FIVE-FOLD MINISTRY: 
A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TEXTURE ANALYSIS OF 
EPHESIANS 4:11-16 
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Are the gifts Paul lists in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers) references to ministry offices or ministry functions? This question is considered using Robbins’s method of socio-rhetorical analysis. This study specifically considers the social and cultural texture of Ephesians 4. Textual analysis determined that there is some support for the designation of the offices of prophet and teacher, but there is little support for the designation of office of apostle, evangelist, or pastor. Textual evidence does suggest that the five gifts of Ephesians 4 are functions of individuals in the New Testament and through the first century.

According to the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance’s website, the population of the world is now over 6.5 billion.\(^1\) Thirty-two percent of the world’s population is considered Christian, but that percentage is dropping even while the world’s population is increasing. It will take strong Christian leadership to reverse this trend and to help complete God’s plan in the world.

Paul, the great church planter, revealed to the Ephesian church part of God’s strategy. “God gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some

pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry and for the edifying of the body of Christ.\(^2\) Many teach that Ephesians 4:11 describes a five-fold ministry paradigm that is God’s design for the modern church.\(^3\) David DeSilva writes, “Ephesians 4:11-16 articulates a healthy model for ministry, one that needs to be universally grasped and enacted if the church hopes to keep up with the needs of the world.”\(^4\) Ministries such as Asian Outreach list the five-fold ministry among their core ministry essentials. However, this pattern of ministry is not without controversy. Others teach that the five-fold ministries passed away along with the original apostles,\(^5\) and the office of apostle and prophet in particular have ceased.\(^6\)

It is often asked whether functions or offices are involved in the lists of Ephesians 4:11.\(^7\) An office is the public recognition by the Body of Christ that an individual has a certain gift and is authorized to minister that gift in what might be termed an official capacity.\(^8\) Some writers view the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as offices,\(^9\) while others view these five gifts as functions of the individual.\(^10\) Some writers point to the overlap in the gifts and functions of the five-fold ministries making it difficult to assign office or function to a particular individual.\(^11\) Yet, other writers

\(^2\) Eph 4:11-12.
\(^8\) C. Peter Wagner, Churchquake (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999), 109.
\(^9\) C. Peter Wagner, Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1979), 60; Duffield and Van Cleave, Foundations of Pentecostal Theology, 424.
are ambiguous regarding function or office and just stress the leadership aspect of the five-fold gifts.\textsuperscript{12}

Do individuals with any of the five-fold gifts receive the title of apostle, prophet, etc., simply because they perform certain functions from time to time or because they occupy some clearly defined position within their communities? Clarification of this issue will enable the church to more aptly fulfill the plan of God.

\textbf{I. APPROACH}

Research questions act as directional signposts for research. The research question for this study is: Are the ministries Paul lists in Ephesians 4:11-12 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers) references to ministry offices or ministry functions? This question is considered through the use of textural analysis (a subset of socio-rhetorical analysis) of Ephesians 4:11-16. Specifically, the cultural and social texture of this text is examined.

\textit{Scope and Method}

This study examines the roles of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher in the New Testament and the writings of the apostolic fathers. Robbins describes socio-rhetorical analysis as a form of exegesis that focuses on the culture in which action takes place as well as on the intended message the author had for the audience.\textsuperscript{13} The social and cultural texture of a text refers to the social and cultural nature of a text as a text. Robbins goes on to state:

\begin{quote}
A text is part of society and culture by the way it views the world (specific social topics), by sharing in the general social and cultural attitudes, norms, and modes of interaction which are known by everyone in a society (common social and cultural topics) and by establishing itself vis-a-vis the dominant cultural system (final cultural categories) as either sharing in its attitudes, values, and dispositions at some level (dominant and subcultural rhetoric) or by rejecting these attitudes, values, and dispositions (counterculture, contraculture, and liminal culture rhetoric).\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

This study focuses on the cultural and social texture of the New Testament and the apostolic fathers. There are several limitations to this study. First, Robbins states that it is not possible to be exhaustive in one’s socio-rhetorical analysis. Second, the size of this study requires the focus to be limited to one texture of socio-rhetorical analysis. Therefore, this study is limited to the social and cultural texture analysis of the New Testament and the apostolic fathers (specifically the 1 and 2 epistles of Clement, the letters of Ignatius, the letters of Polycarp, and the Didache).


