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Exhortation

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

In these troubled times we need encouragement. But are we getting it? The New Testament is quite explicit in saying that encouragement is one of the duties of members of the body of Christ. Yet as I listen, I do not hear much encouragement. It seems that most of what we are getting these days is discouragement.

C.S. Lewis showed enormous insight in the *Screwtape Letters*. If you read the book, you remember that Screwtape instructed his nephew to use discouragement when all of his other weapons failed. Satan and his minions are still on track. They have really turned up the volume on discouragement these days. They are working overtime.

During the last fifteen years I have become aware of the importance of exhortation (encouragement) in my work with the people I counsel. Lately it seems that it is a major part of what I do.

One of my patients (we'll call her Mary) is a juvenile diabetic with all kinds of complications. Juvenile diabetes is the most difficult of all forms of this disease to treat. As a result, it profoundly shortens the life span of the person who has it. Because she had suffered from marked swings of her blood sugar, occasionally resulting in near coma or insulin shock, she developed many complications. She is nearly blind, has kidney failure and peripheral neuropathy. Peritoneal dialysis counteracts the effects of her kidney failure. As well she has had to have both of her hips replaced. Contributing to her problem was Bulimia. There was no way she could regulate her diabetes with that complication.

At the time I first examined her she was still bulimic, but depression was her major problem. It was so severe she didn't want to get out of bed until noon, and she had no interest in doing anything.

She came to me because a friend encouraged her to come. Ordinarily I would not have considered treating her, but after listening to her story, I accepted her. I did so because she was very depressed that was related to a severe attitude problem.

It took several visits to completely evaluate her psychologically and spiritually. My spiritual evaluation confirmed that Mary was a believer. She had accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her savior early in the course of her illness. She did not, however, enter into the Christian faith with joy. She was mad at God. She felt He had played a dirty trick on her by letting her be conceived with the heredity for diabetes. As well, He did not help her overcome her Bulimia. There were many more areas of conflict.

The first misbelief I had to deal with was that nothing could be done for her. Because of her hopelessness, she didn't want to live. Still, she didn't want to die.

Now I had long ago learned that I had to encourage (exhort) patients with chronic disease to believe that they could be victorious even when their life expectancy was

limited. The reality of her illness made it difficult to convince her that she could have hope for a long and full life.

With continuing effort I convinced her that we really do have a loving God, and that he was not responsible for her problems. I have to admit that it was difficult for me to sit week after week, and tell her that God loved her when she continued to have complications of her disease.

As my relationship with her grew, it was an easier task. I prayed that God would love her through me, and that she would develop a right view of Him. Persistence helped. Even though she has moments when she doubts, she now believes that He loves her. There are many other areas of Mary's life where exhortation has helped. She is no longer afraid to die. She handles the recurring complications of her illness with greater equanimity, and is far less depressed.

Mary is only one of the many people who need encouragement. There are many reasons why we have to exhort (encourage) those who are discouraged in this world. The following is a list of the many needs for exhortation. It is as complete as I can make it.

(1) Exhortation of the unregenerate or doubting regenerate person to believe is one of our most important tasks. The world is full of unbelievers and doubters. We are called to make disciples of them, but we cannot do so if we do not encourage them. Our tools are our witness and our knowledge of scripture and history. These two sources of knowledge make us persons who can defend the faith aggressively. This defense is called apologetics.

I did not know what apologetics were until I read a book entitled *Set Forth Your Case*, by Clark Pinnock. It opened my eyes to the need to be able to defend our faith in a positive way. It is not enough to be able to argue for Christianity, we also have to be able to demonstrate the fallacies in the arguments of our attackers. It does not matter if they are atheists or agnostics we have to be able to deal with them in an intelligent way. It is not often that we will convince a committed atheist or agnostic that we have the truth, but the uncommitted will listen, and be persuaded if they can see the truth in our message and the fallacies in theirs.

It is also important that we be able to persuade those who have accepted Christ as savior, but have not accepted all of the message, to realize the necessity of total commitment. There are too many **almost** Christians in the world. It is especially important that we strengthen the faith of those who suffer. Suffering is meaningless if a person does not have faith.

(2) There are many like Mary who have a distorted view of God. The need to look carefully at his attributes as they are revealed in Jesus and in the Word. Mary is just one of many who do not know God. When they really know him he looks altogether different. It is our job to teach them.

(3) In our exhortative efforts we must also encourage people to love. Christ's commandments are to love God, our neighbor, ourselves, one another and to show love by our actions. The very heart of Christianity is love. People will know we are Christians by our love. They will want to know God when they see his love manifest in us. They will truly believe when they experience His love. They will forgive when they know His love. They will even love their enemies. It behooves us to teach them about

love. Part of our exhortation is to convey to them the meaning of Christ's atoning love revealed in his sacrificial death on the cross.

(4) Next we have to exhort persons to absolutely surrender to God. In my experience there are very few persons who have or will absolutely surrender. Andrew Murray wrote that if a person really wanted all that God had for him, he or she had to be completely sold out. Jesus clearly defined what we are required to do. We must forget ourselves and be obedient to his teaching. We have to give up all we have. This means our belongings, our family, our status in society, our pride--everything. We cannot do this if we have not absolutely surrendered. Few of us have ever achieved it. In my Christian life I have only met two or three persons who have truly done so. It is a goal we should all aspire to, and we must exhort others to do so to the best of their ability.

