

Shaping Up the Saints

by Ray C. Stedman

This week the eyes of the whole world were fastened upon an event of historic significance in the meeting of the Roman Catholic Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. We were told that this was the first official meeting of these two heads of churches for four hundred years, since the time of the Reformation, when Henry VIII split off the English church from the Roman Catholic Church. It was a very newsworthy event. But when that event is measured against the letter to the Ephesians, it is seen to be a relatively insignificant thing and of no real importance in the life and power of the church.

There is a truly hopeful movement in our day, but it is not the coming together of long separated communions. It is rather the restoration that is going on in many places around the world of the original pattern of operation for the church, the body of Christ. From this pattern we have so long drifted that we have almost forgotten it existed. But the Holy Spirit is calling men back again to the original intention of God. That intention is outlined for us in this great passage in Ephesians, the fourth chapter, the first sixteen verses. We are nearing now the close of our study in this passage concerning the ministry of the saints.

I should like, therefore, to review briefly the major points we have covered so far:

- We learned that the true church is not made up of those who attend or join a congregation, but, rather, it is made up of all those who are regenerated by personal faith in Jesus Christ. That is what constitutes the unity of the church. It is not, therefore, a unity that can be produced by men. It is achieved only by the Spirit of God taking up residence in the hearts of believing men and women. That unity never needs to be

created by men; it needs only to be maintained. That is where the emphasis must be put today.

- Second, we learned that every member of the body of Christ is given a specific capacity for service. The whole aim and purpose of your life must be related to that gift of Christ to you, if your life is to be meaningful or significant by any eternal measurement. Where these gifts and capacities are being exercised in the power of the Spirit, the church once again becomes a vital, transforming, powerful influence in society, and Christian life becomes for the individual an exciting, gripping thing; there is nothing boring about it, nothing trite, nothing banal.
- Then, third, we learned that these gifts are to be exercised in two directions. A Christian can exercise his gift either in the world, in a ministry of service to men and women who are not yet Christians, or in the church, among the body of believers, to encourage and help other Christians in their development, or, to some degree, in both.
- Then, fourth, we learned the Holy Spirit has set up a process of developing or coordinating these gifts together in the body of Christ through the ministry of four special functions – apostles, prophets, evangelists and teaching pastors (pastor-teachers).

In our last message we saw that the apostles and the prophets have already fulfilled the major ministry of laying the foundations of the church. It was given to them to lay the foundation and those foundations are visible in the Scriptures, the great revelation of God concerning his Son, Jesus Christ. The revelation is all about Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul

says, “Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ,” {1 Cor 3:11 KJV}. There is no other. No life will ever stand the test of time or eternity unless it is built upon that foundation. Jesus himself made that clear. He said there were only two possible foundations, the rock and the sand. If a man builds upon the sand, no matter how impressive his life may be, in time of stress the foundation will be revealed. Unless it is built upon the rock it will never stand.

- We saw, fifthly, that there are apostles and prophets today in a secondary sense, but in the primary sense this ministry was fulfilled only in the beginning. But evangelists and pastor-teachers are still with us and very much in evidence. Upon them now falls the main task of completing the work of “equipping the saints unto the work of the ministry.”

That is declared so clearly in Ephesians 4:11-12:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints, unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ. {Eph 4:11-12 RSV}

I should like to focus on one word in this verse, the word “equipping.” What does this mean? How is this done? This verb, in the original language, is *katartismos*, from which we get our English word, “artisan” – artist or craftsman, a mechanic, someone who works with his hands and accomplishes things. It is a special point of interest that this word first appears in our New Testament in connection with the calling of the disciples. When Jesus walked out along the Sea of Galilee, he saw the two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John, sitting in a boat, busily engaged doing something. What were they doing? They were mending their nets. The word “mending” is the word translated here “equipping.” It is the same word, *katartizo*. They were mending, they were equipping their nets; they were getting them ready; they were fixing them up, preparing them.

This suggests, therefore, that the job of pastor-teacher is essentially that of mending the saints,

getting them ready. The word is also translated in our Scriptures as “fitting them out” or “preparing.” Thayer, who is the authority in this field, says it means “to make one what he ought to be.” I like that. That is the task of the pastor-teacher toward the saints. The nearest modern equivalent is “to shape up.” Therefore, our subject is, the shaping up of the saints.

There are two things we need to say about this. We must note the method by which this is accomplished, and the spirit or **heart attitude** by which it is carried out. Because the latter is much misunderstood, I want to start there.

Shape up! That sounds harsh, doesn’t it? It has overtones of the brutal and tyrannical. It conjures up the image of an ecclesiastical sergeant-at-arms, or a pastoral pop-off, who thunders denunciations at his people.

