

Ephesians 4 : 8-16 is the subject of this exposition by the Rev. James Philip, Minister of Holyrood Abbey Church of Scotland, Edinburgh.

**EXPOSITION :**

# **The Ministry of the Word in the Church**

by James Philip

*Scripture says, "When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men" . . . And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children,*

*tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things which is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

The chapter in which this passage occurs is one of the most significant in all Paul's writings for the teaching it provides about the Church and the ministry committed to it in the Gospel. Its theme of diversity in unity is one which Paul uses on more than one occasion in emphasising the differentiation of function within the body of Christ. The particular part of it that occupies our attention here is the section dealing with our Lord's institution of the ministry of the Word in the Church.

The context of the passage is, as always with Paul, significant for a full understanding of his meaning. He follows his usual method of presenting first of all the great fundamental truths of the Gospel, in the first chapters of the epistle, and then proceeds on the basis of these to make his exhortations to holiness of life: first the great indicatives of the faith, the wealth of our position in Christ, then the grand imperative to walk worthy of our vocation. Paul invariably passes from doctrine to duty, and requires of us that our position in Christ should become our possession in experience. "Become what you are" expresses the idea perfectly. And this passage tells us that the supreme, the chief means by which this moral transformation takes place is the ministry of the Word, bestowed as a gift upon the Church by the risen and ascended Christ.

It is important to see, then, that the gifts given to the Church – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – are given on the basis and as the fruit of, Christ's ascension and coronation. The Apostle's picture is of the activity of a

risen, glorified and victorious Lord on the initiative to bless and sanctify His people. One is reminded of our Lord's own parable about firstbinding the strong man, then spoiling his house (Mark 3 : 27): first He leads captivity captive, then He proceeds to take Satan's prey from him, unloosing the shackles that have bound them, healing the wounds and scars that dark bondage has inflicted upon them, and restoring them to freedom and human personality once again.

The list of gifts Paul gives here is not of course exhaustive, and should be compared with those given in Romans 12 : 6-8 and 1 Cor. 12 : 27ff. Every gift plays its part in the edifying of the body, and each has its unique and distinctive contribution to make. Nevertheless, Paul concentrates here on those gifts relating to the ministry of the Word; for him, they are clearly of paramount importance.

Furthermore, these gifts are not necessarily mutually exclusive, in the sense that a man may be endowed with only one. It is true that some men, in the history of the Church, have been obviously and pre-eminently raised up as, say, evangelists, or prophets, or teachers of the Word, but this does not mean that their work is exclusively evangelism, or prophecy, or teaching. It was not so in the New Testament itself. Paul claimed to be an apostle (1 Cor. 9 : 1), but he was also more – he was a preacher and a teacher (1 Tim. 2 : 7, 2 Tim. 1 : 11). He also claimed to have the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 13 : 2); and who would deny that he was an evangelist, when his labours were so signally blessed

among the Gentiles? The same can be said of Timothy and Titus, who were pastors and teachers in their fellowships, and yet Paul could say to Timothy, "Preach the Word . . . do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry" (2 Tim. 4 : 2,5). It is fair to say, in the light of this, that men called to the ministry today should be considered as called to an all-round ministry of prophetic utterance (in the sense of forth-telling the word of the Lord), evangelism, teaching and pastoral work, although some may have a predominant emphasis on one rather than the others.

#### THE NATURE OF EVANGELISM

In the light of what has been said, it may not be out of place here to ask the question "What is evangelism?" On Scriptural grounds, it is misleading to identify "preaching the gospel" with "preaching a gospel message", as if only the latter were true evangelism. Men who labour to expound the Scriptures are sometimes criticised for not making pointed enough appeals to the unconverted, and the implication is that only the pointed appeal constitutes true evangelism. There is a whole philosophy behind this attitude, but it must be asserted that all the available Scriptural evidence stands in contradiction to it. According to the New Testament, the preaching of the Gospel is the proclamation of the mighty acts of God, not a series of exhortations and entreaties to get right with God. All the characteristic preaching of the Gospel in the Acts of the Apostles bears witness to this. The apostles preached doctrine. Mod-

ern scholarship has established that there was a well-defined apostolic *kerugma* which formed the foundation and basis of all their ministry. And it was objective proclamation in this sense, not subjective appeal, that God was pleased to bless. A careful and unbiased reading of the New Testament will surely make it clear that the apostolic evangelism consisted of the exposition and interpretation of the Scriptures concerning Christ. Paul reasoned with men out of the Scriptures (Acts 17 : 2), opening up and unfolding their meaning in such a way that their message in all its virtue and power got home to mind, heart and conscience. It is precisely the lack of this kind of preaching that has so often brought evangelistic work into such a parlous state today. We need to be clear that it is the law of the Lord that converts the soul (Ps. 19 : 7) not the earnest pleading of men, and this means that it must be proclaimed and expounded objectively, and trusted in – whether it be John's Gospel, Romans, Genesis or Numbers – as having converting power, if the Spirit is in the preaching of it.

