The Ministry of Encouragement

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Being joined to Jesus Christ means that we are joined to other believers, and being united to other believers means that we have certain responsibilities to them. One of these is to minister encouragement. The writer of Hebrews commands us,

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

Too little is said about this duty. What is encouragement? How can we define it? The New Testament uses the verb *parakaleo*, and the noun *paraklesis*, to set this duty before us. The NASB most often translates the word 'encourage', but sometimes as 'comfort' or 'exhort'. How then can we define encouragement? Let me define it in this manner — to encourage is to communicate truth to another believer with the intent to minister comfort and/or exhortation according to that believer's need. If a believer is experiencing trial or difficulty, then comfort will be the predominant note of the encouragement. If a believer is passing through a time of carelessness or spiritual slothfulness, then exhortation will be the predominant note of the encouragement. Or it may be that a believer will stand in need of exhortation and comfort. Seasons of trial and difficulty can also be times of spiritual carelessness. Sometimes discouragement and carelessness go hand in hand, and so comfort and exhortation are needed simultaneously in the life of a believer.

The Word of God not only tells us to encourage, but also shows us how to encourage through the example of others. There are many examples of this in the Bible. One is found in 1 Samuel 23. David was the young man who was being greatly used by God, and Saul was very fond of him until one day some women started chanting, *'Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands'.* Suddenly, Saul did not have the same affection for David. David had to flee from Saul as the angry, envious king tried to take his life.

> Now David became aware that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God. Thus he said to him, "Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father shall not find you and you will be over Israel and I will be next to you; and Saul my father knows that also". So the two of them made a covenant before the Lord; and David stayed at Horesh while Jonathan went to his house.

Jonathan encouraged David in God. The New International Version reads, 'And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and *helped him to find strength in God'*. That is the

essence of encouragement — he helped him find strength in God.

Another Old Testament example in the Book of Esther illustrates the idea of exhortation. Mordecai had learned of Haman's plot to kill all the Jews and he sent word to Esther that she must speak to the king on behalf of her people. Out of fear she hesitated, but Mordecai said:

> Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?*Esther 4:12*

This is powerful exhortation: *'Esther, how do you know that this is not the very reason that God has placed you where you now are? He has put you in this position so that you could speak to the king for your people's deliverance'.* And Esther responded to that exhortation saying, *'I will go, and if I perish, I perish.'*

One other notable example of the ministry of encouragement is found in 2 Corinthians 5:5. *'For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had not rest, but we were afflicted on every side; conflicts without, fears within'.* Here was a man who was troubled, buffeted and tried. But note what he says:

> But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.*2 Corinthians 7:6-7*

Paul was troubled; he was being tried and tested, but he says *'We were comforted by the coming of Titus who had been comforted by his time with you. You had comforted him and he was able to comfort and encourage us.'*

In the light of these examples we can now suggest some basic observations about the ministry of encouragement.

1. All Believers Need Encouragement and All Believers are to Give Encouragement.

Whether the encouragement comes in the form of comfort or exhortation, we all stand in need of it. We all have times of trial and stress and fear when we need to be comforted. All of us can be careless in the most elementary duties of the Christian experience and we need to be exhorted. We all need this ministry, and likewise we are all to engage in this ministry of encouragement. The command that is given in Hebrews 3 applies to all of us, 'Encourage *one another* day after day.'

Some believers are given a specific and special gift of encouragement or exhortation. Romans 12:8 lists exhortation as a spiritual gift. It is a special, specific ability that the Spirit of God gives to some people in the body of Christ. It is also true that the ministry of encouragement or exhortation is one of the prime obligations of those men who are set apart to the ministry of the Word of God: *'Preach the Word, be instant in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction'* (2 Timothy 4:2). But all of us to some degree are to be engaged in the ministry of encouragement! *'Encourage one another and build up one another, just as also you are doing'* (1 Thessalonians 5:11). To give and to receive encouragement is rooted in the fact that we are members one of another, in the fact that we need each other and cannot do without each other.

