that makes the body of Christ take a particular form.
2. Then there is the nervous system in our bodies – that which galvanizes, which stimulates, which makes us alert and active. If it becomes

overactive we become nervously indisposed. We can easily recognize the importance of the nervous system to the body. It corresponds to the work of the prophets in the body of Christ. They are to set truth before us so as to galvanize, electrify, stimulate, and motivate the body of Christ.

3. Then there is the digestive system which corresponds to the evangelist who makes possible growth in the spiritual body. The digestive system takes food which is quite unlike flesh and transforms it into flesh making it a living part of the body.
4. Then there is the circulatory system, the blood, which feeds and cleanses our bodies continually. You can see that this corresponds to the teaching-pastors who labor in the body of Christ to feed it and to cleanse it and to keep it working properly.

The Lord has carefully designed the human body so that every Christian carries about with him a visual aid to understanding the nature of the church. You have a body and your body is a picture of the church of Jesus Christ.

Now perhaps it would be instructive to view this same thing from the standpoint of the other figure Paul uses – the church as a building. The apostle clearly refers to the first two functions (apostles and prophets) in terms of the figure of a building.

In Chapter 2, Verses 19-20, 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 chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:19-22 RSV}

There is the building and the individual Christians as members, stones, within that building. The apostle says the apostles and prophets are given the job of laying the foundation. Theirs is a foundational ministry of widespread effect, whether we

think of the original apostles or contemporary ones. The apostolic gift is still being given today, but it functions in a somewhat secondary sense compared to that of the original apostles.

In the figure of a building, the time sequence is stressed in this particular illustration. Paul gives it again in First Corinthians 12,

And God has appointed in the church first apostles [That does not mean first in rank. It means first in historical sequence. First, apostles;], **second prophets, third teachers,** ... {1 Cor 12:28a RSV}

That is the order in which these gifts were introduced into the church. Here we understand that Jesus Christ, as Lord of the church, has given the right to lay the foundations to the apostles and prophets. Now this is supremely important.

Any of you men in construction business knows that a foundation is of the utmost importance. You do not take risks or chances 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 solidarity of that foundation. The same thing is true in the church. The Lord Jesus made very clear that if a man builds on the wrong foundation he is in trouble. One man builds his house on the sand. The house may look very beautiful, may be impressive, outstanding, but when the storms come, it falls. Another builds on the rock, and his house will stand, {cf, Matt 7:24-27}. It is the foundation which makes all the difference.

It was the task then of the **apostles** and prophets to lay the foundation of the church. We have the record in the Gospels that our Lord called twelve men to be with him (that was their primary characteristic) and to send them out in specialized ministry. He is the one who named them *apostles*. The word means "to send out," or "one sent forth." That is an apostle. The twelve apostles were sent out by the Lord Jesus with a special commission and a special authority. As you follow their ministry you recognize they possessed an authoritative word. Wherever they went they spoke with authority. They were impressed with this themselves. They came back to the Lord and told how they rejoiced when they discovered that the demons were subject to them. When they spoke their word had authority. That authority is the special mark of

an apostle. Later on there were other apostles. Paul came after the twelve and never belonged to the original twelve. He did not take part in their particular ministry, though he was truly an apostle. He was sent to be the apostle to the Gentiles. So were Barnabas, Silas, Timothy and Titus. These also shared in the apostolic ministry.

The work of an apostle was to declare the whole body of truth concerning Jesus Christ. That is the foundation. How do you get into the church? You get in by believing the truth. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is the difference between a believer and a non-believer. If you are a believer in the truth about Jesus Christ (which surely means more than intellectual assent but commitment of the will as well) you are in the church. You are on the foundation. What is that foundation? It is what you believe about Jesus Christ; and the apostles laid that foundation. It is apostolic truth. We find this foundation in the New Testament. "Other foundation can no man lay," Paul said, "than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ," {cf, 1 Cor 3:11 KJV}. 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 our New Testament. This is from the hands of the apostles and the whole church rests squarely upon that foundation. If it does not rest there, it is a very rickety, uncertain structure indeed.

