

# GRACE

Community Church New Plymouth

*Loving God, Loving God's People, Loving Gods World*

## **BEING THE CHURCH**

*by Dr. James M. Boice*

If Christians are to be the church God wants them to be, they must get over a basic misunderstanding of how the church is to function. It is the idea that the work of the church is to be done by the clergy and that role of laymen and laywomen is to do nothing or, at best, merely to follow where the ordained persons lead.

Actually, nothing could be farther from the biblical pattern in the New Testament; it is clear that the work of ministry is to be done by all Christians and that the job of the clergy is merely to equip other Christians for that task. This is the meaning of Ephesians 4:11-13. "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's 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."

### *False and true models*

In recent years, there has been a new readiness in many evangelical circles to see and welcome this truth, but this has not always been the case. Earlier ages of the church have often been characterized by false patterns of ministry rather than by biblical ones, though, of course, there have always been proper functioning churches and ministries.

In his excellent study of the church entitled *One People*, John Stott points out that three false answers to the question of the relationship of clergy to other Christians have been given.

The first he calls *clericalism*, the idea that the work of the church is to be done by those paid to do it and that the role of the lay member is at best to support these endeavors financially. How did this false picture arise? Historically, it resulted from the development of the idea of the priesthood in the early Roman Catholic Church. In those days, the professional ministry of the church was patterned after the Old Testament priestly system with the mass taking the place of the Old Testament blood sacrifices. Only "priests" were authorized to perform the mass, and this meant that a false and debilitating distinction between clergy and laity was drawn. Those who favor this view of the church would say that it goes back to the days of the apostles. But his is demonstrably false. As reflected in the New Testament, the early church often used the word "minister" or "ministry" as referring to what *all* Christians are and must do. It never used the word *hierus* ("priest") of the clergy.

There are historical reasons for the devolvement of clericalism then. But these in themselves are not the whole or even the most significant thing. We see this when we ask: Why did such developments take place historically? Was it simply a matter of biblical interpretation? Or did other factors also enter in and perhaps even distort the interpretation?

The real causes of clericalism are found in the human constitution. On the one hand, there is a problem where the clergy themselves are concerned. It is their tendency to want to run the show, to dominate the normal people who attend church. Sometimes this leads to outright abuse or tyranny. If we need an

example, we can find one in the New Testament in the person of Diotrephes who loved “to be first,” according to the apostle John who writes about him (3 John 9,10). A warning against such a pattern is found in 1 Peter in a passage conveying instruction to church elders: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers, not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (5:2,3).

On the other hand, there is a problem with lay members. Their tendency is to sit back and “let the pastor do it.” Stott quotes a remark of Sir John Lawrence to this effect: “What does the layman really want? He wants a building which looks like a church, a clergy dressed in the way he approves, services of the kind he’s been used to, *and to be left alone.*”

The second false answer to the relationship of clergy to lay members is, understandably enough, *anticlericalism*. For if the clergy despise the laity or think them dispensable, it is no surprise that the laity sometime return the compliment by wanting to get rid of the clergy.

This is not always bad. We can imagine situations in which the church has become so dominated by a corrupt or priestly clergy that a general housecleaning is called for and is, in fact, necessary in order to right the matter. Times like this have occurred historically. Again, we can think of areas of the church’s work that are best done by lay members, for which the clergy are not at all necessary. But these are not grounds for anticlericalism as the normal stance of Christian people. On the contrary, where the church wishes to be biblical, it must recognize not only that gifts of teaching and leadership are given to some within the church for the church’s well-being but also that there is ample biblical teaching about the need for such leadership. Judging from Acts and the various Pauline epistles, the apostle Paul’s regular practice was to appoint elders in every church he founded and entrust to them the responsibility for the training of the flock for ministry (Acts 14:23; 20:17). In the pastoral epistles, the appointment of such leaders is specifically commanded (Tit. 1:5) and the qualifications for such leadership are given (1 Tim. 3:1-3; Tit. 1:5-9).

The final false model of the relationship between the professional clergy and lay members in what Stott calls *dualism*. Dualism says that clergy and lay members are each to be given their sphere, and neither is to trespass on the territory of the other. This describes the traditional Roman Catholic system in which a “lay status” and a “clerical status” are very carefully delineated, but it is also true of certain forms of Protestantism. In such a system, the sense of all being part of one body and serving together in one work evaporates, the church is partitioned and rivalry enters in instead.

