

The Neglected Ministry of Exhortation

The apostles said much about exhortation and considered it to be of special importance in church life; indeed mutual exhortation was the basis of fellowshiping together. Sadly, we see very little of this ministry in modern churches of all stripes, indeed many people appear to have no idea what exhortation is. So a short paper explaining why it is important is called for.

What is an exhortation?

The Greek noun used is *paraklesis*;¹ which means: a calling near, a summons for help. It also means supplication, entreaty, admonition, encouragement, consolation, solace, comfort, refreshment, persuasive discourse or even a stirring address. In a nutshell it means, 'to cause someone to be encouraged or consoled by verbal or non-verbal methods'.²

This is clear enough, and an exhortation encourages and strengthens people, usually by what they say, but sometimes by good deeds. An exhorter is an encouraging person who seeks to strengthen others, usually by applying the truth of God's word in a timely and wise fashion.

This is the human equivalent in the church of what the Holy Spirit does to all believers. The Lord Jesus called him the *Paraclete* (Jn 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7), and this name ('comforter' KJV or 'helper' NKJV) is from the same word family.³ It is also used of Christ himself pleading our cause at the Father's right hand (1 Jn 2:1, 'advocate'), which is why the Lord said he would send 'another' comforter.

So we can see that there are a variety of actions included within the term 'exhortation' and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to help us is a good illustration of the many ways in which this gift is fulfilled.

- The Holy Spirit is our COMFORTER, who comes alongside us when we are weak and in pain.
- He is an ADVOCATE on our behalf praying for us and in us.
- He is a STIMULATOR, egging us on to love and good works.
- He is an ADMONISHER, warning and upbraiding us when we have sinned.
- He is an ENCOURAGER, helping us to lift our heads up when we are weak.
- He is a PROVOCATION, challenging us to do what we say and correct that which is out of joint.
- He is our CONSOLATION, bringing sympathy and encouragement when we are at our wits end or anxious.
- He is our COUNSELLOR who brings wisdom and true advice.
- He is our CONVICTION, able to pinpoint our sins with spotlight clarity and demand repentance.

The Spirit is thus a model for how we can be exhorters in the church. An exhortation is not merely giving a few blessed thoughts for two minutes and sitting down again; it is a multi-faceted ministry that seeks the good in others and is expressed in many ways. Two good exhorters may utilise very different types of ministry, but both will be essentially focused upon the truth of God's word and a motivation to do good to others.

¹ **para,klhsij** Strong's 3874 from 3870. The verb, 'to exhort' is taken from the Greek words *paraineo* (to speak near or advise, warn) or *protrepo* (to turn forward, urge, encourage).

² From Luow-Nida, Friberg and Expanded Thayer Lexica; Vines Exp. Dict.

³ **para,klhtoj** parakletos, Strong's 3875 meaning: someone summoned, called to one's side, especially called to one's aid or one who pleads another's cause before a judge.

At this point it is useful to have an overview of the scope of exhortation in scripture.

Who are spoken of as exhorters?

- Prophets; prophetic ministry is an exhortation (1 Cor 14:3, Acts 15:32)
- Titus (2 Cor 8:17)
- Paul (Acts 14:22, 18:27; 2 Cor 9:5; 1 Thess 2:3, 11, 4:1, 5:14; 2 Thess 3:12; 1 Tim 2:1)
- Solomon (Heb 12:5)
- John the Baptist (Lk 3:18)
- Peter (Acts 2:40; 1 Pt 5:1, 12)
- God (Jer 11:7)
- Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32)
- Jude (Jude 1:3)
- Christ (as a Paraclete)
- The Holy Spirit (as another Paraclete)

What Bible books are called exhortations?

- The Book of Hebrews (Heb 13:22) - called a brief exhortation!
- The First Letter of Peter (1 Pt 5:12) - called a brief exhortation!
- The Book of Jude (Jude 1:3)

Who are commanded to be exhorters?

- All members of the church (Heb 3:13, 10:25)
- Those with the gift of exhortation (Rm 12:8)
- Timothy (and thus all pastors, 1 Tim 4:13, 5:1, 6:2; 2 Tim 4:2)
- Elders (Titus 1:9)
- Titus (Titus 2:6, 9, 15)

The ministry of exhortation

We can thus see a little of the variety within this ministry.

Firstly, the written word of scripture is an exhortation, and the books of the Bible are immensely varied. Sometimes individual books are identified as an exhortation (such as Hebrews), at other times the declaration of God to his people are called an exhortation, and this includes his words recorded as scripture (Jer 11:7). Why is the Bible an exhortation? It is the heart of God expressed in words with a view to do man good. It is God coming alongside those who wish to hear him and seek to do his will.

