The Surprising Ministry of Encouragement

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> *Encourage one another.* (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Does encouragement seem to you a good, but small, thing?

To me, it's huge. I want to explain why I think this way, and I'd like to persuade you to join me. I have never met anyone suffering from too much encouragement in Christ. Have you?

I think about the ministry of encouragement a lot, but not as much as I should. My friend Murray Harris, the New Testament scholar, said to me once, "Encouragement is one of the most important ministries in the church of the New Testament." Our biblical authenticity is at stake here — whether we are overflowingly encouraging to one another.

Encouragement is what *the gospel* feels like as it moves from one believer to another. The ministry of encouragement, therefore, isn't optional or just for people with a knack for it. Real encouragement has authority over us all. It deserves nothing less than to set the predominant tone of our churches, our homes, our ministries. So, let's think it through. And then, let's get after it.

What Is Encouragement?

The New Testament verb translated *encourage* can also mean "to comfort, cheer up, console, speak in a friendly manner." Throughout, encouragement is about the life-giving power of our shared beliefs and our shared life in the Lord.

Jesus used the noun form of this verb when, in John 14:26, he called the Holy Spirit our "Helper" — that is, our encourager as an "empowering presence" among us (*John*, 260). J.B. Phillips paraphrased this title of the Holy Spirit as "someone to stand by you."

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So, we're already seeing what our ministry of encouragement can look like: standing with one another, bringing a life-giving presence to one another. That's a lot more than saying hi as we walk from the parking lot into the church building on a Sunday morning. Real encouragement is one way we experience the Holy Spirit together. It's how we experience real community together. And this kind of community is not life-depleting but life-enriching, not guarded and aloof but all-in and involved, not scrutinizing and criticizing but affirming and strengthening.

Learning to One Another

The “one another” commands of the New Testament paint a picture of the beauty of human relationships. These *one anothers* include not only “encourage one another” but also “love one another” (John 13:34–35), “welcome one another” (Romans 15:7), “confess your sins to one another” (James 5:16), and more. It’s a total way of enjoying Christ together. Who wouldn’t love to jump in? At the same time, have we noticed the “one anothers” that do *not* appear in Scripture but sometimes appear among us? For example, “scold one another,” “humble one another,” “pressure one another,” for starters.

Why don’t we all back up and relearn how to live together in Christ? And is there a better starting place than “encourage one another”? The New Testament puts encouragement at the very foundation of real Christianity: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ . . .” (Philippians 2:1).

But stepping out into new relational patterns is risky — with risks worth taking! The ministry of encouragement frees us from safe neutrality, from keeping our cards close to our chest, from evaluating one another with cost-benefit calculations. Real encouragement sweeps us away into a glad-hearted, up-close engaging with one another. And when the encouragement we’re sharing back and forth gets so strong that it starts feeling awkward, then good! We’re finally getting somewhere.

Does Encouragement Matter?

As I said earlier, I’ve never met anyone who is overly encouraged in Christ. But sometimes I do see people — I’ve done this too! — hyped up with odd emphases and misguided priorities, even in “Christian” ways. The Bible warns us all, “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” (2 Timothy 2:23). But the ministry of encouragement comes with no warning label. We have not taken it too far. The Bible does not say, “Encourage one another — but be careful!”

When we aren’t actively cultivating a social environment of encouragement, what happens then? We start living on a relational starvation diet. What we experience then is not active injury but the lack of affirmation and good cheer we all need. We struggle on, but weakened. Maybe a less-than-energizing kind of Christianity feels normal to many of us. Maybe we can hardly imagine how wonderful it is to be frequently, strongly encouraged and encouraging.

I believe we Bible-believing, good-hearted, doctrinally serious Christians need to go back down to the very foundations. We need to rethink our total life together. We need to rebuild on the gospel itself.

Doctrine Without Culture

How does the gospel change us? At two levels. One, we start believing the truth of gospel doctrine. Two, we start experiencing the beauty of gospel culture. And that second change is not frosting on the cake. Gospel doctrine must never be allowed to hang in midair as a naked abstraction. Gospel doctrine *creates* gospel culture. Relationships of encouragement, among other precious spiritual realities, are what the doctrines are *for*.

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But if we preach the doctrine while neglecting the culture, we end up — well, the way some of us are now: orthodox and exhausted. Whatever swept over the Roman Empire in those early centuries, it wasn't that. What captivated the ancient world was a new kind of community. Those disadvantaged but confident Christians knew what they believed, and they knew the beauty their beliefs created, and the Roman world looked on with astonishment. Tertullian (ca. 160–220) reported what people were saying about Christians: "How they love one another! How they are ready to die for one another!"

Is anyone saying that about us today?

What Encouragement Is Not

Have we modern Christians settled for strong doctrine with an overlay of vague, predictable, blah niceness?

The one thing gospel encouragement *isn't* is average, mediocre, ignorable. The ministry of encouragement is surprising, captivating, energizing. It does require effort and intentionality, but it also leaves us feeling exhilarated and uplifted. Is that how we walk out of our churches on a typical Sunday: exhilarated and uplifted?

When the ministry of encouragement is allowed its actual authority, and it takes over and sets the tone in a community, that is how people *do* walk out of church. They leave thinking, "Man alive, I needed that! It makes me want to live for *Christ* this week! And I can't wait for next Sunday!" And the word for that is *revival*.

Practical Encouragement

So, how can we grow in encouraging one another?

One, let's continually **marinate together in the truths of the Bible**, "that through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). The Bible is the most

encouraging book in all the world. We'd be crazy not to capitalize on that! In our churches and small groups and homes, let's memorize the Bible, sing the Bible, pray the Bible, enjoy the Bible, and be encouraged together by all that Christ is for us, according to Scripture.

Two, let's pool together our personal faith, **sharing our stories of how Jesus is getting us through real life in this world**, "that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Romans 1:12). Every believer has a story to tell — not only how Jesus converted us in the past, but how Jesus is real to us right now. And the apostle Paul considered your faith as encouraging as his own: "both yours and mine."

The pressures of our post-everything world are bearing down on us. But let's not freak out. We have a more powerful way to face life today until the end comes: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, *but encouraging one another*, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24–25).