What is the proper pattern? Ephesians 4:11-13 describes it well, for in pointing out the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are to prepare God’s people for Christian work, it is saying that the proper relationship of clergy to lay persons is

### *Service.*

The clergy are to direct their energy to preparing Christians to be what they should be and to do the work entrusted to them. The laity are to serve the world and others within the church.

Service Pastors are to serve the Christian community so that the saints might be prepared for service—first, service in and to the world and, second, service within the Christian community. Stressing the first of these is important because the church is so often in danger of forgetting it. As is often the case with families, the church sometimes becomes entirely wrapped up in itself and forgets that it is in the world (and not translated immediately to heaven) for one reason only, that it might be of service to the world. It is to minister in and to the world as Christ did.

In his excellent discussion of this point in *Body Life*, Ray Stedman wisely turns to Christ’s own description of his ministry in the world on the occasion of his reading of the Scripture in the synagogue of

Nazareth, early in his ministry. He read from Isaiah where it is written, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18, 19; cf. Isa. 61:1,2).

Some of these prophesied actions involve natural activities, some supernatural ones—in the case of Christ healing the blind, for example—but, as Stedman points out, there is a sense in which those who are Christ’s are nevertheless to do each one. There is a work of *evangelism*, described as preaching good news to the poor. There is a *service* ministry in which captives are freed and the blind healed. This may be literal; our equivalent would be work with prisoners and various forms of medical service. It may also be spiritual in the sense that those who are captive to sin are set free by the truth of God (John 8:32) and those who are spiritually blind are made to see (cf. John 9). Third, there is a ministry of *mercy* to those who are oppressed, a ministry of liberation. Finally, there is the proclamation of *hope* to a world that has almost lost sight of hope. It is the assurance that this is the age of God’s grace, the age in which he is accepting those who turn from sin to the Savior.

Each of these forms of ministry involves the gospel and may be viewed spiritually. But we must not lose sight of the fact that they also involve true physical service in the world. We should not forget Jesus’ story of the sheep and the goats and the basis of their judgment. Christ’s point was that his disciples, the sheep, must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and encourage those in prison. We must all someday meet the Lord for an accounting.

There are many spheres in which the Christian can perform these forms of ministry—in the home, on the job, through voluntary welfare agencies, even through church-directed public service projects. The important point is that Christians must perform them as one part of their calling.

### *Building Up the Body*

The second end for which the saints are to be equipped is building up the body of Christ. The many verses that use the words “one another” or “each other” tell us what this responsibility implies.

#### 1. We are to *love one another*.

This demand is first on the list, for it is emphasized most and in a sense includes everything else that can be mentioned. We find it in John 13, where Jesus gives us his new commandment: “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (vv. 34, 35). It is repeated again twice just two chapters later. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (15:12). “This is my command: Love each other” (15:17).

Paul picks it up in Romans saying, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). He tells of his prayer on behalf of the Thessalonians: “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you” (1 Thess. 3:12). He writes, “You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other” (1 Thess. 4:09). In 1 John, the command to “love one another” occurs five times (3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12), and it appears again in the second letter (v.5).

This love is not to be mere sentiment, still less a profession in words only. It is to be “with actions and in truth,” as John says in his description of it (1 John 3:18). It is to be seen in such practical matters as giving money and other material goods to those of our fellowship who lack these necessities (v.17).

#### 2. We are to *serve one another*.

Paul speaks of this in Galatians showing that service is an outgrowth of love: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one

another in love” (Gal. 5:13). Our example is Jesus himself, who, in the very chapter in which he instructs us to love one another, demonstrated the servant character of love by removing his robes, dressing himself in the garb of a servant and stooping before each of his disciples to wash his dusty feet. He then observed, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15). Does this mean that fellowship is to be expressed in feet-washing? In some cases, it could. But the obvious meaning of the Lord’s act was that we are to be servants generally, that is, in all ways. It is the specific task of deacons to lead us in such service. As small groups we may serve together in supporting a Christian work in the area of the city in which we meet, helping in special projects needed by the church, visiting the sick, taking a turn caring for the elderly, helping members of the church to move from one dwelling to another and scores of other such things. Without some such common concern and service, Christian fellowship is maimed.