Today many are straying from the foundation and as a result they have lost any note of authority or assurance. It is only as the church rests upon this foundation of the faith taught by the apostles that there is any certainty or strength. Human viewpoints or opinions make no difference, what modern knowledge says, or what discoveries science opens to us do not change the foundation. It was laid once and for all, long ago, and it is on this that the church builds. What we are concerned about is what apostles taught. That is the great and ultimate truth, the "truth as it is in Jesus."

Some time ago, in the living room of a private home, I met a number of young Mormon elders. (They never should be called "elders" for they are all very much "youngers." They are usually boys just out of college.) We were discussing, in the presence of an interested party, the differences between the teachings of the Mormon Church and the teachings of the Bible. These young men said, "Our church is the only true church." (This is a

claim they consistently make.) “Our church is the only true church, and the reason we know this to be true is that we have apostles. No other church has any apostles, but the true church of Jesus Christ had apostles.” I said to them, “You are very badly mistaken. The church that I belong to has apostles too.” “Oh,” they said, “what church is that? We’ve never heard of another church that has apostles.” I said, “It happens to be the original church with the original apostles.” They said, “How could this be?” I said, “First, tell me, who are the apostles in your church?” They named off a list which at that time included the then Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, and others. I said, “The only one I have ever heard of in that list is Benson, and I have never seen any particular qualifications on his part to be an apostle.” “Well,” they said, “who are the apostles in your church?” I said, “Peter, James and John, and all the others.” Again they said, “How could this be?” I said, “It is very simple. If I want to know what an apostle says, all I have to do is turn to the New Testament, and there I find it. If I want to know the opinion of the Apostle Paul on a subject, I can turn immediately to what Paul has said. Or the Apostle John. Or the Apostle Peter. You see the church rests upon the foundation of the apostles.” And I added, “That marks your apostles as spurious, false apostles, because the apostles are to lay foundations and the Mormon Church did not begin until the 19th century, many centuries after the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ. If yours are the true apostles, then that would put the foundation up somewhere around the roof line.” Whoever heard of pouring foundations that far along in construction? No, the church’s foundation was laid by the apostles in the testimony they have given to Jesus Christ, “the truth as it is in Jesus,” {cf, Eph 4:21}. That is the foundation. “Any other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid,” {cf, 1 Cor 3:11}.

There is no other line of truth about Jesus Christ. There is no other information to be given about Jesus than the apostles have given. There is nothing else. If there seems to be, as Paul says to the Galatians, “it is another gospel,” {cf, Gal 1:6-7}. It is not the same thing. It is something different. Here is the foundation, and upon this the church is built, and from this comes its strength.

The apostolic gift is still being given today, and it is needed wherever new churches are beginning.

It is not that any new truth is being added to the Scriptures, but the whole body of truth which is given is taken by those who have the apostolic gift and is imparted to new churches wherever they begin. This is always the task of an apostle, to start new churches. We call them pioneer missionaries today. Through the course of church history there have been great apostles as Adaniram Judson in Burma, William Carey in India, Hudson Taylor in China. These are men who had the apostolic gift and were responsible to impart the whole faith to new churches.

Now, along with the apostles are the **prophets**. Not all of the New Testament was written by the apostles and none of the Old. The Old Testament was written by the prophets, and also there were New Testament prophets. Men such as Mark and Luke and James and Jude were not apostles, but, nevertheless, they helped lay the foundations of the church in writing the Scriptures. They are New Testament prophets, and there are others mentioned.

