**Ephesians 4:11-16, Church Building**

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I am the son of a pastor, and around the time I turned 15, my dad’s church started building a new church building. It was a months-long endeavor that most did not get to see, but because I lived in the pastor’s house across the street, I watched the progress every day. I saw concrete floors being poured, steel girders being placed, wooden tresses being hoisted – all of the guts of the building being put in place while it was happening. Now, most people in that church do not know what the church is made out of. But even now a decade later, I still do. If something goes wrong, I can tell you where to drill a hole in the wall to fix it. I can tell you where the circuits are in the building. I can tell you where the storage closets are. I can tell you where the wiring is for the sound system.

Now most of this knowledge is pretty useless, except for two reasons: if something goes wrong, knowing how this building is supposed to be constructed is the first step toward finding the problem and fixing it. And second, if someone nearby wanted to build a similarly-functioning church, I could tell them how to replicate our structure on their own, because well-functioning churches do not just happen; they are built.

My sermon title this morning is “Church Building,” which is a play on words. It could refer, as I just mentioned, to the physical structure in which the people of God assemble week by week, as we are doing now. But if we put a hyphen between the words, it becomes an action: the action, namely, of building – constructing, or to use some Christian jargon “edifying” the Church – understood here not as a building, but as the people of God who comprise the Body of Christ. And it is this second meaning that Paul has in mind in v.12 of our passage of scripture this morning. I want to use the former image – the image of the physical structure, to say something about the latter image, the work of building up mature Christians. I want to suggest to you that Paul believes, as I just said, that well-functioning churches do not just happen; they are built. And in our passage here Paul gives us a little hint as to how they are built: God brings people to occupy offices in the church where they study, explain, and pass on the teaching of the Lord. Our text has two sections, and these will be the two sections of my sermon: what are the offices of the church? And what are they supposed to do?

As I prepared this sermon this week, I was aware of two pressing realities: the first is that this church is even now in the process of trying to find ministry leaders to preach the word and build the church week by week from the pulpit and from the pastoral office. The second is that though I am aware of some of the dynamics of that process, I do not know all of those details. Therefore I have no temptation when studying this passage to defend one candidate, or one faction of the church; on the contrary, I am an outsider here – even though you are always remarkably hospitable to me when I visit your church, and I thank you for that. The service I think I can offer to you this morning is just to say something about how this passage might govern your life together as a church, and then step aside and let you try to discern how the structures of your church might help or hinder that work And that is what I am going to try to do.

**So first, what are the offices of the church?**

In our passage, Paul gives us four different offices that God has given to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers. This last one might in some translations appear to be two different offices (pastors and teachers), but grammatically in Greek it is fairly common to translate them as one office. But there is an office that is missing in this list that is undoubtedly present throughout the rest of the NT’s church polity, and its omission here is useful for telling us the point of all the offices that are mentioned here. That office is the deacon. Why are deacons unmentioned here? I think it is because the deacon, as opposed to all of the four offices here, is not concerned primarily with the handling of the Word of God. We see this in Acts 6, which is the institution of deacons in the church. A dispute arises about how the daily distribution of food ought to work, and that dispute is brought to the Apostles who respond:

“it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

I linger here on what a deacon is because I think the contrast illuminates what holds these four offices in common: the ministry of the Word of God. The work of handling the offerings, the care for the poor, the maintenance of the church building – this is all good and important and necessary work, and it is likely not the work of the four offices we have mentioned above. It is likely the work of the deacons.

So then, we see that these four offices have in common a primary concern with the study and care of the Word of God, and the work of applying that to the live of the church. Let me now say something about each of these individually, so we have a greater sense of what they do. The word ‘**apostle’** is something like “sent one.” This refers to Jesus’ most immediate followers during his lifetime, and there is no indication in the New Testament that the office of the apostle is a renewable office – that is to say, there are no apostles today. Instead, we continue to be built up by the apostles through their written testimony in the New Testament; this is what we mean when we say, in the words of the Creed that we recite here week by week, that “we believe in one holy catholic and *apostolic* church. The church is founded on the apostles and prophets – as Paul already mentioned to us in Ephesians 2.

And this brings us to the second office, the office of prophet. **Prophets** also had a ministry in the OT and NT, and so they have an exalted position as equal to the apostles in Paul’s formulation “founded on the apostles and prophets” because God used them as his mouthpiece. Now, notice that prophets are included in a list of offices that are concerned with the proclamation of the Word; that, and not fortune-telling, or future-predicting, or myth-spinning, is the work of the prophet. Biblical prophecy is *always* tied to the Word of God; it can specify the Word of God, but it can never add to it or contradict it. And understood in this way, the work of prophecy still continues, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 12, where he discusses the different gifts of the Spirit. There are marvelous churches in New Haven that continue to cultivate this gift of understanding and applying scriptures prophetically, and we should pray for them that they continue to hear more and more clearly from the Spirit who inspires them in their work.

