

## The Case of the Missing Comma: The Ministry of the Whole People of God [Ephesians 4: 12]

By Grant LeMarquand

As a 19 or 20 year old I attended a short weekend conference at Epiphany House, then a retreat centre for the Diocese of Montreal. The subject of this event was "Toward the Anglican Ministry," and its purpose was to encourage young people (mostly young men at that point, I believe) to consider whether God might be calling them to ordained ministry within the Anglican Church. Tom Robinson was the speaker and his text was Ephesians 4: 1-13. I don't remember many of the sermons I have heard in my life, but this one has stuck with me. I was not too surprised to learn (much later) that Tom considered this passage to be his 'life text', for he spoke its message on that weekend with a quiet passion:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. 7 But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." 9 (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) 11 And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

My intention in this brief article is not to give any kind of exhaustive exegesis or exposition of this passage.<sup>1</sup> Rather I would like to explore one aspect of this passage (the presence or absence of a comma in v.12!) and how the meaning of the word 'ministry' in this brief passage fits into the overall message of this letter. Put another way, how does what Paul<sup>2</sup> says here about the ministry of the whole people of God fit in with the incredibly cosmic vision given to us in this epistle. But first things first...

### The absence of a comma

Paul's discussion about the ministry of the church in Ephesians 4 is interconnected with the related issue of spiritual gifts. **Verse 11** says that God's gifts to the church are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (or 'pastor-teachers'). This list of gifts differs somewhat from most other New Testament gift lists (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-30; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Usually 'spiritual gifts' are divine abilities or functions given to various people to use for the building up of the Christian community. Here in Ephesians the gifts are actually people. They are people who do certain things, of course, but Paul does not speak of what they *do* as the gift, he speaks of *the people themselves* as Christ's gifts to the church. And these gifts (apostles, prophets and so on) all have common characteristics: they are all leaders in the Christian community who have something to say. Each has some teaching or instructing role within Christ's body.

It is tempting to read Ephesians 4:11 and say something like, 'Paul is talking here about the ministry of the church' as if the 'ministry of the church' and the 'leadership of the church' are

simply synonymous. We speak often, do we not, of someone 'going into the ministry' or 'being called to the ministry'? We usually mean that the person under discussion has discerned the possibility that they have been gifted and called to a specific role of leadership in the church, and that that person is testing the perceived call to see if perhaps they ought to be ordained or commissioned to some office of ministerial leadership. At the beginning of this article I spoke of going to a conference: "Toward the Anglican Ministry" and most of you reading this knew what was meant by that title – 'Toward becoming a professional clergy person.'

But, in spite of our common usage of the word 'ministry' to describe a certain class of people within the church, this is not what the Bible means when it speaks of 'ministry'. Paul doesn't say in Eph 4:11 that "His gifts were that some should be ministers." Let's keep reading what Paul says here because in the next verse Paul will tell us what the leaders of v. 11 are to do.

**V. 12** says that the leaders of the church are "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Much depends here (amazingly!) on how many commas there are in this verse. Originally, of course, when Paul wrote this letter in the Greek style of his day, there were no commas at – in fact there weren't even any spaces between letters! And so it is technically possible to break this clause into either two parts or three parts, as follows:

1.     A.     to equip the saints for the work of ministry,  
       B.     for building up the body of Christ.

(or)

2.     A.     to equip the saints,  
       B.     for the work of ministry,  
       C.     for building up the body of Christ.

If we choose the second option, the tripartite division, we are in effect saying that God has called certain persons to lead the church by equipping the saints,<sup>3</sup> doing the work of ministry, and building up the body of Christ. Quite a number of our Bible translations, by the simple insertion of a comma after the word 'saints', make it look as though Paul was saying exactly that. There is, however, one glaring problem with this approach: it can turn congregations into spiritual consumers and put the burden of God's work in the world squarely on the shoulders of the religious specialists, the clergy. The church (that is, the church as it is, rather than as it should be) has sometimes been described as a being like a football game: thousands of fans in the stands, all desperately in need of exercise, watching a much smaller number of players on the field, all desperately in need of rest! The clergy do the ministry, the congregation receive the ministry? The New Testament knows of no such arrangement.

Rather, when the New Testament speaks of 'ministry' what it means, first and foremost, something that God does in Christ. The word ministry means 'service' and it is the unanimous opinion of the New Testament documents that Christ is The Servant.

