

What is Ministry? - 3

Whenever human beings begin to organise something, you can be sure it will usually go from simple to more complicated. Even when we try to make things easier, we often end up making them harder. Just think of life in the city – supposedly there to save is time, make things simpler – but does it? We have an amazing capacity to over-organise, until something originally very simple has become very complex.

That is especially true when you think of ministry. What the New Testament describes as ministry, and what the modern church has made of it are very different things. If you had to time-warp a first-century believer out of his or her local church and put him or her in one of ours, there would be confusion and shock. The simplicity of the body ministering to one another has been swallowed up in programmes, programmes and programmes.

Go back two hundred years and enter a Baptist church in 1808 and ask them how many ministries they have. They won't understand the question. They will know what ministry is, but they won't understand what you mean by 'how many ministries do you have?'

Last week we examined Ephesians 4 to understand ministry. We saw the tools of ministry – our spiritual gifts. We saw the training for ministry – the evangelists and pastor-teachers. We saw the task of ministry – knowing Christ, growing in Christ and showing Christ.

I Corinthians 12 through 14 is an extended description of ministry. In these chapters, in a more detailed way, Paul explains what ministry is, similar to how he did in Ephesians 4. But here his emphasis is mostly on the tools of ministry, and how to use them.

First three verses of chapter 12 really go with chapter 14. Chapter 14 corrects the abuse of spiritual gifts that had been occurring at Corinth. Effectively, pagan practices, and possibly even demonic practices, had entered the Corinthian church, and Paul had to spend three chapters fixing the mess they had made of spiritual gifts. So most of chapter 12 is the function of spiritual gifts, chapter 13 is the aim and power of spiritual gifts and chapter 14 is the application in regards to the gifts they were abusing.

But from verse 4, Paul begins to describe the truth about spiritual gifts. And in fact, he actually uses three words to describe them. Verse 4, he calls them *gifts*. But verse 5 he calls them *ministries*, or services. Verse 6 he calls them *activities*, or works. This gives us a heads-up as to what spiritual gifts are. Spiritual gifts are not spasms of uncontrollable power convulsing us into a loss of control. Spiritual gifts are not physical sensations that remind us of electrocution or shock treatment. Spiritual gifts are gracious enablements that enable us to serve and to work for Christ in the local church.

We have focused a little too much on the gift aspect. It is a gracious enablement. But it is a gracious enablement that enables you to serve, to work. The end result of the grace is an activity of service to the body.

These gifts are the tools we use to do ministry. The gifts are not ministries, the gifts *enable* ministry. The gifts are the power behind service.

But there is a danger here. God has chosen to make us very differently from one another, and to gift us differently. And the danger might be that we conclude that with such different gifts, that we all have different ministries.

What Paul does here, implicitly is to suggest the Trinity. Spirit- Lord – God. Now why would he mention the Trinity when speaking about spiritual gifts?

Because the Trinity illustrates what he is going to be talking about. The Trinity is one God, but subsisting in three Persons. Each of the three Persons is different. They are not the same. Yet their differences are nevertheless one God. What is the point?

Ministry is performed by individuals but it is not individualistic

I don't need to tell you how individualistic our culture is. "I Did It My Way" sang Frank Sinatra. Ad after ad tells us - "You're worth it" "You deserve it" "You have right to choose". When we eat and drink and breathe this thinking, we begin to believe that others exist for my happiness. Other must provide for my personal self-worth and fulfilment.

And when we enter the church, we bring that smell of the world with us. Some decide they don't want church services, they just want cell-groups, it suits them better. Some decide that they will tag along a ministry for as long as they want – but never become members, just stay on the periphery. Some decide they will attend whatever corporate meetings they want to attend. It does not matter when the Body meets, it only matters when I feel like attending. Some decide that they will attend various churches, depending on who is speaking where, like drive through food joints. Some decide that they have been given a ministry by God, and the church had better find a way to accommodate that ministry. Some decide that they don't want others nosing into their private lives, thank you very much, and they are quite capable of living their own Christian life without interference. Some decide that the rise or fall of their local church is something quite external to them, whatever happens, happens. It's not my fault. If it doesn't work out for them, I'll attend another one. Some decide that the church ought to visit them when they are sick, though they hardly attend the church. Some decide that the church ought to help them financially when they are down and out, though they are hardly ever in church to consider contributing back.

It's what Richard Weaver called 'the spoiled child mentality'. Individualism – I , me , myself, and the universe orbiting around me.

We've already talked about the fact that individualism is what is driving many a church's attitude toward ministry. Tailor-make ministries to the ages, genders, marital status, or interest group in question. Make it all about them. Make it all about meeting their needs, while ministry has the opposite focus.