\textsuperscript{13} Vernon K. Robbins, “Socio-rhetorical Interpretation,” http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/index.cf

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
Definitions

The word apostle is a transliteration of the Greek word apostolos, meaning “a messenger” or “one sent on a mission.” Apostles were literally commissioned messengers carrying out their sender’s mission. They were backed by the sender’s authority to the extent that they accurately represented that commission.

Prophets were spokespersons for God, whose role was known from the Old Testament and continued in the New Testament church. A prophet is one who is divinely inspired to communicate God’s will to His people and to disclose the future to them.

Literally, an evangelist is “one announcing good news.” In the New Testament, the good news is the death, burial, resurrection, and the ultimate ascension of Christ.

Pastors were literally “shepherds.” The term pastor is found only once in the English text of the New Testament. However, the Greek word poimen is found about eighteen times in the New Testament, translated once as “pastor” and the remaining instances as “shepherd.” Most notably, poimen is found in John 10 where Jesus is revealed as the good shepherd. Only in Ephesians 4:11 is shepherd found in reference to a function or office in the Church.

Teachers were expounders of the Scriptures and the Jesus tradition. If they functioned like Jewish teachers, they probably offered Biblical instruction to the congregation and trained others to expound the Scriptures as well.

There has been some discussion as to the distinction of pastors and teachers. In the Greek text of Ephesians 4:11, an article proceeds each of the ministry gifts, but the article is omitted before “teachers.” This omission has led some to claim that it is an indication that the two groups are the same. This distinction becomes important in deciding if these five ministries are offices or functions. It is more likely that a person has multiple functions than a person having multiple offices (this paper considers pastor and teacher separately).

II. SOCIAL AND CULTURE TEXTURE ANALYSIS

Socio-rhetorical interpretation is not a new method of Biblical interpretation, but rather a model for analysis that encourages full use of exegetical skills. According to Robbins, social and cultural texture uses anthropological and social theory to explore the social and cultural nature of the voices in the text. The goal of this analysis is to

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15 Duffield and Van Cleave, Foundations of Pentecostal Theology, 425.
16 Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary.
19 Eph 4:11.
20 Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary.
determine the social and cultural significance of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers in the writings of the New Testament and the apostolic fathers. "Socio-rhetorical criticism uses the term 'cultural' to refer to the status of a phenomenon that appears in a wide range of literature that spans many centuries." This study begins by examining the socio-cultural texture of the five ministry gifts listed in Ephesians 4:11.

Robbins lists three dimensions of social and cultural texture: (1) the specific topics, (2) common topics, and (3) the final topics. Specific social topics are the arena of the social and cultural texture of a text. Specific social topics, the first dimension, are thoughts, ideas, and subjects that are central to a particular kind of social discourse. These topics distinguish one kind of social discourse from another. The specific social topics in socio-rhetorical interpretation of religious texts concern conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, gnostic-manipulation, thaumaturgical, reformist, and utopian discourse. The conversionist response to society considers the outside world to be corrupted and salvation is available only through a profound and supernatural transformation of the person. The revolutionist response to society declares that only the destruction of this world will be sufficient to save people. The introversionist response to society sees the world as irredeemably evil and encourages retreat from the world and enjoyment of the security granted by personal holiness. The gnostic-manipulation response to society does not reject the world and its goals, but says that salvation is possible in the world and that evil can be overcome if people learn the right means to deal with their problems. The thaumaturgical response to society seeks immediate relief from their present circumstances through an act of divine intervention and seeks compensation for personal losses rather than the specific quest for cultural goals. The reformist response to society believes that the world is corrupt because its social structures are corrupt, but if the structures can be changed (and sanctioned by the believers) then salvation will be present in the world. The utopian response to society asserts that people should establish a new social system free from evil and corruption to run the world. Robbins states that it would be rare for discourse in a text as long as a gospel or an epistle to contain only one kind of social response to the world; rather, two or more responses interact, creating a particular social texture for the discourse.