...the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings. (Phil 2: 6-7)

It is the servanthood, *the ministry of Jesus Christ* that is of first importance. The New Testament always speaks first about what He has done for us, not what we can do for Him, for ourselves, or for the world. 'The ministry', if it belongs to anyone, belongs to Christ.

But (wonderfully!) the New Testament also speaks of God giving human beings the privilege of sharing in the ministry of Christ. It is with this ministry in mind that the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are called, because it is their task to "equip the saints for the

work of ministry.” (Note: no comma!) The leadership of the church exists not to do the ministry, but to train, to teach, to exhort, to instruct the whole people of God to do the ministry. Every person who is baptized, that is, every person has been called into a relationship with Jesus Christ by faith, has been commissioned (‘ordained’ if you like) as a minister in Christ’s church. The ministry of Christ shared by the church is a ministry which is not restricted to one part of the church, but a ministry given to the whole church. “To each”, Paul says in another place, “is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Cor 12:7) No believer is left out of this promise for all have received the same gift-giving Spirit. Not all gifts are the same, of course. Some are more public, up-front, leadership-type gifts. But these are not superior callings, just different ones.

### **The ministry of church to the world**

But what is the purpose of God in calling his church to ministry? The letter to the Ephesians has an amazing answer to that question: the ministry of the church is God’s way of announcing (and embodying!) the message of God’s salvation not only to the world...but also to the unseen powers of the universe: “that **through the church** the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.” (Eph 3:10; cf. 6:10-20)

You see, in Eph 2:11-22 Paul had pointed out the fact that the church is in fact a miracle. The church, Paul says, is made up of both Jews and Gentiles, groups who were previously enemies, alienated from one another, have now been made one by the power of Christ’s death on the cross. God has in fact made one new thing (the church) out of the two (Jews and Gentiles). By being one the church is a sign of God’s own unity. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (4:4-6) Because the church is one, it proclaims and reflects the truth of God to the world: that God is one, that He is the only true God, the God of all people and of the whole world. Because He is the only God He has devised one plan for the world’s salvation – faith in Christ. (2:1-10, especially v.8) Because the church is one body with many diverse members it reveals the love of God to the world: if Jews and Gentiles can be one people, then all the warring peoples of the earth can learn to come under the loving Lordship of Christ.

The church not only announces this message of salvation in Christ it also embodies it in its relationships. The church is to demonstrate the reality of the love of God by its lifestyle which is to be characterized not by its clear authority structures or rigid canons of discipline (although these may be necessary and helpful from time to time) but primarily by “mutual submission” to one another in love (Eph 5: 21), that is, the sanctification of the ordinary parts of human life. (Ephesians 5: 21-6: 9)

In short, God has a plan for the universe. Put quite simply it is a plan “to unite all things in Christ.” (Eph 1:10) “All things” here seems to mean “all things” – everything that He had made, for as the collect for Ash Wednesday reminds us, ‘God hates nothing that He has made.’ In God’s time the cosmos will be brought to completion and to complete unity “in Christ.” And the church is a key part of this plan: it is “through the church” that God is announcing this plan to the principalities and powers. (3:8-10) The church’s ministry, therefore, (under God, in the power of the Spirit) includes growing up into maturity in Christ (Eph 4:13), speaking the truth in love (4:15-16), living ordinary lives in mutual submission (5:21-6:9), battling evil powers by the power of prayer (6:10-20).

It is the task of the church to do this ministry. It is the task of leaders within the church to equip the saints for this work of ministry, not to presume to do it for them.

## Endnotes

(1) This has been done elsewhere, of course. The commentaries by Marcus Barth (*Ephesians*. [2 vols. Anchor Bible, 34A; N.Y. Doubleday, 1974]), Andrew Lincoln (*Ephesians*. [Word Biblical Commentary, 42; Waco, TX: Word, 1990]) and George Caird (*Paul's Letters from Prison* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1976]) are all helpful in various ways. As usual, John Stott's exposition (*God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* [The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IVP, 1979]) is a clear and relevant unpacking of the text.

(2) I say 'Paul' deliberately here, although some will be aware that the authorship of this letter is disputed. For arguments for and against Pauline authorship see Barth (for) and Lincoln (against).

(3) 'Saints', in the New Testament sense, means all of those made holy, all of those sanctified by God in Christ, that is, all Christians. See the beginning of almost any of Paul's epistles where he addresses the whole church to which he is writing by this term.

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