2. Encouragement is a Spiritual Ministry.

It is a ministry which is related to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In fact the word that is translated comfort, exhort, encourage in the New Testament is also used as a title of the Holy Spirit. He is called the Comforter, the Paracklete.

'The Church was walking in the comfort of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 9:31). To encourage is not simply to exercise a natural ability to be kind or sympathetic. Someone who has a natural tendency towards sympathy and kindness may be especially gifted of God to exercise the ministry of encouragement. It would be very wrong to belittle these natural characteristics. But the ministry of encouragement involves more than being naturally a sensitive, sympathetic person. Furthermore, to encourage is not to flatter. The flatterer really has his own interests in view. The encourager has the interests of the other person in view. Nor is encouragement just cheering up somebody by saying: 'Come on, cheer up. Think positively. Look on the bright side of things. Everything's going to turn out right. Come on, cheer up'. That is not the spiritual ministry of encouragement. We need the Spirit's power for this work!

3. The Ministry of Encouragement must Involve Verbal Communication.

We can give and receive bits of encouragement without words being spoken. A tender smile and a nod of the head from the right person at the right time can give encouragement. Sometimes the quiet and silent example of certain people may result in our being encouraged. But for the most part, this ministry must involve words — it must involve speaking, as Scripture makes clear. We do not for example read, in Acts 15:32, 'And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren *by their example'*. No! They encouraged and strengthened the brethren with *'a lengthy message'*. They spoke. They said things. They communicated thoughts through words.

The importance of verbal communication is underlined by the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:18. The believers in Thessalonica were troubled about the future experience of their brethren who had died prior to the Lord's return. Paul tells them that those who have died in Christ will rise and, with the living, meet the Lord in the air at his return. He closes the paragraph in verse 18 by saying, 'Therefore, comfort one another *with these words*'. The apostle says, *'You are in need of comfort. You need to encourage one another. I have given you truth. Now take these words, and communicate to one another so that you can be comforted'*. If we are going to be encouragers, we must use our tongues. We must speak! That means we may need to pray that God will help us overcome a carnal shyness — a shyness which is characteristic of our lives because we are afraid that what we say will not come out the right way. We need to pray, 'Lord, help me to mortify my pride that makes me afraid of saying something the wrong way'. How often have others been deprived of needed blessing because we failed to speak up? How often someone has been deprived of a blessing because we did not say, 'I appreciated what you did. That was a blessing to me'. Have others missed the blessing of needed exhortation because we failed to say in love, 'My friend, I'm concerned about an area of your life that seems to be lacking'? Encouragement involves the use of words!

4. The Ministry of Encouragement is Linked to our Continuance and Progress in the Faith.

When Paul returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, his ministry was one of *'strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith'* (Acts 14:2-22).

The concern of Hebrews 3:13 is our continuance in the faith, the fact that we must go on cleaving to Christ. We must hold fast the beginning of our assurance unto the end. We must persevere. How are we to do this? Our encouraging of one another is one of the means God has ordained for our perseverance: *'not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, encouraging one another as you see the day approaching'* (Hebrews 10:25). There is much more at stake in this matter of encouragement than our emotional contentment — much more at stake than our psychological comfort. Our spiritual safety is involved. Mutual encouragement is one of God's means to keep us in the way of obedience and holiness. We need the sanctifying pressure of one another. Some of the influences of the Holy Spirit that we need are not communicated to us immediately, but through other members of Christ's body. We cannot exists spiritually without each other. The Bible knows nothing of private sanctification apart from the ministry of the body. God has linked our spiritual safety to the ministry of others to us.

It is a painful thing to see people depart from the Lord, whether their departure be temporary or permanent. How many of those people who have departed from the Lord could have been

helped or rescued by the right word being spoken at the right time?

What are *The qualifications for most effectively carrying out this duty*? All believers are commanded to encourage their fellows, but not all of us are able to do this with equal effectiveness. What are the things which make us like Barnabas — a *'son of encouragement'*?

