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Sermon

# *Equipping the Saints*

**Ephesians 4:11-16**

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Bud Wilkerson was a successful American football coach, who once famously said “I define football as 22 men on the field desperately needing rest, watched by 22,000 fans in the stadium, desperately in need of exercise.”

I want to look today at Ephesians 4v11-16 to see what sort of exercise is good for the body of Christ. Jesus is interested in having his body well-built! So as we look at Ephesians 4:11, (page 1138 in the pew Bibles ) we see that the whole thing here is Jesus’ idea. He initiated it. “It was HE who gave these gifts of apostle, prophet etc. He is the master-designer of both us and the church. You could say that because he designed and built the model, he should have the best ideas as to how to make it function well.

Just like an athlete in training, Jesus is focussed on developing the muscle-power of his Body, his people; making them mature and completely “fit-for-purpose”.

His plan is for us to be influenced and taught by at least 5 different kinds of gifted people. This means we should not expect any one leader to be Superman, superbly trained and gifted in every area. The church needs the plurality of gifts that Jesus gives to the church, in order to achieve balance.

I imagine some of you have attended a gym at some stage in your life and will know that our bodies, in order to function best, need to be built up carefully to avoid exercising one part at the expense of another part. Once I went to a gym for 6 months but stopped because I developed pain in my knees. It was caused by unbalanced exercise that developed one muscle too much.

Eph 4:11 “It was He (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.” There are several other lists of gifts Paul gives in his epistles (eg Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12) We could look upon these as sample lists – no single list is a complete list of all the spiritual gifts there are. Jesus puts these people in our lives and in our churches in order to help us grow up. The Ephesians 4 gifts we are looking at are given for the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of ministry and the building up of the body of Christ. (Eph 4:12) And the gifts are people.

So how do these people equip the church? Apostles are people who travel to get kingdom work done. They train the feet, if you will. The evangelists reach out. They train the body to be outward-looking, not navel-gazing. Prophets remind us that we need to listen to God and make known what he is saying. Pastors/shepherds nurture the body and discipline it to rest and repair. Teachers bring the necessary food and instruction. All building up the body to function well.

While they will naturally operate in the strength of their strength, they are also supposed to equip the saints. To do what? I think, to carry out those same functions; they model and teach how to operate in those gifts.

The easiest example to understand is the spiritually-gifted evangelist. From the name “evangelist,” it is clear that this person is good at telling people about the good news of God’s kingdom and about his son, Jesus Christ. But when this person actually engages in evangelism, he is not “equipping the saints for the work of service.” He is reaching out to non-believers. The evangelist does not equip until he spends time helping other believers know how to reach others for Christ.

Now, take this same idea into the realm of the apostle, the prophet, and the shepherd/teacher. Again, these people should do what they are good at (ie prophesying, or shepherding & teaching), but they need also to help others to learn how to do the stuff.

An apostle who is always going, but never helps others to go, is not doing the work of an apostle. That is why Ian and I like to take other people on any mission trip we go on. We do not expect the team members to be experts in mission work. We just expect them to want to learn and grow.

So, those of you who are equippers, how can we tell if we are equipping others? First, we are doing the work that we are gifted at; but also, we are showing others how, and giving them opportunities to do the same work. Then we debrief and help them learn from any mistakes.

In [Ephesians 4:16](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%204.16), Paul tells us why this is so important. The church grows properly only when the whole church is working together. When only the apostles, prophets, teachers etc are working, the church does not grow.

It’s time for the equippers to stop doing all the work and start equipping others to work. This means, that at times, the equipper needs to step out of the way so others can start to function as God has gifted and prepared them. If we never feel others are ready, it may be because WE are not equipping them.

Those of us who don’t seem so obviously gifted, it’s time for us to step up and take responsibility for putting ourselves in a place where we can learn. I believe that we all can learn and function in all these areas to some extent. God may put specialists among us in the church to teach us, but 1 Cor 14:31 tells us we can all learn to prophesy. That means, learn to hear from God and speak his word to edify others.

We can all learn to speak of our faith to others and spread the good news, we can all exercise care and pass on good sound instruction from the Bible - and so it is with the other gifts Paul mentions elsewhere. All can operate the gifts as the Holy Spirit enables them, but they need help to learn how to start.

God does not want a family of babies. You don’t want to see a baby which does not grow up. What age is the most delightful? Toddlers who totter about, 3 year-olds who come out with their funny sayings, earnest 10 year-olds?