Within this framework we can see that an extremely complex argument, such as the book of Hebrews is called a brief exhortation. Thus an exhortation is not necessarily a simple, concise statement. It may be an extended didactic lesson. Hebrews contains some very difficult passages that have stretched the minds of commentators for centuries, yet the writer calls it an exhortation because its purpose was to provoke believing Jews not to go back to legalism but to press on in Christ, despite persecution. The writer came alongside these Jews in their difficulties and taught, encouraged, admonished and provoked them. The result was a long letter of exhortation.

Some exhortations arise from the ascension ministries of the Lord. Clearly apostles exhort by the very nature of their job, and we see that Paul, Peter, Timothy and Titus are called exhorters. We also see that prophets, through their ministry of speaking for God to encourage his people, are also exhorters. Elders are to be exhorters, since the task of shepherding must include exhortation. Teachers will exhort by nature of their teaching, if

it is applied properly to the conscience of their audience. In one sense these ministries are 'professional' exhorters. We expect them to exhort. Part of the content of their speech will, of necessity, be exhortation. However, these exhortations will all differ. Apostolic exhortation is not necessarily like pastoral exhortation; one is to build and establish a church foundation, the other is to protect and care for the flock.

But all God's people are called to be exhorters

exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb 10:25)

The closer we get towards the end of all things, the more important the ministry of exhortation becomes. We need each other in these dark times and we support and help each other in our exhortations.

Admonition

Admonish one another. (Rm 15:14)

A good exhorter will give another person exactly what they require to be encouraged to move on at the right time. But this is where it becomes more difficult, because what a person sometimes needs is something he doesn't want. Also what a person needs may be something very difficult for the exhorter to do. For example, a person in sin or behaving in a way that leads to sin needs to be admonished. This is a part of exhortation, and yet it is very rarely done because it requires courage and tact to be the exhorter, as well as a willingness to listen on the part of the exhorted.

Admonition is frequently mentioned by the apostles, as it is a crucial ministry in the church, yet it is so rarely evidenced as it is a difficult thing to do. Even so, if the church fails to fulfil this ministry, people will suffer. Warning is as much a part of exhortation as encouraging.

- *Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.* (Rm 15:14)
- *And we urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.* (1 Thess 5:12)
- *Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother.* (2 Thess 3:15)
- *Admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children.* (Titus 2:4)

As a child grows up, it is vital that warnings occur daily. Without warnings the child has no idea of what is dangerous. Warnings are good for us. Without warning signs on roads there would be many accidents. Warnings are not restrictions to annoy us, but guidance to protect us. Admonitions are warnings; advice to bring us to a correct frame of mind. Some experiences enable us to grow without warnings, just as a child falling over learns to balance his frame. However, some experiences don't teach us anything, they just kill us. A child putting a wet finger into an electrical appliance is likely to die. Thus warnings are vital to protect and enhance life. This is equally true in church life. Admonishing is thus a crucial ministry, especially the good advice given by older folk to younger.

Comfort

Comfort each other and edify one another ... comfort the fainthearted (1 Thess 5: 11, 14)

God is the God of comfort (Rm 15:5; 2 Cor 1:3); when his prophets speak, their ministry is, **edification and exhortation and comfort to men** (1 Cor 14:3). As God helps us in our troubles, so we are thus prepared to bring comfort to those who are afflicted (2 Cor 1:4). No grace is wasted. As we receive grace in our tribulation, we then use that grace to help others in similar trouble. The very act of helping others, through this comforting exhortation, actually brings comfort to us as well (2 Cor 7:13). It is no surprise that the Greek word for 'comfort' is often *parakaleo*, from the same word family as 'exhortation'.

The application of truth through exhortations brings comfort, or solace, to our hearts (Eph 6:22), so that the more we learn about truth, the more settled and composed we become, able to withstand greater temptation and trial. Perhaps the greatest comfort is the hope that Jesus will soon return and take us to be with him forever (1 Thess 4:17-18). All our trials need to be viewed on the basis that this life is short and the struggles we endure are a slight momentary affliction when compared to the joy and bliss of eternal life in fellowship with God.