Let’s be honest and admit that there have been plenty of this kind of pastor-teachers – far too many of them. Even in the early church there was at least one. His name was Diotrephes. You’ll find him mentioned in John’s third letter: “Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence” {cf, 3 Jn 1:9}, he is called. But this image is a distortion of the scriptural concept of a pastor-teacher. Remember that we have already seen that this concept of a pastor-teacher covers a far wider range than the traditional view of a pastor. It includes also Sunday School teachers, child evangelism workers, teachers and leaders of Home Bible Discussion groups and of women’s classes. It refers to anyone who acts as a teacher or a shepherd in any sense. Such is a pastor-teacher: any who serves in this capacity, no matter how limited it may be. It may even include a ministry to your own children in your home. Thus it involves a very wide range.

But we must first understand the spirit in which this ministry is to be exercised. The Scriptures specifically warn against the idea of tyranny, of being an ecclesiastical or religious autocrat. The Apostle Peter writes to the elders as, “a fellow elder with you,” and he says, “Take the leadership, the oversight, over God’s people, but not as lords over God’s heritage,” {cf, 1 Pet 5:1-4}. Not as lords! The Revised Standard Version puts it this way “not domineering over those in your charge,” {1 Pet 5:3a RSV}.

You can see this is a quite different Peter speaking here than the brash disciple of the Gos-

pels. Here is a man who has been chastened and humbled, and who is now fulfilling the commission the Lord Jesus gave him after the resurrection when he repeated three times the question, "Peter do you love me?" and thrice said, "Feed my sheep, feed my lambs," {see, John 21:15-19}. Here Peter's words are an echo of the Lord's words, feed the sheep, don't fleece them.

Remember that occasion when the disciples were quarreling among themselves (this is almost incredible, but it is recorded in the Scriptures that they were arguing as to who should be the greatest among them when they came into the kingdom) and the Lord overheard them. He said to them, "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them" (this is the same phrase Peter uses in the negative) "and their great men exercise authority over them," {Matt 20:25 RSV}. The key word there is *over*. In the world, power is measured by how much authority you have over someone else. You often hear people ask, how many men do you have under you? Or another will boast, "You know, I have just received a promotion. I now have five hundred men under me." But our Lord has said that in the day when God will measure the worthwhileness of men, the standard will not be how many men you had serving you, but how many you have served. It will not be how many have done something at your command, but how many have you done something for? That is the measure of power in the kingdom of heaven! Jesus added these words, "Whoever would be great among you must become the servant of all," {cf, Matt 20:25-27, Mark 10:42-44}.

Now those are not words to be taken lightly. Every teacher, especially, must heed these words. We must ever remember that we are not bosses. We are instruments, we are servants in this work of building the church. There is a process of selection going on all the time and it is the Master Builder who selects the stone. He has a place here for a certain stone in the building of his church, and he looks about for that which will fit the place. He picks up a stone and at first it looks as if it is going to be just the right one. He lifts it over and tries it out, but it doesn't fit and he rejects it. This is what goes on in the church sometimes. Leaders are put in certain positions for awhile and it looks as if they are going to be effective, but then they are rejected. It is the Lord's prerogative to do this. Then perhaps he chips out others and shapes them up, knocking off some of the high spots, and finally fits

in a piece exactly where it belongs. This is often what he is doing through the ministry of teaching. The teacher who is his instrument must remember that it is not his task to make the final decision. It is the Lord's responsibility. The authority of a teacher is never that of a tyrant or of a ruler. It is that of one who comes as a voice of Another.

Further, the ministry of shepherding and teaching must be done, as we are told in the Scriptures, without desiring personal glory. Many of you have had the privilege of teaching someone else. You well know that right there is often where the full force of temptation to pride can strike you. There is something very pleasing to the ego to stand in front of a group and have every eye looking at you and every ear listening carefully to what you have to say. It is so terribly easy to love that feeling and to find ways of nurturing it and encouraging it.

To speak very frankly and openly to you, one of the reasons why I only infrequently go to the back of the room at the end of a message to greet people is because I found that when I did it regularly it was ministering to my ego in such a way that I had a battle with pride. I had to stop because people were saying such nice things to me, and I found myself loving to hear them. It is easy for a teacher or a pastor to carry on his work for hidden reasons of personal prestige or glory. We love to be regarded as dedicated, mature Christians. We are all too much aware, at times, of our seeming sacrifice to time and money to do this work. We think that we really deserve the attention and praise of others because we have been faithful at what we have been given to do.

