

Understanding the 5 Fold Ministry: Roles and Significance



By Steve Dragswolf • September 21, 2024

Many Christians today might be unfamiliar with the concept of the 5 fold ministry. Although the Apostle Paul identified and explained this biblical concept, many church leaders overlook the benefits of implementing it in their churches or ministries due to thinking that the roles of the apostle and prophet are no longer necessary.

In this article, we will discover how relevant the 5 fold ministry remains today by looking deeply at what it is, why the roles of apostle and prophet are still active today, how to implement the 5 fold ministry in your church, and discuss some of the most popular verses that describe the way these giftings operate and function.

The 5 fold ministry is a beneficial spiritual construct that can help churches achieve their goals through a broader leadership structure. Read on to find out why this is true and how to create a healthier church.

The 5 Fold Ministry Explained



At its simplest, the concept of the 5 fold ministry is found in Ephesians 4:11 where Paul describes five unique assignments for [leaders](#) in the early church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

While each role has a different purpose, the goal remains the same for each aspect of the 5 fold ministry. They are to work together *"to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith..."*(Ephesians 4:12-13a). In effect, the 5 fold ministry unites through their different roles to build up the church by showing new Christians and the world how it operates as one body.

It is important to note that these different ministry roles identified by Paul are designed to work alongside one another and be submitted to one another

(Ephesians 5:21; 2 Corinthians 1:24; Philippians 4:2-3) under Christ while remaining in these five unique positions. Therefore, the 5 fold ministry isn't a hierarchical list establishing a power dynamic in the church. Each role complements the other and builds upon the work of the church.

Is the 5 Fold Ministry Still Relevant Today?

Paul states that *"Christ himself gave"* these roles to the church, but there is considerable disagreement within the church today on whether all of these assignments are still applicable. In particular, the roles of apostles and prophets have either been absorbed by the pastoral role or ignored altogether.

Apostles are Still Relevant

Some point to verses like 1 Corinthians 4:9-21 and 15:8-9 to say that Paul was the last of the apostles. They also say that Acts 1:21-26 clearly states that an apostle must have been with Jesus the *"whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us "* (Acts 1:21-22). Mattias and Barsabbas were offered as replacements for Judas because they fit this criteria, with Mattias winning the position.

Paul's addition to the apostles, however, occurred differently. He wasn't with Jesus at all when Christ was alive and persecuted the early Christians after Christ's death and resurrection. Paul was a strident Jewish believer who thought Christ was only a false messiah, and he sought to punish those who strayed from what he understood as traditional Jewish belief.

Yet, Christ appeared to Paul miraculously while walking on the Damascus road

(Acts 9) and ushered him into apostleship through a subsequent series of events.

While the disciples had clear criteria for replacing Judas among the original 12 disciples/apostles, Paul's addition to the apostles reveals that the same criteria aren't universal for subsequent inclusions. This means more people could be added as apostles outside the original 12 disciples.

Barnabas is named as an apostle (Acts 14:14), and Apollos is consistently referenced in Paul's writings and even equally among other apostles (1 Corinthians 3:22). There are [potentially up to 23 apostles](#) that can be found or inferred in the New Testament, revealing to us that apostleship is still relevant outside of the original disciples.

Prophets are Still Relevant

Prophets are regularly found in both the Old and New Testaments. Outside of the books of the Bible that focus on a handful of the most well-known prophets (Jonah, Daniel, Isaiah, etc.), the Bible states that many more operated in this role.

Old Testament Prophets

- **Moses:** *"Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses..."*
Deuteronomy 34:10
 - **Samuel:** *"...Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord."* 1 Samuel 3:20
 - **Nathan:** *"...Nathan the prophet..."* 2 Samuel 7:2
 - **Elijah:** *"...Elijah the prophet approached..."* 1 Kings 18:36
 - **Elisha:** *"The prophet Elisha summoned a man..."* 1 Kings 18:36 2 Kings 9:1
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New Testament Prophets

- **John the Baptist:** *"...and more than a prophet."* Luke 7:26
 - **Agabus:** *"...One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted..."* Acts 11:27-28
 - **Judas and Silas:** *"Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets..."* Acts 15:32
 - **Anna:** *"There was also a prophet, Anna..."* Luke 2:36
 - **And even Jesus fulfilled the role:** *"This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."* Matthew 21:11
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Like with the apostles, some argue that the role of the prophet has ceased since the early church. They point to verses like 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 and Hebrews 1:1-2 to support their arguments that there are no more prophets today.

The Hebrews verse is the most explicit mentioning, *"In the past God spoke to*

our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,". Many take this verse to mean that the role of the prophet has stopped because Jesus was the final prophet. They also point to Pentecost in Acts 2, where the [Holy Spirit](#) first fell upon all Christian believers, saying the prophet's work in connecting people with God's word and will is upended by the work of the Holy Spirit who speaks to us.

However, Judas (a common name at the time and not the Judas who betrayed Jesus), Silas, and Agabus were all mentioned as continuing in the role of the prophet after Christ died and was resurrected. They existed and operated after the Holy Spirit filled believers.