The gift of a prophet differs from an apostle in that the apostle has the word of authority. He gives an authoritative declaration of the whole body of truth concerning Jesus Christ. But the prophetic gift is to interpret that authoritative word and so to explain it that the truth becomes clear and vital and compelling. The word prophet suggests that very thing. It comes from a root word which means “to cause to shine,” with the prefix *pro*, which means “before.” Someone who stands before and causes the word to shine – that is a prophet. This is beautifully reflected in Peter’s second letter. He says, “We have a more sure word of prophecy which shines as a light in a dark place,” {cf, 2 Pet 1:19}. That is the prophet’s task.

Paul says in First Corinthians, “to prophesy is to speak unto edification, encouragement and comfort,” {cf, 1 Cor 14:3}: To so speak as to build with a word of edification. The church owes much to prophets. Not only were the Scriptures given to us by certain of the prophets but the great theologians of the church have been men with a prophetic gift. Some of you own a Scofield Reference Bible. It has helpful notes written by Dr. Cyrus Scofield who was not a clergyman, not ordained to the ministry, but who was a lawyer, a layman. He had the gift of a prophet and his writings have been helpful to people in explaining the revelations of the apostles. He has made them clear, made them to shine,

made them understandable. Many of the great leaders of the church have been prophets, as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the evangelical theologians of our day. Many pastors and Bible teachers also have prophetic gifts. The men who bless your hearts at Bible conferences are speaking as prophets, making the truth clear and shining and gripping. Billy Graham has this ministry, along with the gift of an evangelist.

Then we come to the third ministry here – **evangelists**. This is linked with the pastor-teachers. Evangelists and teaching-pastors work together, just as the apostles and prophets work together. In the body as a whole, the evangelists and teaching-pastors work with individuals within the church. The evangelist is concerned with the beginning of the Christian life, while the teaching-pastor is concerned with the development and the growth of that life. Therefore, evangelists are basically obstetricians, having to do with birth, and teaching-pastors are pediatricians, having to do with diets and diseases and the need for fresh air and exercise.

To return to the figure of a building, an evangelist is the quarryman, the man out in the rock quarry who digs the rock out, cuts it loose from its basic structure, and breaking it out, separates the rock into smaller pieces. The teaching-pastor then becomes the stone mason, the one who shapes the rock, puts it in proper form and fits it into the building in its proper place, according to the great blueprint of the Architect. This is the work of these two gifts together in the body of Christ.

Now, all Christians are expected to evangelize, but not all have the gift of an evangelist. Perhaps I can make that clear. All Christians evangelize as witnesses, but a witness is different than an evangelist. A witness is simply one who tells what happened to him. That is all. Any Christian and all Christians are expected to relate what happened, to be able to give a simple testimonial of what Jesus Christ has done. This is as easy as talking about any other experience. If you can talk about what a joy it was to get married, how wonderful your husband or your wife is, or your children, or your grandchildren, you can also witness for Christ. To talk about these things simply and naturally, that is a Christian witness. But an evangelist goes further. An evangelist knows how to explain the why, and the how, of the great redeeming story of Jesus Christ. He is able to proclaim the truths that pro-

duce a new birth. He is forever dealing with the great proclamation that God has not left man in a hopeless condition but has made a way at great cost through the cross and the resurrection, by which men and women who struggle on in their endless fight against the deteriorating forces of life can be set free and given a new start and a new basis for battle. That is the message of the evangelist.

It is the message of hope and of joy and of gladness. The evangelist's task is not to go about denouncing sin. He may call people's attention to that which is causing them so much misery and heartache in their life, but his job is not to denounce sin. It is not to thunder away at people, and tell them what miserable creatures they are, and that God is waiting to strike them dead with thunderbolts of judgment from the heavens. It is not to expose the horrors of hellfire, and to hang sinners over it until they writhe and tremble. That is not the task of an evangelist. (This the work of a prophet, if it needs to be done at all.) The evangelist's work is to talk about the overwhelming grace of God and what he has done in human life, the overpowering love of the Father that is calling people back to himself and offering to set their twisted lives straight when they open their hearts to the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. That is an evangelist.

