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“Equipping the Saints” (Eph 4:12):
Implications for Theological Educators

Ephesians 4, particularly the theme of “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (v.12), offers an excellent basis to examine the challenges put to contemporary theological education. After a brief consideration of the Letter to the Ephesians as a whole, I reflect on chapter 4 and verse 12 in its context. Then I propose an essential responsibility for theological educators that flows from this text entails forming character and virtues.

Background of Ephesians

The language and style of Ephesians are markedly different from Paul’s seven genuine epistles. One noticeable characteristic of Paul that is missing is the personal greetings. No associates or fellow Christians are mentioned as co-senders. Furthermore, the letter appears to address Christian churches in general and not a particular situation. Ephesians indicates that Paul was unknown to its audience (see 1:15; 3:2), but such personal distance would not be true of Ephesus, where the apostle spent considerable time (Acts 19:1-22) and from which he wrote various letters to the Corinthians. It is possible that Ephesians was a circular letter to churches in the environs of Asia Minor or modern Turkey (possibly around the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis). The letter to the Ephesians was probably written around the last third of the first century CE. While some argue that Paul is the author, most agree that its authorship is pseudonymous, written by a disciple of Paul, shortly after his death. This disciple knew and used Colossians and other Pauline letters to compose this letter, which explains the verbal similarities. One of the main purposes of this letter is to help Gentile Christians appreciate the extraordinary gifts they have received through Christ (see the prayer in 1:3-14).

Diversity of Charism

The fourth chapter of Ephesians focuses on the theme of building up the church. Each member should strive for unity and fulfill his or her role of ministry, so that the church may advance in maturity. Ephesians 4 may be divided into three parts. The first part (4:1-6) deals with the theme of...
unity, which the author urges everyone to live in a manner worthy of their calling, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (4:2-3). The second part (4:7-12) discusses ministry in the church that is characterized by a diversity of gifts which come from the risen Christ to build up his body. It is this section that I will focus on shortly. The third part of chapter 4 of Ephesians (4:13-16) describes the outcome of effective ministry, namely, Christian maturity.

Four Roles of Leadership

According to Ephesians, every member of the church receives a gift of grace “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (v. 7). The gifts are not for the benefit of the individual but for the benefit of the whole church. While all believers are gifted, some are given special charism. The author highlights four roles of leadership in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers.

The Greek word *apostolos* literally means “one who is sent, a messenger.” From the gospels, we know that Jesus appointed twelve. After Judas’s death, a replacement was chosen from among those disciples who had been witnesses of Jesus’ ministry and resurrection (Acts 1:21-26). These apostles continued to exercise a special leadership role in the earliest years of the church (1 Cor 15:5; Acts 6:2; Rev 21:14). But there seemed to have been other apostles who did not witness Jesus’ ministry, such as Paul (1 Cor 9:1-2; Gal 1:1; 2 Tim 1:11) and many others (Acts 14:14; Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 15:7). Preaching and founding new communities were their major tasks (Williamson, 116).

New Testament prophecy was not focused on foretelling the future or critiquing social injustices. Prophets receive revelations, understand mysteries, disclose the secrets of the hearts, and strengthen the community through inspired exhortation and praise (Luke 1:67-79; Acts 15:32; 1 Cor 13:2; 14:12-32). While some were resident in local communities (Acts 13:1), others had an itinerant ministry (see *Didache* 11–15). Christian prophets held a position of honor and authority in the early church, second only to that of apostles (1 Cor 12:28) (Williamson, 88).

We know very little about the work of evangelists in the early church. Acts describes Philip as an evangelist (21:8) who preached the gospel in Samaria and evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch (8:5-13, 26-38). Timothy is exhorted to do the work of an evangelist by constantly proclaiming the word of God (2 Tim 4:2-5). These few instances indicate that evangelists, like apostles, announced the good news of salvation and called people to conversion in Jesus’ name. The association of evangelists with the authors of the gospels came only later.

The final two gifts mentioned in Ephesians are pastors and teachers. While it is possible that these were two distinct ministries, the way that is written here in Greek, namely with only one article attributing for both nouns, may imply one ministry for pastor-teachers. Similar to the apostles and prophets, there were itinerant teachers who traveled around to build up the early Christian communities. The term “teacher” (*didaskalos*) is third in Paul’s list of 1 Corinthians 12:28, following the apostles and prophets (Rom 12:7; Acts 13:1; 1 Tim 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Peter (Acts 8 and 9) and Apollos (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Cor 3:4-6) are two notable examples. However, there were also resident leaders who presided over the community, teaching and pasturing (or literally “shepherding”) the flock (John 21:15-17; 1 Pet 5:1-4). Shepherding involves protecting the community from false teaching (Acts 20:29-31). There is a natural link between the ministry of teaching and shepherding.
since most pastors were expected to teach. While teachers might not all be pastors, it is rare however that a gifted teacher is not also shepherding (or “mentoring”) a student from unhealthy influences (MacDonald, 292).

The purpose of these gifted individuals is to prepare every member of God’s people, particularly the laity, for works of service, namely “to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ” (4:12). Ministry, diakonia, covers a wide range of activities in the New Testament, from preaching and teaching the word (Acts 6:4) to distributing food to the poor (Acts 6:1), to providing hospitality to strangers in need (Luke 10:40), and missionary activities (Luke 10). According to the author of Ephesians, the work of ministry is not limited to a privileged few in leadership roles, such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. Rather, the work of ministry is carried out by all the “holy ones” (or baptized believers) whom the leaders have equipped. The term “equipping” (katartismos) is a medical/technical term referring to mending or repairing. It suggests the preparation, training, and discipline necessary to equip believers to do the work of ministry (Vooy, 92). Since all believers are saints (hagioi), as is evident from the way Paul addresses members of his communities (e.g. Rom 1:7; Eph 1:1, 15, 18; Phil 4:21-22), all believers are to be equipped for diakonia. Furthermore, once trained and equipped, all Christians are ministers and missionaries.

The ultimate goal of equipping believers is for “building up the body of Christ” (4:12). The author uses a powerfully mixed metaphor describing the church in both organic (“body”) and architectural (“building up”) terms. The aim of all believers, the gifted equippers as well as the equipped, is to strengthen the church, to reach a maturity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and to establish unity in the church (4:13-16). All believers are entrusted with this common goal and purpose.

**Theological Educators**

In light of the responsibilities articulated by the author of Ephesians, what might emerge as primary among the tasks of contemporary theological educators? Theologian and professor Stephen Bevans suggests that the formation of character and virtues in his students holds primacy. He writes:

In my own philosophy of teaching theology, I believe that every course I teach is a “missionary act” or an act of evangelization. To quote one of my colleagues from a conversation about teaching that we had as a faculty some years ago, my goal in teaching is to “make my students virtuous,” to share with them my love of the tradition and my love and service of God (109).

This instinct is evident as well in the work of theological educators Jeffery Jones and Robert Pazmino. In their article entitled, “Finding a New Way: A Call to Reconceptualize Theological Education,” they state: “Theological faculties are revisiting their priorities and reconceptualizing theological education as the formation of character and virtues in relation to the mentoring of students” (17). Interestingly, the author of Ephesians gives us a catalogue of virtues to emulate. As a prisoner in the Lord, he urged all believers to lead a life worthy of their calling, namely, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:2-3). Needless to say, developing a habitus of virtuous living begins with the educator charged with a responsibility to equip the saints.
References


