

Ministry and Ordination, Gifts and Gender

A Study of Ephesians 4

I believe that Ephesians 4 is a foundational text for the understanding of ministry in the Christian church. It shapes the key hermeneutical principles for the study of ordination.

1 Context

The description of ministry is to be found in Ephesians 4:7-14. Ephesians 4:1-6 gives the context.

These verses speak of the unity of the church, both as the given nature (v4) and the challenge (v3) of the body which is the people who belong to Jesus Christ. They also call for a character which matches the spirit of the Lord – humility, patience, forbearance, love (vv1-2).

Viewing these opening verses as the context for the statement on ministry points to the fact that ministry is intended to reflect the unity of the church, but that tensions relating to ministry may also challenge this unity.

2 Christ ascended and descended

The statement of ministry is presented as an exposition of Psalm 68:18, reinterpreted Christologically (v8). The original verse describes the Lord God ascending to the place of honour on Mt Zion as the victor over the enemies of his people and over the forces of evil. In the Hebrew and Septuaginta verse the Lord God is acclaimed as the one who *received* gifts from people, gifts that were the acts of homage of a conquered people. When this verse is quoted in Ephesians, the Lord *gives* gifts to people, and it is the giving of gifts that is the key to the statement on ministry.

In the exposition Christ is identified as the Lord God of Psalm 68, and his ascent becomes the pivotal concept. The victory of the Lord God on behalf of his old covenant people is reinterpreted as the salvation victory of Christ over evil. And the kingly ascent of the Lord God is reinterpreted as the completion of salvation and Christ's ascent to his heavenly Father (v10).

But in this exposition Ephesians takes a further step of introducing the idea of the descent of Christ – ascent implies also descent (v9-10), and Christ's descent is to the 'lower earthly regions'.

The meaning of this statement has been debated exegetically. It could refer to the incarnation of Christ, or his descent into hell, but neither interpretation seems to fit fully with the argument that is being developed. Another suggestion is that it refers to the Pentecost event: Christ ascended to heaven and then descended from heaven to give the gifts of ministry. In this exegesis there is an implied identification between the Christ who is the Lord of the church and the Holy Spirit who is the enabler of the church. (For this interpretation see Ralph Martin: *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon – Interpretation Commentary*: John Knox Press 1991).

3 Christ gave gifts of ministry

The explicit conclusion of this exposition, regardless of the referent that is preferred, is that Christ gave gifts of grace to people (v7) and these gifts are the basis of ministry (v11). The Pentecost interpretation of v10 reinforces this conclusion. The grace (ἡ χάρις) that is given is not the grace of

salvation that is given without measure to all who believe. It is the specific gifts given to individuals for their life as Christians to be used in ministry. It is the grace gifts given according to the will and apportioning of Christ (v7).

4 Gifts of ministry

The text then makes a jump. Christ gives the gifts of ministry but these gifts are now the people who serve in these ministries (v11). *He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers.*

Translators have usually tried to combine the double concept: Christ gives gifts to people so that they can minister, and Christ gives such people to the church so that it can receive their ministry.

The ministries that are listed are not defined or described. It is understood that they are recognised. Nor is it stated that this is a definitive list of ministries. It is quite conceivable that other ministries could have been included, or that the ministry roles could have been designated in other ways, as they are in various sections of the New Testament.

The list of ministries suggests that there is an order in ministry. Different people are recognised as having different ministries. But there is not a set order, in the sense that the church must have these ministries and no other ministries.

Within the list of ministries there is no suggestion that one or more ministries should be considered to be ordained in the sense of having a higher status or higher authorisation. Rather each ministry is ordered or ordained to serve its own purpose.

5 The purpose of ministries

The purpose of these ministries is then described in a series of cumulative purpose clauses.

All of these ministries are intended 'for the preparation of God's people for the work of service' (v12). The service of God's people is intended 'for the building up of the body of Christ' (v12). The goal of this building up process is that 'we all attain unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God' (v13, and this goal is further described as 'being mature, reaching the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (v13).