Many people today possess the gift of an evangelist – both men and women. They can exercise it anywhere. It doesn't have to be done in mass meetings. Billy Graham's ministry is not the only kind of evangelism there is. The gift of an evangelist can be exercised to a single individual, as you see in the Scriptures when Philip spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch and told him of the grace of Jesus Christ. An evangelist can exercise his gift anywhere.

Linked with this is the work of a **teaching-pastor**. These are also called *elders* in the Scripture, as well as *overseers* or *bishops*. Overseers and bishops happen to be the same Greek word; it is simply translated two different ways. "Bishop" is the English translation of *episcopus*, and the literal meaning of that is "overseer." Elders or bishops were always limited to one locality, one group of Christians, one church. A man who was an elder in one church was not also an elder in another place. He could be an elder or a teaching-pastor only in one place.

Nor were these always men who devoted their full time to this ministry. In this church we have not one pastor or three, but thirteen. They are all called to exercise the gift of an elder, the gift of a pastor, a teaching-pastor. These are the ruling elders.

There are also some in the New Testament who are elders, but are not called ruling elders. Those would include ministries such as Sunday School teachers, Home Bible class leaders, and boy's and girl's group leaders. Anyone who exercises the gift of teaching and shepherding within the church is a pastor-teacher whether he is full-time at the work or not.

But, in addition, there are those who spend time in administration or ruling. These are the chief leaders of a church, the ruling elders. Now how do they rule? "Not as lords," Peter says, "over God's heritage," {cf, 1 Pet 5:3 KJV}. They are not to be bosses. They are not to tell people what to do as the final authority and what they say goes. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples once, "Be not as the Gentiles are, lording it over others," {cf, Mark 10:42-45}. The rulers of the church do not exercise their authority in that sense, as bosses in the church. They are to rule as examples, Peter says. When they do something, others will be motivated to do it. But if the teaching pastors do not show in their own lives an example of what they teach, they have no other authority. Their authority comes from their spirituality, from their spiritual relationship to God. If they lose that spirituality, they also lose their authority. It is not the office that gives them the right to rule, it is the man and his gift before God.

Now these are the four developing and training ministries of the church. A few men, in the course of the history of the church, have had all four of these gifts. Certainly the Apostle Paul is one. Paul was an apostle, certainly a prophet, and also an evangelist and teaching pastor. He exercised all these gifts on one occasion or another. All of them are especially needed in today's confused world.

Where there is weakness here, there is bound to be weakness in the church. Where there is strength here, that strength will be imparted to the whole church and the church will become powerful again. These men are set by Jesus Christ within the church to exercise these particular gifts. They are there to equip the saints unto the work of the ministry. That is not easy to do. Saints are very difficult people at times. Contrary to popular impression, saints are not made of plaster. They are sometimes made of very hard, resistant materials. They are certainly not made of sugar and spice and everything nice. They much more closely conform to the frogs and snails and puppy-dog tails. Saints are often made up of stubborn hardness, harder than diamonds, and laziness, slower than Christmas. In other words, they are made of the same stuff as pastors and teachers!

God trains saints by starting with the leaders, and knocking the rough spots off them, and shaping them up. The leader really can't do much to help others unless he has been through this treatment himself. But all this is necessary in the shaping of us up together, in building this amazing building that God is building today, this great structure which in secret is taking shape through history, invisible to the world. God is building a building that will be for his habitation, not only now but through all eternity. One of the most amazing things happening in human history today is the structure and building of the church. As Christians, we need to get our eyes off the superficialities to the reality of this – to hear and see the exciting things that God the Holy Spirit is doing in our midst, the way he is taking us and shaping us, molding us and knocking off the rough spots, and putting us into place.

In our next study together we will start at this point and see how the Holy Spirit uses these four functionaries within the church to equip the saints, to perfect the saints, unto the work of their ministry.

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