

## The Church: A Group of Encouragers

The following general outline and some of the content was taken from Tom Ferrell, (former?) pastor of Arlington Presbyterian Church

The need of encouragement by fellow believers is repeated often in the Bible.

- I Thessalonians 5:11: Therefore encourage one another.
- Hebrews 3:13: But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today".
- Hebrews 10:25: encouraging one another, and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him- a threefold cord is not quickly broken (ESV).

The English word "encourage" has three basic meanings: (1) to cheer (gladden) or to inspire with courage or hope, (2) to stimulate or spur on, (3) to give help or aid. This is pretty consistent with what we see in the Bible.

In the New Testament there are a number of different words that describe the saints comforting one another.

I Thessalonians 5:14 tells us to "encourage the fainthearted." The Greek word translated "encourage" (*παραμυθεομαι paramutheomai*) means to speak soothingly or to console by coming alongside of someone (TDNT, V, 817). The recipients of comfort are those who sorrow (Ro. 12:15b), the sick or prisoners (Matt. 25:36, 43), orphans and widows (Ja. 1:27), and even at times the apostles themselves who were imprisoned and condemned (Col. 4:11). This word is used twice in John's account of the death of Lazarus. John 11:19 says, "and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to *console* them concerning their brother" (see also Jn. 11:31). In other words, encouragement involves cheering the brokenhearted and the dispirited among us.

Another Greek word for encouragement is *sterizo* (στηρίζω). *Sterizo* (στηρίζω) is usually translated as "strengthen." Literally, it means to "make fast" or "support" or to "stabilize" or to establish something (TDNT, VII, 653). It was a word used when someone leaned against a tree for support (TDNT, VII, 654). In the New Testament we see the saints propping up or supporting one another in their faith. I Thessalonians 3:2, Paul says, "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to *strengthen* and encourage you as to your faith." In Acts 15:41 Paul was traveling through Syria and Cilicia *strengthening* the churches. In Acts 18:23 Paul was *strengthening* the disciples. In Romans 1:11 the strength is in experiencing the comfort of the Gospel.

It ought to be our goal to do all within our power to see to it that each one is established firmly in the faith - that each one is assured of his or her salvation; that each one is resting entirely upon the merits of Christ; that each one is utterly convinced of the truth of the gospel.

In the New Testament, this establishment of others in the faith is described in a number of ways:

1. It is described as spurring one another on in living a distinctly Christian life.

Hebrews 10:24, "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." The Greek word (παροξυσμός *paroxusmos*) means to stimulate or to excite to activity or growth. In Acts 17:16 the related verb is translated as "provoked." When Paul was waiting in Athens it says, "his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols." Before that, in Acts 15:39 the verb was used of being irritated. Encouragement involves prodding each other to do good deeds; it is creating an "irritant" that makes others move.

2. It is described as refreshing one another.

Paul looked forward to meeting with those in the church of Rome to find "refreshing rest" in their company (Ro. 15:32). When he wrote to Philemon, Paul said, "For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints *have been refreshed* through you, brother" (Phm. 1:7), and "let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ" (Phm. 1:20).

Other examples are as follows:

- I Corinthians 16:17-18: And I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus ... For they have refreshed my spirit and yours.
- II Corinthians 7:13: For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.
- II Timothy 1:16a: The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus for he often refreshed me.

As believers our aim should be to refresh the saints, not add burdens; our desire for others should be to give rest to the souls of others, to be people whose attitudes, presence, and deeds cause the hearts of others to rejoice.

3. It is described as urging one another forward in ministry initiatives.

- Acts 18:27: and when [Apollos] wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he helped greatly those who had believed through grace.

4. It is described as exhorting one another (I Thess. 4:10), appealing to one another (I Tim. 5:1), and urging one another along in godly conduct (Acts 14:21-22).

In other words, encouragement takes many shapes, but it is more than lending a sympathetic ear, more than telling that struggling brother that everything will be OK or that he needs to hang

in there, and more than the verbalizing of trite sentiments. Biblical encouragement is a deliberate, rich, gutsy thing that builds others up in their faith by helping them draw near to Christ.

***If encouragement is our mutual obligation, why do we find it so difficult?***

There are perhaps five basic reasons we fail at encouraging each other.

1. Sometimes we are poor at encouragement because of the shallowness of our relationships. Many of our relationships are of no greater depth than those of the world. We know nothing of each other or the struggles we face so we have no platform to encourage from.
2. Perhaps we are not good encouragers because we are uncomfortable talking about spiritual things. Talking about a theological issue, a passage of Scripture, or Christian ministry ought to be as natural and easy as talking sports, computers, or gardening.
3. At times we may fail to be encouragers because of our own self-centeredness. These days many people feel trapped, shackled by schedules, stuff, problems, and obligations. They are unable to extricate themselves nor simplify their lives in order to gain the freedom to serve others.
4. Maybe we do not encourage others because of the spiritual leanness of our own souls. For the most part, we are not given to those classic spiritual disciplines that have nourished and sustained the souls of generations of believers – the reading and study of God’s Word, prayer and fasting, simplicity and solitude, journaling, and theological reflection. We do not have anything to encourage with because we have no ready supply of encouragement from God in our own lives.
5. Too often we come into the assembly of believers totally unprepared. We were up late on Saturday night and we leave the house prayerless and hurried on Sunday morning. We are simply not ready for the God-ordained opportunity opened up to us to help someone else advance in their walk with God, nor to speak words of kindness and affirmation to a fellow traveler.

