

Breaking Free: From Caregiver to Equipper

By Greg Ogden

The Protestant Reformation promised a revolution and the Augustinian monk Martin Luther was its first revolutionary. Luther issued the following broadside against the hierarchal and clerically bound Roman Catholic Church of 1500's: "Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood...For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope..."¹ Gone would be the division between clergy and laity. The old caste system and class distinction between the ordained and non-ordained would be a thing of the past. Why? Because the New Testament envisions a universal priesthood inclusive of all who are baptized into the name of Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:9, Rev. 1:6, 5:10).

How have we done in fulfilling the promise that we are all priests before God and priests to one another? David Watson prophetically wrote,

"Most Protestant denominations have been as priest-ridden as the Roman Catholics. It is the minister, vicar, or pastor who has dominated the whole proceedings. In other words, the clergy-laity divisions have continued in much the same way as in pre-Reformation times, and the doctrine of spiritual gifts and body ministry have been largely ignored."²

What is the evidence for this? The church has been compared to a football game with 50,000 people in the stands in desperate need of exercise who watch 22 people on the field in desperate need of rest. This spectator mentality manifests itself in the way we approach worship. Worshippers see it as the responsibility of those on stage to provide an engaging, meaningful and entertaining show, while it is the worshipper's job to give an instant review of the worship service as they pass through the receiving line following worship. On many a Sunday after concluding the morning message, I expected to glance over to the choir only to see them raise cards from their laps rating the morning message—9.9, 9.4, and so on.

How did we get here? What are the reasons for the gap between the biblical and historical promise of universal priesthood and the spectator reality of everyday church life? As much as we might wave the theological banner of the priesthood of all believers, it is my conviction that we have inadvertently adopted a dependency model of pastoral ministry that has created passivity among God's people. The thesis of this article is that we need to shift from a **dependency**

¹ Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church", Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), 282-83.

² David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 253.

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model to an equipping model of pastoral ministry if we are to see the promise of an every member ministry become a reality.

The Dependency Model Defined

What is the dependency model? *Pastors do the ministry, while God's people are the recipients of their pastoral care.*

We have inadvertently adopted a professional caretaker model of ministry, which has resulted in passivity among the people of God. Most pastors are fully aware that a major portion of their job is to respond to the care needs of their members and constituents. If someone is in the hospital, grieving the death of a loved one, experiencing a life-altering setback, facing marital difficulties, struggling with a rebellious child, etc., the pastor is expected to show up. The emotional contract between pastor and people in most churches is "If I am having difficulty, Pastor, I expect you to be there to get me through it. If you don't show up, you are failing to do the job pastors are supposed to do. If you have failed in providing care, you have failed as a pastor."

Pastors have been turned into responders. I was leading a two-day seminar for a conference of Methodist pastors. The pastoral attendees to a person came tethered to their beepers and cell phones. When the beepers vibrated and the cell phones played their tunes, I would watch a pastor vanish from the meeting room only to return hours later after attending to the need to which they were beckoned to meet.

An Unhealthy Family System

To dramatize the impact of this caretaker, dependency model of ministry, I compare it to an *unhealthy family system*. What would we think of parents who kept their children perpetually under their thumb at home and never intended to develop them into caring, responsible, and independent adults? We would consider that a sick family. Yet, isn't this exactly what has become an unexamined and accepted model of ministry? We have paid pastors to be spiritual guardians to dependent children who need to be constantly cared for. As a result, the children remain perpetually so. We have been trapped in, under the shackles of an interlocking set of expectations between pastor and people, which has been equally unhealthy for both. There has been a conspiracy of dependency that has been equally entered into by pastor and people alike.

Only the Pastor Can Deliver Real Ministry

One of the manifestations of this unhealthy family system is the belief that *only pastors can deliver real ministry*. There is a commonly held myth that

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pastors bear the presence of Christ to a greater degree than the average lay person can.

Jerry Cook, a pastor in British Columbia, tells the following story. He had heard through the church grapevine that a woman in his congregation was upset with him because she had been in the hospital seven days and he had not found time to visit her. After she returned home from the hospital he decided to give her a phone call. But before he called he did some investigation and discovered that she had been visited by an average of four people a day from the church during her seven days in the hospital. The phone conversation went something like this:

Pastor Cook: "Well, Mrs. White, how are you feeling?"

Mrs. White replied curtly, "Well, I'm fine *now*."

