

(One Body in Christ) 4. Helping One Another

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of mutual encouragement and correction within the Body of Christ for spiritual growth and fellowship.

Scripture: Proverbs 10:17, Proverbs 20:19, Ecclesiastes 7:5, John 13:14, Acts 14:22, 1 Corinthians 1:4, 2 Corinthians 4:12, Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 4:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Hebrews 3:13

Topics: "Body Of Christ", "Mutual Ministry"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the importance of speaking the truth in love and growing in all aspects into Christ, emphasizing the responsibility of every believer to minister life to the Body of Christ. He highlights the significance of bearing the Cross, dying to self, and engaging in a mutual ministry of encouragement and admonition within the Body. Poonen stresses the need for honest fellowship, where believers refresh and cleanse one another through encouragement and correction, ultimately building up the Body of Christ.

Transcript

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, Who is the Head, even Christ, from Whom the whole Body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the Body for the building up of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15, 16).

These and other verses in the New Testament make it plain that every believer has a responsibility to minister life to the Body of Christ, in his own way. This is not the exclusive privilege of preachers, but the duty of all members of Christ's Body.

We have already seen the importance of bearing the Cross and of dying to self. This is the basic law of interpersonal relationships in the Body of Christ. This is also the primary means by which each member ministers life to the Body. "Death works in us, but (as a result) life in you", wrote Paul to the Christians at Corinth (2 Corinthians 4:12). The more we bear the Cross in our lives, the more we shall be ministers of life to the Body, even if we do not have the gift of preaching.

Fellowship, as we have already seen, is a two-way matter. Giving and receiving are involved. All of us need to give to others in the Body and all of us need to receive from others. We saw in the last chapter, how some through feelings of inferiority may hesitate to give, and how others, feeling superior may feel that they have nothing to receive. When all members of the Body function as they should, there will be a

giving and receiving in love that will lead to the building up of the Body.

The Bible tells us of a dual responsibility that each of us has in the areas of giving and receiving. We are told to encourage and to correct one another.

Consider the following commands in the Bible:

Warn (admonish, urge and encourage) one another every day....hat none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin....

Not forsaking or neglecting to assemble together (as believers) as is the habit of some people, but admonishing - warning, urging and encouraging - one another, and all the more faithfully as you see the day approaching" (Hebrews 3:13; 10:25 - AMP).

These commands are almost totally ignored by the vast majority of believers, yet they highlight two of our chief responsibilities as members of Christ's Body.

The word translated "admonish/encourage" in the above passages is the Greek word parakaleo. The noun form of this verb is parakletos, which translated as "Comforter", is the word Jesus used to refer to the Holy Spirit in John chapters 14 to 16.

This would seem to indicate that encouragement and admonition are two of the chief ministries of the Holy Spirit. And if the Holy Spirit of God dwells in us as members of Christ's Body, He will seek to express Himself through us to one another in a mutual ministry of encouragement and admonition. We shall therefore be quenching the Spirit if we fail to engage in such a ministry. Hence the Word of God exhorts us:

We earnestly beseech you, brethren, admonish (warn and seriously advise) those who are out of line....ncourage the timid and fainthearted.... Do not quench the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:14, 19 - AMP).

This does not mean that we shall be spending our time encouraging and admonishing others all the time. No. There is a time and place for exercising any ministry. We must, however, recognize our responsibility in these areas.

It probably was to this ministry that Jesus was referring when He told His disciples at the last supper, "You also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Washing the feet would both refresh and cleanse them - after they had tramped the dirty roads, wearing only sandals.

Likewise, encouragement can refresh a weak and discouraged brother and correction can cleanse a straying brother. We must be willing to wash others' feet and have our feet washed by them in return.

Encouraging Others

Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the disciples in the churches they had established, by encouraging them, so the record reads (Acts 14:22).

We too can strengthen others through a ministry of encouragement - not only through the preaching of the Word, but also by offering appreciation where it is due.

Jesus was always quick to give a word of appreciation where due. He praised a centurion for his faith (Matthew 8:10), a repentant woman for her love (Luke 7:47) and Mary of Bethany for her devotion (Luke 10:42; Mark 4:8, 9).

To His failing disciples, He said, "You are those who have stood by Me in My trials" (Luke 22:28).