***Why do we need encouragement?***

We need encouragement because the way is hard and the journey is long. Acts 14:21-22 says, “And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’” Aggravating the difficulty of the journey is our own ignorance of God’s will, the weakness of our faith (Lu. 17:5), our susceptibility to weariness, and our tendency to wander from the way of grace (Gal. 1:6-7a, 3:1-3). We need the help and the encouragement of others to stay in the way of obedience.

***What is the focus of encouragement?***

Acts 14:21-22 says the disciples were encouraged *to continue in the faith*. I Thessalonians 3:2 also says that Paul sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the believers *in their faith*. Colossians 2:5-7 states, “for even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and *the stability of your faith in Christ*. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him *and established in your faith*, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.” The common thread in all these verses is faith; we encourage each other in the faith.

“Saving faith may be defined as a certain conviction, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance (trust) on the promises of God in Christ” (L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 503).

So the goal of mutual encouragement is that we all come to the end of our days still in the faith, that we all continue day by day in hearty reliance upon the promises of God in Christ, and that we all live lives consistent with our calling as Christians.

***In what ways should we encourage each other?***

1. We should remind one another that our life is to be lived for the glory of God.

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy he wrote, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1:17). It was this glorious thought that motivated Paul to keep going.

2. We should remind one another that life is short and eternity is near.

- James 4:14: yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. *You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.*
- Hebrews 10:25b: encourage one another, and all the more *as you see the day drawing near.*
- Galatians 6:10, so then, *while we have opportunity*, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

It is this constant exhortation from our brothers and sisters that will help us keep temporal endeavors and material goods in proper perspective.

- I Timothy 6:9-10: But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.

3. We should remind one another to continue ministering to the saints.

- II Corinthians 4:1: Therefore, *since we have this ministry*, as we received mercy, we *do not lose heart* (see 4:16).

- Galatians 6:9: and *let us not lose heart in doing good*, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.

4. We should remind one another that we are not alone in our struggles.

- I Peter 5:9: But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that *the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world*.

5. We should remind one another to keep plodding, to continue on the road even though progress is torturously slow.

- Hebrews 12:1b-2a: . . . let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith . . .

The goal is to finish the race, not be flashy.

6. We should remind one another to continue in our faith until the end.

Hebrews 3:6: but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house-- whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

The real goal is to make it to the end still in the faith, still in love with the Lord, still looking to the reward, still resting on the work of the Savior, and still preferring the way of holiness to the way of sin. It is finishing the course (II Tim. 4:7). It is hearing the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant ... Enter into the joy of your Master" (Matt. 25:21).

7. We should remind one another of the truth regarding our sin, and encourage one another to proceed rightly.

- Hebrews 3:13: But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest anyone of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

"What is urged is a spirit of mutual helpfulness which regards the Christian society as a spiritual unity. Thus it is important that the whole be in a strong and prosperous state" (Kent, 73, 74). We are responsible for each other. This underlies one of the great values of the local church. Christians who treat the church with a consumer mentality, going here and there to meet their "needs," fail to see the importance of the local church as God sees it. The local church is designed by God as an organism with an organic unity between members, each contributing to the health of the whole. "The healthy life of the individual member is dependent upon the life around him, and on the part he takes in maintaining that life" (Murray, *The Holiest of All*, 131, 132).

In Hebrews 3:7 the author warned "today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." The urgency that we must apply this to ourselves should be applied to others as well. Persevering in faith to the end is a community project. To procrastinate in hearing allows for a hardening of the heart by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13). All sin is deceit, for its promised pleasures are a lie. Its dire effects are

not usually seen at once. "The human heart is then fooled into thinking that there is no penalty at all, and it becomes dull and insensitive to the heinousness of sin. The blinding and dulling effects of sin might cause some Christians to think that reverting back to Judaism was not really much of a step, and certainly not a backward one. The temporary advantages (easing of social pressures from the Jewish community, and so forth) would be made to seem of much more practical importance than the theological implications of such a move" (Kent, 74). In reality, this would be considered a repudiation of Christ and forfeiture of one's salvation.

8. We should remind one another of the value of a good conscience.

- I Timothy 1:19: keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected, and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.

9. We should remind one another of God's tender mercies.

We are prone to ingratitude. We desperately need others to point out to us the multitude of divine favors that are ours every day.

Of course, encouragement also involves extending every common courtesy. It is to point out people's gifts, strengths, and their contribution to the body. It is to thank them, to express appreciation for them, to meet their physical needs, to render assistance when they need a little help from their friends.