

# ONE BODY IN CHRIST

## Zac Poonen

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### PROLOGUE

"Does my becoming a Christian", asked a new convert, "involve joining the church near my house, where people are so frequently quarrelling with each other?"

What answer shall we give to such a query?

Called to manifest the beauty of Divine Love to the world, many churches are instead hot-beds of internal politics and rivalry - caricatures of what Christ intended them to be. (Included are many evangelical churches that have all their doctrines right - except the doctrine of love!)

The clear witness of the Christian community is a fundamental necessity for the effective propagation of the gospel. Evangelicals are in danger of putting the cart before the horse, when evangelism is stressed and fellowship ignored.

An anemic church can never fulfill God's purposes.

Surely we need to set our own house in order first, before we can invite others to join our fellowship.

What can we do to rectify the dismal state of interpersonal relationships in the Christian community today?

The Word of God has an answer, if we care to listen....

## CHAPTER ONE

### ONE BODY - THE BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP

Despite man's advancement in many areas, human relationships continue to present problems all over the world. Business concerns and agencies spend huge sums employing personnel to promote harmony among workers.

Well, one might think it is understandable that self-centred, unconverted people find it difficult to get along with each other, but surely when people are born-again and have become new creatures in Christ, such problems can never arise. For, after all, when God is the center of one's life and service, what possible room can there be for the petty problems that besiege others?

Yet, sadly, no proof is needed of the fact that Christians fight and quarrel with each other, all over the world. Many are not even on speaking terms with some of their fellow-Christians; some cannot even stand the sight of certain other Christians. The Name of God continues to be disgraced in the world by the behaviour of professing believers.

Jesus said that the world would identify His disciples by their intense love for one another. This was - generally speaking - literally fulfilled in the first two centuries of the Christian era. The world looked at the Christians with amazement then, and exclaimed, "Behold how these Christians love one another!" Today the story is different and the world often says, "Behold how these Christians hate one another!"

Relationships are indeed most important. Gifts, talents, methods, techniques, programmes and finances are all secondary to people and to inter-personal relationships. The church can fulfill her God-ordained function as the light of the world only when there is true Christian fellowship among her members. Likewise, an individual believer can become a minister of life to others only when he himself has learned to live according to the law of love with his fellow-Christians.

#### **Two-dimensional fellowship**

The Bible plainly and repeatedly teaches that no Christian can have fellowship with God without fellowshipping with other believers. You cannot walk with God if you do not walk in love with your fellow-believer.

The cross on which Jesus died had two planks - a vertical one and a horizontal one: Jesus came to bring peace not only between man and God (vertically) but also between man and man (horizontally). The vertical and the horizontal relationships go hand in hand. You cannot have the former if you ignore the latter.

John, the apostle of love, has some very strong words to say on this matter. One of the evidences, he says, of genuine conversion is that a man begins to love his fellow-Christians. If a man does not have this love, it is a sure indication that his conversion is spurious and that he is heading for eternal death (1 John 3:14). Doctrinal correctness was not the only test that the apostles applied to ascertain where a man stood in relation to God.

Later on in the same letter, John says that if a man claims that he loves God while hating his brother, he is a liar. Mark that! The proper name for such a man is not "believer", but rather, "liar"! And John's logic is irresistible. He says a brother is visible whereas God is invisible. If you cannot love the visible, it is impossible to love the invisible. (1 John 4:20).

Now compare this with the experience of most "believers." Love for God is usually assessed in terms of busy activity in Christian work or in terms of rapturous feelings of delight experienced in a meeting. These can be most deceptive. I have come across believers who are out of fellowship with other Christians who testify nevertheless to "wonderful times of prayer" and to "amazing results in service."

How could they possibly be walking with God when they have not even made an effort to settle matters with other members of God's family against whom they have a grudge? Surely Satan has blinded their minds to the truth of Scripture!

#### **The price of broken fellowship**

Often we do not realise what we deprive ourselves of, when fellowship is broken with other believers. The Bible tells us that we can discover the breadth, length, depth and height of Christ's love and be filled with all the fullness of God only along "with all the saints" (Eph. 3:17-19). It is only as we know the reality of fellowship with the believers God places us with, that we shall be able to enter into an experiential understanding of the love of Christ and of the fullness of God.

The one who cuts himself off from any fellow-Christian, thereby deprives himself of the experience of Christ's love and grace which could have been his through that person. When we fail to live by the law of love, we rob ourselves of some of Christ's riches and some of God's fulness.

### **The Body of Christ**

Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians is centred around the great truth of believers being one Body in Christ. Christ is the Head of the church, and the church is His Body (Eph. 1:22,23). Each believer is a member of this Body.

This is not just a fact to be acknowledged intellectually but one that should affect our daily life.

The first half of the letter to the Ephesians deals with the doctrine of the Body of Christ. The second half of the letter deals with the practical outworking of this truth. And this is how the second half begins:

*"Therefore..... walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.....(for we are all parts of) one body" (Eph. 4:1-4).*

In other words, once a person has understood and "seen" this truth of the church being the Body of Christ, he should long to walk in humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love, unity and peace with his fellow-believers. When a Christian does not walk like that, it indicates that *he hasn't seen the Body of Christ*.

Such a person needs to go back to the first three chapters of Ephesians and say, "Lord, I'm blind to something here. Please teach me. Please open my eyes." For the truth of "the Body" is not one that we can grasp merely with our intellects. As Paul says, the eyes of our heart need to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit, if we are to know (Eph. 1:18,22,23).

To the church in Corinth, Paul wrote, "You are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Cor.12:27). True, the Christians in Corinth in the first century were only a small part of the worldwide, past, present and future group of believers that constitute the Body of Christ; but they were nevertheless to be a local expression of that Body in Corinth. This is the calling of every group of believers in every age and in every place. It is God's intention that every Christian fellowship, whether it be a church, organization or body of workers, be a visible expression to the world of the Body of Christ.

When Jesus Christ came to earth, He came in an earthly body. God showed Himself to man through that physical body of Christ. Without a physical body, Christ could not have accomplished what He did, and the world would not have known what God was like. A physical body was essential.

Now, consider what limitation there would have been in Christ's ministry on earth, if His body had paralyzed or uncoordinated limbs. If, for example, His legs, arms or tongue had been paralyzed, He could not have walked to the homes of sinners, or put His arms around lepers, or spoken the words of life. He could do all these and more, only because He had a strong, healthy body.

When Christ ascended to heaven, God gave Him another Body on earth to carry on His work - a Body of believers redeemed by His blood out of every nation and tribe and language. This Body of believers, indwelt by the same Holy Spirit Who dwelt in Christ on earth, was to continue the ministry which Christ, using His physical body, had begun. This is the calling of the church.

Do you see why Christ is limited on earth now? His new Body (the church) has limbs and organs that are either paralyzed through sin or uncoordinated through disunity.

Satan cannot attack the physical body of Christ today, but he can and does attack Christ's new Body. Satan (unlike many believers) realizes that Christ's work on earth can be limited by non-functioning or non-cooperating members in the church.

How desperately we need to pray for spiritual vision concerning the Body of Christ. It is indeed one of the greatest needs of the day. May God help us to see Christ as Head over His Body and each of us as members in it. Such a vision alone can make the church triumphant.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **GROWING IN LOVE**

The Body of Christ is built up and grows by the exercise of spiritual gifts and by love (Eph. 4:11,12 and 16). Gifts and love are both needed. Hence we find that wherever gifts are spoken of in the New Testament, the exercise of love is also simultaneously stressed (1 Cor. 12 (on gifts) and 13 (on love); Romans 12:4-8 (on gifts) and verses 9 and 10 (on love); 1 Peter 4:10,11 (on gifts) and verse 8 (on love)).

#### **Christ-like love**

Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment just before He went to the cross. They were to love one another as He had loved them (John 13:34). It is this last phrase that makes Jesus' command impossible to fulfill without God's grace.

What is the distinctive feature of the love of Christ? Surely, it is the cross on which He died for us. So when He tells me to love my brother as He loved me, it is a call to follow His example and to die to self in my relationship with my brother. Self-denial is to characterize my relationship with other members in Christ's Body. This and nothing less than this is true Christian love. When we are told that "we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16), it is not a reference to physical death, but to something far more difficult. It is easier to die once as a martyr than to lay down our self-life many times every day in our relationship with our fellow-believers. But it is to the latter that Jesus calls us.

Such sacrificial, unselfish love is the fundamental law of the body of Christ. One who does not carry the cross and choose the way of self-denial cannot fulfil his function in Christ's Body.

Why are we offended and irritated with other Christians? Surely, because Self is still on the throne of our lives. We consider ourselves so important, that we feel we must be respected and consulted by others. We feel that others must behave and order their affairs as *we* want them to. We expect others to be kind and considerate to us, to 'make much' of us and praise us. Such feelings and expectations are clear evidence of the fact that we know nothing of the cross experientially. Our lives are still dominated by selfishness and revolve exclusively around Self and its interests.

True Christian fellowship can never be experienced among believers, if the love of the cross is not made the fundamental rule in the conduct of their relationships. Apart from such love, whatever goes by the name "fellowship" will only be social friendship and not the true communion of the Body of Christ. Such social friendship exists in worldly clubs too. Sadly, many Christian churches and groups are no better than clubs!

The members of a Christian fellowship should be closely interlocked one with the other. God has not called us to be an assortment of dismembered limbs thrown together as in an anatomy laboratory, but to be united one with the other as parts of a living organism like the human body. But there is a price to be paid if this is to become a reality - the price of each member denying himself for the sake of others. Blessed indeed is that Christian group where all the members are willing to live by this rule.

What are some of the practical implications of living by the law of love?

### **Forgiving love**

Consider first, the area of mutual forgiveness. No one who denies himself can ever harbour bitterness or a grudge against another, or fail to forgive another human being. Resentment exists only in hearts where Self is still on the throne.

Jesus once told a parable of a servant who, though forgiven much by his master, could not forgive his fellow-servant a paltry debt. His master, on hearing this, handed over the unmerciful servant to the torturers to be punished. "So", said Jesus, "shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt.18:35). However one interprets being handed over to the torturers for punishment, that is exactly what Jesus said would happen to those who adopted an unforgiving attitude or even harboured an unforgiving spirit against any of his fellow-believers. Notice that Jesus emphasized that forgiveness must be from the heart. In other words, it must be wholehearted and not an external ritual. Telling someone that you forgive him is meaningless if there is still bitterness in your heart.