### 3. We are to *carry one another’s burdens*.

This is Paul’s instruction in Galatians 6:2. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” It is an obvious outgrowth of the command to love one another, for this is what Paul is specifically referring to as the law of Christ. We love by helping shoulder the cares that are wearing down our fellow Christian.

Small groups are particularly important if we are to do this effectively. For how are we to carry another’s burdens unless we know what they are? And how are we to learn about them unless we have a context in which Christians can share with one another honestly? There are many problems at this point, one of which is our natural reluctance to let our hair down and confess what is really bothering us. If we have problems with our school work or at home with our children, we hesitate to say so because admitting to what may be a failure leaves us vulnerable. We worry about what others may think. Again, if we are having marital difficulties, we are afraid to admit that this is the case. We keep it in, and the problems build to the point where they sometimes prove unsolvable. How are Christians to learn to share their burdens in such areas? The easiest way is through a natural building of acceptance and confidence in the small group setting.

### 4. We are to *forgive one another*.

Quite a few texts talk about the necessary element. The obvious reason is that we frequently wrong one another or are wronged and so need to forgive and be forgiven. Here are three texts on this matter from the apostle Paul.

Ephesians 4:31, 32—”Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.”

Colossians 3:12, 13—”Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:1-3—”As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

We learn from these verses that, although the early church had a high degree of true fellowship, at times it also had troubling moments in which bitterness and wrath erupted and the peace of the church was threatened. If peace was not destroyed, it was because Christians learned to be patient with one another and forgive the slights, whether real or imagined.

### 5. We are to *confess our sins to one another*.

James says, “Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (5:16).

In opposition to the Catholic doctrine of confession, in which confession is made to a priest and absolution or remission of sins is received from him, Protestants have stressed that the proper biblical pattern is mutual confession in which one Christian may confess to another and be assured

by him that God has pardoned the sin and has forgiven him through Christ. This is the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and it is a very important concept. We who are Protestants must admit, however, that confession of this type, while biblical, is nevertheless more common among us in theory than in practice. And it is probably the case that many, perhaps most Protestants go through life without ever confessing anything to anybody. To judge from our speech, one would think that we do not sin and never have problems. How destructive this is of true fellowship! How wonderfully helpful it would be if Christians would honestly admit their difficulties and draw upon the much needed prayers and counsel of others for their struggle. James obviously intends this result; in encouraging us to confess our sins to each other, he links the matter of confession to prayer and promises that such will be helpful: “the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (v.16).

6. We are to *instruct one another*.

If we do not know the Word of God and do not walk closely with him, we cannot do this. We have no right to teach another. On the contrary, if we do know the Scriptures and are close to God, it should be true of us as Paul said it was of the Christians at Rome; “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another” (Rom. 15:14).

7. Finally, we are to *encourage one another*.

Paul speaks of this in writing to the Thessalonians, who had recently lost some of their number through death. In their case, this was accompanied by confusion about the doctrine of Christ’s second coming, and Paul wrote to them to explain what this would mean in regard both to themselves and to all those who would die while waiting for it. He explained that Christ would return and that those who had died in Christ would be the first to be raised in their new, Christ-like bodies. Moreover, there would be a reunion as the spirits of these, now clothed in their resurrection bodies, would be united again with those other believers who would then still be living. After reviewing this theology, he concludes, “Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18).

Mutual edification contributes to the health of the church, and this relates to the important first area of service in that an unhealthy church can hardly minister to the world properly. What is it that keeps the church from being the kind of godly influence Christ obviously intended it to be? Disunity is one thing. A church expending all its energies fighting within itself can hardly be of much use elsewhere. Ignorance is another cause of failure. If the church does not understand the issues of the day or the solutions provided by the gospel, it cannot help the world even though it is not divided internally and is anxious to help. The church can also be hindered by immaturity. It can be weakened by sin. Each of these faults can ruin the church’s effectiveness, and that is why Paul speaks of “*unity in the faith . . . knowledge of the Son of God . . . maturity [manhood] . . . the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*”

How are we to get to that point? The answer is that each Christian is to help others. Each! It is not the job of the minister alone. His job is to equip the saints to do the work of building up the body of the church and minister to the world.

### *Feed My Sheep*

How are evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for this work?

How long must the work of equipping be done?