1. *There must be a deep personal concern for the things of Christ and the welfare of souls.* To encourage effectively, a person must be one whose greatest concern in life is to know and to please Jesus Christ. The person whose Christianity is little more than a religious garb that he pulls out on Sunday cannot effectively carry out this duty. If the things of Christ and the Word are not paramount to you, then you will have no success in this ministry of encouragement.

2. *The second qualification is personal experience of comfort. 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God'* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). God gives us comfort in our affliction so that we can take the comfort that God gives us and impart that to other people. It may be a great help to someone in need to be able to say: 'Yes, I know what you're going through. I've been there, and the Lord brought me through the trial. I know what you're talking about and God brought me through the trial. The Lord gave me grace and strength. He delivered me out of that affliction. God is able to do the same thing for you' (cf. 2 Timothy 3:10-11).

   That is real encouragement. It may well be that this is God's purpose in our own trials. We ask: 'Why, Lord? How long, Lord? Why me, Lord?' One of the reasons God may be taking you through trials is so that later you will be able to look at someone and say, 'I know what you're talking about. I know how badly it hurts'. God is making you an effective encourager.

3. *The third qualification is being an example in those matters about which we exhort*. When encouragement takes the form of exhortation, our own lives must exemplify our own exhortations.

   Barnabas was an effective encourager. Acts 11:23 relates his ministry of encouragement to the believers in Antioch. He was effective and powerful in exhorting and encouraging. Why? Because *'he was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit'* (Acts 11:24). John Owen, in his Commentary on Hebrews 3, says, *'Exhortation is nothing but an encouragement given unto others to walk with and after us in the ways of God and the gospel'*. What does it mean to exhort? Does it mean to stand back with pointed finger saying, 'You ought to do this'. No! Exhortation is saying, 'Follow me. Come on, brother!' Elders, teachers and deacons, how can you exhort people if you are not an example to them? If you have no prayer life, how can you say to someone, 'Brother, how is your prayer life?' If you do not love the Word of God and read and meditate upon it, how can you exhort your children to love the Word? Exhortation without example is hypocrisy.

4. The fourth qualification for effective encouragement is *knowledge of the Word*: *'Concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another'* (Romans 15:14). The order in the verse is important. You are filled with knowledge, and thus able also to admonish one another. There must be knowledge of the Word to exhort and encourage effectively.

   To quote Owen again, *'Those then who undertake this duty must be sure to have a word of truth for their warrant, that those who are exhorted may hear Christ speaking in it. For whatever influence other words or reasonings may have on their affections, their consciences will be unconcerned in them. And this should not only be virtually included in what is spoken, but also formally expressed that it may put forth its authority immediately and directly'*.

   In other words, if we are going to exhort someone, we need to be able to show them that our exhortation is completely based on God's Word. Owen goes on to say, *'Those exhortations which are not formally spirited or enlivened by an express word of Scripture, are languid weak and vain'*. Our exhortations have to be 'spirited' with the Scripture. Is your knowledge of the Word severely limited? Then you will be limited in exercising this ministry. Nevertheless we must all do what we can. If you are young in the faith, you can at least take an elder by the hand and say, 'I appreciate your ministry in our midst. I thank God for you. I'm praying for you'. Do what you can and keep learning the Word so that you can be yet more effective.

Finally, we require some practical directives for carrying out this duty and ministry of encouragement.

1. Seek to know if you have the spiritual gift of encouragement

Are there indications that God has especially equipped you to minister comfort and exhortation? If so, then focus major concern and effort on doing these things. Possession of the gift magnifies your obligation to perform the duty.

2. Be diligent to nurture your own soul for the sake of others

Why should you be diligent to pursue holiness? For your own sake? Of course; but you should diligently seek holiness for the sake of others also. A troubled soul may need a word from you. How tragic if you are not prepared to give it!

3. Make use of the opportunity you have

Take time to make a telephone call to that fellow believer who you know is now discouraged. Pray for boldness to speak a word to that one who may be starting to stray from the fold.

May God by his Spirit so work in us that it can be said that we are, like those in Rome, *'able also to admonish one another.'*