

Encouragement and Unity

I find myself repeatedly amazed at being included in what God the Creator is doing in the world. The staggering fact is that he has called us to be with him and to share in the plans he has to sum up everything in the Lord Jesus Christ. (See ***Ephesians 1:7-12, Colossians 1:13-14, Daniel 7:13,14,27***) Nothing we have done or ever could do has earned us that privilege – he has simply called us through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. All he needs is our response!

At the very first, Jesus started by ‘calling forward’ the ones he wanted for two main reasons: to be with him and for him to send out in word and in power (***Mark 3:13-15***). The initiative was his – and it still is!

His calling is right at the heart of the church. The Greek word ‘*ekklesia*’ (translated ‘church’) means simply ‘called out’. As Watchman Nee has wisely said, “There is no such thing as a call from God that is not a call ‘out of’ the world. The church is *ekklesia*. In the divine intention there is no *klesia* (‘calling’) which lacks the *ek* (‘out’).” (*Love Not The World*, ch 5).

We are called through the good news about Jesus (***2 Thessalonians 2:14***)

We are called by the grace of Christ (***Galatians 1:6***)

We are called out, into peace in one body (***Colossians 3:15***) (literal meaning)

There are **many** more references to the fact that we have been called! See ***1 Corinthians 1:24, Ephesians 4:1,4, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 1:9, Hebrews 9:15*** – just to get you started!

In ***2 Corinthians 5:20***, Paul talks about God making an appeal through those who proclaim the gospel, imploring people to come to him. The word translated ‘appeal’ is significant – it means ‘to call alongside’ and speaks volumes about the love of our Father.

That same word is used in ***Hebrews 3:13***, but here it is translated ‘encourage’. What better way to encourage but to ‘call alongside’ or get alongside each other? On what basis? The next verse tells us: We have become sharers in Christ together.

Having been individually ‘called out’ to him, we are now to call each other alongside, shoulder to shoulder, sharing our calling into fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ (**1 Corinthians 1:9**)

How often? Day by day! Why? To prevent any of us becoming hardened by ‘the deceitfulness of sin’. Like hard skin developing where perhaps a shoe rubs our foot. As the skin hardens, we gradually lose sensitivity and don’t feel as much as we did before.

In the previous verse (**Hebrews 3:12**) we have instructions to watch out for each other, so that none of us ‘turns away from the living God’ – in other words, drops out of – or rejects – the ongoing and real working relationship with our Father, which started when he called us. If we just start to learn to do this, church life will be radically changed!

The Lord Jesus gave us some of the ‘nuts and bolts’ of how to do this in **Matthew 5:23-24** and **Matthew 18:15-17**. Have a look at these passages yourself. Whether the fault is yours (and therefore the other person has something against you) or the fault is theirs and they need to be challenged, the responsibility to take action rests with whoever becomes aware of a problem. And the aim is always reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship, definitely NOT point-scoring or proving yourself right.

Instead of waiting to be challenged, how about admitting our own faults to each other, as **James 5:16** says, “so that you may be healed” – ?

On the positive side, we are told to consider (i.e. give some serious thought to) how we can ‘spur one another on toward love and good deeds’ and not to give up all meeting together but to encourage (‘call alongside’) each other – and all the more as we see the Day drawing near. (**Hebrews 10:25**)

There is a mutual responsibility here. This is not activities or meetings, nor a formula to be followed, but a passionate desire to see every one who has been called into fellowship with the Lord Jesus continue and grow more complete in him.

Paul shared this desire – deeply! In **Colossians 1:27-28** he writes that he proclaims ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’, “admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone

fully mature in Christ.” Every one, fully mature in Christ! Wow! Evidently Paul thought that was possible – he set his sights on it. Do we realise that our little bit of getting alongside can start to have the same effect?

Right at the heart of this sort of encouragement is the understanding that it is **essential** for each of us to keep up to date with the grace of God, not letting ourselves – or each other – become ‘hardened’ to sin and insensitive to the Holy Spirit. We may talk of spiritual warfare, but this is where it really counts – each one functioning properly in the Body of Christ and so causing corporate growth and effectiveness, ‘according to the proper working of each individual part.’ (**Ephesians 4:16**, NASB)

The instruction to ‘watch out’ for each other in **Hebrews 3** is taken a step further in **Hebrews 12:14-17**. In the context of encouragement, strengthening and healing, we are told to ‘Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord’ and then to take responsibility to make sure that no-one ‘falls short of the grace of God’.

This is not setting a standard of behaviour that we should reach and it doesn’t just mean making sure that people have had some experience of God’s grace at some time in the past. The word translated ‘falls short’ means ‘lag behind’, ‘miss out’. The question is ‘how up to date are you with the grace of God?’

Let me emphasise again: This is **not** some sort of ‘spirituality competition’ or ‘one-up-manship’. This is vital to our growth, individual and corporate, because the result of NOT keeping up to date with the grace of God is what the writer calls a ‘root of bitterness’, which has far-reaching and devastating effects. (**Deuteronomy 29:18** also talks about a root of bitterness, with dire consequences.)

We have probably all seen situations where fellowships have been split and bitterness has divided those who used to be in good relationships with each other in the Lord. Sadly, all too often, there is certainly ‘trouble’ and many people are ‘defiled’ by it. Many explanations can be offered, but this passage in **Hebrews 12** indicates the most likely root cause of bitter disunity: not keeping up to date with the grace of God.

How can we do that, keep up with the grace of God? The clue is back in **Hebrews 3** – ‘day by day’. Are we learning how to actively take hold of the grace of God to us in the Lord Jesus – on a daily basis? If we are, and perhaps today is not quite as fresh as it could be, then the ‘calling alongside’ of a brother or sister may be just what we need to get us back on track, once more actively taking to ourselves all that we have seen of ‘the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints’ (**Ephesians 1:18**). And, of course, as we learn to go on living in the benefit of what we have already seen of the grace of God, we make it possible for the Holy Spirit to show us more, to **lead us into** (not just ‘know about’) more truth as the Lord Jesus promised. (**John 16:13, 1 Corinthians 2:12**)

The ‘see to it’ here in **Hebrews 12:25** is different from the one in **ch. 3:12**. Here the word is ‘oversee’, ‘supervise’. The other one is simply ‘watch out’. Among all the people who read this letter when it was written, this word would have jumped out to one group. They were the ones in all the various local churches who were elders or overseers – taken from the same Greek word *episkopeo* – those who watched over the believers in fellowship and took special responsibility for their spiritual welfare. They had to be mature – at least a bit further ahead than the others – so that they could oversee properly. If you like, they needed to be a little ‘taller’ spiritually so that they could ‘look over’ their brothers and sisters

As they took responsibility – as much as they could – to make sure that every single member of the local church was keeping in an active and up to date working relationship with Father through all that was theirs by the grace of the Lord Jesus, they did the most important thing towards the life, stability, growth and unity of the church. A vital role, still needed today, and this verse shows that we are **all** called upon to exercise the same responsibility to some extent. Not something to be left just to the leaders!

“Encourage one another daily . . .”

Dave Taylor July 2016

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