Paul when writing to the churches - even to the most carnal ones - usually found something to appreciate in them. To the Church in Corinth, riddled with factions, disputed and immorality, Paul began his letter thus:

I can never stop thanking God for all the wonderful gifts He has given you, now that you are Christ's. He has enriched your whole life. He has helped you speak out for Him and has given you a full understanding of the truth; what I told you Christ could do for you has happened! Now you have every grace and blessing; every spiritual gift and power for doing His will are yours during this time of waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. And He guarantees right up to the end that you will be counted free from all sin and guilt on that day when He returns. God will surely do this for you, for He always does just what He says, and He is the One Who invited you into this wonderful friendship with His Son, even Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:4-9 - TLB).

Only then did he go on to say, "But, dear brothers, I beg you in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves" (verse 10).

Paul tried to begin with something positive. So must we.

This does not come naturally to all of us. Most of us tend to see the negative side of others first. But if we submit to the discipline of the Holy Spirit, we shall find Him showing us something to appreciate in everyone.

A teacher once spread a large white sheet of paper with a small ink-spot in one corner, in front of his class and asked the children to write down what they saw. All of them described the small ink-spot rather than the large area of unspoiled paper. So, in human relationships, we often tend to concentrate on other people's minor defects.

Altering one's outlook requires determination but it is worth the effort. Gradually the habit of noticing other people's good qualities can be acquired. The next step is to tell them how much one appreciates those good qualities.

Honesty

We can encourage our fellow-believers often by an honest admission to them of our humanness and of our struggles.

We are called to be witnesses of Christ. But if in our testimony, we give others a false impression of our lives, then we are actually false witnesses. The vast majority of believers fall into this category. They give others a glorious account of their triumphs but never say a word about their struggles or their failures. They testify to many prayers God has answered, but mention nothing about the prayers for which God's answer was No. They describe all their mountain-top experiences in detail, but never so much as mention a word concerning the many long valleys that lay between those mountain-tops. They are false witnesses, for they give an unreal picture of the Christian life.

I remember, as a young Christian, struggling to live a life that was pleasing to God, hearing many such testimonies from other Christians. Not one of them told me, either from the pulpit or in personal conversation, that they too had fears and unresolved problems and unanswered prayers, or that there were things in the Bible that puzzled them too. I assumed therefore that such problems and queries were peculiar to me. The result was that all their testimonies only discouraged me; and discouragement in turn, led me further away from the Lord.

Then I read in the Bible of how the great Apostle Paul was often perplexed, how he despaired, how some of his prayers were not granted, how some of the sick people he prayed for were not healed, and how he even had fears, and was comforted in his depression by fellow-believers (2 Corinthians 4:8; 1:8; 12:8, 9; 2 Timothy 4:20; 2 Corinthians 7:5, 6). Paul's honesty lifted my spirit and I was encouraged to press on.

Paul never wanted others to have a false impression of him (2 Corinthians 12:6). And so, he told them in plain words that he was a human being - not an angel. He lived in victory over all known sin, but he was still a human being who could make mistakes and in whom the flesh was still not eradicated. Paul's aim was always to help others, not to impress them. Through his honesty about his humanness, he became an instrument of encouragement to many.

It is the desire to impress others which makes many of us unwilling to be honest with them about our struggles and our anxieties. This shows that we are not really interested in helping them to a closer walk with God. We are not concerned that they are discouraged by the unrealistic standards that we have set before them. We seem to be quite content as long as we ourselves are held in high esteem.

There is a price to be paid if we are to be channels through which the Holy Spirit encourages others - the price of honesty.

True Christian fellowship must be based on light. We can walk in true and deep fellowship with one another only if we are willing to walk in the light. This involves a willingness to be ourselves with each other - avoiding all sham and hypocrisy. This is how God intends Christians to walk with one another. Remember, the first sin publicly judged by God in the early Church was hypocrisy (see the story of Ananias and Sapphira recorded in Acts 5:1-14).

Sin has caused all of us to wear masks in our mutual relationships. We are afraid and ashamed of being known as we actually are. We live in a world full of people wearing masks; and when people get converted, they don't take off their masks. They wear their masks and go to meetings and meet with other people - and call that fellowship. But such fellowship is a farce. Yet the Devil has got most Christians satisfied with just that.

