

## Man's Greatest Challenge (Part 3)

### The Gift of the Ministry

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As you know, this sermon series through which we have been going was inspired by a 2003 speech delivered by Michael Crichton, the novelist (many of you have probably read his books). He states that the most important challenge facing mankind today is our ability to determine what truth is. Allow me to once again quote from a passage of particular relevance to us:

"The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of distinguishing fantasy from reality, truth from propaganda. Perceiving the truth has always been a challenge to mankind, but in the information age (or as I like to think of it, the *dis*information age) it takes on a special urgency and importance."

This great challenge collides with the fact that we are nearing the end of an age. As Jesus tells us in Matthew 24 it is going to be a time of the worst crisis of mankind's history and that if He did not intervene no one would be saved alive. We are coming upon a time (or I should say we are already *in* a time) in which it will be very difficult to distinguish what to believe and what not to believe, what is truth and what is error. It is only going to grow worse. We know from the Bible that "wicked men and deceivers are going to wax worse and worse." We have to be on the ball!

Here we are, true Christians, whom Paul calls the weak, the base, and the foolish of the world. (Hopefully we are not that way still, but this is our spiritual condition when we are initially called.) We have now been made aware of the many deceptions coming at us, and that it is our very salvation which hangs in the balance! Will we, the elect of God, be able to determine what is truth and what is error as trouble and misinformation continually increase? Are we even *equipped* to make such monumental decisions which directly impact upon our salvation? Do we have the spiritual discernment to recognize and embrace God's revelation; and, conversely, to recognize and *reject* Satan's counterfeits? Do we have what it takes? Thankfully, we have the encouragement and the promises from God that we *can* know the truth and that He will give us the help to discern that which is true from that which is false!

The disciples were facing a similar dilemma as their time with Jesus was coming to an end. They were going to be the ones who would have to make the monumental decisions concerning the course of the Church and they would not have Jesus there to help them (or so they thought).

But Jesus exhorts them...

John 14:18, 16-17 "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you...and I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper,

that it may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees it nor knows it; but you know it, for it dwells with you and will be in you."

Of course He is speaking of the Holy Spirit. It is obvious from a straightforward reading of this text that Jesus tells His disciples He would be with them by means of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He says that He is going to send them a helper so that they will be able to determine truth. And then He says, "I will be with you; I will come to you!" He comes and lives His life in us *through* (by means of) the Holy Spirit. He projects part of Himself to us. It is that Spirit that comes into us. And, as the Apostle Paul expands on this in I Corinthians 2:16, we see that it is the *very mind* of Christ we are given!

With God's mind—Christ's mind in us—we *can*, indeed, make these monumental decisions which directly affect our salvation! He, by His Spirit in us, will lead us into all truth as He promised. It all hinges on whether we will recognize it, follow it, and submit to it. It is the guide He gives us to help us in this task of determining truth from error.

Nevertheless, even though I have built it up as I have over the past few minutes, in most cases the Holy Spirit is not enough by itself—believe it or not! It is a great gift that God gives us. And it can do great things in us, and with us, as long as we follow and obey it. But usually, because "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," we need other help to guide, direct, and teach us.

Therefore, God gives certain gifts in order to compliment and assist that which Christ does through the Holy Spirit. Obviously, what Christ does is the more important, efficient, and just plain *better* of the lot, but this other gift to the Church is a tremendous blessing! The particular gift of which I am speaking is—in these days—quite UNPOPULAR! It is dismissed in some quarters as unnecessary, corrupt, self-seeking, abusive, common or profane, and even worse! I am referring to, of course, *the ministry!*

It is the third *vital* piece in this series of sermons (along with the proper understanding of the nature of God and the authority of scripture) which are all necessary to be able to determine truth from error. God has the greatest effect among these three. He is the one who reveals His nature to us. He is the one who gave His own Word to us as authoritative instruction. And He has given His Spirit that we may understand these truths. But He has also provided for us a human element—in the form of the ministry—as teachers, shepherds, guides, leaders, and helpers of the brethren.