Ignoring the sharp tone, Pastor Cook said, "I understand you have been in the hospital."

"Well, it's a little late."

Playing dumb, Pastor Cook responded, "A little late for what?"

"I was there for seven days and *nobody came*."

Pastor Cook informed her that he was aware that she had many visitors during that time. Then she revealed her true convictions: "Yes, people from the church came, but *you* did not come."³

What is the tragedy of this story? Was it that the pastor had failed to do his job? Hardly, he and others had created a mobilized ministry, and therefore Mrs. White was well cared for. The tragedy is that she missed the real presence of Christ in her visitors, because only the pastor could deliver "real" ministry. The authentic ministry of the people of God was discounted, because the pastor occupied an elevated position.

³ Jerry Cook, *Love, Acceptance, and Forgiveness* (Glendale, Calif.: Regal, 1979), 102.

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Need To Be Needed

The flip side to “only the pastor can deliver real ministry” is that pastors start to believe that they are indispensable. One of the psychological profiles suggested for those who become pastors is they have a “need to help people.” There is nothing wrong with that, unless...this becomes an inordinate need to please people.

I received the following note after visiting a 75 year old man in the hospital following his surgery. With tears Joe spoke movingly of an emotional and spiritual encounter with the Lord in preparation for his surgery. This was truly an epiphany for which they were willing to give me considerable credit.

Dear Greg,

Busy as you were, you came to visit Joe. We consider this a great blessing. Yes, many saints visited too but still your visit meant the most!

Prayers were answered through the nurses, doctors, and you. Joe is doing well.

Enjoy your well-earned vacation.

With our love,

Joe and Evelyn (not their real names)

Wow, what an emotional hook! “Busy as *you* were.” I brought a blessing. I am more important than the rest of the saints. Emphatically God answered *my* prayers. Now I can go on *my* well-earned vacation. Unbeknownst to them, these sincere and wonderful people were reinforcing my megalomania.

The dependency model of ministry has subverted the biblical teaching that the church is the body of Christ and every member has a valued part to play. On the one hand, we can say we believe the doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers”, while denying it in the way we actually do ministry in the local church. To the extent that we endorse pastors as the authorized caregivers, believe that only they can deliver real ministry, and then make the heroes who were there in our times of need, then we have created a system where pastors are domineering parents and the people of God are perpetual children.

Even if pastors want to break out of this unhealthy system, many pastors revert to the dependency model because there is too great a price to be paid for

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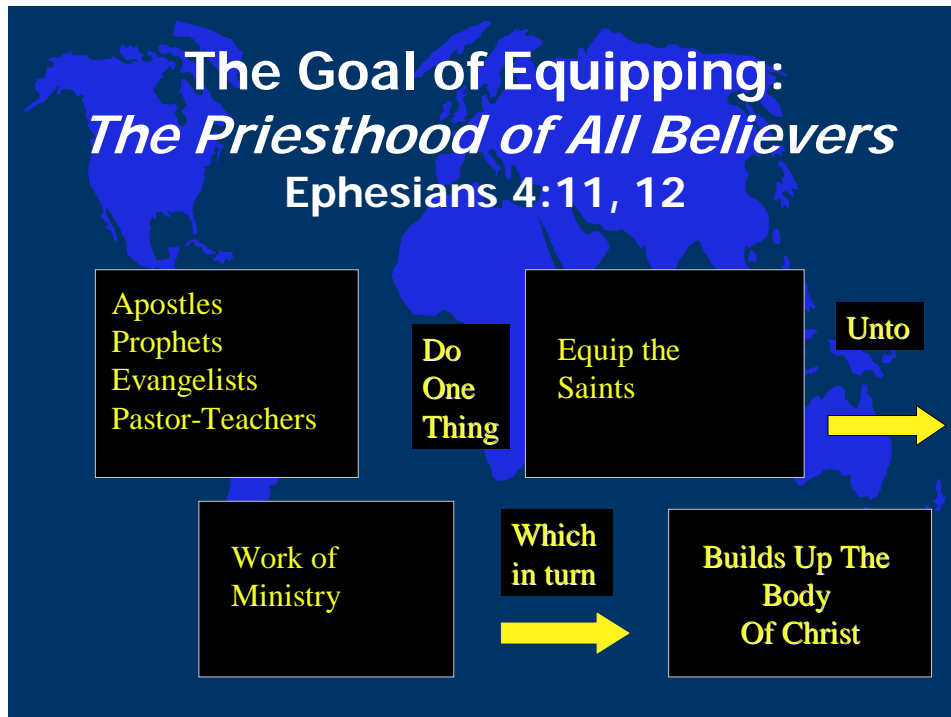
becoming an equipping pastor. The expectations of the people make pastors feel trapped. The last thing they want to have implied is that they are failing to live up to the in-place expectations. The path of least resistance is to succumb to the pressures of a congregational wants rather than to go through the painful process of reeducation.