It was John MacArthur who mentioned that the phrase 'my personal relationship with Jesus' has a negative dimension to it, it seems to suggest a private, isolated experience that may or may not interact with other Christians. Yet the Scriptural approach is my corporate relationship with Christ.

The danger in gifting individuals is that you may foster individualism. And right through this chapter, Paul fights against it from almost every angle. He has just enlisted the highest possible example – the Trinity.

Paul is setting up the fact that ministry is many members serving one another in One body. We are not the same member, we are different members. But we are not many churches, we are one local church. Ministry is the use of our differing spiritual gifts in one local church for the one goal of knowing Christ and making Him known. We are individuals, but not individualistic.

Put simply, ministry is a unified goal through diversity of function. One goal – know Christ, grow in Christ, show Christ.

Though each member will be different, and his type of service in the church different, he or she is empowered and equipped by the same Spirit as every other member of the body.

V7, 8, 9, 10

Again we see this in verses 28-30. Everyone is different.

Look how many times the word 'same' occurs – v4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11. Why? God is emphasising – your differences are minor; what you have in common is my Spirit.

Different gifts do not have different origins. It is not like teaching comes from the Spirit but mercy from somewhere else. You do not apply to this god for leadership, and to that god for faith. It comes from the same Spirit. That means something else.

Different gifts do not have different goals. Though hearts do very different things from stomachs, their goal is the same – life! You may do very different things from other believer – but it all comes back to this one thing – knowing Christ and making Him known.

What Paul now does is he picks an illustration which best suits his purpose of explaining how things happen in a local church. He uses the illustration of the human body.

A body has many parts – heart, lungs, limbs, eyes. But those many parts, still only make up one body – not many bodies. However, within a body you have total interdependence, total equality, total harmony for the good of sustaining life.

So is the church of Christ. V12

The local church is one corporate entity that functions to know Christ and make Him known.

However, God chooses to place very different people into that one body. But He does so by using the same Spirit, that we all drink of, that baptises us into one body. Whether we be Jews or Greeks, bond or free, we all end up being part of the same entity v13. Just like the same blood is pumped to all the organs of the body, so we are all indwelt by the same Spirit.

a) The local church is not one member's ministry v14

The body is not one member but many. The body is not one big eye or toenail, it is many members. And Paul illustrates this humorously by asking, if a hand felt that the big idea in a body is to be a foot, and because it was not a foot, it felt it was not part of the body, would that mean it was not part of the body? The same goes for the ear, feeling that the most important thing in a body is the eye, and because it is not an eye, it is not part of the body, would that really make it not part of the body?

To put it in our terms, is the local church just one member's ministry? Unfortunately, it often becomes that way, at least in perception. A church becomes a foot ministry, and every member not functioning as a foot feels useless.

This happens when the emphasis shifts away from our task – which is to know Christ and make Him known - onto the individual ministries of the members.

Of course, the ministry most likely to make people feel this way is teaching. Since learning the Word of God is critical, since we give the bulk of our corporate worship times to teaching, we could wrongly perceive that the local church is all about this one ministry – teaching. The church is a mouth. And then, members whom God has not equipped or made to be a mouth start saying, because I am not a mouth, I am not of the body.

Eating is critical to your body's survival. But a lot more needs to happen in your body than just eating. Your body cannot be one big mouth.

That's why Paul says in verse 17 – how could the body be one big eye, or one big ear?

What you need to ask yourself is this: how has God equipped me to make Christ known to other believers in this church? It is not only through teaching the Word, though we are to all share the Word with one another (Col 3:16). We make Christ known to one another through encouraging one another, through kindness, through prayer, through mercy, through assistance, through organisation, through leadership, through acts of service, through giving. In fact, as we will see, the New Testament gives you at least 28 different ways to show Christ to one another.

The way God has equipped you is part of His wise and good pleasure. Verse 18 says that.

But this truth of one body being made up of many members leads Paul to make another point:

b) The local church needs every member's ministry

Every member needs the Body, because there is equality in the body.

When Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution, it affected every branch of science. One of the areas of human biology that Darwinists tried to use to prove their theory was the idea of vestigial organs. A vestigial organ is a part of the body that apparently has no use or no function. Evolutionists claimed it was proof of evolution – something we used to use when we are monkeys, that we no longer use. And they had over 180 such things, including the wisdom teeth, the appendix, the tonsils, eyebrows, eyelashes, ear muscles, the coccyx that they thought were vestigial. But in the many years since then, the almost unanimous opinion is that the so-called vestigial organs all have at least one function. God made man as He wanted to, without waste.