Ephesians 4:7 But to each one of us grace [This is not necessarily the grace we receive at baptism, although this includes it. I do not want to leave it out. I want us to get a more sweeping view of this idea. We can insert here the words *favor*, *gifts*—or even *providence*.] But to each one of us [*providence*] was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

God gives us what we need, in measure, according to what He wants us to do. He gives us grace.

Ephesians 4:8 Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."

Paul is speaking not just about grace, but *all* of God's gifts to men which directly affect our salvation. That is what Christ did when He led captivity captive. He was able, at that point, to bless us with the spiritual gifts which we would need in order to join Him where He is. What are some of these gifts? What do we *need* to be with Christ?

Ephesians 4:11-16 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

We are going to go back through this section of scripture while focusing on the role of the ministry. It is clearly listed as a gift, a blessing, from Christ Himself to the Church. And we can see that it is one of the first ones mentioned and, therefore, one of the most important.

Ephesians 4:11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.

We know from James 1:17 that God gives only good and perfect gifts. This is not to puff up the ministry and make it into something that it is not. "Good" is correct—it is for the good of the Church that He does this. "Perfect," on the other hand, does not necessarily have the same meaning that we would normally think of. It simply means "suited for the task." God gives a ministry to the Church that is for their good and it is assigned a specific task. The men who are chosen to serve in this manner are able to do so because God gives *them* gifts to fulfill their work.

We can identify these specific works by the names which God gives to the various ministerial functions:

- First there are apostles. Apostle means envoy—an ambassador having a certain mission to fulfill. We can identify what his role is—he is sent with a message.
- Prophets are spokesmen (whether they preach with inspiration

from God's Word or whether they foretell the future). They are spokesmen—one who speak for another.

- Evangelists spread good news. That is what the word, "euaggelistes," means—they spread good news.
- Pastors are shepherds. They have a flock that they keep and tend.
- Teachers are instructors.

These are all different works and diverse roles. We have those who are sent on a mission; we have spokesmen; we have spreaders of good news; we have shepherds; and we have instructors. Some overlapping occurs among these different roles, but they are, nonetheless, all specific and individual in their primary functions.

Ephesians 4:12 for the equipping of the saints [This is why He gives these particular gifts. *Minister* means servant—if you are a minister you are a servant. This is the basic definition. A minister is not someone who is "high and mighty." He is the one who should be washing the feet and serving. First and foremost he is the servant of Christ and then he serves the Church.] for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

These are two broad tasks. Each task requires a particular ministerial gift. The first one is for the preparation of the Church member to serve—to do good works. We are given grace and God is working with us and perfecting us so that we may do such works.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

It is the ministry's task, then, to give us what we need so that we can serve (minister). They exist for the equipping of the saints, for the work of service. We come out of the world in a raw state (Paul says "base and foolish") and now we must learn an entirely new way of life; there is a transformation from the raw, diamond-in-the-rough state into a servant—a Christian servant. They give us what we need in order to serve others.

The second responsibility addressed here is for the ministry to build up the body of Christ—to build up the Church. This does not necessarily mean literal numbers of people. This is meant in terms of edification and growing into the image of Jesus Christ as a whole. We all, *together*, mature and come to perfection (Hebrews 6:1).

This precious gift, then, not only teaches us to serve, but helps us mature spiritually into the image of Jesus Christ. These are parallel tasks and the primary objectives of the ministry—albeit rather *broad* objectives. Because of this, they are subject to a great deal of interpretation. To "build up the Church" can be taken in many ways; and "teach us how to serve" can be taken in many ways. Paul is going to clarify and expand upon these goals in the next few verses.

Ephesians 4:13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

This is no small order. The ministry's job is a monumental task! The goal is to bring *every member* of the Church of God up to the same level as Christ! This is sobering, is it not—"to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ?" God placed this task into the hands of flawed and corruptible men! Of course, Christ is the Head and He has the control. Nevertheless it is a HUGE responsibility and almost beyond our ability to grasp! It is certainly beyond our ability, of and by ourselves, to fulfill. Jesus Christ, thankfully, is there to provide whatever is needed to reach this standard of excellence.