Stimulation / Provocation

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works. (Heb 10:24)

The apostles stirred up the Lord's people for various reasons. Sometimes it was to stir up a gift which was dormant (2 Tim 1:6), at other times to stir up godliness (2 Pt 1:13), or even to provoke giving (2 Cor 9:2). One of the purposes of exhortation is to provoke a reaction - to stimulate action, faith, love, good works or even repentance. A Biblical exhortation will always provoke a beneficial reaction in some way.

Encouragement

That all may learn and all may be encouraged. (1 Cor 14:31)

Most instances of the word family 'encourage' in the NT of the New King James Version are translations of the Greek verb *parakaleo* - 'to exhort'. Encouragement is a specific form of exhortation. The word in English means: to hearten, cheer, uplift, inspire, motivate, stir up, embolden, fortify, stiffen the resolve of, support or assist. It is a coming alongside to help that person be lifted up when they have no ability to lift themselves. It is very similar to consolation. An encourager stirs people and motivates them out of entropy.

Consolation

The consolation with which he was comforted in you. (2 Cor 7:7)

On every occasion that the New King James Version translates a NT word as 'consolation', it is the Greek word *paraklesis* in the original. In other words, consolation is really exhortation, but the translators feel that the context of the verse steers the meaning of *paraklesis* more towards consolation rather than other meanings of 'exhortation'.

This aspect of exhortation is one that brings solace, refreshment, sympathy, compassion, pity, commiseration, relief, moral support, reassurance, and soothing. It is a drawing alongside to help someone be supported during an emotional crisis, such as bereavement, illness or depression. There is great need of this today.

Counsel

Give *instruction* to a wise *man*, and he will be still wiser; teach a just *man*, and he will increase in learning. (Prov 9:9)

The original words that are translated as 'counsel' in the NT are applied to God and his counsels towards men. The NT usually uses the word 'exhortation' to imply counselling. But counselling is one of the key means that exhortation is applied in one-to-one situations.

Counselling is the impartation of sound advice, the application of Biblical doctrine to a given practical situation. It is where a wiser person helps a more inexperienced person come to terms with the truth as it applies to their current situation. A good example of this is when Prisca and Aquila took Apollos to one side and explained the Gospel to him more perfectly (Acts 18:26).

Strengthening

Strengthen your brethren. (Lk 22:32)

In one sense the result of all exhortation should be a strengthening in some form. It may be a strengthening of resolve to persevere, or a strengthening of understanding to believe better things, or a strengthening of morals to be more holy.

Strengthening means to establish a person more securely. If you strengthen a fence post, you establish it in concrete to stop it moving and add support to the whole structure. The souls of disciples need to be strengthened (Acts 14:22, 18:23), and this is done through exhortation. Churches also need to be strengthened (Acts 15:41) and this usually means being better established in the truth, as a result of exhortation. Exhortation that firms people up is strengthening and the exhortation brings greater awareness of Christ who strengthens us (Phil 4:13; 2 Tim 4:17).

Church life

Now all of these features of exhortation may be manifest in the fellowship life of modern Christians outside of church meetings. There is continual exhortation going on in homes as believers seek to help needy brethren in one situation or another. Very often exhorting takes places on the telephone, in letters and emails and over cups of tea. This is normal and good. However, the prime place of exhortation is in church gatherings, and this is a very different matter.

The key to Biblical gatherings is mutual edification, the building up of one another through the ministries and gifts that God bestows upon the church community. 1 Corinthians 12 explains this far better than I can, and in very simple terms. The gifts of the Spirit are given for the benefit of the body. [I will ignore the question of supernatural gifts here, God's point in 1 Corinthians 11-14 is clear, the body needs the gifts and ministries of all members, whether supernatural or ordinary.]

That mutual edification is the basis of fellowship life in the gathered church is seen in such passages as:

- Therefore let us pursue the things which *make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Rm 14:19).
- Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Cor 14:26).
- Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. (Rm 15:2)
- Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. (Eph 4:29)
- I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets that the church may receive edification. (1 Cor 14:5)
- Let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. (1 Cor 14:12)
- Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (Rm 14:19)
- Comfort each other and edify one another. (1 Thess 5:11)
- ... speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Eph 4:15-16).

We could develop this further but the point is surely made.

Since edification is building a person up, perhaps the key ministry in doing this is exhortation. The prime instrument in building someone up is the impartation of truth through effective exhortation. Since the truth makes us free, what can be better medicine than a Biblical exhortation? Consolation is applying truth in bereavement. Encouragement

is applying the truth to someone discouraged. Provocation is applying the truth to someone who needs to be shaken up and motivated. Counselling is applying the truth wisely to someone who needs sound advice. Strengthening is applying the truth to someone who is weak.