When we violate God's law of love, we hinder the working of the Body of Christ. But that is not all. We harm ourselves as well. Dr. S.I. McMillen, in *None of These Diseases*, says, "The moment I start hating a man, I become his slave. I cannot enjoy my work any more, because he even controls my thoughts. My resentment produces too many stress hormones in my body and I become fatigued after a few hours of work. The work I formerly enjoyed is now drudgery. Even vacations cease to give me pleasure. The man I hate hounds me wherever I go. I cannot escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind."

Hidden grudges and bitterness are ruining the effectiveness, and even the physical health of many Christians and Christian workers throughout the world today.

Jesus taught that we were to take the initiative in restoring fellowship, even where a brother feels (rightly or wrongly) that we have hurt him. "If you are standing....offering a sacrifice to God", said Jesus, "and suddenly remember that a friend has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar and go and apologize and be reconciled to him, *and then come and offer your sacrifice to God*" (Matt. 5:23, 24-TLB).

Likewise He said, "When you are praying, *first* forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins too" (Mark 11:25-TLB).

Jesus calls us in all situations to deny ourselves, swallow our pride, and "go the second mile" in seeking to restore fellowship wherever it has been broken. At times, despite our best efforts at reconciliation, a brother may adopt a hard, unforgiving attitude; but if we have made the effort we have discharged our responsibility before God.

Jesus' words make it clear that God cannot accept our worship or our service or anything else that we offer Him, if we have hurt another member of His body, and have made no effort towards reconciliation. I wonder at times, how many Christians take the words of Jesus seriously. Many treat God's commands lightly and thereby bring spiritual death into the Body of Christ.

"A further reason for forgiveness", Paul tells us, "is to keep from being outsmarted by Satan" (2 Cor.2:11-TLB).

### **What does he mean?**

If someone's conduct towards us is inspired by Satan, and we retaliate in like manner, we are serving Satan too. How foolish we are, if we are stung into serving Satan by someone else's bad conduct.

When people cursed and reviled Jesus on the cross, they were serving Satan. But Jesus served His Father and so could pray, "Father, forgive them."

So the question is not one of whether we are right and our bitterness justifiable, but rather this: Whom are we going to serve - Satan or God?

We are often most in danger when we know that *we are right* and the other party is wrong. For it is in such situations that we can become self-righteous Pharisees. We may be right concerning the issue, but wrong in our attitude - Satanic rather than Christ-like, proud rather than humble.

God delights in being merciful and all His children should have this quality in them. Hell is the only place in the universe where mercy is totally absent. And therefore a merciless attitude and an unforgiving spirit would only indicate that we have a little bit of Hell in our hearts.

Besides, we deprive ourselves of God's mercy when we fail to show mercy to others in their failings. The Bible says, "There will be no mercy to those who have shown no mercy" (Jas. 2:13). God treats us in the same way as we treat others.

To one who joyfully accepts the cross in his life, humbling himself and forgiving others is an easy step. Only those who persist in keeping Self enthroned find forgiveness difficult.

Showing mercy and forgiving others is only a first step. The Bible calls us to go even further and to cover our brother's fault (1 Pet. 4:8) "Love forgets mistakes" (Prov. 17:9-TLB), and so when we have forgiven a brother from our hearts, we should bury the matter completely. We should not tell others of his having failed and of our having forgiven him - for that would put him in a bad light. Our endeavour should be to place our fellow-believers in the best light possible.

Through such love the Body of Christ is built up.

### **Loyal love**

*"If you love someone, you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost" (1 Cor. 13:7-TLB).*

Loyalty involves not saying anything behind a person's back which one is not prepared to tell to his face. Backbiting is the pastime of cowards.

This does not mean that we are not to give an adverse report about a fellow-believer when asked for our opinion about him in a marriage proposal or by a prospective employer. In such situations, we must remember that our loyalty to God and to His work supersedes our loyalty to our fellow-believers, and commits us to truthfulness. But where truth permits, we should cover our brother's faults as much as possible.

### **Patient love**

*"Love is very patient. It is not irritable or touchy" (1 Cor. 13:4,5-TLB).*

It is easy to bear with the faults of others and to be patient with them when we are willing to deny ourselves. If we die to self, we cannot be irritated or offended by the conduct of others. We shall be delivered too from touchiness and impatience. A love that cannot bear patiently with the faults of others is merely sentimental and human. The love of Christ is of an altogether different quality.

The Bible commands us:

**"BE PATIENT WITH EACH OTHER, MAKING ALLOWANCE FOR EACH OTHER'S FAULTS BECAUSE OF YOUR LOVE"** (Eph. 4:2-TLB).

Here is a verse that should be written in bold letters before every church and Christian fellowship. Patience is one of the clearest evidences of the love of the cross.

We are all fallen human beings. When we see our own faults honestly, it is easier to be tolerant of the faults of others. Our impatience and irritability are usually a measure of our self-righteousness.

### **Unprejudiced love**

*"If you love someone, you will.....always expect the best of him" (1 Cor. 13:7-TLB).*

Because of the self-centredness of our natures, our evaluation of others is usually based on selective perception - that is, we see in others only what we want to see. If we detest a person, we see only his weaknesses and believe everything evil that we hear about him; and likewise, when we adore an individual, we see only what is good in him and believe everything good that we hear of him. We see people through "coloured glasses." Hence the phrase, "Love is blind"!

To give but one illustration of selective perception: Many of us have pre-conceived ideas about how people from certain communities and races behave. And when we hear a rumour or a scandal about one of them (which may be totally false), our prejudices are immediately reinforced, we believe the gossip without question and fellowship is destroyed.

To avoid such pitfalls, we should seek to rid ourselves of all pre-judgments (or prejudices) against communities or races or any other category of people. It is also a helpful discipline to remember the good points of those whom we do not naturally like, and to recognize the weaknesses of those whom we idolize. We must judge those we dislike with mercy, and those we admire with realism.

We should never judge others on the basis of hearsay, nor jump to conclusions on the basis of what we see. A person's behaviour may appear suspect. But there may be a good explanation for it. We should seek to put the best possible interpretation on the actions of others, at all times.

It was said of Jesus (in a prophetic reference), that He would not form a judgment by hearsay or even by appearance, but would seek to arrive at a righteous assessment of people (Isa. 11:3,4).

So must it be in the Body of Christ.

### **Respectful love**

Love places a high value on others.

When Self is on the throne of our lives, we tend to despise or ignore others. But when we bear the cross and die to self, we begin to respect, value and even delight in our fellow-believers.

What is our attitude to believers who are socially, intellectually, or spiritually inferior to us? Our answer will depend on whether we know the reality of Calvary love in our lives. The love of God was seen in Christ when He died to His position and to His superiority as God and came down and identified completely with fallen man. His love was neither patronizing nor condescending, neither should ours be.

But how often one member of the Body looks down on another because of racial, social, cultural or other differences. Such "Christians" (even if they are fundamentalists in doctrine) can never be instruments for building up the Body of Christ, for they have not understood the first principle of Christian service - the principle of 'incarnation'. The Word became flesh and dwelt among the people of the world as one of them. As it was with the Head, so must it be with the members of His Body, if we are to be effective for God.

Do you value your fellow-believers? Do you recognize your need of them and genuinely seek their fellowship? Or do you form little cliques consisting of congenial people of the same race, community or intellectual or social level, circulate exclusively within such cliques and call that 'fellowship'? If so, the great Deceiver of men has robbed you of riches that might have been yours if you had humbly sought fellowship on an equal basis, "with all the saints."

### **Courteous love**

*"Love is kind.....never rude (1 Cor. 13:4,5-TLB).*

"Kindness makes a man attractive", the Bible says (Prov. 19:22-TLB). We are courteous towards strangers, but often rude towards those with whom we rub shoulders daily. It does not cost us anything to be courteous or to say a few words of kindness and thus "spread a little honey" wherever we go. Yet most of us neglect to do this. Kind words and acts could have deepened many a fellowship that remained on a shallow level. Like oil in machinery, courtesy could have eliminated friction in many of our relationships.

But we are slow to learn.

Because we are basically self-centred, we have to discipline ourselves and educate ourselves in the art of being kind. Fellowship does not develop naturally. It has to be cultivated carefully like a garden.

How often, through careless utterances a believer wounds another. How many Christians seek to earn a reputation for humour, by cracking jokes at the expense of others. They may be less eager to tell a joke against themselves!

There is value in humour - certainly - but it should not result in making others feel small or awkward. Remember, "It is harder to win back the friendship of an offended brother than to capture a fortified city" (Prov. 18:19-TLB).

### **Caring love**

Love is concerned about the needs of others.

The love of Christ, we have been seeing, is not self-centred. It is unselfish. This applies in the area of our brother's need as well.

Consider the human body. When any part of the human body is injured causing an infection, immediately large number of leucocytes (white blood cells) are produced in the blood to combat the germs that have caused the infection. These leucocytes rush to the injured area to battle with the bacteria causing the problem and die in the process, forming what is known as 'pus'. Millions of white blood cells give up their life to bring health to the injured part.

What a lovely illustration of the way the Body of Christ should function!

The Bible says, "God has put the Body (of Christ) together in such a way....that the parts have the same care for each other that they do for themselves. If one part suffers, all parts suffer with it, and if one part is honoured, all the parts are glad" (1 Cor. 12:24-26-TLB).

This last verse is not a *command* telling each part to suffer when another part suffers, or to be glad when another is glad. It is rather a *description* of how every part of the Body is affected by the suffering or joy of another part. Every member of the Body of Christ *who is in close touch with the Head*, will *automatically* share in the suffering and the joy of the other members.

If there is a living relationship between us and the Lord and if our eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit to see the truth of the Body of Christ, then when another member suffers, we shall suffer with him. His problem will cause us concern too. If that is not happening, it would indicate that we are out of touch with the Lord.

### **Generous love**

The Scripture says, "What's the use of saying that you have faith and are Christians, if you aren't proving it by helping others? Will that kind of faith save anyone? If you have a friend who is in need of food and clothing, and you say to him, 'Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat hearty', and then don't give him clothes or food, what good does that do"? (Jas. 2:14-16-TLB).

Again it says, "If someone who is supposed to be a Christian has money enough to live well, and sees a brother in need, and won't help him - how can God's love be within him?....Let us stop just saying we love people; let us really love them, and show it by our actions" (1 John 3:17,18-TLB).

This does not mean that we should be distributing money indiscriminately to every Christian who professes to be in need. No. Joshua and the leaders of Israel once made a big mistake by showing compassion to the people of Gibeon, who played a trick on them by pretending they were in great need (Joshua 9). Many well-meaning and kindhearted Christians have been fooled likewise by professional deceivers.