6 A definition of ministry

Therefore, according to this passage, ministry is defined by the gifts of Christ (through the coming of his Holy Spirit), and by its purpose of building up the body of Christ. Where people are given the abilities and will to serve Christ and witness to his Gospel, and where people are using these gifts for the sake of drawing people into the church, and building up the faith and life of people in the church, there is ministry.

7 Ordering and ordaining ministry

This passage suggests that there will be an order to ministry, as different people serve different roles within the greater process. It understands that each role is gifted in its own particular way, and that

each role is important. It does not suggest that there needs to be a two-fold division between ordained and non-ordained ministry.

Ministry is defined by its origin in the gifts of Christ and its purpose of building up the body of Christ. Ministry will be ordered, recognising the gifts of Christ, and structured to serve the purpose of edification. However a particular order is not prescribed. Rather orders will develop and must be evaluated according to the purpose of ministry. The shape or the order of ministry may change from age to age, place to place, group to group, as has in fact happened. Any discussion on the order of ministry should take place within this context.

This purpose-oriented definition of ministry corresponds to the definition of ministry in the Augsburg Confession. In the Augsburg Confession there is a clear line from God's work of justification, to the gifts of God's Word and Sacraments as the means by which this justification is created, to the gift of ministry by which the means of grace are administered. Ministry is defined by its origin and purpose, not by a definition of the people who serve as ministers.

Ordination is a form of recognising the gifts that God has given to a person and authorising and commissioning this person to use these gifts on behalf of Christ and on behalf of the church as a body. According to the above discussion, ordination belongs to the ordering of ministry, and the use of ordination and the form of ordination may vary.

8. Key hermeneutical principles

According to the above discussion we can note and develop some key hermeneutical principles:

- a) The ministry of the church is determined Christologically
- b) The theology of ministry should be defined by passages that describe the nature and purpose of ministry within its Christological context
- c) The ministry of the church is defined by the gifts it receives and employs
- d) The ministry of the church is defined by its purpose in building up the body of Christ
- e) The shape of Christian ministry will be determined by applying these principles to a particular context
- f) New Testament passages that describe a particular ministry should be interpreted within their particular context

9. Ministry and Gender

According to the above discussion the essentials of ministry are not determined by gender.

Gender is not a factor anywhere in the description and definition of ministry in Ephesians 4.

In particular:

- a) The text quoted speaks of Christ giving gifts 'to people' (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις – v8)
- b) The ability to minister is determined by gifts received.
- c) Ministry is to be evaluated and validated by its effect of edifying the body.

Gender may be a factor in the shaping of a particular ministry, depending how gender and gender roles are perceived in any particular context, and if they are considered to have a bearing on the effectiveness of ministry.

We can then understand Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 2:12, *I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man*, to be a statement about the effectiveness of a particular ministry. In the context in which he was writing, he considered giving a woman the authority to teach would be disruptive rather than edifying. In a different context a church could make a quite different judgment.

10 Conclusion

I believe that a study of Ephesians 4 leads to the clear conclusion that women should not be automatically excluded from any ministry because of their gender. If a church orders its ministry according to the categories of ordained and non-ordained ministries, this principle (non-exclusion of women) applies to ordained as well as non-ordained ministries.

The debate our church must have is whether there is any reason why gender may have a bearing on the effectiveness of any particular ministry, and then to order its own ministry accordingly; and whether in our present context including women in or excluding women from ordained ministry is going to enhance ministry as the building up of the church.

If the church recognises that the women of the church have been given gifts which can be used in the ministries which are identified as ordained ministry, and if a church believes that an ordained ministry of women and men is going to be most effective in building up the church, then it must invite suitably gifted women to share in this ministry.

DISCUSSION

What do you consider to be the Biblical basis for the practice of ordination? In what sense is the practice of ordination a Scriptural command? In what sense is ordination a practice chosen by the church to serve its ministry purpose?

Consider your attitude towards the ordination of men only or the ordination of men and women. Does a study of this passage qualify, challenge, or confirm your attitude?

How might the hermeneutical principles derived from this passage relate to the interpretation of other key passages in this debate?

Do you consider your maleness or femaleness to be a gift? If maleness and femaleness are themselves gifts, do they relate to your readiness and ability to serve in an ordained ministry?

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