A far healthier model views the pastor, not as the caretaker of those who can't fend for themselves, but as the equipper who encourages and provides a context to train all God's people for ministry.

An Equipping Model of Ministry

The closest thing to a biblical job description for the role of pastor is found in Ephesians 4:11-12: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ..."

As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. The following diagram⁴ by Ray Stedman serves as visual exposition of this text (see page 132 in *Unfinished Business* for this chart):



⁴ Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1972), 81.

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Paul defines equipping in terms of results. Equipping is occurring if the “saints” (the common, ordinary believer) are doing the work of ministry and in turn, the body of Christ is being built up. It is exactly at this point where Satan has diverted pastors from their call to the high-sounding role of caregiver. Satan has pulled off a masterful ploy—get the pastors and teachers doing other things that equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

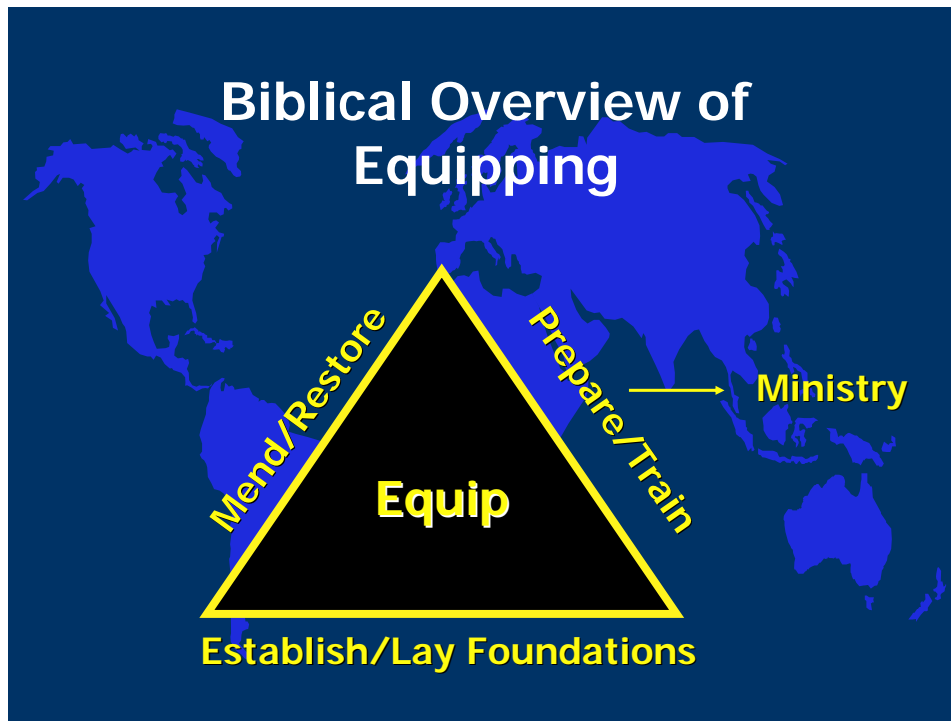
A generation ago the lay Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood, wrote a seminal book called *The Incendiary Fellowship*. It was in this work that he made the proposal that *equipping* was the primary calling of those in pastoral ministry. The following statement is the best summary of the New Testament view of ministry I have ever read: “The ministry is for all who share in Christ’s life, *the pastorate is for those who possess the peculiar gift of being able to help men and women to practice any ministry to which they are called.*”⁵

The word for *equip* in the original Greek (*katartismos*) is instructive. On the one hand, it comes from the medical world used to describe setting a broken limb or bringing a joint back into proper alignment. Equipping conveyed the sense of mending so that a part of the body could function again according to its proper design. In Mark 1:19 we are told that James and John are “mending” their nets. A fishing net is only useful if it is able to do what it is designed to do. The word *equip* was also used for an artisan who worked with his hands to make something useful or beautiful. In other words, equipping implies that all the saints have a particular function or ministry for which they are suited.