There is no virtue in being gullible.

But let us seek to be in touch with the Lord and then we shall have wisdom for every situation. We are not to be governed merely by human compassion. We should be in touch with the Head and governed by His leading.

### **Christ-directed love**

In the human body, there is co-ordination among the various parts because each part 'obeys' or is controlled by the head (or brain). Likewise in the church, true fellowship can be a reality between the members only when Christ (the Head) is in control of inter-personal relationships. It is dangerous for two Christians to form a deep relationship without Christ being in between them and being the central figure in their relationship.

I have seen instances where truth has been compromised by Christians for the sake of friendship. God's work suffers in many places today, because human loyalty takes precedence over loyalty to the truth of God. In all such cases, it is obvious that the fellowship that exists between the persons concerned is not through Christ but on a human plane. This is often mistaken for deep Christian fellowship, but is actually a counterfeit of the real thing.

If we live in close and deep communion with the Head, obeying His laws, we shall naturally have the right attitude to other members in the Body. Our fellowship one with another will then be deep and genuine, not sentimental and frothy.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **EQUAL MEMBERS**

Scientists tell us that no two snowflakes anywhere in the world have the same patterns. Likewise, no two human beings anywhere in the world are completely alike.

God has created infinite variety in the universe. This is what makes creation so wonderful and beautiful. How unimaginably boring life would have been if there had been no variety in the universe. Likewise, how uninteresting and prosaic life would have been if all human beings were exactly alike in temperament and personality.

There is variety in the Body of Christ just as there is in the human body. At the same time, there is an organic unity among the various members. All the members are equally important and necessary, although their functions in the Body may be completely different. No member is more important than another. No one's ministry should exclude another's. When the Body operates with each member fulfilling his own special function, then alone will there be a powerful corporate presentation of Christ to the world.

In Old Testament times, God often worked through individual prophets who were His representatives and mouthpieces. But not so now. Today, God works through the Body of Christ. God and Christ are to be represented to the world through the corporate working together of believers harmoniously in one Body. And for this purpose, no one believer is more important than another. Each member's gifts are necessary for the upbuilding of the Body and for its ministry to the world.

A failure to recognize this as God's way can cause feelings of inferiority and superiority in the church. Paul speaks about these in 1 Corinthians 12.

### **Feeling inferior**

Paul speaks first to those who, feeling inferior, assume that their gift is *not* as necessary to the building up of the Body as another's.

"If the foot says, 'I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand', that does not make it any less a part of the body. And what would you think if you heard an ear say, 'I am not part of the body because I am only an ear, and not an eye'? Would that make it any less a part of the body? Suppose the whole body were an eye - then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything? But that isn't the way God has made us. He has made many parts for our bodies and has put each part just where He wants it. What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! So He has made many parts, but still there is only one body" (1 Cor. 12:15-20-TLB).

It is always harmful to compare ourselves with others in the Body of Christ - either favourably or unfavourably. Such comparisons can lead to pride - or discouragement and jealousy. When the foot begins to compare itself with the hand, it may say, "Well, I don't have as prominent a part in the body as the hand. I am usually covered over with socks and shoes, at the lowest end of the body, and hardly anyone ever notices my existence. The hand, however, is noticed by others every day. It is always busy doing something, whereas I am inactive most of the time." Once having compared itself thus, it is but a short step to discouragement and to the development of a spirit of complaining against God for having made it a foot instead of a hand. Such a spirit leads many a believer to bury his talent and do nothing what ever for the strengthening and good of the Body of Christ. The church of Jesus Christ suffers today because of multitudes of believers who wish they had some spectacular gift. Not having such a gift, they decide to do nothing.

Having a grudge against God for not giving you the gift that you see someone else has, is only a short step away from jealousy; and jealousy kills fellowship. As the Bible says, "Wherever there is jealousy or selfish ambition, there will be disorder and every other kind of evil" (James. 3:16-TLB).

If only we could *see* the Body of Christ, there would be absolutely no room for jealousy. In the human body, the foot has no problem being just a foot. It never desires to be anything other than a foot and it never dreams of becoming a hand. It is quite content to be a foot. It knows that God has made no mistake in making it a foot. It rejoices in being a foot; it rejoices equally in seeing what the hand can accomplish, even though it realizes that it can never accomplish anything similar.

So will it be with all who have "*seen*" the Body of Christ. When you are envious of another, when you cannot rejoice wholeheartedly at seeing another member being greatly used of God, it is obvious that you have not understood this truth at all. Any member who lives in close communion with the Head will rejoice and be glad when another member of the Body is honoured (1 Cor. 12:26).

There is no room for competition either, between one member and another in the Body of Christ. Co-operation, not competition, is the law of the Body.

When you see another fulfilling some ministry ably, and you plan to show others that you can do just as good a job (if not better), then Self is obviously still in the centre of your life. If you were living in submission to the Head, you would never be competing with anyone in the Body. You would instead concentrate on doing your own specific job - and doing it well.

If we believe in the perfect wisdom of God, we shall recognize that God knows best what gift to give each of us. There will then be no complaining, no discouragement and no jealous longing after another's gift.

There is no need for anyone in the Body of Christ to feel inferior. All members of the Body may not be equal in terms of ability or talent, but all are equal in terms of usefulness to God in their own appointed place.

We are called to be *ourselves* - radiating God's glory through the particular temperament, gift and talents that God has given us. There is much limitation in the church today, because believers do not bring into it their own special

contribution. Vainly trying to imitate somebody else, they quench their own special gift, and as a result contribute nothing to the ministry of the Body.

### **Feeling superior**

To those who feel superior, Paul writes:

"The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' And some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary.....So God has put the body together in such a way that extra honour and care are given to those parts that might otherwise seem less important....Now here is what I am trying to say: All of you together are the one body of Christ and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it (1 Cor. 12:21-27-TLB).

There are some conceited snobs in the church who feel they are more important than their fellow-believers. They consider their ministry to be more necessary to the Body than that of others. Of course they never express their feelings lest they be considered proud, but their actions and attitudes give them away. Such spiritual pride not only ruins them spiritually, but also rings the death-knell of true fellowship.

The eye is a very important part of the human body and has a significant function to perform. But if (to continue the analogy) it despises the hand saying, "I don't need you", then it has misunderstood its function in the body altogether.

So with anyone who considers his ministry more important than another's. Our hearts are so deceptive that we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that we are called to be spiritual leaders and prophets among God's people. Those who fall into this trap then covet to be elders in churches and leaders in Christian organizations. They feel superior to others and are like a cancer in the Body of Christ.

No one is indispensable in God's work. When Elijah complained to God that he was the only one prophet standing true to God in the land of Israel, the Lord told him to go and anoint Elisha to replace him as prophet (1 Kings 19:14-16). Perhaps this was to teach Elijah that God would never be without men whom He could use. Even the great Elijah was not irreplaceable.

No one is *indispensable* in Christ's Body.

On the other hand, no one is *dispensable* either. The Bible says that all the members are necessary.

But we have first to recognize that we are *dispensable*, before we can become truly *indispensable*. We are most needed in the Body of Christ when we have realised our nothingness. Whenever someone feels that God's work in a certain place will not carry on without him, the truth usually is that the work would be far better off without him!

God's work is dependent on the corporate ministry of the Body of Christ - not on any one individual. In fact, the individual who tries to do everything himself is a positive hindrance to the work of God - for he leaves no room for others to function.

The eye is an important organ, but if the whole body were just one big eye such a body would be quite useless. Thus, when a church or Christian organization centres around the ministry of one man (however gifted he may be), it ceases to be an expression of the Body of Christ. Such a group actually becomes a hindrance to the work of God. However impressive the statistics may be, churches that centre around one gifted leader or pastor, do not fulfill their God-ordained function. True Christian fellowship is impossible in such a situation.

When one cell in the body grows into a size far beyond what God intended for it, it can only do so by crushing the life out of other cells in the process. This is cancer and, untreated it always kills the body.

This, alas, is the situation in many Christian organizations and churches. The believers therein are not able to grow spiritually because of the overpowering personality of one man in their midst. They are like small mushrooms growing under the shade of a mighty oak tree, that seldom see the sunlight themselves.

Let those who have an outstanding spiritual gift take note: You are more likely to hinder the growth of other believers than those with mediocre gifts. You are more likely to kill true fellowship than other less-talented brethren. Besides, you are in danger of making members of Christ's Body more dependent on yourself than on Christ the Head.

If we do not allow others to fulfil their ministry, we violate one of the fundamental laws of the Body. The Bible exhorts everyone of us to regard others as *more important* than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). We may not be able, in all honesty, to consider everyone as *more spiritual* than ourselves, and the Bible does not urge false humility. What we are asked to do is to consider others as *more important*. Surely we can all do this - if we see our place and the place of others in the same body.

This does not mean that all the gifts of the Spirit are of equal value to the upbuilding of the Body. The Bible itself tells us that some gifts are of greater value than others (1 Cor. 14) and we are told to "earnestly desire the greater gifts" (1 Cor. 12:31). All believers have a definite contribution to make to the ministry of the Body, but those who have been given a more useful gift by God (in His sovereignty) will naturally be able to make a more significant contribution. The fact that some have a more outstanding gift is not inconsistent with the fact of the equality of all believers - for equality does not mean uniformity.

## We need each other

One of the wonderful things about our Lord, when He walked on earth, was that even though He was perfect and superior to everyone else, He moved among men as their equal. This is how we are called to live too. Jesus lived as a man needing the fellowship of other men. He turned to Peter, James and John in the garden of Gethsemane and said, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me" (Matt. 26:38). He, the Son of God, needed the prayer-fellowship of His imperfect disciples.

Yet how many of us are so self-sufficient! We ignore weaker members of the Body thinking that we do not need them. We only betray our spiritual poverty and blindness by such an attitude. For remember, the Bible says, "Some of the parts (of the body) that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary" (1 Cor. 12:22-TLB).

The internal organs of our physical body, like the heart and the liver, are never seen by anyone; yet they have vital functions to perform. So too in the Body of Christ. Some who do not have any public ministry, and who are unknown, are really most necessary.

The Bible says that even the Head (Christ) does not say to the feet (the least and lowest members in the body), "I don't need you" (1 Cor. 12:21). How much less can we do without even the weakest and least-gifted of our fellow-believers. They have something to minister to us of Christ. So we should listen to them. If we ignore or despise them, we shall in that measure, deprive ourselves of the fullness of Christ.