The answer to the second question is “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,” that is, throughout the entire church age until Christ returns for us. The answer to the first question is clearly: by teaching, preaching and living the Word of God.

In biblical languages this is often described as “feeding the sheep,” for the work of pastor-teacher is similar to the work of a shepherd in caring for and especially feeding his sheep. The idea is present in the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 77:20), but it is far more important in New Testament usage, probably because it is based on Christ’s special words of instruction to Peter after the latter had denied Jesus three times just before his crucifixion. Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17).

We notice even before we look at the nature of the responsibility that the sheep are called Christ’s sheep. They are his in two ways.

First, by creation; he made them. Second and even more importantly, by redemption. On an earlier occasion the Lord has said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). In speaking to the Ephesian elders just before his final departure to Jerusalem, Paul said, “Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). If the flock were ours—whether as ministers, elders, or even as parents (thinking now of our children of whom we are overseers)—we could do with it as we wished or as we thought best. But if it is Christ’s, as it is, then we must do as he wishes, recognizing our responsibility to him.

The specifics of that responsibility are that those with the gift of being a pastor-teacher (clergymen, elders, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders) are to “feed” those sheep entrusted to their spiritual care. They are to do that by teaching, sharing and in any other way communicating the Word of God. There is a sense in which this all applies quite broadly, for there are very few who do not have some degree of responsibility for someone. We are all usually undershepherds in some way. But it is a special word for preachers, because the task of teaching the Word of God is particularly their own. The normal preacher has many functions. He must administer, counsel, visit and do scores of other things. But just as the primary responsibility of a carpenter is to build and a painter to paint, so the primary responsibility of a pastor is to teach the Word of God. Indeed, if he does not, how can he expect the other undershepherds of his flocks to fulfill their own share of this responsibility?

There is a decline in this area today, first in regard to teaching and then generally in preaching. There are several reasons for it.

First, attention has been shifted from preaching to other needed aspects of the pastoral ministry, things like counseling, liturgies, small group dynamics and similar concerns. These things are important. They are part of a minister’s work. But they should not, indeed they must not, shift attention away from his primary responsibility, which is to teach the Word of God. Moreover, the two are not in opposition. For it is when the Word of God is best preached that these other concerns are best cared for. An example is the age of the Puritans. Preachers in this period were noted for their mature expository sermons. Their material was so weighty in some instances that few today are even up to reading it. Yet, this does not mean that other aspects of the ministry were neglected. On the contrary, worship services were characterized by a powerful sense of God’s presence, and those who did such preaching and led such services were intensely concerned with the problems, temptations and growth of those whom God had placed under their care.

A second possible reason for the decline in preaching is the contemporary distrust of oratory. People in our day are sensitive to being manipulated and dislike it. Since preaching is clearly directed to moving people (and not merely instructing them), this seems to be manipulation, and some turn from it.

The trouble with these explanations is that, although they have an element of truth about them, they are both based on external matters or external situations and so miss the internal or fundamental cause of preaching’s decline. What is the answer in this area? The answer is that the current decline in the preaching and teaching of the Word of God is due to a prior decline in a belief in the Bible as the authoritative and inerrant Word of God on the part of the church’s theologians, seminary professors and those ministers who are trained by them. Quite simply, it is a loss of confidence in the existence of a sure word from God.

Here the matters of inerrancy and authority go together. For it is not that those who abandon inerrancy as a premise on which to approach the Scriptures necessarily abandon a belief in their authority. On the contrary, they most often speak of the authority of the Bible most loudly precisely when they are abandoning the inerrancy position. It is rather that, lacking the conviction that the Bible is without error in the whole and in its parts, these scholars and preachers inevitably approach the Bible differently from inerrantists, whatever may be said verbally. In their work, the Bible is searched (to the degree that it is searched) for whatever light it may shed on the world and life as the minister sees them and not as that binding and overpowering revelation that tells us what to think about the world and life and even formulates the questions we should be asking of them.

Yet the work of equipping is to be done not only by speaking the Word of God but also by living it, as we have indicated. This is what Jesus was referring to when he used the image of shepherding of himself. For in describing his work he said, “When he [that is, himself] has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him” (John 10:4). He means that he does everything first. He sets the pattern which others are to follow. So should all those whose task it is to equip other Christians.

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