The following diagram pictures the various dimensions of equipping ministry, which can be explored more fully in my book, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*⁶ (see page 136):

⁵ Elton Trueblood. *The Incendiary Fellowship* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 41, italics added.

⁶ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 2003.



In other words, *the* ministry is to not to be associated with what pastor's do, but what the whole people of God are called to do. A pastor's part is to assist the members of the body to find their contribution to building up the body of Christ.

In order to interpret the function of an equipping pastor to the contemporary congregation, it would be useful to find an image that defines the equipping relationship between pastor and people. Trueblood proposes and rejects a number of alternatives. If we call a pastor *the minister*, as we often do, then are the ordinary people of God not ministers? The Scriptures equate pastor with *elder*, but this tells us nothing about function. *Overseer*, *shepherd*, or *pastor* conveys spiritual oversight and protection of the flock, but not empowerment. It is for these reasons that Trueblood ventures beyond biblical language to fresh imagery to help us understand the defining function of an equipper. He proposes the image of "coach" as the best modern equivalent. But realizing that coach can sound as if pastors are simply ones who shout instructions from the sidelines, he qualifies this with the addition of "player-coach." In other words, equipping pastors are in full partnership with parishoner players in the "game" of ministry.

One of the consequences of urging pastors to shift from the dependency caregiver model to that of an equipping leader is that it creates a crisis of identity. If I am not the one upon whom people have learned to rely, then who I am? Trueblood addresses this, "The idea of the pastor as the equipper is one which is full of promise, bringing back self-respect to people in ministry who are

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sorely discouraged by the conventional pattern...To watch for underdeveloped powers, to draw them out, to bring potency to actuality in human lives—this is a self validating task.”⁷

I have clear recollections of the impact of the first time I used the term *coach* to describe my role. I was called as an associate pastor with the working title of Pastor for Leadership Development and Discipleship. Since equipping people for ministry in the areas of small groups, spiritual gifts, and discipling were integral to my job description, I was reaching for a way to define my equipping identity. I was caught off guard by the reaction to my inadvertent sign off to my first newsletter article with “Your coach, Greg.” First, people had some fun with it. I received many a slap on the back accompanied by comments like, “How’s the coach?” Coach was obviously an image people could relate to while breaking down clerical barriers. Yet it was one particular interchange that reinforced for me just how much the image of coach captured the relationship between pastor and people. With great enthusiasm, Shirley approached me, “Let me see if I have this right. If you are our coach, then we must be on the same team, right?” I assured her that there were not two teams--a clergy team and a laity team. She went on, “If you are our coach, then it must be your responsibility to help me discover my role on the team and assist my development on it, right?” I said, “You got it.”

The image of coach brings to reality that the church as the body of Christ is a team on which all the players are valued and can make a contribution. It was for this reason that a church I served in Northern California adopted as its motto, “On This Team Everyone Plays.”

What are the implications of an equipping model for the way ministry is actually carried out? In other words, how does the equipping model bring “the priesthood of all believers” to full flower? To bring the equipping ministry to reality it must impact pastoral priorities, leadership manner and the structure of church life.

Priorities

With the dependency model, we have said that the pastor is primarily a responder to the pastoral care needs of a congregation. I often ask pastors, how do people get on to your schedule? Do you proactively seek out the people in whom you make a planned investment or do people place themselves on your schedule because they have a concern they want addressed? How should “player-coaches” spend their time? Training up leaders. Coaches coach. They

⁷ Elton Trueblood, *The Incendiary Fellowship* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 41, italics added.

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spend their time developing people who want to be engaged in ministry. Here is my rule of thumb: 80 percent of a pastor's time beyond preparation to preach or teach should be spent with the 20 percent of the congregation with the greatest ministry potential. It is an inviolable truth that our ministries can only extend as wide as there are self-initiating, Christ honoring disciples.

Jesus modeled and understood this better than anyone else. Why did Jesus have his twelve? Why was it that his prayer in John 17 at the time of the completion of his ministry was solely focused on the twelve? Jesus trained up twelve who would carry on his ministry after he returned to the Father. How strategic are we in the investment of our lives?