Fellowship is always a two-way matter. There is giving and receiving. Those of us who have ability in the ministry of the Word often feel that others should always listen to us, because we feel we have something to give them. Even in conversation, many of us tend to dominate the scene, so that our brother hardly gets a chance to say a word. When he does get a chance to say something, we impatiently wait for him to finish, so that we can start preaching to him again. How self-important we are.

The Bible says, "Let everyone (preachers included) be quick to hear (and) slow to speak" (James. 1:19). We need to educate ourselves in the art of listening to others. After all, God has given us *two* ears and only *one* mouth! And as someone has said, "God has given us ears that are always *open* and a mouth that *shuts*"! So, our prayer should be:

*"Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff,  
And nudge me when I've said enough."*

We need to listen to one another. We need each other's help. No member of the Body is self-sufficient.

## No room for pride

When we see the Body of Christ, we cannot but recognize the equality of all believers - irrespective of race, education, intelligence or social background. All are equal and all are equally needed. None being more necessary than the other, and all having something to contribute, no one *need* feel inferior, no one *can* feel superior; and pride, comparison and jealousy are ruled out altogether.

There will be no room even for that inverted form of pride (which assumes the guise of humility) that some Christian workers have who glory in the fact that despite their being so spiritual (?) and so qualified, they are yet willing to work under less spiritual and less qualified brethren. How blind such people are to the Body!

How many a problem is solved when we have spiritual revelation on the Body of Christ!

## Unity in variety

There is a God-ordained variety in the Body of Christ.

God uses our different temperaments and gifts to present a balanced picture of Christ to the world. By ourselves, each of us can at best present only a distorted and unbalanced image of Christ. Any single person's ministry, by itself, can only produce unbalanced Christians. How thankful we have to be that there are others in the Body with different emphases and temperaments. For example, if two brethren are ministering the Word to the same group of believers, and one's emphasis is, "Don't be too sure that you are filled with the Holy Spirit, for you may be deceiving yourself", and the other brother's emphasis is, "Be sure you are filled with the Holy Spirit", on the surface they may appear to be contradicting each other. But both emphases are needed - so their ministries could be mutually complementary.

In the Body of Christ, we can have the followers of Calvinistic and Arminian theology working together, each bringing their distinctive emphases - for both viewpoints are in the Bible. As Charles Simeon once said in this connection, "The truth is not in one extreme nor in the other. Much less is it in the middle. The truth is in both extremes held simultaneously." So, we need people presenting both extremes.

Then again, there is room for 'outgoing' personalities as well as for shyer ones. Different temperaments can be mutually complementary. Some people may be over-cautious; never taking a step forward without much deliberation, weighing all the 'pros and cons', and wondering for a long time whether to move or not. Others are more carefree and tend to rush ahead enthusiastically, without thinking deeply about the consequences. Because both these (and other) kinds of personalities are found in the Body of Christ, there is a balance. If the Body consisted only of hesitant, deep-

thinking personalities, progress might be too slow. Conversely, if the Body consisted only of impetuous enthusiasts, there might be too many unfinished projects.

Each temperament has its strengths and weaknesses. A variety of people with a variety of temperaments, working together as Christians, can present a more complete and more accurate picture of Christ to the world. So we should not be wasting our time trying to make everyone in the Body like ourselves. We should allow each one to be himself. What we do need to concentrate on, is how our strengths could support another's weaknesses. His strengths could in turn support our weaknesses.

By working together, Peter and John (men of different temperaments) brought more glory to God than they could ever have done independently. Paul and Timothy - strikingly different in their temperamental make-up - could yet labour together in the gospel and form a powerful team.

There are brilliant intellectuals as well as those with mediocre minds in the church. Naturally, their presentations of the truth of God will vary. But neither category can despise or criticize the other, for both are equally needed in the Body, to present the gospel to a world consisting of intellectuals and non-intellectuals, philosophers and housewives, students and farmers, etc., God needed a genius and a scholar like Paul for His work as well as an unlearned fisherman like Peter. They had different styles of preaching the same good news, but each had a distinctive part to play, and neither could have done the work that God did through the other, just as ably.

Conversion does not alter a man's intellectual capacities. Neither does it compel him to change his social status. The gospel does not eradicate the heterogeneous nature of society here on this earth, although social distinctions do become irrelevant in Christ. God had need for a wealthy man like Philemon as well as for Onesimus who was a servant in Philemon's house. Their social levels and standards of living remained unchanged, but each of them had a distinct contribution to make to the Body of Christ, that the other could never make; and so they could labour together in the gospel.

God never intended the Body of Christ to be full of people who were exactly alike in every way - like motor cars turned out of a factory. No. The very ministry of the Body is dependent upon the variety of its members. There would have been stagnation and spiritual death if all were alike.

Even our disagreements with one another can be used of God to deepen our fellowship and lead us on to spiritual maturity. Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron. So one man sharpens another." Two "iron men" can sharpen each other instead of clashing with each other.

Sometimes God places two people with different temperaments together in His work, and as they labour together, the sparks may fly between them, but this may be God's way of "sharpening" them. If one person is like iron and the other like clay, there will be no sparks and no sharpening either. Instead there will be the imprint of the iron on the clay - one strong-willed person's opinion forced on the weak-willed person. God's intention however is *not* that one person should force his views on another, but rather that both should learn from each other. We can disagree, but we can still be united, and still love one another. In fact, we can love one another more deeply in such cases.

I believe God permits differences of opinion (on non-fundamental matters) between different members of the church so that there is greater opportunity for the exercise of Christian love. Loving one another would have been an easy matter if we all saw eye-to-eye on every matter. But when we disagree, our love is tested. So we need to thank God for disagreements that do not divide or disunite us.

A Christian fellowship that boasts no differences of opinion is 'suspect'. The members of such a fellowship are either failing to think for themselves or being dominated by one strong-willed person.

True Christian fellowship is forged and sharpened on the anvil of healthy, loving disagreements.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HELPING ONE ANOTHER

"Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, Who is the Head, even Christ, from Whom the whole Body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the Body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:15,16).

These and other verses in the New Testament make it plain that every believer has a responsibility to minister life to the Body of Christ, in his own way. This is not the exclusive privilege of preachers, but the duty of all members of Christ's Body.

We have already seen the importance of bearing the cross and of dying to self. This is the basic law of interpersonal relationships in the Body of Christ. This is also the primary means by which each member ministers life to the Body. "Death works in us, but (as a result) life in you", wrote Paul to the Christians at Corinth (2 Cor. 4:12). The more we

bear the cross in our lives, the more we shall be ministers of life to the Body, even if we do not have the gift of preaching.

Fellowship, as we have already seen, is a two-way matter. Giving and receiving are involved. All of us need to give to others in the Body and all of us need to receive from others. We saw in the last chapter, how some through feelings of inferiority may hesitate to give, and how others, feeling superior, may feel that they have nothing to receive. When all members of the Body function as they should, there will be a giving and receiving in love that will lead to the building up of the Body.

The Bible tells us of a dual responsibility that each of us has in the areas of giving and receiving. We are told *to encourage* and *to correct* one another.

Consider the following commands in the Bible:

"Warn (admonish, urge and encourage) one another every day....that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin....

"Not forsaking or neglecting to assemble together (as believers) as is the habit of some people, but admonishing - warning, urging and encouraging - one another, and all the more faithfully as you see the day approaching" (Heb. 3:13; 10:25 - Amplified Bible).

These commands are almost totally ignored by the vast majority of believers, yet they highlight two of our chief responsibilities as members of Christ's Body.

The word translated "admonish/encourage" in the above passages is the Greek word *parakaleo*. The noun form of this verb is *parakletos*, which (translated as "*Comforter*"), is the word Jesus used to refer to the Holy Spirit in John chapters 14 to 16.

This would seem to indicate that *encouragement* and *admonition* are two of the chief ministries of the Holy Spirit. And if the Holy Spirit of God dwells in us as members of Christ's Body, He will seek to express Himself through us to one another in a *mutual* ministry of *encouragement* and *admonition*. We shall therefore be quenching the Spirit if we fail to engage in such a ministry. Hence the Word of God exhorts us:

"We earnestly beseech you, brethren, admonish (warn and seriously advise) those who are out of line....encourage the timid and fainthearted....Do not quench the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:14,19 - Amplified Bible).

This does not mean that we shall be spending our time encouraging and admonishing others *all the time*. No. There is a time and place for exercising any ministry. We must, however, recognize our responsibility in these areas.

It was probably to this ministry that Jesus was referring when He told His disciples at the last supper, "You also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Washing the feet would both refresh and cleanse them - after they had tramped the dirty roads, wearing only sandals.

Likewise, encouragement can refresh a weak and discouraged brother and correction can cleanse a straying brother. We must be willing to wash others' feet and have our feet washed by them in return.

### **Encouraging others**

Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the disciples in the churches they had established, "by encouraging them" - so the record reads (Acts 14:22).

We too can strengthen others through a ministry of encouragement - not only through the preaching of the Word, but also by offering appreciation where it is due.

Jesus was always quick to give a word of appreciation where due. He praised a centurion for his faith (Matt. 8:10), a repentant woman for her love (Luke 7:47) and Mary of Bethany for her devotion (Luke 10:42; Mark 4:8,9).

To His failing disciples, He said, "You are those who have stood by Me in My trials" (Luke 22:28).

Paul when writing to the churches - even to the most carnal ones - usually found something to appreciate in them. To the church in Corinth, riddled with factions, disputed and immorality, Paul began is letter thus:

"I can never stop thanking God for all the wonderful gifts He has given you, now that you are Christ's. He has enriched your whole life. He has helped you speak out for Him and has given you a full understanding of the truth; what I told you Christ could do for you has happened! Now you have every grace and blessing; every spiritual gift and power for doing His will are yours during this time of waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. And He guarantees right up to the end that you will be counted free from all sin and guilt on that day when He returns. God will surely do this for you, for He always does just what He says, and He is the One Who invited you into this wonderful friendship with His Son, even Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:4-9-TLB).

Only then did he go on to say, "But, dear brothers, I beg you in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves' (verse 10).

Paul tried to begin with something positive. So must we.

This does not come naturally to all of us. Most of us tend to see the negative side of others first. But if we submit to the discipline of the Holy Spirit, we shall find Him showing us something to appreciate in everyone.

A teacher once spread a large white sheet of paper with a small ink-spot in one corner, in front of his class and asked the children to write down what they saw. All of them described the small ink-spot and no-one mentioned the large area of un-spoilt paper. So too, in human relationships: We often tend to concentrate on people's minor defects and do not see the good in them.