Of course, we are far too subtle to ever say so. But it is evident in the hurt feelings we display when something doesn't quite go our way, and in our desire to quit if we haven't been noticed for a while, as well as in the jealous cattiness by which we refer to another's ministry who is doing the same type of thing. It is apparent in the sarcasm we use with those listening to us, or the false modesty we often employ. I have long ago learned that when a man says to me, "I am only trying to serve the Lord in my own humble way," that I am talking to the proudest man in six counties around.

We soon discover that it is quite possible to use the work of the Lord to satisfy our personal egos. And that is always a devilish thing. That subtle inflating of ego is what the Word of God warns

consistently against in regard to teachers. The Lord Jesus pricked that balloon when he said, “The Pharisees love greetings in the market places and the best seats in the meetings, and to be called doctor when they go about,” (Rabbi is what he said, but we use the word doctor.) “But,” he said, “you are not to be called rabbi, for one is your Master and all you are brethren,” {cf, Matt 23:6-8}. That means that you pastors, you leaders, you teachers, are no better than anyone else. You are no greater than they are. The only authority you have is the authority of the truth. That’s all. Your own spirituality must rest on that.

It is also clear from the Scriptures that pastors and teachers are not to be motivated by greed – not for filthy lucre, not for love of money. There are places today where that may be hard to understand. Conditions must have been quite different in the early days than they are now. The pastorate has seldom been a place to get rich, and certainly Sunday School teachers and others don’t teach for love of money. But it can often be a problem. Pastor-teachers are to be examples. That is what Peter adds, “being examples to the flock,” {1 Pet 5:3b RSV}. That, again, reflects the Lord’s words when he said of himself, “When the good shepherd puts forth his sheep, he goes before them,” {cf, John 10:4}. He does everything first. He leads them out by doing the things first. No teacher has the right to teach whose life does not exemplify the teaching. If he tries it, to say one thing and be another, the Lord will ‘pull the rug out from under that man’ and his ministry will be despised.

Now let us go on to the second thing, the **method of this work** of shaping up the saints.

How are the saints to be fitted out? How are they equipped? What is the process? The answer is all contained in the title given to this ministry: Pastor-teacher, shepherd and teacher, therefore, shepherding and teaching. The Apostle Paul put it in a slightly different way in describing his own ministry to the Colossians. He said to them concerning the Lord Jesus,

Him we proclaim [that is always the center of the message], **warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, in order that we might present every man mature in Christ.** {cf, Col 1:28}

There you have it. That is, the process exactly. “Warning every man and teaching every man, in all wisdom.”

Notice the balance there. What a wonderful sanity of balance the Scriptures maintain. It is not just teaching. It is not simply standing up and imparting information about doctrine. That must be preceded by the ministry of warning. I wonder if your reaction to that wasn’t the same as mine when I first read it. “Isn’t this the wrong order? Shouldn’t this be reversed? Shouldn’t it be teaching and warning? ‘Teaching every man and warning every man’”? Surely, you teach them first, and if they don’t receive that, then you warn them what the results will be, isn’t that the normal order? That is the way it struck me, until I looked more closely at this word translated *warning*. I found that is it the word for “mind,” plus the verb “to put.” “To put in mind” is the idea. That is, to call attention to something. When I saw that, I saw clearly that the order here is extremely important. You must get someone’s attention first, and then you say what you have to say. I wonder if the reason why so much of our teaching is weak and powerless is because we try to impart it without first captivating the interest of our hearers.

There is an old, almost odorous story about a man who wanted to train his mule. The first thing he did was to pick up a big stick and hit the mule a resounding wallop between the ears. As the mule staggered about someone said to him, “What is the matter? Why did you do that?” And the man said, “In order to teach a mule, you must get his attention first.” That may not be true of mules, but there is a good deal of truth in it as to humans. This is exactly what the apostle is saying here. Interest must first be awakened.

Much of the problem of teaching is that we don’t take the trouble to do that first. There is, therefore, no note of reality about it. We talk about the Scriptures, but, in the ears of our hearers, they are something quite remote from life. We speak of heaven and hell, and goodness and truth, and all of it sounds unreal. No wonder preaching has been described this way,

A mild-mannered man standing up before mild-mannered people and exhorting them to be more mild-mannered.

One recent writer put it,

“The gospel of love is a volume, bound in rose leaves and printed with peach juice by the beaks of hummingbirds on the leaves of lilies.”

How robust! No wonder the world holds this message in contempt. Yet it is supremely relevant to life. It is talking about you and me, and it is what we need to hear.