Ephesians 4:17-18 states, “This I say... no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart.” This verse (directly following the text regarding the ministry gifts) is a conversionist response to society. The conversionist response is characterized by the view that the world is corrupt and the people need to change in order to change their society. Paul states that one of the purposes of the ministry gifts is to “mature manhood.” This conversion process is ongoing as indicated by the phrase

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24 Ibid., 110.
25 Robbins, Socio-rhetorical Interpretation.
“until we all attain” and the ministry gifts are meant to facilitate this conversion and maturing.

The second dimension of social–cultural texture is common social and cultural topics. Common topics concern the social and cultural systems and institutions that the text presupposes and evokes.²⁸ Individuals living in an area know common social and cultural topics either consciously or instinctively. Individuals raised in these common areas learn these common social and cultural values, patterns, or codes. Common topics listed by Robbins include honor, shame, legal contracts, challenge–response, economic exchange, and purity codes.

Each of the five ministry gifts (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher) are common social/cultural topics. The first ministry gift listed, apostle, has significant meaning for the first-century church. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews refers to Jesus as the apostle (tôn Apóstolon) and the High Priest of our confession.²⁹ The Jewish high priest was a specific “office” in the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament did not have an office of a “sent one” or “apostle,” but the imagery of the sending of individuals to another with authority was not unknown. Moses was sent unto Pharaoh³⁰ and Gideon sent out messengers throughout Manasseh.³¹ In classical Greek, usage of the Greek verb apostéllō generally referred to the sending of a fleet or embassy, but it was also used by Epictitus to describe Zeus’ sending a teacher of philosophy as his messenger.³²

In Jesus’ day, the word apostle was used often, mostly in reference to the twelve disciples. Luke 6:13 says that Jesus called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also called apostles. Paul regarded himself as an apostle and was accepted by the early church as an apostle. Most of the approximately eighty times the word apostle appears in the New Testament refers to Paul or the twelve. Along with Paul’s listing of the ministry gifts in Ephesians 4:11, he seems to refer to the office of an apostle in 1 Corinthians 12:28.³³

Two chapters from Clement’s First Epistle to the Corinthians address leadership appointment and succession of the apostles. Chapter 42 states:

The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus, the Christ, was sent from God. Thus, Christ is from God and the apostles from Christ. In both instances the orderly procedure depends on God’s will. And so the apostles, after receiving their orders and being fully convinced by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and assured by God’s word, went out in the confidence of the Holy Spirit to preach the good news that God’s Kingdom was about to come. They preached in country and city, and appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. Nor was this any novelty, for Scripture had mentioned bishops and deacons long

²⁸ Ibid., 159.
²⁹ Heb 3:1.
³⁰ Ex 3:10.
³¹ Jgs 6:8.
³³ “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.”
before. For this is what Scripture says somewhere: “I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith.”

And chapter 44 states, “Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave themselves instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in ministry.”

These two chapters refer to the leadership succession of the apostles, but the office or function of an apostle is not referenced. However, the offices of bishop and deacon are specifically mentioned. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers (Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp) have no mention of an apostle referring to offices or functions other than the twelve apostles or Paul. The Didache, however, makes reference to apostles and prophets: “Now about the apostles and prophets: Act in line with the gospel precept. Welcome every apostle arriving, as if he were the Lord. But he must not stay beyond one day. In case of necessity, however, the next day too. If he stays three days, he is a false prophet. On departing, an apostle must not accept anything save sufficient food to carry him till his next lodging. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet.”

Some have argued that this reference to apostle indicates the possible succession of the office of apostle. However, the reference to apostle in the Didache likely refers to the itinerate minister. The New Testament even used apostle in a more general sense (Rom 16: 7; 1 Thes 2:6). There is no evidence that an office of apostle existed outside of the designation of the twelve and Paul. However, the function of apostle (Biblical and extra-Biblical) existed before and after Paul’s epistle and was likely to continue.