Altering one's outlook requires determination but it is worth the effort. Gradually the habit of noticing people's good qualities can be acquired. The next step is to tell them how much one appreciates those good qualities.

### **Honesty**

We can encourage our fellow-believers often by an honest admission to them of our own humanness and our struggles.

We are called to be witnesses of Christ. But in our testimony, if we give others a false impression about ourselves, then we become false witnesses. The vast majority of believers fall into this category. They give others a glorious account of their triumphs but never say a word about their struggles or their failures. They testify to many prayers God has answered, but mention nothing about the prayers for which God's answer was No. They describe all their mountain-top experiences in detail, but never so much as mention a word about the long valleys that lay between. They are *false* witnesses, for they give an unreal picture of the Christian life.

I remember, as a young Christian, struggling to live a life that was pleasing to God, hearing many such testimonies from other Christians. Not one of them told me, either from the pulpit or in personal conversation, that they too had fears and unresolved problems and unanswered prayers, or that there were things in the Bible that puzzled them too. I assumed therefore that such problems and queries were peculiar to me. The result was that all their testimonies only discouraged me; and discouragement in turn, led me further away from the Lord.

Then I read in the Bible of how the great apostle Paul was often perplexed, how he despaired, how some of his prayers were not granted, how some of the sick people he prayed for were not healed, and how he even had fears, and was comforted in his depression by fellow-believers (2 Cor. 4:8; 1:8; 12:8,9; 2 Tim. 4:20; 2 Cor. 7:5,6). Paul's honesty lifted my spirit and I was encouraged to press on.

Paul never wanted others to have a false impression of him (2 Cor. 12:6). And so, he told them in plain words that he was a human being - not an angel. He lived in victory over all known sin, but he was still a human being who could make mistakes and in whom the flesh was still not eradicated. Paul's aim was always to *help* others, not to *impress* them. Through his honesty about his humanness, he became an instrument of encouragement to many.

It is the desire to *impress* others which makes many of us unwilling to be honest with them about our struggles and our anxieties. This shows that we are not really interested in helping them to a closer walk with God. We are not concerned that they are discouraged by the unrealistic standards that we have set before them. We seem to be content as long as we ourselves are held in high esteem.

There is a price to be paid if we are to be channels through which the Holy Spirit encourages others - the price of *honesty*.

True Christian fellowship must be based on *light*. We can walk in true and deep fellowship with one another only if we are willing to walk in the light. This involves a willingness *to be ourselves* with each other - avoiding all sham and hypocrisy. This is how God intends Christians to walk with one another. Remember, the first sin publicly judged by God in the early church was hypocrisy (see the story of Ananias and Sapphira recorded in Acts 5:1-14).

Sin has caused all of us to wear masks in our mutual relationships. We are afraid and ashamed of being known as we actually are. We live in a world full of people wearing masks; and when people get converted, they don't take off their masks. They wear their masks and go to meetings and meet with other people - and call that fellowship. But such fellowship is a farce. Yet the Devil has got most Christians satisfied with just that.

It is true that it is impossible for any of us to remove our masks completely. Living in a sinful world and fellowshipping in an imperfect church, and bound by the flesh ourselves, it is neither *possible* nor *desirable* to be completely honest with others. Total honesty is not *feasible*, because we can't see ourselves fully. Neither is it *advisable*, because it may hinder others.

We certainly need *wisdom* in being honest. But we should never *pretend* to be something that we are not. That is hypocrisy - and hypocrisy was condemned outright by Jesus.

A self-righteous, Pharisical attitude is what prevents many Christians from being channels of help and encouragement to others. Our attitude must be such that our fellow-believers and others will feel free to come to us and "let their hair down" and unburden themselves, knowing that they will meet with sympathy and understanding, and that they won't be despised for their ignorance or for their failures.

The world is full of lonely, tense, fear-ridden and neurotic people. Christ has the answer to their problems, but that answer should come to them through His Body, the church. But alas, most Christians are so self-righteous and unreal that they drive away people in need.

Keith Miller says in *The Taste of New Wine*, "Our modern church is filled with many people who look pure, sound pure, and are inwardly sick of themselves, their weaknesses, their frustration and the lack of reality around them in the church. Our non-Christian friends either feel, 'That bunch of nice untroubled people would never understand my problems'; or the more perceptive pagans, who know us socially or professionally, feel that we Christians are either grossly ignorant about the human situation, or are out-and-out hypocrites."

We need to learn what it is to have honest fellowship with others on a personal level - and we can all begin with one person.

There are dangers in this realm of honest fellowship, however, that we should be aware of, so that we can steer clear of them. Here are some guidelines that may help:

*First of all*, such intimate fellowship must be restricted to *individuals of the same sex*. We should not forget that we are still living in a fallen world and that the flesh (and thereby the potential for sin) is yet within all of us. It is therefore, most dangerous for anyone to try and develop an intimate fellowship with someone of the opposite sex, outside the marriage relationship. Those who have attempted to do so, have invariably fallen into one sin or another.

*Secondly*, we must *follow spiritual principles* laid down in God's Word for our fellowship - and refuse to be guided by psychiatric techniques. The Holy Spirit should be in control of our fellowship, and we must allow Him to lead us closer to one another spontaneously. We should never force anyone into an artificial honesty.

*Thirdly*, remember that the aim of fellowship is *not to confess our sins* to each other and to get a strange, unscriptural consolation thereby. The Bible nowhere encourages us to confess our sins to anyone and everyone. *We must confess sin in the circle in which it was committed*. If we have sinned against God alone, we need to confess only to God. If our sin was also against some other individual or group, then it must be confessed to them too. But we are *not* to confess our sins to all our fellow-believers. Such confession of sin besides being quite unnecessary, may actually be a hindrance to others - by polluting their minds and perhaps encouraging them to sin similarly. We are to build up the Body of Christ. Make sure you do not tear it down. Scripture exhorts us to *encourage* and *admonish* one another, *not* to confess our sins to one another.

(The only reference in the New Testament to confessing our faults to one another (James 5:16) is obviously, as the context indicates, in relation to *physical healing*. Sickness is sometimes caused by unconfessed sin. And so James urges a full confession of sin in the presence of the elders, so that healing may not be delayed on that count. That command should never be taken out of its context and given a wider application that it was never meant to have. Remember that, 'a text taken out of context is a pretext').

A foolish honesty can harm the testimony of Christ and also give occasion for unnecessary gossip. I remember hearing a story of three deacons in a church who decided to have honest fellowship with each other. One said that his weakness was money and that he was stealing church funds. Another admitted that his weakness was sex and that he was living in sin with a certain lady in the church. The third said, "My weakness is gossiping; and I can hardly wait to leave this meeting!"

The Bible says, "Don't tell your secrets to a gossip unless you want them broadcast to the world" (Prov. 20:19-TLB). There are unscrupulous people even in the church. Make sure you don't place either yourself or others in embarrassing situations by an unwise "honesty". When in doubt, as to how honest you should be with another in fellowship, it is better to err on the side of *saying less* rather than more.

When we stick to the teaching of God's Word, we are safe.

Then *fourthly*, we should *watch our motives*. "Honesty" with others that is really designed to enhance our reputation as humble saints is abominable. I have heard believers publicly confess certain "respectable sins" (such as "I am not praying enough", "I am not witnessing as much as I should", "I need to be more compassionate", ad nauseam) that left them looking more like saints than sinners. Of course, that was their intention - to obtain the approval of their fellow-believers for their "honesty." Beware of such "humble pride!"

*Fifthly*, we should bear in mind that *confidences* shared with us by others are a *sacred trust*, never to be betrayed. Such matters as people have told us concerning themselves or concerning others must never be shared even as "prayer requests." It is simply shocking to hear the amount of gossip that is passed around under the pious umbrella of "I am sharing this only for prayer."

*Sixthly*, we should *avoid an unhealthy and carnal curiosity* when someone shares his heart with us. We are warned in God's Word not to be busybodies in other people's matters (1 Pet. 4:15). We are not to go prying into people's affairs. Our aim in fellowship is to help another, not to discover all his faults and sins.

*Finally, let us ask God to be between us* in all our sharing and fellowship. His presence alone can shield us in our sharing. If Christ the Head is not in between us, our fellowship can degenerate into a carnal exercise that falls short of God's purpose.

True Christian fellowship involves each member encouraging the other. Where this is practiced, the bonds of fellowship are sweetened and strengthened.

### **Admonishing others**

Faithfulness to our fellow-members in the Body demands that we admonish and correct them in love when we see them going astray. True love could never sit back in silent complacency, watching a brother about to go over a cliff.

The Bible says, "Don't hate your brother. Rebuke anyone who sins; don't let him get away with it or you will be equally guilty" (Lev. 19:18-TLB).

The Bible does not ask us to go around pointing out everyone's faults to them. We can only correct those with whom we have already established a bond of fellowship; otherwise our reproof may be misunderstood and do more harm than good.

We should certainly avoid correcting a person's faults, if we have never praised him for his virtues. Expressed appreciation is the best background against which to show a person his faults. We have already seen how Paul followed this pattern when writing to the Christians at Corinth.

We should likewise refrain from offering correction to one who we know will patently reject it. The Bible says, "If you rebuke a mocker, you will only get a smart retort; yes, he will snarl at you. So don't bother with him; he will only hate you for trying to help him. But a wise man, when rebuked, will love you all the more" (Prov. 9:7,8-TLB).

Needless to say, we should never offer correction to anyone if we ourselves are unwilling to receive it from others.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when we must correct our brethren. Jesus said, "Rebuke your brother if he sins, and forgive him if he is sorry" (Luke 17:3-TLB). *Correcting* our brother is as sacred a responsibility as *forgiving* him. We are to neglect neither.

In Matthew 18:15-34, Jesus speaks at length on both these subjects - correction and forgiveness. On correction, He says, "If a brother sins against you, go to him privately and confront him with his fault. If he listens and confesses it, you have won back a brother. But if not, then take one or two others with you and go back to him again, proving everything you say by these witnesses. If he still refuses to listen, then take your case to the church, and if the church's verdict favours you, but he won't accept it, then the church should excommunicate him" (Matt. 18:15-17-TLB).

"Open rebuke is better than hidden love." And you will find that "in the end, people appreciate frankness more than flattery", for "flattery is a form of hatred and wounds cruelly" (Prov. 27:5; 28:23; 26:28-TLB).