Leadership Manner

There is leadership manner that is consistent with empowering others for ministry. An equipping leader is first of all a *real person*. Equipping pastors come off the pedestal and come alongside God's people and share the journey. Any who hang around me for any length of time know that I have at times been crippled with undefined fear and anxiety. This got to be so bad that I finally had to seek assistance from those in the body of Christ who exercised spiritual gifts of inner healing. Does this diminish my authority? Not at all. First, it tells people that I am willing to do what it takes to become Christ's person and secondly, people say, "He deals with the same stuff that I do. If he can face it, so can I."

Besides being a real person with others, an equipping takes delight in highlighting and shining the spotlight of the ministry of others. An equipping leader takes no greater pleasure than in believing in and seeing the ministry of others come to fruition. I co-teach as a pastor with a lay person in a community within our congregation. There is not a week that goes by that people do not say to me, "Greg, Chuck (my partner) is such a good teacher. Where did you find him?" I could count that affirmation of Chuck as implicit criticism of me or it could feed the need to hog all the attention, but instead I choose to be thrilled that Chuck has a context where his gifts can shine.

Decentralized Structure

An equipping ministry is a decentralized ministry.

Small Groups. In Exodus 18 Jethro instructed to Moses to manage the nation of Israel by breaking in groups of 1000's, 100's, 50's, and 10's and place an able, trustworthy leaders over each group. It is hard to imagine an equipping ministry without a small group structure where equipped lay persons are given the tools and responsibility to care for a group of 10. We say that the most

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important leader in our church is not the senior pastor, nor any of the paid staff, but the leader of a ministry team or neighborhood group of 10.

Gifts Discovery. It must also be emphasized in an every member ministry that all of God's people have been gifted and called to ministry. Whether you have some formal process of classes and coaches that help people clarify what they are motivated to offer or whether it is built into the psyche of your church, there must be a permission giving atmosphere that says, "Everyone is valued here." At an adult retreat one of our lay leaders used a phrase that summarized the way the body of Christ is supposed to function. He said, "We don't have it all together, but together we have it all." That says we are all needed, and God has gifted through His Spirit everyone with something to offer.

Discipling. Finally, there must be an intentionality of growing people to maturity through discipling. The most important time I spend each week is with three other men from 7-8:30AM on Wednesday mornings. The purpose of this time is for all of us to grow up to maturity in Christ, and be equipped through multiplication to disciple others. The closing chapter in Howard Snyder's book *Liberating the Laity* is entitled "Pastors: Free to Disciple." Snyder states that discipling is the primary focus of a pastor's ministry:

"Essentially, the pastor's first priority is to so invest himself or herself in a few other persons that they have also become disciplers and ministers of Jesus Christ. It is to so give oneself to others and to the work of discipling that the New Testament norm of plural leadership or eldership becomes a reality in the local congregation. In others words, it is to bring the ministry of all God's people to functioning practical reality."⁸

Let me conclude my attempt to contrast the dependency model with the equipping model, by allowing you to hear the testimony of one pastor's journey of shifting from a do-it-all caregiver to an equipping leader. (The following letter was received while I was the director of a Doctor of Ministry Program. This pastor makes reference to my book, *Unfinished Business*, from which the thoughts of this article are derived.)

"In 1998 I submitted my proposal (for the Final Project) and it was approved. You pointed out that I needed to add your book to my bibliography. In my excitement I went out and purchased your

⁸ Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 243. For a more complete exploration of the practice of reproducing disciples see Greg Ogden's *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (InterVarsity Press, 2003) and Greg Ogden's curriculum for discipling entitled *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 1998).

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book the same day. However, after I understood where you were coming from my excitement turned to disappointment. I wanted to write my thesis on the 'omnicompetent' pastor and your book with its radical idea stood in the way of that.

I was working 80 hours a week at the time, doing absolutely everything within my abilities in order to be a successful pastor. Yet my church wasn't growing, as a matter of fact it was losing membership and finances.

In December of '99 I was on my knees asking the Lord to transfer me to another church, but He did not. After my prayer that night I went to my basement to light up the furnace, and there on the top of the furnace was your book. That night I read the whole thing, anger burning within my because you were tearing down everything I believed was biblical about pastoral ministry. During the next six days I read it four times and each time I felt better about your message.

For a year and half now I have been applying your book to my ministry. People in the church are more relaxed. At this time we have twenty six church members directly doing ministry that only a yeas ago would have been strictly my domain. Our attendance went from seventy to one hundred and eighty. This year alone during the first six months we have had twenty-one baptisms. It took me a long time to internalize your message, but it has definitely been life changing."⁹

⁹ Used by permission of the author