This is a terrifying (and I mean "fearful") goal for which the ministry is designed—to lead us to that point and to think that God has the confidence it can be done through men. It is just mind-boggling! However, it is a responsibility of the ministry—this huge and terrifying directive. But we know that if God so commands us, then it is possible—even though it is so terribly difficult. We cannot shrink back from it. We can, however, be awed by it!

We are all on the same road. It is not just the ministry. Their job is to produce more ministers, more servants of Christ to do the same job. We are all in this together. It is a cooperative effort, then, this edifying of the body of Christ, this equipping of the saints. It is a cooperative effort with God, through His Spirit, and the member and the ministry together. We are all heading in that one direction.

In giving this goal, Paul includes two more parts of the process: "coming to the unity of the faith" and "coming to the knowledge of the Son of God." We are now branching out into other areas.

The first one, coming to the unity of the faith, encompasses what is called in the book of Acts "the full counsel of God." This is the whole truth, everything, the entire Bible—God's full revelation to mankind. The minister must teach this Word to all those over whom he is given responsibility. This is so that we are all on the same page as far as what we believe. The whole Church is then unified in the faith, in the beliefs, and in the doctrines. So much more can be done when everyone has the same goals and the same beliefs.

The second part, coming to the knowledge of the Son of God, is a little different. It may seem as though it is the same thing as faith, but this idea of knowledge puts a different twist on it. The word translated as "knowledge" has the connotation of *experiential* knowledge. It is not "book learnin'," as we say down south. It is actually *living* it, applying it, going through it.

You may be able to read a book about rebuilding an engine, but it is simply "head knowledge" until you actually get in there and get your fingers all greasy and take it apart and put it back together. You may find that you do not know one thing after reading the book until you get in there and see how all the parts work. There may be many people who read the book and say, "Oh yeah, I understand that!" But when you come right down to it there are only a select few who are skilled enough as mechanics to make the engine run better than it did before.

In summary, then, the two parts are: one—the knowledge that we would receive in a classroom setting such as we are now in. And two—the knowledge we gain as we go out and use it.

The ministry not only teaches us the academics, but also leads us through the "lab." They are guiding and directing us through life. They are not here to live our lives for us, but to be here for counsel and to point us in the right direction using God's Word which shows us what we need to do.

In many cases this has been abused. Ministers have, in the past, taken this too far. Some people have not even been able to buy a car, or move, or whatever without the preacher's permission. This is just plain stupid! This is not his job! His job is to give counsel and to protect. His job is not to make the decisions for the members. How are they going to grow if the minister is making all the decisions? One cannot come to the knowledge of the Son of God by proxy. We have to do it! The minister's job is to be there in times of crisis and, when counsel is needed, to say in effect, "This is the way, walk you in it." Then we have to make the decision. It is the intellectual knowledge and the experiential knowledge—these two things—working together to build us into Christ, to come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

We are not asked to do anything that Christ, Himself, did not do. He knew His own Word better than anyone. Yet as the Son and our example, the Father made Him go through 33 ½ years of experiential knowledge, too. And it was not until the end of this time that He was prepared to be our faithful High Priest. He was then able to understand what it was like to be human and, therefore, to be Mediator between God and mankind.

The ministry, then, is asked to be a type of mediator, as well, to help the membership along in this same process. They *give* the academic and they *help* in the experiential. Right and sound doctrine is one thing, but full and experiential knowledge leading to wisdom is equally necessary—and the ministry is there to help in both areas.

Ephesians 4:14-15 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.

Verse 14 acknowledges that the minister's job is to help Christians mature in the truth so that they are not easily deceived (pictured as children tossed to and fro) or persuaded to embrace the error of specious doctrines that are careening around. They have the discernment to quickly spot them and point them out—urging people to avoid them. They are to keep the Church stable, spiritually mature, and strong against anything that may be false!

Also, the ministry's work is not done in a vacuum; it is not done in seclusion. They are not in some compound tucked away from the world, but they are in the world where tricky and cunningly crafty men lie in wait to deceive, trying to distract our attention from the trap which is about to spring! Satan is alive and well out there! This facet of their work demands a more proactive approach. They are the "storm troopers" of the Church and they are out there on the

front lines making sure that the enemy stays clear of the rest of the body of Christ.