We need to be cautious however, about the spirit in which we offer correction to our fellow-believers. We are not called to be "*self-constituted censors of others*", lest we be judged by God with greater severity (James. 3:1-Amplified). We are not here to tell other people how they should be organising their homes, or what standard of living they should maintain. Because of our carnal natures, many of us are "Nosy Parkers." Some are turned away from the Lord because of self-appointed "prophets" who think they are called to set others straight!

Our calling is to build up the Body of Christ. Any correction that we offer anyone must be with this aim. If it is not, then we can do far more good by remaining silent.

We must make sure that our facts are correct, giving others the benefit of the doubt in every possible way. Having done that, we have the responsibility to obey the exhortation which says, "If a Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help him back on to the right path, remembering that next time it might be one of you who is in the wrong. Share each other's troubles and problems, and so obey our Lord's command. If anyone thinks he is too great to stoop to this, he is fooling himself. He is really a nobody" (Gal. 6:1-3;-TLB).

That command is directed *not* to all believers but to those who are "godly" or "spiritual" (verse 1). The spiritual man is the one who has first removed the logs from his own eyes, before he takes a step to remove the speck he finds in his brother's eye (Matt. 7:1-5). The spiritual man is also the one who is humble enough to recognise that he himself is capable of falling into the same sin that his brother has fallen into (Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 10:12).

Further, a prospective "speck-remover" must be gentle as well as spiritual. For, after all, removing a speck from someone's eye is a delicate business: harsh, rough treatment may drive the speck further into the eye and thus do more harm than good!

The spiritual man is also one who will speak to another faithfully only after prayer has given him the right attitude, so that he feels far more hurt by his brother's fall than his brother will be hurt by his rebuke. This is what it means "to share each other's problems" (Gal. 6:2).

The spiritual man is one controlled by the Holy Spirit - for that is the meaning of the word "*spiritual*." This implies that he offers correction only when he receives the inner witness of the Spirit urging him to do so. For, as the Bible

says, "there is a right time for everything.....a time to be quiet and a time to speak up" (Eccl. 3:1,7-TLB). We need to be in close touch with the Head, if we are to know the best time to approach another member of the Body with a word of correction. Only those who are in close touch with the Head should undertake such a ministry.

Correction is a sacred responsibility that we have to each other, as members of Christ's Body. Jesus said (in Matthew 7:5) that after we remove the log from our eye, we have the responsibility to go to our brother to remove the speck from his eye. We are not to sit back doing nothing after cleaning up our own eye. Neither are we to go to our brother merely to point out the speck in his eye. Our responsibility is to help him get rid of it. That involves standing with him and cooperating in removing the speck.

### **Receiving encouragement**

Fellowship, as we have repeatedly seen, is a two-way matter. Every part of the human body needs to *receive* assistance from, as well as *give* assistance to, the other parts of the body. So too in the Body of Christ.

We must be humble enough to acknowledge our need of encouragement from others. It is a proud spirit that professes to be able to carry on without any encouragement from anyone. If we are honest, we must acknowledge that we are able to live and work much better when encouraged. Each of us needs encouragement.

Consider the attitude of the apostle Paul, when writing to the young Christians at Rome: "I long to visit you", he says, "so that I can impart to you the faith that will help your church grow strong in the Lord. Then, too, I need your help, for I want not only to share my faith with you but *to be encouraged* by yours: each of us will be a blessing to the other" (Rom. 1:11,12-TLB).

There we have a clear example of how the members of the Body are to function towards each other. Even the great apostle, despite all his experience and maturity, recognised his need to receive help and encouragement from the young Christians at Rome.

We too need one another's help and encouragement.

### **Receiving admonition**

We must also be humble enough to receive *admonition* from others. All of us have faults. What is worse, all of us have '*blind spots*', so that we are not able to see some of our faults as clearly as others can see them.

This is where other members of the Body can help us - if we are willing to receive their help. If, however, they sense a proud, unteachable spirit in us, they may never come and tell us what they see, and we alone will be the losers.

Paul was faithful to rebuke Peter, when he saw Peter compromising. And Peter, in turn, was humble enough to accept Paul's rebuke, for he saw that Paul was right. The result was that others were blessed too, and the Body of Christ was built up (Gal.2:11-16). What loss might have been incurred, if Paul had kept silent or if Peter had been too proud (as the senior apostle) to receive the word of correction!

Are we accessible and open to those who may have a word of reproof for us? Or do we indicate to others *by our attitude*, that we do not want any criticism? If other members of the Body find it difficult to approach us with advice, it is more than likely that even Christ the Head may be finding it difficult to get through to us.

One of the clearest tests of our spiritual condition is our attitude to criticism.

Here is what the Bible says on this theme:

"It is better to be criticised by a wise man than to be praised by a fool!....Anyone willing to be corrected is on the pathway to life....To learn, you must want to be taught. To refuse reproof is stupid....If you refuse criticism you will end in poverty and disgrace; if you accept criticism you are on the road to fame....If you profit from constructive criticism you will be elected to the wise men's hall of fame. But to reject criticism is to harm yourself and your own best interests...The wise man learns by listening ..... Don't refuse to accept criticism; get all the help you can...Wounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy " (Eccl. 7:5; Prov. 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:31,32; 21:11; 23:12; 25:12; 27:6-TLB)

The Body of Christ will be built up, as each member fulfills his responsibility in giving and receiving.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUBMISSION AND LEADERSHIP**

The laws of the kingdom of God are quite opposite to the laws of earthly kingdoms - as different as heaven and earth (Isa. 55:8,9).

On earth, leaders who exercise authority over others are considered to be superior, and those who have to submit, inferior. But it is exactly the reverse in the Body of Christ. The laws of the Body call us to:

"Honour Christ by submitting to each other" (Eph. 5:21-TLB);

"Serve each other with humble spirits" (1 Pet. 5:5-TLB);

and "through love, serve one another" (Gal. 5:6).

Every member is called to submit to and serve the other. "How is this possible?", one may ask, "Are not the younger ones called to submit to the elders?"

Such a question arises because submission is often misunderstood to mean obedience alone. But we can submit to others by denying ourselves also. That is how Jesus lived. He denied His rights constantly in His relationships with others. This is the primary meaning of submission. And this is what each member of the Body is called to do.

Jesus has shown us the glory of submission, and so we should rejoice to walk this pathway all through our lives.

### **Submission to Divinely-appointed authority**

God is the ultimate authority in the universe. There is no doubt about that. But God also delegates authority. Government rulers, parents and church-leaders have authority in society, in the home and in churches.

The church is not, as some consider it, a democracy where everyone is directly responsible to God alone. No. There are leaders appointed by the Lord in the Body, whom we should submit to, and obey *in church-matters*. This is the will of God and is clearly taught in Scripture.

Just as the Word of God commands people to submit to rulers, wives to husbands, children to parents, and servants to masters, so also it commands subjection to elders in the church.

For example, the Bible teaches that man is God's delegated authority over woman. Even though redeemed men and women are equally members of the Body of Christ, yet God commands woman to be in subjection to man in the church (1 Cor. 11:3; 14:33-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-13).

Similarly, God has placed elders to give leadership to local churches. Where elders are truly appointed by God in a church, they are the Lord's delegates and wield something of His authority. The Lord told the disciples whom He sent out, "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me" (Luke 10:16).

The Word of God has commands such as:

"Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).

"We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labour among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thess. 5:12,13).

"Now I urge you brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints) that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labours" (1 Cor. 16:15,16).

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

"You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders" (1 Pet. 5:5).

God places us as members of Christ's Body in fellowship-groups (churches or teams of Christian workers). Therein, we are called to submit to the spiritual leaders God appoints over us, and to move with them as a team. In individual matters, God's guidance comes to us directly; but in team matters, guidance comes to us through our spiritual leaders.

In Acts 16:9,10, we read that Paul alone received guidance from God as to where he and his team of workers were to proceed next. His team, comprising of Silas, Timothy and Luke, followed him, fully believing that God was leading, for they were working under Paul's leadership. It was *not* necessary for them to obtain separate guidance from God for their move, for it was a *team matter* and God had already spoken to their leader.

In the human body too, certain members are so placed that they have to move when certain other members move. For example, the little finger on my right hand is an independent member that can move by itself, in direct obedience to signals from the head. At the same time, being a member of my right arm, it has to move along with that arm when the arm moves. It cannot detach itself from my arm at such times and refuse to move, for God has placed it as a part of the 'team' of members that constitute my right arm. It does not have to move when my left arm moves, for it is not a member of that team, but it does have to move with its own team.

If God has placed us in a church fellowship, or in a team of Christian workers, we are obliged to submit to the leadership that God has placed over us and to follow them *in team matters*. The only thing that we need to be sure of is that God has placed us in that team. Once that matter is settled, there is no question but that God expects us to submit to and obey our leaders. Many problems in Christian work are solved, once this Scriptural principle is understood.

Consider the example of the Son of God Himself. As a young lad, we read that He lived in subjection to Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:51). Jesus was perfect. Joseph and Mary were not. Yet the Perfect One lived for years in subjection to imperfect human beings, because that was God's will for Him. The Father's will settled all matters with finality for Jesus. If His Father wanted him to live in subjection to Joseph and Mary, He would do just that - and that too, for as long as His Father wanted Him to.

A time did come, later on in Jesus' life (after His baptism), when He ceased to be subject to them - when His Father called Him to leave His home and move out into His ministry as the Son of God. Thereafter, His answer to His mother Mary was, "What do I have to do with you" (John 2:4). But as long as His Father kept Him in subjection to Joseph and Mary, He joyfully submitted.

So we see, from the example of the Perfect Son of God too, that the only important question is, "Is it God's will that I should be in this fellowship?" If the answer is 'Yes', then it becomes our duty to submit to God-appointed leadership.

Rebellion against authority was the first sin committed in the universe, when Lucifer, the head of the angels, rebelled against God's authority over him.

In the world today, there are two spirits operating - the Spirit of Christ leading people to *submit* to divinely-constituted authority, and the spirit of Satan leading people to *rebel* against such authority.

The spirit of rebellion is rife today in society, in the home and in the church too. This is a clear indication of the world rapidly drifting away from God, and being increasingly controlled by Satan. We are called as members of Christ's Body to stand against this Satanic principle and to follow Christ's example of submission.

We can never lose out by submission to God-appointed leadership. On the other hand, we have a lot to lose by rebellion.

Submission to divinely-appointed leadership is God's method of leading us on to spiritual maturity. We shall remain spiritually stunted if we do not submit where God calls us to.