The second ministry gift listed in Ephesians 4:11 is the prophet. Prophecy has an ancient history. Prophesy and soothsaying were known throughout the ancient near east including Egypt and Babylon.

During the intertestamental times, the Jews recognized that prophecy had ceased, but they did look forward to a revival of prophecy during the messianic age.

In Jesus’ day, the Jews and Jesus considered John the Baptist to be a prophet (Mt 11:9-14, 14:5, 21:26; Mk 11:32; Lk 20:6), and many recognize that Jesus Himself was a prophet (Mt 21:11; Jn 4:19). Paul recognized the gift of prophecy (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 14:1) and seems to recognize the office (or vocation) of prophets (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:20, 4:11). NT warnings against false prophets (Mt 7:15; 2 Pt 2:1; 1 Jn 4:1) presupposes the existence of authentic prophets. The Didache acknowledges prophets and prescribes a test for false prophets. As with the apostle, the Didache acknowledges the role of prophet. The office of prophet is well documented in the Old Testament and New Testament and there is evidence that prophesy and the office of prophet continued through the first century and beyond.

The third ministry gift listed in Ephesians 4:11 is the evangelist. The role of evangelist seems to begin in the New Testament. Evangelist literally means “one who

34 Didache 11:3-6.
proclaims good news.” There are three references to an evangelist. Philip is designated as an evangelist in Acts 21:8. This is the only instance in the first-century Christian literature that an individual is given the title of evangelist. The second mention of evangelist is Ephesians 4:11 where Paul lists it among four other ministry gifts, and the third mention of evangelist is Paul’s admonition to Timothy to do the work of an evangelist. There is no corroborating evidence that the “office” of evangelist existed. However, Paul’s instruction to Timothy indicates that the function of evangelist exists and is important. There are no references to an evangelist in the writings of the apostolic fathers.

The fourth ministry gift listed in Ephesians 4:11 is the pastor or shepherd. The term pastor is an anglicized form of the Latin/French word for shepherd, but it has not appreciable metaphorical significance.37 Shepherd evokes a mental image from the Old Testament, especially Psalms 23. Jesus also used this imagery in John 10 where he indicates that disciples are sheep and that He is the good shepherd. Pastor/shepherd seems to indicate the basic functioning of ministry: love, compassion, care, protection, provision, etc. As used by the New Testament, pastor designates both an endowment for ministry and the one who fills that ministry, but implies no fixed office.38 There is no further mention of the term pastor as a function or office in the first-century Christian fathers.

The fifth and final ministry gift listed in Ephesians 4:11 is teachers. Teaching and schools were known throughout the ancient near east and included the Greek philosophers. Teaching is common throughout the Old Testament using words and phrases such as train, learn, instruct, tell, show, make to know, cause to know, and expound. While the Old Testament contains no specific references to academic instruction, several allusions to public instruction or to teaching at court or sanctuary appear.39 Examples include Moses’ instruction of the Israelites (Dt 31:12f), Eli’s instruction to Samuel (1 Sm 2-3), Nathan’s counsel to King David (1 Kgs 1:11-40), Jehoshaphat’s programs of instruction in the law (2 Chr 17:7-9), and Isaiah’s relationship to a group of disciples (Is 8:16). The basic assumption regarding teaching in the Old Testament appears also in the New Testament.40 Paul established teaching as a gift (and perhaps an office) in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11. The ministry of teaching (and likely the office of the teacher) continues in the first century. The Didache states, “You must then, elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are credit to the Lord, men who are gentle, generous, faithful, and well tried. For their ministry to you is identical with that of the prophets and teachers. You must not, therefore, despise them for along with the prophets and teachers they enjoy a place of honor among you.”41

The third dimension of social–cultural texture is the final cultural category. The cultural location of a reader, writer, or the text is categorized through the final cultural

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37 Timothy S. Laniak, Shepherds After My Own Heart (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 21.
40 Ibid.
41 Didache 15:1, 2.
categories of social–cultural texture.\textsuperscript{42} It is concerned with the manner in which people present their propositions, reasons, and arguments both to themselves and to other people (i.e., rhetoric). Uncovering the cultural location (in contrast to the social location) of a reader or writer reveals their dispositions, prepositions, and values which influence the writing and reading of a text. Robbins states that these topics separate people into one of five final cultural categories: dominant culture, subculture, counterculture, contraculture, and luminal culture.\textsuperscript{43}