Now all these things should be taking place in the church meeting. Different folk should be ministering exhortations as the Spirit guides them, thus many people will be helped in several different ways. When the only person speaking is a pastor, who essentially preaches a sermon and little else, there is far less chance of the multiple needs in the congregation being met. This is why there are so many spiritually weak and needy people in the modern church. While an effective Biblical sermon may touch many folk, and this is all well and good, God's declared intention is that many people minister not just one.⁴

Then again, even in the sermon we frequently see great weakness. The writer to the Hebrews calls his letter a brief exhortation. Further, he specifically states that he has to write to these Jews as weak believers who need milk and not solid food. Yet this letter is difficult even for theologians to understand. Two passages are amongst the most difficult scriptures to explain in the whole Bible. Many believers simply have very little understanding about the arguments presented here - despite them being of critical importance today.

My point is that the apostle (Paul?) saw this argument as a normal, brief exhortation. It seems that exhortations in the early church could be long didactic arguments containing deep theology. In Troas Paul continued in such vein for hours, albeit not in a sermonic form but in dialogue.⁵ Exhortations may sometimes be brief and concise, but they can also be extended forms of teaching to achieve a specific objective to strengthen the listeners. Despite the many formal arguments in Hebrews, the single key point is to drive the readers to press on and not give up and become legalistic again. All the arguments demonstrate the pre-eminence of Christ and the need to stay faithful to him, rather than falling back to serve the shadow of Christ in Judaism.

Church speeches need to be effective exhortations. Teaching must be applied and made effective in practical relevance to the listeners.

The gathered church must be a place of constant, multiple exhortation. All ministry must be focused upon drawing alongside people and doing them good, encouraging them to love and good works in service to God and the brethren. While our worship is centred on Christ and focused upon breaking bread together, our ministry should be in various forms of mutual exhortation.

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⁴ For further information on this see my paper, *A Biblical Challenge To Current Unbiblical Church Practices* or my booklet, *Some Forgotten NT Truths about the Church*.

⁵ Acts 20:7. 'Preached' in the KJV is the Greek word *dialegomai*, meaning: to discourse, dialogue, debate; to converse, argue, discuss.

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Appendix One

All the occasions the words for exhortation are used in the Bible

[New King James Version]

Exhortation

Acts 13:15

And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, 'Men *and* brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.'

Rm 12:8

He who exhorts, in exhortation;

1 Cor 14:3

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

2 Cor 8:17

For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord.

1 Thess 2:3

For our exhortation *did not come* from error or uncleanness, nor *was it* in deceit.

1 Tim 4:13

Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

Heb 12:5

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: 'My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him.'

Heb 13:22

And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words.

Exhortations

Lk 3:18

And with many other exhortations he [John the Baptist] preached to the people.

Exhort

2 Cor 9:5

Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time,

1 Thess 4:1

Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more

1 Thess 5:14

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

2 Thess 3:12

Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.

1 Tim 2:1

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men,

1 Tim 5:1

Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort *him* as a father, younger men as brothers,

1 Tim 6:2

And those who have believing masters, let them not despise *them* because they are brethren, but rather serve *them* because those who are benefited are believers and beloved. Teach and exhort these things.

2 Tim 4:2

Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.

Titus 1:9

Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Titus 2:6

Likewise exhort the young men to be sober-minded,

Titus 2:9

Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all *things*, not answering back,

Titus 2:15

Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you.

Heb 3:13

... but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

1 Pt 5:1

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed.

Exhort

Rm 12:8

He who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Exhorted

Jer 11:7

For I earnestly exhorted your fathers in the day I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, until this day, rising early and exhorting, saying, "Obey My voice."

Acts 2:40

And with many other words he [Peter] testified and exhorted them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation.'

Acts 15:32

Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

1 Thess 2:11

As you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children,

Exhorting

Jer 11:7

For I earnestly exhorted your fathers in the day I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, until this day, rising early and exhorting, saying, 'Obey My voice.'

Acts 14:22

... strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'

Acts 18:27

And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace;

Heb 10:25

... not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

1 Pt 5:12

By Silvanus, our faithful brother as I consider him, I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God in which you stand.

Jude 1:3

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

Etymology

The development of the word 'exhortation'

A calling near for help

Encouragement

- consolation
- solace
- comfort
- refreshment
- supplication
- entreaty

Admonition

- provocation
- stimulation
- conviction
- counsel

Persuasive discourse

- Teaching
- Edification
- Argument

This is my attempt at explaining the fulness of the word and is not a professional semantic study.