The Holy Spirit within believers does a lot of the prophets' work, but there is still a place for people who are intent on hearing and obeying God's word like the prophets. These prophets help us listen and obey when we are hard-headed. They also confirm what the Holy Spirit is telling us individually, holding us accountable to the word of God.

This exploration shows that the 5 fold ministry is still relevant to the church today. Each of the five roles found in Paul's explanation can help the [church operate](#) more clearly and relevantly. Many churches have avoided two of these roles and have found that corruption can easily ensnare a pastor who tries to operate in all five areas alone.

When implemented correctly, the 5 fold ministry can help safeguard your church from some common pitfalls.

How to Structure Your 5 Fold Ministry

All five roles of this ministry work well together when simply defined and purposefully stated. Since most Christians understand the roles of the pastor, teacher, and evangelist while struggling to understand the role of the apostle and prophet, here is a quick explanation of each role found within the 5 fold ministry that distinguishes their role from one another.

- **Apostles:** Leaders who establish and oversee churches or ministries and serve as the governing factor. We see elements of this type of leadership in [church planters](#), missionaries, pastors, and elders.
- **Prophets:** Those who receive and communicate God's messages to others and hold the body of Christ accountable to what God is saying. While this is the most contentious of the 5 fold ministry in churches today, it is fundamental in discerning and assessing God's will in the church and holding Christians accountable to God's word.
- **Evangelists:** Leaders whose sole focus is to proclaim the gospel of Christ to those not yet involved in the greater body of Christ. These leaders help gather people into the church.
- **Pastors:** Shepherds who guard and care for the believers in the church. Most people are familiar with this role, which is prominent in the modern church. Pastors today have often taken on the roles of apostles and prophets.
- **Teachers:** Those who explain the scriptures deeper, grounding believers in Christian doctrine to help them mature and fight against unbelief. This role helps maintain unity by aligning believers' minds and hearts with logic, study, and life application.

Many churches will express the different aspects of the 5 fold ministry regardless of whether they are doing it intentionally or not. Churches often forego labeling roles outside of pastoral ones and have people who fill these other roles somewhat unofficially anyway.

Some modern churches are heavily pastor-centric, meaning everything

revolves around the head pastor and moves down hierarchically from there. Other churches have a congregational model where the members or a board of elders maintain most of the church's governing power. Each of these methods of church governance has its pros and cons.

The goal of the 5 fold ministry is to help separate the powers, similar to the functions of our tripartite government, with its executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Employing a broader church leadership structure with a 5 fold ministry objective can help prevent many adverse and unwelcome situations that pastors have faced in recent decades.

Practical Steps and Tips for How to Structure a 5 Fold Ministry

There are many ways to implement a 5 fold ministry structure in your church, ranging from a pure separation of powers in church leadership to a modified form in which the lead pastor or board is still primarily in charge and the 5 fold elements become ministries under their guidance. The latter approach appears to be the preferred method for churches that intentionally operate in the 5 fold model.

Regardless of how you choose to structure your 5 fold ministry, here are some helpful steps and tips to assist you in introducing or enhancing your application of this method of church leadership found in Ephesians 4:11-16:

1. Identify and Empower Leaders

To begin with, you must find capable leaders whom you trust and who have giftings in one particular 5 fold area. Some people may be able to operate in more than one area; for instance, many pastors are teachers, and many evangelists are pastors. However, the goal is to establish a primary responsibility among your leaders.

- **Apostles:** [Search for honorable and trustworthy visionary leaders](#). These people will help govern your church and decide its greater vision, goals, and approaches in the future while analyzing and assessing its current performance.
 - **Prophets:** Find people you trust with a good foundation in the Bible and Christian doctrine, who actively engage the Lord and listen and obey the Holy Spirit. The best prophets are humble but vocal, willing to push back when necessary and submit when appropriate.
 - **Evangelists:** Evangelists are often easy to find. They love to share their faith anywhere and everywhere, often going out in search of someone to share the gospel with.
 - **Pastors:** Those with a heart for shepherding and caring for people find their calling in relational and encouraging pastoral work. Lead pastors can (and should, if their churches have over 100 members) find others to help them lead their congregations.
 - **Teachers:** Good teachers understand the Bible and Christian doctrine well, look to the Lord for guidance, and seek to assist others in understanding what the Bible says and how to study it themselves.
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2. Provide Training and Mentoring for Each Role

Once you find your leaders for the 5 fold ministry, you must equip them with the necessary resources to help them succeed by providing consistent training and mentoring.

Church conferences, biblical education, ministry training, impactful books, and other similar activities will help fortify your leaders in their ministries.

Retired pastors and other Christian leaders with ministry experience can help mentor your leaders, providing a larger support network for all involved.

3. Foster Healthy Collaboration in the 5 Fold Ministry

Even if your church maintains its governmental structure with one source as the head of the church, seek to create an open environment where each of your 5 fold ministers can speak freely and confidently as church leaders.

Recognize how essential and complementary the five different ministries operate and encourage submission to one another through regular [communication](#) and partnership.