One further point on the nature of the gifts: "pastors and teachers" constitute a combined office, as the Greek makes clear. This is significant, and it is possible to see a reason for such a union. The teaching of the Word, the exposition of Holy Scripture, is something that probes men's hearts and lives, and unearths and brings to the surface the basic human problems and needs that lurk hidden in the recesses of the soul. It is this fact that necessitates pastoral care and help in order to resolve them and

bring relief and blessing. According to the narrative of the Gospels, the presence of Jesus seemed again and again to draw into the open the demons that hitherto had remained concealed in the dark and hopeless depths of men's lives, in order that they might be challenged and cast out of them. In the same way today, the Word exposes the works of the evil one in human experience, to enable wise pastoral care to be exercised for the establishment of spiritual health.

The reality of this healing and restorative activity is borne out in what Paul proceeds to say in vv. 12, 13 about the purpose of the institution of the gifts of ministry in the Church. The A.V. gives a threefold division of v. 12, following Chrysostom, Calvin and others, and takes the three clauses as co-ordinate. But this is open to question on linguistic and grammatical grounds, and it is better either to adopt a twofold division of the verse (so NEB), and render, "with a view to the equipment of the saints for their work of service, and to the edifying of the body of Christ", or to take the three phrases as successive and dependent on one another (so Luther and others) and so interpret, "with a view to the full equipment of the saints for the work of ministration or service they have each to do in order to the building up of the body of Christ" (Salmond, in Exp. Gk. Test.). In any case, the phrase "the work of the ministry" can scarcely refer to the ministry of the Word for, as Abbott rightly points out (ICC), "we cannot suppose the teachers themselves to be included among those who are the objects of the

functions enumerated in v. 11." It is better to take *diakonias* in the more general sense of "service", applicable to all believers, than the more restricted and specific sense of service of an official kind. Moule is therefore right when he interprets Paul's meaning to be that "the Divine gift of a Christian ministry is to have its effect above all things in the fitting of the saints (true believers in general) for active service for the common Lord." Moule proceeds to take the next phrase, "the edifying of the body" as "a special aspect of the 'work of service' just mentioned", thus following Salmond's interpretation (quoted above). But it is equally possible to refer this phrase directly to the institution of the gifts of ministry in the Church, for "the edifying of the body" is as truly the purpose of ministry as is the equipment of the saints. Indeed, taken thus, the function of ministry has both a negative or preparatory and a positive and proper character. For the word translated in the A.V. as "perfecting" by its etymology has almost a negative and preparatory connotation. It is of some importance to examine this in detail.

#### THE PERFECTING OF THE SAINTS

The Greek word *katarthismos* occurs only here in the New Testament, but its verbal form *katarthiszo* is found several times in Paul and other N.T. writers. Its literal meaning is "to fit together, to bring into its proper use, whether for the first time, or after a lapse" (Souter). It is used outside the New Testament by one Greek writer as a medical

term, for the setting of a dislocated joint, and this use of it is graphically suggestive when carried into Paul's context here. For a true ministry of the Word has precisely this function, to set disordered lives aright. One has only to think of the disturbance that one life morally and spiritually out of joint can bring to a fellowship of believers.

A number of significant New Testament usages of *katarthissein* may be usefully examined to shed light on its meaning here.

(i) Hebrews 11 : 3:

"Through faith we understand that the worlds *were framed* by the word of God".

Here the word is used of the creative act of God, and this also defines the purpose for which the ascended Lord has given gifts of ministry to His Church – in order that by the proclamation of the Word the new creation might be brought into being in the lives of men. We are told in Acts how the apostles went everywhere preaching the Word, and new life was born across the face of Asia and Europe. God Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness in the beginning, shone in the darkened hearts of men by the preaching of the Word to give the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ. It pleases Him by the foolishness of preaching to save (i.e. to bring into newness of life) them that believe.

(ii) Matthew 4 : 21:

"James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee, *mending* their nets."

The translation of *katarthissein* here as "mending" tells us by implication that the ministry of the Word is given

in order that broken things might be mended and made serviceable. This is a particularly apt idea in view of our Lord's own words, "I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mark 1 : 17). Sometimes, when engaged in the service of Christ, it is possible to fish all night and catch nothing because we are working with nets that need mending. Mending nets is just as characteristic of the fishermen as casting nets, and in the spiritual sphere the former is a necessary preliminary if the latter is to be effective.

(iii) Gal. 6 : 1:

"If any man, be overtaken in a fault, ye who are spiritual *restore* such an one in the spirit of meekness."

"Restore" is our word here, and the implication is that the ministry of the Word fulfils a work of restoration in those who fail and become a disappointment to themselves and to others and to God. Our Lord counted on the possibility of His children failing and being overtaken in faults, and graciously provides the remedy in the word of His grace.