Although we have mentioned Christ's commandments above, I must emphasize the importance of being obedient to our Lord's teaching. This is not a dutiful obedience. It is an obedience that arises out of our love for Him. If we are not obedient we quench or grieve the Holy Spirit. We cannot remain in his love if we are not obedient.

(5) Humility is one of the areas that we need to encourage. Real humility is to see ourselves through God's eyes. We are persons of infinite worth. We are his children, and as such have been made princes and princesses. We are children of the King.

Although humility is a gift of the Holy Spirit, is it something that we also have to cultivate. Our achievements in the world are not the result of our own efforts. In my own life, I have become aware of the role the Lord played in my success long before I ever became a Christian. I know that he was working to prepare me for my ministry even when I was a pagan.

If anyone would boast, let him boast of what the Lord has done (2 Cor. 10:17). We are then to exhort persons to humility, for pride is the greatest of the seven deadly sins.

(6) If we love someone we have to trust them. Christians have to be exhorted to trust God. How many times have I heard persons demur when they are asked to step out in faith and do something God has asked them to do. If I ask them why they can't be obedient and do it, they reply that they cannot trust God. They are not sure that he is there, and are even more dubious that he will provide them with the support and guidance they need.

A good example of trusting obedience occurred in the life of Ross Whetstone, a leader in evangelism in the Methodist Church. Ross stammered badly even after he went to college. Because he wanted to be an obedient Christian he, with a group of his colleagues, went out to publicly share his faith. He did not expect to be called on. Nevertheless, the leader did call on him. When he rose to speak, he spoke without stammering, and was never bothered by the problem again. He trusted the Lord to give him a witness, and he did.

(7) People like Mary have great difficulty in believing God's affirmation. The real proof of his love for us is the testimony of his Spirit joining to our spirit to declare that we are his children. Many Christians have never experience this event. If they haven't we need to exhort them to remain steadfast in prayer asking God to reveal himself. God will reveal himself over and over again if we ask him. These may be minor, i.e. fleeting

evidences of his Spirit, or they may be major. If he reveals it all, we will know how wide, long, high, deep and wide his love is. His love is something that we should all experience.

(8) Today, Christians need holy boldness. It is a time when we have to proclaim to the world around us the truth of the Gospel. We have been intimidated too long. The time has come to speak up in public. We cannot proclaim our message only in the safety of the church. The fish we want to catch are not in the church. A lost mankind needs to hear it. All believers need to be exhorted to speak wherever they go in the world.

(9) One of the most important exhortations is to call people to inspect themselves and recognize their sin. Our faith has always had prophets who confront us with our sin. John the Baptist confronted the people of his day. Jesus continued his confrontations. Others have confronted sin throughout the history of the church. Today there is little confrontation. Rarely do we hear a call to stop sinning. If we are to follow in the footsteps of our Master, we must encourage all men to confront their sin, confess it and repent.

Very frequently I have patients in acute panic, afraid their sins are going to be found out. Even though they know they have sinned, they are often reluctant to confront it, repent and pray for forgiveness. I am sometimes hardboiled in forcing them to confront it. Surprisingly, they rarely get angry.

We do, however, need to be merciful in our confrontations. Almost all unregenerate sinners are aware of their sin. Most of them have guilt about it. It is not our job to judge them. We must be merciful, and offer them salvation with its attendant forgiveness. They are free to accept or reject it. Do not condemn them if they reject it. Pray for them.

(10) One of our greatest sins is to believe the lies that liberals and humanists have taught us. We are taught these lies in our schools, our churches and in the media. Many of them have been translated into laws. There is no hope for us unless we inspect our belief systems, confront the lies we have learned, repudiate them and believe the truth. Jesus said that the word of God was truth. It is what we are to believe. Our exhortation is to call all men to believe so they may know the truth and be set free.

(11) Peter warned us to be watchful. Satan does prowl around like a roaring lion to see whom he can devour. Satan appeals to our human nature to lead us astray. As Christians we should be aware of his efforts to establish a stronghold in our minds from which he can lead us astray. We need to be warned about his techniques. We have to be taught ways to defend ourselves.

(12) We have to exhort Christians to resist temptation and not grow weary of doing good. An area in which our exhortations can be applied most effectively is against the folly of using drugs and alcohol and being sexually promiscuous. The alcoholic beverage industry constantly exhorts people to use alcohol, and drug pushers exhort children and youths to use drugs. Planned Parenthood encourages promiscuity. Since they exhort all to sin, why should we not unceasingly exhort them to remain or become abstinent.

(13) Keep on keeping on. This is an exhortation that applies to our prayer life,

continuation in the Word, resistance to the enemy and bearing our sicknesses and suffering. If we are in bondage we have to "keep on" in our effort to escape until freedom comes.

(14) It is said that the Bible is a guide to right living. The only problem is that most Christians do not read it. If they do, they do not live by it. It is necessary that we exhort one another to read it, and believe that it is worthy of obedience.

(15) One exhortation that is constant in the church is the plea for financial support to the institution. It is the only one that I have heard repeatedly during my Christian life. It is surprisingly ineffective. Only four or five percent of Christians tithe. They spend far more on recreation, alcohol and tobacco products, than they give to the church. Even so, in churches where the Spirit guides the church and its members, exhortations to give are not necessary.

In conclusion let me say that we have sinned in not proclaiming our faith as the Lord told us to do. We need to repent and be cleansed so that we can carry his message into the world. We need the support of our fellow believers. This support comes through exhortation, and the Means of Grace. Let's get on with our job.