Good collaboration comes when a clear vision, established values, and healthy strategies are clearly stated, which will unite the five ministries in purpose.

The goal of the 5 fold ministry is to model Christ-like behavior, leadership, and unity so that the church as a whole will do likewise.

4. Let Your Leaders Lead

Create opportunities for each role to lead according to their giftings and allow them the freedom to contribute meaningfully to the church. Pastors must have trustworthy leaders to head each 5 fold role to avoid more significant conflict and turmoil.

Let each leader take on roles particular to them:

- Include apostles in strategic leadership areas, overseeing the church, other ministries, and new initiatives.
 - Allow prophets to offer prophetic insight and direction for the church congregation and current or new ministries.
 - Let evangelists dream up outreach events and train others in evangelism.
 - Embolden a group of pastors to engage in pastoral care, counseling, and small group leadership.
 - Trust your teachers to teach in various settings and develop discipleship curriculums, church growth methods, and mentorship for your church body.
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5. Regularly Assess the Health of Your 5 Fold Ministry

Ensure you are constantly analyzing how well your 5 fold ministry is operating and be willing to make the necessary changes to establish a healthy church structure.

This can mean replacing current leaders, adding more leaders, correcting the way a ministry operates, and continuously seeking God's wisdom and direction for your church and ministries.

To ensure the growth and success of each church leader, emphasize character development, spiritual maturity, and skill development. Prioritize healthy relationships among the leaders by worshipping, praying, and growing spiritually together.

These five steps and tips will help you better implement the 5 fold ministry in your church. Every church may apply these roles differently, but the overall outcomes will be the same. Remember, the goal of the 5 fold ministry is to build up the church in unity and equip believers for works of service.

What Does the Bible Say?

Several verses teach or confirm the existence of the 5 fold ministry. In this final section, we'll look at a few of the most popular verses and give context for how they apply to the church today. The verses below are quoted from the New International Version.

Ephesians 4:11-13

"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Paul's explanation in Ephesians is the most straightforward and relevant passage for including the 5 fold ministry in churches.

The early church operated this way, and Paul never seems to suggest that later churches should operate any differently. Therefore, applying the 5 fold ministry to modern church expressions is relevant and necessary.

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts."

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains that the body of Christ comprises different parts and reemphasizes a few elements of the 5 fold ministry. He states that not all are apostles, prophets, or teachers, alongside workers of miracles, but that Christian believers should desire these gifts.

Churches today should seek out leaders who desire the elements of the 5 fold ministry and receive their callings in them. These leaders can then [help others find their gifting and calling](#), and then mobilize them for work in the Kingdom of God.

Romans 12:4-9

"For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

Again, Paul mentions aspects of the 5 fold ministry in this letter to the Roman church, emphasizing that though we have different gifts, we still operate as one united body.

Paul briefly mentions here that, *"If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith."* He ties our efforts to our beliefs, which helps us operate in our gifts with boldness and confidence. We must remember that we don't do ministry on our own. Instead, we rely on the gift giver, Christ, who will sustain and encourage us in our ministries.

This verse also greatly encourages Christians who are not leaders to embrace the gifts God has given them to minister to the world.

1 Peter 4:10-11

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen."

The Apostle Peter joins in by adding a similar passage on how we use our gifts to lead others by doing so knowing that the Lord is doing it through us. Peter here echoes Paul's statements and puts his spin on how he understood the way God worked in Christians, which builds on what other apostles have said.

As ministers of God, we must recognize that we do all things for God's glory. Our goal is to glorify Christ. How we do so may look different for each of us, but we are doing well if we help people understand and praise Jesus better.

We could list several other verses that speak to the particular nature of each role in the 5 fold ministry, but these verses give an introduction and overview of its nature from the two most influential apostles, Paul and Peter.

Conclusion

Throughout our study of the 5 fold ministry, you may have noticed a few themes occur several times: unity, giftings, and faith. These three themes help us connect the benefits of the 5 fold ministry.

- **Unity:** The greatest purpose of the 5 fold ministry is to show the world that Christians are united. Unfortunately, it's well-documented how divided the Christian church is today. Implementing the 5 fold ministry can help unify the church.
- **Giftings:** Leaders must understand that their roles and leadership are gifts from God that must be cultivated and protected. We can easily take these gifts for granted, but we should fight to preserve their purity. Consistently remind yourselves that everything you do is for the glory of Christ crucified.
- **Faith:** Our faith is instrumental in how effective we are in our ministry

leadership. Trust in the faithfulness of God to help you as a leader maintain your boldness and confidence to lead well. Our reliance must be focused primarily on Christ, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us.

The 5 fold ministry is an often overlooked but helpful framework for a healthy church leadership structure. By understanding how this type of leadership works and some helpful tips for implementing it in your church, you will be better prepared to protect your church and ministry from common pitfalls associated with churches and ministries that rely primarily on a singular leader. Visit our [Church Giving blog](#) for more helpful articles on Christian doctrine, [church management](#), [impactful fundraising](#), and more.

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