(iv) 1 Pet. 5 : 10:

"The God of all grace, Who hath called us unto His eternal glory . . . *make* you *perfect* . . . stablish, strengthen, settle you".

The etymological meaning of *katarthissein* is almost interpreted and commented upon in the words which follow it – stablish, strengthen, settle, for this is the redeemed man's "proper condition" in the purpose and intention of God. One is reminded of our Lord's parable of the lost coin which, from being lost, was brought back into circulation, and restored to the function for which it was origi-

nally minted. It is the work of the ministry to do this for men. Such, then, is the equipment of the saints for the service they are to render to Christ. But "to be brought into one's proper condition" is in a real sense preparatory, since it is only at this point that service can be effective. The positive character of ministry is defined in the phrase "the edifying of the body of Christ", and this is surely distinct from the other, which could be called the therapeutic, aspect. To continue the medical analogy, when a man is sick, it is the hindrances to health that must be dealt with. But the necessary antibiotics or the surgery do not of themselves restore him to health; they merely remove the obstacles to health and make the return of health possible. Now he must be built up, and the emphasis and treatment become different. So it is in the spiritual realm; first one deals with all that hinders, then growth is possible; and in the encouragement of growth, the spiritual life is up-built. And while it may be true that we are not always spiritually sick and in need of therapy, we do need spiritual food day by day, and as Peter says (1 Pet. 2 : 1,2) we are to desire the sincere milk of the Word that we may grow thereby.

#### GROWTH AND MATURITY

This contrast of ideas is continued in vv. 13 and 14 in the metaphors of childhood and maturity. The evidences of immaturity – childishness, inconstancy, shallowness, lack of discernment – are meant to indicate a state of unpreparedness, not to say unfitness and disqualification, for fulfilling the service to which we are

called in the Gospel, a condition for which the institution of the ministry of the Word is the appointed and sufficient answer. This is indicated in v. 13, where the word "come" is a strong one in the Greek, and has the force of "reaching one's destination" as "a full-grown man". This last has a collective reference, and applies to the Church as the body of Christ rather than to the individual believer, although of course it applies to him also, and needs to. The thought of a full-grown Church going forth into service "terrible as an army with banners" is a very wonderful one, and perfectly describes the advance of the early Church in Paul's own day. Effective, fruitful service, then, flows from adulthood in spiritual experience, and this must be the primary concern in Christian ministry, so to apply the Word to men's hearts that they will grow up to maturity, and then develop in maturity till they become the best they can be for Christ.

The idea of growth ("stature" in v. 13 refers to height or growth, rather than age) is continued and further emphasised in v. 15. The verb translated "speaking the truth" has in fact a wider meaning than the A.V. gives it. Alford translates "being followers of truth", but better still would be "cherishing the truth". The Christian, as Moule says, is to "cultivate an instinct for Divine truth as against its counterfeits, in thought and in life." Here the attitude of the saints to the ministry of the Word is in view (in terms of our Lord's warning "Take heed how ye hear"). It is by cherishing the truth, and receiving it as one would receive a welcome guest into one's

home (cf 1 Thess. 2 : 13, where the word Paul uses of receiving the word of God has precisely this force – *edexasthe*), that we grow up into maturity in Christ "in all things". This last phrase is important, since it indicates all-round, balanced growth, emotional, intellectual, moral, spiritual. This is the great desideratum in spiritual life, and nothing less can be properly called the development of true Christian stature.

To complete this marvellously full and comprehensive discussion of the nature and purpose of the ministry of the Word, Paul adds a final word about the inevitable outcome of this whole operation. The A.V. translation of v. 16 is somewhat cumbersome, although its general meaning is really quite clear. The essential idea is the inner harmony and coherence of the body and the common growth of the limbs through individual connection with the Head ("fitly framed together and compacted"). The phrase "by that which every joint supplieth" has been variously rendered, but is probably best taken as "through every contact with the supply", i.e. through the union of every member of the body with the Head. This is further suggested in the next phrase, "according to the proportionate working of each several part." Each member of the body of Christ has his contribution to make to the harmony and well-being of the body, and will make that contribution when he responds without reserve to the ministry of the Word. And this will result in the glad, spontaneous, and inevitable increase or growth of the body. Here is the true, New Testament conception of evangelical

outreach – the Church as the body of Christ energised and vitalised by an unreserved reception of the word of ministry, healed, equipped, built up into maturity and balanced development, and thus made self-propagating and fruitful in the service of the Gospel.

This, then, is the service for which the saints are to be equipped, this the final purpose and goal of the ministry of the Word in the Church of Christ. It is a measure of how much and how far we have departed from this basic, Biblical concept that our pattern and practice of evangelism is often so very different from that of the early Church.