The Lord Jesus always captured attention when he taught. I often laugh as I read the accounts of his teaching. There is that story when he was preaching a great lesson on faith in him as the bread of life. Evidently the apostles were among the crowd and he could see them yawning and restless, “we’ve heard this a thousand times before.” They were paying no attention. What did he do at the end of the message? He sent them out into the sea alone into a storm. When the winds were howling and the waves were threatening to engulf the boat, the disciples were hanging on for their lives in the midst of the storm. Then, looking out through the darkness they saw, to their fright and amazement, their Lord walking on the water. As he came to them across the water, he certainly had their attention. When he got into the boat the first thing that he said to them was, “Oh, you of little faith,” {cf, Matt 14:31}. Now they began to listen, and they never forgot that lesson.

When the Apostle Paul went to Athens to preach to the sophisticated Greeks, he didn’t get up on Mars Hill and announce, “Ladies and gentlemen of Athens, I have come to speak to you on the moral superiority of Christianity to paganism.” No, he had been walking around the city noting certain things first, and when he got up he said, “You people are certainly very religious. As I have gone about this city I have seen nothing but altars everywhere. I even found one erected to an Unknown God. Now that is very interesting. There is something about God that you don’t know yet and that is what I have come to talk to you about,” {cf, Acts 17:23}. Thus he had their attention, “putting in mind” first, not finger-wagging. The key to true teaching is awakening interest, arousing attention. It is “warning every man” and then “teaching every man” in Christ.

Now I have only a moment to dwell on the matter of **teaching**. I want to say but a word now,

and then we will conclude this in our final message of this series.

Someone has defined preaching or teaching as “the ministry of comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable.” That is exactly what Paul is saying, is it not? Only he puts it in the right order. “Disturbing the comfortable,” first warning – and then, teaching. This needs to be done again and again. That is the way the saints are fitted out – equipped.

It is no good having people come to church to hear the same old thing. One of the weaknesses of the American church is that we love to come only to hear someone say what we already know. It is because we love to feel, “Well, this is for the fellow behind me, or that lady over there, but thank God it doesn’t reach me. I can say a hearty Amen.” Too many Christians want to come to church only so they can say, “Amen.” But that isn’t what the truth should do to us. The truth ought to get under our collars and into our hearts and bother us greatly at times. Oh, it is often comforting, wonderfully comforting. It is also very enlightening, and we can learn a great deal. But before it can be comforting, even before it can be enlightening, it needs to be disturbing. That is where every teacher of the truth needs to put a great deal of emphasis.

Once attention is gained, the task then is to teach the truth. It is the truth that changes and delivers man. This teaching the truth is what Peter calls, “feeding the flock of God which is among you,” {cf, 1 Pet 5:2}. It requires faithfulness to the whole counsel of God, not riding theological hobbies. It is not preaching continually on one theme, or picking out all the verses that have to do with one subject, as baptism or the coming of the Lord, and forever thumping on that tub. It is to expound the whole truth of God. That is why there is nothing better as a means of doing this than the expository message. The expository method – preaching through a book, or a section of a book, leaving out nothing, commenting on everything, touching it all – that is the best method.

Scripture is written in that way. Isaiah says that the revelation of God comes in this manner, “Here a little, there a little; line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little,” {cf, Isa 28:13}. You don’t find in the Scriptures a chapter on justification and another on sanctification and another on baptism, but it is all woven together. You can never take a sizable section of

the Word of God and comment on it without presenting truth in balance.

It is the truth in balance which does the trick of equipping the saints. Only the Word of God can teach a new Christian the difference between a zealous, dedicated heart which operates in the energy of the flesh and looks so spiritual, and that quiet commitment of the Spirit-filled life which faithfully does a thing whether it is being observed or not. It is the Word of God only which can teach us that. But, Oh! what a difference in the church when we stop being flagrantly zealous and start being spiritually powerful. It is the pounding of the hammer of the Word that finally pulverizes the granite hardness of our rationalizing hearts and breaks through to make us aware that God is trying to say something. It is the truth, driven home by a heart made earnest in prayer, that melts and softens and heals, and thus causes individuals to grow.

I want you to see one vivid illustration of how successful this is, and then we are through: Look at Acts 19; Paul is describing his experience in the city of Ephesus, the very city to which this letter is written. In Verse 8 we read,

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God [three months of teaching]; but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of

the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them [i.e., the synagogue], taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus [in the margin you will note the added words, present in many manuscripts, “from the fifth hour to the tenth”], this continued for two years, ...”
{Acts 19:8-10a RSV}

That means that Paul taught these people for five hours a day, every day, for two years. That adds up to some 25,000 hours of teaching. Is it any wonder that the verse concludes,

... so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.
{Acts 19:10b RSV}

That is what it takes to shape up the saints unto the work of the ministry.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this pointed word to our hearts, especially to those of us who have responsibility in teaching and leadership to the rest of the church. We pray that we may be found faithful stewards of the mysteries of God. In Christ's name, Amen.