Sometimes, when a wolf gets in among the sheep, it is necessary for the ministers to go after what people may consider to be one of their own. Remember that wolves do wear sheep's clothing. It is the job of the ministry to "unmask" the wolves before they are able to ravage the flock. They are put out for the Church's protection.

In verse 15 Paul says that the ministry has to "speak the truth in love." This gives us a hint that, sometimes, speaking the truth in love may hurt people, but it is part of the job. If there is something happening in the Church that is not good it is the minister's job to keep peace so that there can be righteousness (James 3:18) and stability. If he fails, the result may be people falling away because of apostasy!

They have to be the truth-tellers and expose heresy and falsehood. Why? They must do this so that "we may grow up into Him who is the Head." We will not be growing up into Him who is the Head if we have an injection of falsehood. It is the minister's job to keep that at bay as best he can.

Verse 16 really shows us where Paul's mind is—on the goal!

Ephesians 4:15-16 ...may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

He keeps coming back to Christ. Christ is the Head; Christ is the One we are all trying to form into as His body. We have to *conform* to Christ. We have to all work together. This is the most effective way to do a job—in unity. If we are all following the ministry in what is right and true then there is going to be growth—spiritual growth. The whole Church will grow stronger and more faithful and closer in love. It will be constantly built up. Like I said, this does not mean numbers. God works in small groups. He calls the Church a "little flock." It is a remnant, but it is a remnant that is unified, growing, producing, and more and more looking like the Head all the time. The ministry has a big part to play in all of that!

Christ gives the ministry to the Church. He makes them effective. He causes the growth, the unity, and the work to be done. The ministry is just a tool in His hands. He is the Head. He directs the rest of the body—which includes the ministry. This is something that both ministry and lay members must keep in mind! It is *His* will, *His* purpose, *His* direction, *His* work that is important. The true ministry of the Church is truly and biblically "Christ-centered"—Christ-directed, Christ-oriented, Christ-imitating.

This is in stark contrast to this world's so-called Christ-centered ministry because they are focused on a false caricature of Him. They are Christ-centered on "a baby meek and mild." They are Christ-centered on a lifeless body hanging on a cross.

We are centered on the Living God at the Father's right hand!

Notice what this passage leaves out. Many of us have been in the Church for decades and have had a history in the Worldwide Church of God organization. There was an incorrect understanding and, therefore, an incorrect application of the ministry which had developed because the organization was distracted at certain times. If we were to think back to our experiences in the Worldwide Church of God and compare that to Ephesians 4, we would conclude that there was a lot going on in the ministry at that time that we do not necessarily see included in the scripture. Ephesians 4 focuses *entirely* on the ministry's spiritual function. It is *entirely* spiritual!

Paul's little passage here makes no mention whatsoever of socials, youth activities, political activities, work parties, fund raisers, concerts, etc. The ministry's job, according to Paul, is focused on spiritual objectives.

In the early history of the Church, however (in Acts 6), it was made obvious that a physical element of service was required. And so, the office of deacon was created (under God's inspiration, of course). The apostles said that they needed to devote themselves to the spiritual needs of the Church—to prayer and teaching. Others were needed (and ordained) to do the physical works of the Church. Jesus brought out this principle, in type, when He taught His disciples that one cannot serve God and mammon—we cannot serve two masters. One or the other will suffer.

The ministry will, from time to time, have to attend to physical needs because those things do come up: we enjoy gathering together for organized social events; we reach out to those in need by organizing work parties (a widow with a leaky roof needs someone to repair it); at times we need to raise funds to do something (our children need activities).

These things are all fine and necessary, but our priorities must be in order. The spiritual comes first and all else must be secondary to that. The most important thing is growing into the image of Jesus Christ. If the physical consumes most of the ministry's time then they become nothing more than distractions and the whole Church suffers. The minister suffers, too. He is too busy working on the Church's social calendar rather than their spiritual condition.