The fact is, the same is true in the Body of Christ. As Paul puts it, the eye cannot claim it does not need the hand, nor can the head say it does not need the feet. All members of the body are necessary. In the same way, all members of a local church are necessary.

Now, it is true that not everyone is as *apparently* necessary. Parts of the body are not equally necessary to the observing eye. But the Bible says, in reality, God has actually set things up so that the human body has equal honour to its members.

Indeed, a liver does not look attractive. Most of us are glad that our livers are not part of our faces. So God has enclosed them behind protective bone, muscle, skin, as if giving them a special place. The eyes are attractive. So God does not honour them by enclosing them behind all that flesh, but by letting them be on the outside.

Someone says, “Come on, a foot is clearly not as nice as an eye.” But Paul wisely answers, but on those parts which seem to be unpresentable, we put greater honour on them. What do we do with our feet? We put stylish, sometimes expensive things on top of them. Our eyes don't need to be covered up, because they have a natural beauty. The result is, when we appear in public, our eyes look honourable and our feet do as well.

That's how the human body works. The parts that seem less, actually are honoured in other ways, which shows they are equal. And if they are equal, every part's function is necessary to the overall health.

The one teaching or leading seems to the observer to be far more necessary than the one who prays at home for all the other members. But the fact is, they are equally necessary. The vigorous music leaders seems more necessary than the aged member who has trouble walking.

In the same way, God gives greater honour to the part that lacks it. To the weak, He gives extra attention. To the strong, who need less, He puts them elsewhere where their strength is used. To the one who is slower, He honours with a lot more instruction, than the one who is faster. The one who is less sensitive, He places them in the place to take some of the blows, because they have the honour of being tougher. The ones who are more sensitive, He honours them by placing them where they are shielded.

In the end, what it means is the members are equal, and have equal need of one another. You need

the ministry of every person that God places in this body, directly or indirectly.

When someone is not exercising their ministry to this body, you will feel it. We all will. You might not know that it is because so-and-so is refusing to pray, or because so-and-so is refusing to serve, but you will feel it.

The Body will quite simply know Christ less, and make Him known less.

But God says – they are equally necessary. And that leads to a third point.

c) The local church must minister to its members equally.

It is a sense that one member is more vital or more important or worthy of more honour that creates a schism in the body. The word *schism* means a tearing, a division. Some get more attention, more honour than others, instead of the natural care there should be. This kind of inequality brings resentment over time. People feel uncared for, unrecognised, unnoticed, unneeded. Instead of this inequality, Paul says in v25 – the members should have the same care for one another.

The word *care* actually means a kind of anxiety. It means to be deeply concerned about. It means to think earnestly about, to be burdened for.

Because we are one, we suffer when one suffers. We rejoice when one rejoices. Ministry is not shooting blanks into the air, it is targeting one another to know Christ and make Him known. That brings to mind the fact that there are over 28 'one-another' commands in the New Testament. What they add up to is, ministry. Love one another – know Christ and make Him known to one another.

Do you realise how the other members of this church have a ministry to you, directly or indirectly? Many people act as if there is only one person who has a ministry to them – the pastor-teacher.

Do you realise how you have a ministry to all the other members of this church, directly or indirectly?

Now the major application of this passage is going to come in chapter 13. He closes this chapter with the words – I show you a more excellent way. What is the more excellent way? The content of chapter 13.

But in closing let me make one other application.

It seems to me that this illustration of the body only works in the context of a local church. I don't know how the members have the same care for one another, or suffer or rejoice with one another in the kind of immediate and equal sense this passage suggests if we are talking about the church worldwide.

If this is a local church that is in view, it seems to me that what the Bible takes for granted is that people who minister to one another are members of one another. As the parts of the body are one, in communion together, so the Bible implies that in a local church ministry occurs between the members. Those that have come in, who have made a commitment to be in a local church until God moves them elsewhere.

When you think about what we have seen, it only makes sense. How can we minister to one another equally, if we don't know who is in the body and who is out? Who has asked for ministry, and who hasn't? Who is in communion with us, and who isn't?

How do we hold people accountable for their ministries if we aren't sure they are in the body?

Now you can be a non-member and minister to others, I don't doubt that. My question would be, why continue in that state? Why not make it known to this body that you want to be known as a part of it, that you are covenanting with it, that you are formally coming under its authority, that you wish to have its accountability. It would be an odd stomach that wanted to do the body's digestion,

yet remain outside the body. It would be an odd liver that wanted to do purification, but remained outside the body. So, if you are functioning like a member, why remain outside?