Many a believer has never learnt in experience, the reality of God's sovereignty because he has never known what it is to be checked and thwarted in his plans, as a result of a humble submission to his spiritual leaders. No one can serve God effectively or be a spiritual leader himself who has never known submission to others at any time in his life.

Submission is not something disgraceful and oppressive, as the Devil whispers in our ears. On the contrary, it is the means by which God protects us spiritually. In the early years of our Christian life, when we are still ignorant of the ways of God, we can be saved from many a pitfall and from leading others astray in our youthful zeal, if we submit to our spiritual leaders. Those years spent in submission can also be the time when God teaches us the laws of His kingdom and thereby makes us spiritually wealthy, so that we can have a ministry to others.

How much we lose when we evade the pathway of submission!

## **Leadership**

God Himself calls some members of the Body of Christ to exercise spiritual leadership over others.

One of the first things that all such leaders must recognise is that Christ is the only Head of the Body. Headship is never delegated by Christ to anyone. Individual domination in a local church (or group of churches) or in a fellowship of Christian workers, is therefore a positive violation of the Sovereign Headship of Christ.

This is why the leadership prescribed for the New Testament church is through a body of elders (plural not singular). The elders together are to exercise spiritual authority (See Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:5; James. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1).

In Matthew 18:18-20, Jesus said that where two or three gathered together in His Name, He would be present in their midst giving them authority to bind and to free. The immediate context of the passage (see v.17) seems to indicate that Christ was referring primarily (though not exclusively) to the elders of the church (being at least two or three in number) exercising this authority. One person by himself apparently could not exercise such authority. (Otherwise it would have been meaningless for Christ to specify "two or three").

We are not living today under the old covenant. In those days, God often appointed one man to lead His people - e.g. Moses, Joshua, David, etc., Those leaders were all *types* of Christ. Now that Christ Himself has come, He alone is the Head of the people of God. And He works through corporate leadership in the Body.

In the early days of the Christian era, the Lord did give a special authority to the eleven apostles and to the apostle Paul, over the churches, but that was because the apostles were the foundation stones of the church (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14) and were the channels through which God gave His written Word to the church. Such a situation does not exist today, and so it would not only be foolish but audacious for anyone to justify his authoritarian actions by reference to Paul's action as an apostle. It is more likely that such a person may be like Diotrephes rather than like Paul. (3 John 9).

Diotrephes was a self-appointed 'apostle' who wanted to take the lead single-handed in the church. He is denounced in no uncertain terms by John.

Wherever a man today seeks to give single-handed leadership to God's people, he stands in great danger of leading them back to old covenant times, spiritually. This must be borne in mind especially by those with strong leadership capabilities.

No doubt, God does even today, form teams of Christian workers, where a Timothy and a Titus work under a Paul. But this should only be in the initial stages of the formation of the team. As time went by, even Timothy and Titus were considered by Paul as fellow-workers, and not as junior helpers.

The divinely-ordained plan for leadership in the Body of Christ is through a group of elders (whether for a church or for a team of workers). This is a provision that God has made for the safety of the church - to prevent any one person's point of view becoming too dominant.

It is easy for those with great vision and ability to get impatient with the slowness of others with whom they have to share leadership in Christian work. They may then be tempted to assert themselves, and override others, claiming that they are doing so for the ongoing of the work of God. But such a violation of God's order will finally lead to the stunting of the growth of other members of the Body of Christ.

Look around and see the condition of churches and organisations where there is one strong authoritarian leader, and you will invariably find that the Christians therein are spiritual dwarfs. Such one-man leadership may appear to be dynamic with an abundance of programmes, but the Christians who are led do not grow. This is not God's intention for Christ's Body. He would rather have fewer programmes and projects, and more spiritual growth among the members.

### **Qualifications for leaders**

Only God can appoint a man to be a spiritual leader. If our appointment to an office is merely by man, we can never exercise Christ's authority. Herein lies the foolishness of those who seek to be voted into positions of Christian leadership - and do not seek to be appointed by God.

A spiritual leader must lead his flock in the way of the cross. This implies that he must be one who is faithfully walking the way of self-denial himself.

Then again, no one can be a leader in the Body of Christ who does not long to be a servant of others, as Christ Himself was. Jesus said, "The kings and great men of the earth lord it over the people; but among you it is different. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be greatest of all must be the slave of all. For even I, the Messiah, am not here to be served, but to help others" (Mark 10:42-45-TLB). Paul, the great apostle, who had an authority exceeding anyone else's was a servant of others (2 Cor. 4:5; 1 Cor. 9:19). This is another of the primary qualifications for spiritual leadership.

A spiritual leader is called to exercise authority over those whom God places under him, and at the same time to be a brother to them and a fellow-member in the same Body. It is this delicately-balanced relationship of leader-brother that is often so difficult to maintain. We tend to be unbalanced one way or the other. We shall need much grace from the Lord constantly, if we are to maintain this balance. Hence the absolute necessity for the leader to live close to God in a "face-to-face" relationship. This was the secret of Moses' effective leadership of 3 million of God's people in the most adverse of circumstances for 40 years (Deut. 34:10; Num. 12:8).

Spiritual authority, being God-given, is not something that we have to assert over others or even force others to submit to. We should never compel others to listen to us or to obey us. God Himself will deal with those who resist His representatives. The servant of the Lord does not ever have to strive with men (2 Tim. 2:24,25) - for if God is behind our authority, why should we seek to defend our position. God will Himself defend us and establish our authority. If we are seeking to assert our authority ourselves, it must be because our authority is not God-given at all.

A spiritual leader should not defend himself or seek to justify and vindicate himself, when attacked or slandered. The Bible says, "Christ is your example. Follow in His steps.....He never answered back when insulted; when He suffered He did not threaten to get even; He left His case in the hands of God Who always judges fairly" (1 Pet. 2:21,23-TLB). The Son of God, the greatest authority, refused to strive with men and to assert His rule over them. He left it to God to defend Him and to vindicate Him. This is the path that all under-shepherds in the church must tread. As a spiritual leader, if you live under God's authority yourself, you can safely leave everything in His Hands. You can afford to ignore slander and criticism and backbiting against you, for God's promise is that He Himself will defend His servants against such attacks (Isa. 54:17). Oswald Chambers has said that when someone flings mud at us, if we try to wipe it off, we will stain our clothes. But if we leave it alone, it will dry up in due course and fall off by itself; and there will not be any stain. This is the wisest way to deal with slander.

Watchman Nee, out of the many years of experience that God gave him in the exercise of spiritual leadership in China, gives us some wise counsel in his book, *Spiritual Authority*. He says:

<<"It is not the violent or the strong but a man like Paul whose bodily presence is weak and whose speech is of no account (2 Cor. 10:10) - whom God will establish as an authority.....People usually assume such things as the following to be the necessary requirements for an authority: splendour and magnificence, strength of personality, bearing or appearance, and power. To be an authority, they reason, one must possess a strong determination, clever ideas, and eloquent lips. But it is not these that represent authority; instead they stand for the flesh. No one in the Old Testament exceeded Moses as a God-established authority, yet he was the meekest of all men. While he was in Egypt he was quite fierce, both in killing the Egyptian and in reprimanding the Hebrews. He dealt with people by his own fleshy hand. So at that time God did not appoint him as an authority. It was only after he had become very meek - more than all men on earth (Num. 12:3) - that God used him to be an authority. The person least likely to be given authority is often the very one who considers himself an authority. Likewise, the more authority a person thinks he has, the less he actually does have....

"Authority is set up to execute God's order, not to uplift oneself. It is to give God's children a sense of God, not to give a sense of oneself. The important thing is to help people to be subject to God's authority.....To be a delegated authority is not at all an easy thing, because it requires the emptying of oneself.....

"Authority is not a matter of position. Where spiritual ministry is lacking, there can be no positional authority. Whoever has spiritual service before God has authority before men. Who, then, can fight for this authority, for there is no way to strive for ministry? Just as ministry is distributed by the Lord, so authority is also decided by Him.....We should not attempt to outdo the authority of our ministry....Many brothers mistakenly imagine that they can take up authority at random, not knowing that .....one's authority before men is equal to one's ministry before God. If authority exceeds ministry, it becomes *positional*, and is therefore no longer *spiritual*.....

"Those who *seek* to exercise authority should not be given authority, for God never gives authority to such persons. But strange to say, he who senses *his incompetency* is the one to whom God gives authority..... A man needs to fall before God before he can be used; whenever he lifts himself up he is rejected by God.....

"How serious will be the judgment upon those who grab God's authority with their carnal hands. May we fear authority as we fear the fire of Hell. To represent God is not an easy thing; it is too great and too marvelous for us to touch. We need to walk strictly in the way of obedience. The path for us is obedience, not authority; it is to be servants, not to be heads; to be slaves, not to be rulers. Both Moses and David were the greatest of authorities, yet they were not people who tried to establish their own authority. Those today who desire to be in authority ought to follow their footsteps. There should always be fear and trembling in this matter of being an authority." >>

The church today suffers because of a great dearth of spiritual leaders. There are many who hold titles and exercise their authority officially. But spiritual leadership is scarcely to be found. Jesus once looked out at the crowds that came to him and felt great pity for them, "because their problems were so great and they didn't know what to do or where to go for help. They were like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36-TLB). The situation is just the same today.

We desperately need leaders in the church, who have the heart of a shepherd and the spirit of a servant, men who fear God and tremble at His Word.

## CHAPTER SIX

### POWER THROUGH UNITY

"Two can accomplish more than twice as much as one, for the results can be much better. If one falls, the other pulls him up; but if a man falls when he is alone, he's in trouble.....And one standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer; three is even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken" (Eccl. 4:9-12-TLB).

You may remember the story from Aesop's fables, where an old farmer taught an object lesson on unity to his three children, who were constantly quarreling among themselves. Taking a number of weak sticks, he showed them how the sticks could quite easily be broken individually, but when tied together in a bundle were almost impossible to break.

Even the children of this world realise that there is strength in unity and fellowship.

"The locusts", the Bible says, "though small are unusually wise, for though they have no leader, they stay together in swarms (Prov. 30:27-TLB). Therein lies their safety and their power.

In the church of Jesus Christ, we need to relearn this lesson.

Right at the outset, however, let me clarify that I am not referring to an organisational unity of Christians or of churches, formed by man, at the cost of compromise and the sacrifice of God's truth - such as in the modern day ecumenical movement. That type of unity is a farce and a counterfeit of the unity that Christ prayed for in His High-Priestly prayer (recorded in John 17).