My dad was at the headquarters Church area during the time Mr. Tkach was in charge. The Church was so distracted by this time that the Y.O.U. calendar was set first and then the Church calendar was set around it! This shows us how out of focus things had become circa 1987-88. The Y.O.U. was driving the Church calendar! Which was more important—a basketball tournament or teaching the Church of God? Obviously, by this time, it was basketball tournaments!

This is what I mean, things in the Worldwide Church of God organization were not perfect and they very quickly got out of kilter once Mr. Armstrong died. But even before Mr. Armstrong died there was a lot of this stuff going on. And it was distracting the Church from what Paul says (here in Ephesians 4) is the primary purpose of the ministry and the Church. We need to make sure that we understand this definite priority.

We find a great deal more instruction on this throughout the New Testament. One could say that the two epistles to Timothy and the epistle to Titus are directly addressed to today's ministry. These contain God's inspired instructions, through Paul, to young ministers about how

to lead their congregations and how to be good servants of Christ. They are now an important part of His Word.

In I Timothy 4 my NKJV has a subtitle, *A Good Servant of Jesus Christ*. Paul instructs Timothy, in particular, on how to be a true Christian minister. This parallels his instructions to the Ephesians, which purposely takes a more general approach and is inclusive of the whole Church in showing what is supposed to be the job of the ministry. But here they are much more specific and personally directed to the individual minister and, subsequently, stand as God's instruction to each and every single minister today.

I Timothy 4:6-16 If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. These things command and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attention [We can think of this in terms of Jesus Christ rather than Paul, "Till I come, give attention..."] to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

Wow! These are huge and significant words! Paul begins by saying that a good minister teaches his congregations the truths about which he had written in the first three chapters. While we will not go through chapters 1-3 at this time, let us just move forward and refer more specifically to the first five verses of this particular chapter—chapter four—in which he warns of a coming apostasy.

This is interesting when we consider that the Bible was written—for the Church, yes, but more specifically—for the *end-time* Church! It is only in this end-time that the Bible has been so widely distributed. This is the time when the Church most needs these very instructions! So he says that if Timothy (and the ministry of Jesus Christ) gives instruction and warning about the coming apostasy then he (and all true ministers) will be a good servant of Jesus Christ. These are truths about which the Church needs to know!

I Timothy 4:6 If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of

the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

Paul outlines two vital points in verse 6 by which the minister is guided: The words of faith and the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. This directly parallels what we saw back in Ephesians 4:

- The "words of faith" are the truths which are written in God's Word.
- The "good doctrine which you have carefully followed" is that which was taught by other ministers, including Paul, himself.

Not only was Timothy to follow what was in God's Word, but he was also to follow what the apostles and other teachers had given him. And, as we can see, Timothy had faithfully done that.

I Timothy 4:7 But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness.

A good minister rejects the profane (or worldly) things. And he also rejects what we might call the "silly" or the worthless. Old wives' fables are those which have no basis in reality, but they come down to us as proverbs. They might be reliable, but more often they are not. How valuable is something which may or may not be reliable? The true minister avoids the worldly things because his focus is on the spiritual things of God's Word. Silly and worthless things are rejected, as well.

I Timothy 4:8 For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.

His efforts (it says to "exercise yourself") are wholeheartedly placed into what is godly. These godly endeavors, as a minister of Christ, will be beneficial now in this life and in the life to come. In other words the minister is not to waste his time on fleshly pursuits, whatever they happen to be—even if they are good.

Paul uses exercise as an example. Obviously exercise is good and a minister should practice this to a certain extent, but he is not a "fitness freak." This would take up too much time. It would be a distraction. He should keep himself in good health, yes, but he is not to become a fanatic about it. His goal is on the *spiritual* health of his flock. There must be a balancing of priorities. I just use this as an example because Paul uses it. The worth of these physical pursuits is temporary, but Paul says (in II Corinthians 4:18) that we are supposed to be investing in the eternal—the things that do not fade away. And so it is more important for the ministry to focus on the spiritual pursuits.

Paul says that, "this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance" (I Timothy 4:9). We can understand from this that devotion to these godly things should be widespread among the

ministry.

I Timothy 4:10 For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach,  
because we trust in the living God, who is