*Dominant culture* rhetoric represents a system of attitudes, values, dispositions, and norms that the speaker either presupposes or asserts are supported by social structures vested with power to impose its goal in a significantly broad territorial region. A *subculture* rhetoric imitates the dominate culture and claims to enact them better than the members of dominant status. Subcultures differ from one another according to the prominence of one of three characteristics: (1) a network of communication and loyalty, (2) a conceptual system, and (3) ethnic heritage and identity. *Counterculture* rhetoric rejects the explicit and mutable characteristics of the dominant or subculture rhetoric to which it responds. Counterculture rhetoric evokes the creation of a “better society” not by force or legislation, but by offering alternatives and hopes that the society will “see the light” and adopt a more humanistic way of life. *Contraculture* rhetoric is a short-lived, counterculture deviance, primarily a reaction–formation response to a dominant culture, subculture, or counterculture. They inherently have more negative than positive ideas. Finally, *liminal* culture rhetoric lasts only momentarily. Liminal culture appears and disappears as people move from one cultural identity to another, or consists of people or groups that have never been able to establish a clear social and cultural identity in their setting.

The final cultural dimension determines a text’s cultural location. Cultural location concerns the manner in which people present their propositions, reasons, and arguments to themselves and others. Of the five final cultural dimensions presented by Robbins, Ephesians 4 reflects conceptual subculture rhetoric. Subcultures differ from one another according to the prominence of a network of communication and loyalty, a conceptual system, and ethnic heritage and identity. The most prominent feature of a conceptual subculture is their basic assumptions of life, the world, and nature. Paul is not preaching to reform the world or the Mediterranean culture, but is preaching a diversion from the Gentile world (“you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind,” Eph 4:17b). Being different from the world is the goal. It is through the ministry gifts the church will be able to change the world.

**III. CONCLUSIONS**

It was determined through examination of the common social and cultural topics of the five ministry gifts, that there is evidence that the office of prophets and teachers existed prior to Paul's writing of the Ephesian epistle and the continuation of these offices was likely through the first century and beyond. Although the Greek word *apostéllō* is found in the Greek literature and the concept of an official “sendee” is not

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\textsuperscript{42} Robbins, *Socio-rhetorical Interpretation.*

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.; Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse.*
uncommon in Greek and Hebrew literature, the official designation of apostle seems to be unique to the New Testament. There is the specific designation of apostle for the twelve and Paul and the general designation of apostle for others “sent” in an official capacity, but there is no evidence that an office of apostle existed. As with the apostle, the designation of evangelist seems to be a New Testament concept. However, Philip was specifically designated an evangelist and inductive reasoning tells us that evangelists will continue in the Church age to fulfill the Great Commission. The most uncommon designation is the pastor (shepherd). While the role and image of the shepherd is common in the Old Testament and Jesus brought the imagery into His ministry, there is no other textual evidence to suggest there is an office of pastor. The basic functioning of the ministry is shepherding, therefore the function of the pastor/shepherd continued through the first century.

Our research question is: Are the ministries Paul lists in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers) references to ministry offices or ministry functions? To summarize the findings: cultural and social analysis of the NT text and apostolic fathers determined that while there is some support for the designation of the offices of prophet and teacher, there is little support for the designation of office for apostle, evangelist, or pastor. Textual evidence does suggest that the five gifts of Ephesians 4 are functions of individuals in the New Testament, through the first century and beyond.

IV. FUTURE RESEARCH

The conclusions of this paper should be taken as only one step to answering the question: Are the ministries Paul lists in Ephesians 4:11 references to ministry offices or ministry functions? As noted in an earlier section, this paper was limited to one texture of socio-rhetorical analysis. Future research should include analysis of Ephesians 4:11 exploring the inner texture, intertexture, ideological texture, and sacred texture of socio-rhetorical analysis.

About the Author

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