It is true that it is impossible for any of us to remove our masks completely. Living in a sinful world and fellowshiping in an imperfect church, and bound by the flesh ourselves, it is neither possible nor desirable to be completely honest with others. Total honesty is not feasible, because we can't see ourselves fully. Neither is it advisable, because it may hinder others.

We certainly need wisdom in being honest. But we should never pretend to be something that we are not. That is hypocrisy - and hypocrisy was condemned outright by Jesus.

A self-righteous, Pharisaical attitude is what prevents many Christians from being channels of help and encouragement to others. Our attitude must be such that our fellow-believers and others will feel free to

come to us and "let their hair down" and unburden themselves, knowing that they will meet with sympathy and understanding, and that they won't be despised for their ignorance or for their failures.

The world is full of lonely, tense, fear-ridden and neurotic people. Christ has the answer to their problems, but that answer should come to them through His Body, the Church. But alas, most Christians are so self-righteous and unreal that they drive away people in need.

Keith Miller says in *The Taste of New Wine*,

"Our modern church is filled with many people who look pure, sound pure, and are inwardly sick of themselves, their weaknesses, their frustration and the lack of reality around them in the church. Our non-Christian friends either feel, 'That bunch of nice untroubled people would never understand my problems'; or the more perceptive pagans, who know us socially or professionally, feel that we Christians are either grossly protected and ignorant about the human situation, or are out-and-out hypocrites."

We need to learn what it is to have honest fellowship with others on a personal level - and we can all begin with one person.

There are dangers in this realm of honest fellowship, however, that we should be aware of, so that we can steer clear of them. Here are some guidelines that may help:

First of all, such intimate fellowship must be restricted to individuals of the same sex. We should not forget that we are still living in a fallen world and that the flesh (and thereby the potential for sin) is yet within all of us. It is therefore, most dangerous for anyone to try and develop an intimate fellowship with someone of the opposite sex, outside the marriage relationship. Those who have attempted to do so, have invariably fallen into one sin or another.

Secondly, we must follow spiritual principles laid down in God's Word for our fellowship - and refuse to be guided by psychiatric techniques. The Holy Spirit should be in control of our fellowship, and we must allow Him to lead us closer to one another spontaneously. We should never force anyone into an artificial honesty.

Thirdly, remember that the aim of fellowship is not to confess our sins to each other and to get a strange, un-scriptural consolation thereby. The Bible nowhere encourages us to confess our sins to anyone or everyone. We are to confess sin in the circle in which it was committed. If we have sinned against God alone, we need to confess only to God. If our sin was also against some other individual or group, then it must be confessed to them too. But we are not to confess our sins to all our fellow-believers. Such confession of sin besides being quite unnecessary, may actually be a hindrance to others - by polluting their minds and perhaps encouraging them to sin similarly. We are to build up the Body of Christ. Make sure you do not tear it down. Scripture exhorts us to encourage and admonish one another, not to confess our sins to one another.

(The only reference in the New Testament to confessing our faults to one another (James 5:16) is obviously, as the context indicates, in relation to physical healing. Sickness is sometimes caused by unconfessed sin. And so James urges a full confession of sin in the presence of the elders, so that healing may not be delayed on that count. That command should never be taken out of its context and given a wider application that it was never meant to have. Remember that, 'a text taken out of context is a pretext').

A foolish honesty can harm the testimony of Christ and also give occasion for unnecessary gossip. I remember hearing a story of three deacons in a church who decided to have honest fellowship with each other. One said that his weakness was money and that he was stealing church funds. Another admitted that his weakness was sex and that he was living in sin with a certain lady in the church. The third said, "My weakness is gossiping; and I can hardly wait to leave this meeting!"

The Bible says,

Don't tell your secrets to a gossip unless you want them broadcast to the world

(Proverbs 20:19 - TLB).

There are unscrupulous people even in the church. Make sure you don't place either yourself or others in embarrassing situations by an unwise "honesty". When in doubt, as to how honest you should be with another in fellowship, it is better to err on the side of saying less rather than more.

When we stick to the teaching of God's Word, we are safe.