**Evangelists** seem to be those that have a particular ministry of telling the gospel to those who are not yet Christians, and particularly, in areas where the Gospel has not yet been heard. Perhaps the closest equivalent we have today is ‘missionaries.’ There is no indication that the office of evangelist has ceased, so I think we should identify people who seem to have a distinctive capacity for explaining Christianity to people who have never heard it before or who do not currently believe it, and we should support them in that work.

And finally we arrive at **the shepherd-teacher.** This term is one of the many terms that Paul uses to describe the group of men that have authority in a local church setting. He uses a whole host of words through the New Testament interchangeably to describe this office: overseers, elders, ministers, pastors, shepherds. In the NT, these all refer to the same office, but they show the different functions that apply to that office. Here in our passage we have “shepherd” and “teacher.” We know what teacher means; one who is a steward of a body of knowledge who passes it down. What about a shepherd? That is a bit harder to understand. For clarification, we might think of the way the Lord is compared to a shepherd in Psalm 23. The shepherd leads people into health, and away from danger. The task of the shepherd-teacher, then, is to look like Christ. And we see this also in the more explicit list of qualifications for the office of pastor, which is given in Titus and Timothy – which are known as “the pastoral epistles.” I want to look at that description, so turn with me to 1 Timothy 3:1 with me.

This is the list that ought ever be before a pastoral search committee. That much is obvious. This person is adept and wise with practical wisdom, yes. But he is also virtuous, and steeped in the Bible. The temptation is, when looking for leaders of churches, to look for managers rather than pastors. I do not mean to demean practical, efficient skillfulness in leading an organization. Those skills are real skills. But I call this impulse a “temptation” for a reason; if we come to believe that our churches will be healthier if we follow a model given to us by a business school rather than from a confidence in the efficacy of the Word of God, then frankly, I do not know what we are doing here any longer.

This is also the list that ought to be before the eyes, I think, of every young Christian who wants to know what maturity in Christ might look like.

One final comment on these four offices before I proceed to my second point; in our passage here the people who fill these offices are characterized as being “given” by God. That is to say, wise church leaders are gifts from God. I exhort you to be thankful to God for them, to pray to God for them. These offices are the architecture of the church. If the church works, it will work because of these gifts.

**Second, what are these church leaders supposed to do?**

Paul answers this question over the course of the rest of our passage from vv.12-15, which are all summed up in the phrase “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” If over the course of this sermon thus far you were tempted to believe that the church primarily consists in what its leaders do, this passage stands as a correction. Every time Paul uses the term “the saints,” he refers to all those Christians in the church he is addressing; in other words, this means you. The work of these church leaders is to devote themselves to scripture, to prayer, to teaching, so that *you* in the pews might be equipped to do the work of ministry. You, Christian, are, in this way, ministers. This might be one of the implications of Martin Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of *all* believers; we are all to intercede for each other, to speak the words of God to each other, and to imitate Christ as we go about our work. The teachers of the church are designed to empower the congregation to do its work, not replace the congregation in doing its work. And here is where the text combines the high theses of cosmological unity with the, to our eyes, lowly themes of church polity: do you want unity? Do the work of the saints. Do you want Christ to be magnified in the people? Do the work of the saints.

* Exhort to acquire pastoral and ministerial training, and to become a church that sends church leaders. Especially students who come through here and go back to China.
  + Strategic place of this church.

The conclusion of the passage gives us the culmination of the Christian life, the goal at which we are aiming, in three resulting clauses that restate each other:

1. Until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.
2. To mature personhood
3. To the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ
   1. So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, but human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Recently I preached about the significance of theology and doctrine in the life of the Church. Paul insists upon this.

* 1. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Maturity in Christianity is always Christoformity; it is always looking more like Jesus. This is why it is impossible ever for a Christian to grow too wise for Christ.

Spurgeon’s opening sentences at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in London, on Monday, March 25, 1861,

*I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist . . . I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist . . . But if I am asked to say what is my creed, I think I must reply––"It is Jesus Christ." . . . The body of divinity to which I would pin and bind myself for ever, God helping me, is . . . Christ Jesus, who is the sum and substance of the gospel; who is in Himself all theology, the incarnation of every precious truth, the all-glorious personal embodiment of the way, the truth, and the life.*