At age 3 or 4, Mummy & Daddy are infallible; they go to school and then the teacher is infallible; they reach their teens and the teenagers themselves are infallible! Does any parent want to keep teenagers for ever?

The greatest satisfaction for a parent is to see the child grow to be a responsible adult. And God wants his children to grow up. Grow up to reach the stature of Jesus Christ! That is the goal and the test. If you think “I’ll never make it,” well, yes, you will – God promises that he who began a good work in you will continue it and bring it to completion. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Jesus’ purpose in forming the church was to produce a group of people like himself. People who offer others the loving, the grace, the truthfulness, the faithfulness, the forgiveness, the healing of Christ. We are collectively his body and we demonstrate him. We represent him.

These people with the 5-fold gifts are like personal trainers for the Body of Christ: it’s as if Jesus has said “OK, my bride, you need to go to the gym. You need to practice building one another up in love so that you become mature, unified and until you know me.” (v13)

Knowing the Son of God takes time and effort. It dies not usually happen overnight. It pays to hang around people who are a bit more intimate with Jesus than you are. This will increase your desire to know him better.

My hope and prayer for St Stephen’s home groups is that they will learn to build one another up in Christ, learn to honour one another, to support one another and so they will be acting like the supporting ligaments that St Paul mentions in verse 16. The body of Christ needs these supporting ligaments as people start to build up their faith muscles, as they learn to speak the truth in love.

St Paul talks about each part doing its work, supporting each other and building up the body with love and care. We need each other and if one part is missing, the rest are the poorer for it. When we all do our bit, no-one has to carry the can all by himself.

It would be easy to just think of church duties at this point. When Paul talks about “works of service” in verse 12, we might think “He’s talking about doing jobs in church services.” Or we might think He’s talking about making a meal for someone in need, or running errands for someone. But no, the emphasis is how we learn to imitate Christ. How we grow into the fullness of Christ.

The five-fold ministry gifts are all demonstrating the characteristics of what Jesus did in his ministry. He did them all. As we focus on Jesus and think through how he expressed these things in his life, we will be well on the way. Well on the way to learning to relax and let him express his life through us – his pastoring, his speaking the words of the Father to us, his reaching out, his leaving home to go out to find people, his teaching.

This may indeed mean that we do put ourselves out for someone in need, but the focus will be on imitating Jesus, rather than focussing on the task itself or the pleasure it gives us to do it.

And as we mature in this way, we will reach unity in our faith. The fullness of Christ’s character will be expressed through us as a fellowship (v 15) “we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head.”

I spoke earlier about the example of an athlete in training. Think of how it would be if the parts of the body did not submit to the leadership of the head but thought their own way was best.

It would be as if they were saying, “Our Father in heaven: Hallowed be my name. My kingdom come, my will be done on earth as I’m sure it will be in heaven. Give me today my daily bread and forgive me my sins as I try to get other people to repent of their sins against me. Lead me and keep me from evil people who don’t agree with me, for mine is the rulership and the power and the glory for ever, Amen.”

When we think of that, we realise how foolish it is to try and manipulate everything to conform solely to our own way of thinking. Let’s rather conform our minds to God’s way of thinking that we find in the Bible, his Word. He is the Head of the body.

Ian said in his sermon last week that in cerebral palsy, the trouble is that one muscle group dominates over the others, which are very weak. When the person tries to move an arm it flies out wildly, because there is no equal and opposite muscle working to stop the wild excessive movement.

It is the same in the body of Christ. Each of us needs to be in submission to Jesus – He will instruct us how to avoid dominating others and pushing our own agendas. Paul talks later in Ephesians of how we need to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The picture of people in the church as infants, blown here and there by gusts of wind, is like the example of the person with cerebral palsy. In contrast, in the body of Christ instructed by Jesus, the Head brings harmony and peace and a deep sense of purpose.

This is completely what Ian and I, Anne Lindy and Heather need as a team, as we head towards Kondoa on Friday. Please pray for us as a team. Pray that we will be given grace to submit one to the other and so love one another so much that the M u slims in the villages will say, “Look! How they love one another!” and they will want what we have.

Pray for us as we travel to 7 different villages sharing the gospel with M u slims. Pray that we will be given words to say at the right time. Please pray that we receive from God every good, spiritual tool to do the work of the Kingdom, to God’s glory.

Pray for us that we will be a visible demonstration of the quality of shepherding, prophecy, apostleship, teaching and evangelism that Jesus modelled. Because without prayer, nothing. Without you, we will fail. We need your prayers and backup to be Jesus’ people reaching out to Kondoa.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version® ©*1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

1. Philippians 1:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)