Then fourthly, we should watch our motives. "Honesty" with others that is really designed to enhance our reputation as humble saints is abominable. I have heard believers publicly confess certain "respectable sins" (such as "I am not praying enough", "I am not witnessing as much as I should", "I need to be more compassionate", ad nauseam) that left them looking more like saints than sinners. Of course, that was their (conscious or unconscious) intention - to obtain the approval of their fellow-believers for their "honesty." Beware of such "humble pride!"

Fifthly, we should bear in mind that confidences shared with us by others are a sacred trust, never to be betrayed. Such matters as people have told us concerning themselves or concerning others must never be shared even as "prayer requests." It is simply shocking to hear the amount of gossip that is passed around under the pious umbrella of "I am sharing this only for prayer."

Sixthly, we should avoid an unhealthy and carnal curiosity when someone shares his heart with us. We are warned in God's Word not to be busybody in other men's matters (1 Peter 4:15). We are not to go prying into people's affairs. Our aim in fellowship is to help another, not to discover all his faults and sins.

Finally, let us ask God to be between us in all our sharing and fellowship. His presence alone can shield us in our sharing. If Christ the Head is not in between us, our fellowship can degenerate into a carnal exercise that falls short of God's purpose.

True Christian fellowship involves each member encouraging the other. Where this is practiced, the bonds of fellowship are sweetened and strengthened.

Admonishing Others

Faithfulness to our fellow-members in the Body demands that we admonish and correct them in love when we see them going astray. True love could never sit back in silent complacency, watching a brother about to go over a cliff.

The Bible says, "Don't hate your brother. Rebuke anyone who sins; don't let him get away with it or you will be equally guilty" (Leviticus 19:18 - TLB).

The Bible does not ask us to go around pointing out everyone's faults to them. We can only correct those with whom we have already established a bond of fellowship; otherwise our reproof may be misunderstood and do more harm than good.

We should certainly avoid correcting a person's faults, if we have never praised him for his virtues. Expressed appreciation is the best background against which to show a person his faults. We have already seen how Paul followed this pattern when writing to the Christians at Corinth.

We should likewise refrain from offering correction to one who we know will patently reject it. The Bible says,

If you rebuke a mocker, you will only get a smart report; yes, he will snarl at you. So don't bother with him; he will only hate you for trying to help him. But a wise man, when rebuked, will love you all the more (Proverbs 9:7, 8 - TLB).

Needless to say, we should never offer correction to anyone if we ourselves are unwilling to receive it from others.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when we are to correct our brethren. Jesus said, "Rebuke your brother if he sins, and forgive him if he is sorry" (Luke 17:3 - TLB). Correcting our brother is as sacred a responsibility as forgiving him. We are to neglect neither.

In Matthew 18:15-34, Jesus speaks at length on both these subjects - correction and forgiveness. On correction, He says,

If a brother sins against you, go to him privately and confront him with his fault. If he listens and confesses it, you have won back a brother. But if not, then take one or two others with you and go back to him again, proving everything you say by these witnesses. If he still refuses to listen, then take your case to the church, and if the church's verdict favours you, but he won't accept it, then the church should excommunicate him (Matthew 18:15-17 - TLB).

"Open rebuke is better than hidden love." And you will find that "in the end, people appreciate frankness more than flattery", for "flattery is a form of hatred and wounds cruelly" (Proverbs 27:5; 28:23; 26:28 - TLB).

We need to be cautious however, about the spirit in which we offer correction to our fellow-believers. We are not called to be "self-constituted censors of others", lest we be judged by God with greater severity (James 3:1 - Amplified). We are not here to tell other people how they should be organising their homes, or what standard of living they should maintain. Because of our carnal natures, many of us are "Nosy Parkers." Some are turned away from the Lord because of self-appointed "prophets" who think they are called to set others straight!

Our calling is to build up the Body of Christ. Any correction that we offer anyone must be with this aim. If it is not, then we can do far more good by remaining silent.

We must make sure that our facts are correct, giving others the benefit of the doubt in every possible way. Having done that, we have the responsibility to obey the exhortation which says,

If a Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help him back on to the right path, remembering that next time it might be one of you who is in the wrong. Share each other's troubles and problems, and so obey our Lord's command. If anyone thinks he is too great to stoop to this, he is fooling himself. He is really a nobody (Galatians 6:1-3 - TLB).