The unity that the New Testament speaks of, is the unity of the members of Christ's Body with one another, under the Headship of Christ - an *organic* unity and *not an organisational* one. It excludes those who are outside of the Body of Christ, even if they have the label 'Christian'. There can be no union between the living and the dead. Those made alive in Christ through the new birth can find their spiritual unity only with others who have been similarly regenerated by God. Christian unity is forged by the Holy Spirit Who alone makes us members of Christ's Body. The Bible exhorts us to "strive earnestly to guard the harmony and oneness produced by the *Spirit*" (Eph. 4:3-Amplified). Any unity formed *by man* is worthless.

### **Satan's strategy**

Satan is a cunning foe and he realises that he cannot overcome a united Christian fellowship that lives under the authority of Christ and His Word. His strategy for warfare, is therefore, to begin by sowing discord, suspicion and misunderstanding among the members of a fellowship, so that he can paralyze them individually.

Jesus said that the powers of Hell would not be able to overcome His church. (Matt. 16:18). It is the church, the Body of Christ, that is promised victory in the battle against Satan. A believer standing in isolation from other believers may find himself defeated.

Satan attacked Christ constantly during Christ's life on earth, but was unable to prevail. Finally at the cross, Satan's power over man was taken away from him by Christ (Heb. 2:14; Col. 2:15).

Today, Satan cannot attack the Risen Christ. His attacks are therefore directed at Christ's Body, the church. Victory over Satan is possible only as we stand united against him, as a Body under the Headship of our Lord.

In a fellowship of Christians, even if one member is not fulfilling his function, the power of the Body is, to that extent, weakened. Satan knowing this, seeks continually to isolate individual members of a group, or to divide the group (or church) into cliques. Either way, he succeeds in his aim.

This is why we must be constantly on our guard against the wiles of Satan, lest he weaken the links between us and other members of the Body of Christ.

### **The authority of the Body**

The earlier chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians, disclose the 'mystery' of the Body of Christ. Towards the end of the letter, there is a description of the spiritual warfare that the church is engaged in and of the armour of God necessary to overcome in the battle.

Since the general theme of Ephesians is the church as the Body of Christ, it would seem to imply that the warfare described at the end of the letter is something that the Body as a whole is engaged in - and not just the individual members on their own. We need one another in this battle.

Earlier in the same letter, we are told that Christ has been exalted far above all, as the Head of the church (Eph. 1:20-23). It is one thing to know that Christ has been exalted, and quite another to know that He has been thus exalted as the Head of His Body the church. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians was that they might have spiritual revelation on this latter truth.

This truth has far-reaching implications for the church here on earth. For if Christ has been exalted far above all as the Head of the church, it implies that the church has a share in the exercise of Christ's authority. Consider an illustration from the human body. It would not be possible for my head to sit on a throne without my body sitting on the same throne also. So too with Christ and His Body.

The authority that Christ has is something that He desires to give to His church. Why is the church then so powerless today? Surely it must be because it hasn't recognised and taken its place as the Body under Christ's Headship.

Christ's authority is exercised through His Body, not just through isolated individuals. The human body functions in obedience to the head, because it is a co-ordinated organism and not merely a miscellaneous assortment of limbs and organs. So too in the Body of Christ. Where there is a coordinated Christian team, there Christ's authority can be exercised effectively.

Do you see now why Satan hates the truth of "the Body" and why he will do everything in his power to keep us blind to it? And if we do grasp the *intellectual* truth of the matter, Satan will try to blind us to its *practical* application.

### **Symphony in the Body**

Jesus made many promises in relation to *individual* believers praying to God. But in Matthew 18:18,19, we have a promise made to a *section* of Christ's Body praying in unison:

"Whatever you bind on earth", Jesus said, "is bound in heaven, and whatever you free on earth will be freed in heaven. I also tell you this - if *two of you* agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask for, my Father in heaven will do it for you" (TLB).

The word translated "agree" in verse 19, is the Greek word "*sumphoneo*", from which our English word "symphony" is derived. Jesus was referring in these verses to a unity among even two of His children that would be like a musical symphony. This implies more than just saying "Amen" at the end of another's prayer. Symphony implies a deep harmony of spirit between those who are praying together. When the fellowship of even a small group of Christians is like the symphony produced by a well-conducted orchestra, then (Jesus said) their prayers will have such authority that anything they asked for would be granted. Such a group of Christians would have authority to bind Satan's power and to liberate Satan's captives.

The reason why such a fellowship could exercise such authority was explained by Jesus: "For", He said, "wherever two or three are gathered together into My Name, there I AM in the midst of them" (verse 20-Amplified). Christ the Head is present with all His authority in the midst of such a fellowship, and therefore the powers of Hell can never stand against it.

One reason why the church described in the "*Acts of the Apostles*" knew the reality of this authority was because they had this unity in their fellowship.

"All of these (the 11 apostles) with their *minds in full agreement* devoted themselves steadfastly to prayer.....

"And all who believed were *united* and together.....and day after day they regularly assembled in the temple with united purpose.....

"And they (the apostles and other believers).....lifted their voices together *with one united mind* to God.....(Acts 1:14; 2:44,46; 4:24-Amplified).

Because they were integrated into one Body under the authority of Christ, they could exercise the Lord's authority in prayer. They were not highly educated, they had no social influence and no financial backing, yet they turned the then-known world upside down for Christ.

When Peter was locked up in prison, all of Herod's forces could not stand against the power of that early church on its knees before God (Acts 12:5-11). Satan's kingdom was shaken to its foundations by that church as it went forth as one Body, registering the victory and authority of Christ in human lives all over the Roman Empire (See Acts 19:11-20 for one example of this).

Today Satan ridicules the efforts of a disunited church trying to oust him from his strongholds by gimmicks, gadgets, conferences, theological knowledge, eloquence and trained choirs.

None of these are of any avail against Satan. The church needs to know again the reality of being one Body united under the Headship of Christ.

A fellowship of Christians properly related to each other, growing in love for one another and living in obedience to Christ and His Word is the greatest threat to the kingdom of the Devil on earth. Satan dreads nothing else as much as that.

Let us make it our prayer that the Lord will help us to live each day in the light of the glorious truth of our being *one Body in Christ*. As more and more Christians throughout the world begin to understand and to live by this truth, we shall assuredly see the church, though small in number, restored to her pristine glory, an instrument in God's Hands to rout the forces of darkness and a channel of blessing to a needy world.

## EPILOGUE

## CALVARY LOVE

The Body of Christ builds itself up by Calvary love.

As a help to meditation on this theme, I give below some extracts from Amy Carmichael's book *IF*.

I would suggest that you go through the following sentences unhurriedly, meditating on each description of Calvary love.

"If I have not compassion on my fellow-servant even as my Lord had pity on me", then I know nothing of Calvary

love.

If I belittle those whom I am called to serve, talk of their weak points in contrast perhaps with what I think of as my strong points; if I adopt a superior attitude, forgetting ‘Who made thee to differ?’ and ‘What hast thou that thou hast not received?’, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I can easily discuss the shortcomings and the sins of any; if I can speak in a casual way even of a child’s misdoings, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I find myself half-carelessly taking lapses for granted, ‘Oh, that’s what they always do’, ‘Oh, of course, she talks like that, he acts like that’, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I can write an unkind letter, speak an unkind word, think an unkind thought without grief and shame, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If, in dealing with one who does not respond, I weary of the strain, and slip from under the burden, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I am perturbed by the reproach and misunderstanding that may follow action taken for the good of souls for whom I must give account; if I cannot commit the matter to God and go in peace and in silence, remembering Gethsemane and the Cross, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I do not look with eyes of hope on all in whom there is even a faint beginning, as our Lord did, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I cast up a confessed, repented and forsaken sin, against another, and allow my remembrance of that sin to colour my thinking and feed my suspicions, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I cannot keep silence over a disappointing soul (unless for the sake of that soul’s good or for the good of others it be necessary to speak), then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I am afraid to speak the truth, lest I lose affection, or lest the one concerned should say, ‘You do not understand’, or because I fear to lose my reputation for kindness; if I put my own good name before the other’s highest good, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I cannot in honest happiness take the second place (or the twentieth); if I cannot take the first without making a fuss about my unworthiness, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I take offence easily, if I am content to continue in a cool unfriendliness though friendship be possible, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I feel injured when another lays to my charge things that I know not, forgetting that my sinless Saviour trod this path to the end, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I feel bitterly towards those who condemn me, as it seems to me, unjustly, forgetting that if they knew me as I know myself they would condemn me much more, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I say, ‘Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget’, as though the God, who twice a day washes the sands on all the shores of all the world, could not wash such memories from my mind, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If one whose help I greatly need appears to be as content to build in wood, hay, stubble, as in gold, silver, precious stones, and I hesitate to obey my light and do without that help because so few will understand, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If monotony tries me, and I cannot stand drudgery; if stupid people fret me and little ruffles set me on edge; if I make much of the trifles of life, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I am inconsiderate about the comfort of others, or their feelings or even of their little weaknesses; if I am careless about their little hurts and miss opportunities to smooth their way; if I make the sweet running of household wheels more difficult to accomplish, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If interruptions annoy me . . . then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If souls can suffer alongside, and I hardly know it, because the spirit of discernment is not in me, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If something I am asked to do for another feels burdensome; if, yielding to an inward unwillingness, I avoid doing it, then I know nothing of Calvary love. .

If the praise of man elates me and his blame depresses me; if I cannot rest under misunderstanding without defending myself; if I love to be loved more than to love, to be served more than to serve, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I crave hungrily to be used to show the way of liberty to a soul in bondage, instead of caring only that it be delivered; if I nurse my disappointment when I fail, instead of asking that to another the word of release may be given, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If in the fellowship of service I seek to attach a friend to myself, so that others are caused to feel unwanted, then I

know nothing of Calvary love.

If I refuse to allow one who is dear to me to suffer for the sake of Christ, if I do not see such suffering as the greatest honour that can be offered to any follower of the Crucified, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I slip into the place that can be filled by Christ alone, making myself the first necessity to a soul instead of leading it to fasten upon Him, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If my interest in the work of others is cool; if I think in terms of my own special work; if the burdens of others are not my burdens too, and their joys mine, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If the ultimate, the hardest, cannot be asked of me; if my fellows hesitate to ask it and turn to someone else, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I covet any place on earth but the dust at the foot of the Cross, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

That which I know not, teach Thou me, O Lord, my God."

"Love through me, Love of God,  
Make me like Thy clear air  
Through which unhindered, colours pass  
As though it were not there".