This command is directed not to all believers but to those who are "godly" or "spiritual" (verse 1). The spiritual man is the one who has first removed the logs from his own eyes, before he takes a step to remove the speck he finds in his brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5). The spiritual man is also the one who is humble enough to recognise that he himself is capable of falling into the same sin that his brother has fallen into (Galatians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 10:12).

Further, a prospective "speck remover" must be gentle as well as spiritual. For, after all, removing a speck from someone's eye is a delicate business: harsh, rough treatment may drive the speck further into the eye and thus do more harm than good.

The spiritual man is also one who will speak to another faithfully only after prayer has given him the right attitude, so that he feels far more hurt by his brother's fall than his brother will be hurt by his rebuke. This is what it means "to share each other's problems" (Galatians 6:2).

The spiritual man is one controlled by the Holy Spirit - for that is the meaning of the word "Spiritual." This implies that he offers correction only when he receives the inner witness of the Spirit urging him to do so. For, as the Bible says,

there is a right time for everything.... time to be quiet and a time to speak up (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7 - TLB).

We need to be in close touch with the Head, if we are to know the best time to approach another member of the Body with a word of correction. Only those who are in close touch with the Head should undertake such a ministry.

Correction is a sacred responsibility that we have to each other, as members of Christ's Body. Jesus said (in Matthew 7:5) that after we remove the log from our eye, we have the responsibility to go to our brother to remove the speck from his eye. We are not to sit back doing nothing after cleaning up our own eye. Neither are we to go to our brother merely to point out the speck in his eye. Our responsibility is to help him get rid of it. This means that we are to stand alongside him and cooperate in the removal of the speck.

Receiving Encouragement

Fellowship, as we have repeatedly seen, is a two-way matter. Every part of the human body needs to receive assistance from, as well as give assistance to, the other parts of the body. So too in the Body of Christ.

We must be humble enough to acknowledge our need of encouragement from others. It is a proud spirit that professes to be able to carry on without any encouragement from anyone. If we are honest, we must acknowledge that we are able to live and work much better when encouraged. Each of us needs encouragement.

Consider the attitude of the Apostle Paul, when writing to the young Christians at Rome: "I long to visit you", he says, "so that I can impart to you the faith that will help your church grow strong in the Lord. Then, too, I need your help, for I want not only to share my faith with you but to be encouraged by yours: each of

us will be a blessing to the other" (Romans 1:11, 12 - TLB).

There we have a clear example of how the members of the Body are to function towards each other. Even the great Apostle, despite all his experience and his maturity, recognised his need to receive help and encouragement from the young Christians at Rome.

We too need one another's help and encouragement.

Receiving Admonition

We must also be humble enough to receive admonition from others. All of us have faults. What is worse, all of us have 'blind spots', so that we are not able to see some of our faults as clearly as others can see them.

This is where other members of the Body can help us - if we are willing to receive their help. If, however, they sense a proud, unteachable spirit in us, they may never come and tell us what they see, and we alone shall be the losers.

Paul was faithful enough to rebuke Peter, when he once saw the latter compromising, and Peter, in turn, was humble enough to accept Paul's rebuke, for he saw that Paul was right. The result was that others were blessed too and the Body of Christ was built up (Galatians 2:11-16). What loss might have been incurred, if Paul had kept silent or if Peter had been too proud (as the senior apostle) to receive the word of correction!

Are we accessible and open to those who may have a word of reproof for us? Or do we indicate to others by our attitude that we do not want any criticism? If other members of the Body find it difficult to approach us with advice, it is more than likely that even Christ the Head may be finding it difficult to get through to us.

One of the clearest tests of our spiritual condition is our attitude to criticism.

Here is what the Bible says on this theme:

It is better to be criticised by a wise man than to be praised by a fool!....nyone willing to be corrected is on the pathway to lifeTo learn, you must want to be taught. To refuse reproof is stupidIf you refuse criticism you will end in poverty and disgrace; if you accept criticism you are on the road to fameIf you profit from constructive criticism you will be elected to the wise men's hall of fame. But to reject criticism is to harm yourself and your own best interestsThe wise man learns by listeningDon't refuse to accept criticism; get all the help you canWounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy" (Ecclesiastes 7:5; Proverbs 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:31, 32; 21:11; 23:12; 25:12; 27:6 - TLB).

The Body of Christ will be built up, as each member fulfils his responsibility in giving and receiving.

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