

## HEBREWS 10.24,25; 13.7, 17: LOVE AND HONOUR - TRUE LOVE ENCOURAGES ONE AND ALL [Chelmsford 25 March 2012]

Everybody has their ups and downs – and some of us have more downs than ups. Life can be tough – very tough. And what a difference it makes when in those tough times somebody speaks a positive word to us.

Listen to the wisdom of three American authors:

- John Maxell, a leadership guru, wrote: *“Remember, man does not live on bread alone: sometimes he needs a little buttering up”*
- William Ward reflecting on a life-time of pastoring a church wrote: *“Flatter me and I will not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you”*.
- William James, a noted psychologist said: *“The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated”*.

We all need encouragement – we all need to be appreciated. Or as Americans would say, we all need to be ‘stroked’!

The letter to the Hebrews was written with the purpose of encouraging a group of Christians who were on the verge of giving up.

Living in a world that was hostile to the Christian faith, some of them had almost had enough. This was the context in which the author wrote

**“Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s *there*, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When you find yourself flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls”** (Hebs 12.2-3 Peterson)

Jesus is our role model – and he is the ultimate source of encouragement when life is tough.

But there are times when we need the human touch.

There are times when we need a personal word of encouragement.

As we come toward the end of our ‘Looking for Love’ course, I want us to look at three specific ways in which we can be encouragers – and I want to do this on the basis of some further verses from the Letter to the Hebrews.

## 1. LET US ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

In the first instance we need to encourage one another

**“Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love & to do good.. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer”** (10.24-25)

**“Let us be concerned for one another”**. The underlying Greek verb (*katanoeo*) means to “*direct the mind and reflect upon*” (Lee) – or as the NRSV “*to consider*”.

I.e. the readers of this letter are being encouraged to focus their minds and energies on how they might best meet the needs of their fellow church members.

Goodness, have you ever sat down and thought what might be the needs of the people in your home group – and how you might best help them in their Christian growth and development? For that is what is in mind here.

The author to the Hebrews gives three illustrations of what this concern for one another, might involve

### ***1. Provoke one another***

The GNB translates: “**Help one another to show love and to do good**”.

But that is not strong enough. In the words of the NRSV (also AV) we are called to “**provoke**” one another – to love & good works. Or as the REB puts it: “**We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness**”.

Here we have a reminder that there is no such thing as a private Christian.

Our faith is personal, and yet cannot remain personal. Our brothers & sisters in Christ have a right & a duty to involve themselves in our lives, and we in turn are called to involve ourselves in their lives.

We have a duty to “**provoke**” one another to live up to our calling!

### ***2. Meet with one another***

**“Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing”**

Some of those to whom this letter was being written were apparently becoming a little slack in attending church - sadly, there have been many since.

But the fact is that we miss out on church to our detriment.

To withdraw from Sunday worship as indeed from attending a mid-week fellowship group is to deprive ourselves – it is to run the risk of becoming cold in the Christian faith. But we can also deprive others. The fact is that when we withdraw from attending services & fellowship groups, the church is the weaker!

It is this which the writer has particularly in mind – ‘*Show your concern for others by going to church – think of the good your going to church will do to others!*’

For the sake of others, if not your own, don’t give up on church!

### 3. *Encourage one another*

**“Let us encourage one another all the more, since you see the Day of the Lord is coming nearer”.** We are to ‘spur’ one another on (Peterson) in the Christian life.

This encouraging or spurring on of one another is not just telling others that we love them & appreciate them, but above all that God loves them & cares for them.

We are called to remind one another that, however tough life may be, there is a new world coming – **“the day of the Lord is coming nearer”** – where **“there will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain”**.

All the trials & tribulations of this life will be no more – instead we shall be forever with the Lord.

In the light of this I would suggest that one of God’s challenges for us all this week is to see how we can encourage one another – not least in our ‘Looking for Love’ groups

## 2. LET US ENCOURAGE OUR LEADERS

Yes, leaders need encouragement. They too are human.

Next Wednesday the Looking for Love course focuses on honouring and respecting leaders.

One of the Scriptures down for reading that day is found in 1 Thess 5.12-13:

**“We beg you, our brothers and sisters, to pay proper respect to those who work among you, who guide and instruct you in the Christian life. Treat them with the greatest respect and love because of the work they do”.**

In other words, Paul is saying – ‘encourage your leaders’.

One of my buddies is Nick Mercer, who together with Steve Gaukroger offered the following advice in their book *Double Cream*:-

*It may be that you don’t like your church’s minister. Well here is a tested prescription by which you can get rid of him (or her)*

1. *Look at him straight in the eye when he’s preaching, and maybe say ‘Amen’ occasionally. He’ll preach himself to death in a short time*
2. *Start paying him whatever he’s worth. Having been on starvation wages for years, he’ll promptly eat himself to death*
3. *Shake hands with him and tell him he’s doing a good job. He’ll work himself to death*
4. *Rededicate your own life to God and ask the minister to give you some church work to do.*
5. *If all else fails, this one is certain to succeed: get your congregation to unite in prayer for him. He’ll soon be so effective that some larger church will take him off your hands.*

I smiled when I read this – and yet there is an ‘edge’ to it as well.

The reality is that encouragement of ministers can often be sorely lacking.

Occasionally, however, encouragement comes. I keep a folder in my filing cabinet, and every letter or e-mail of encouragement goes there – sadly, it is not a massive file.

On a Sunday we can preach our hearts out – and hardly anybody seems to notice. If you get one thank-you at the door you are doing well – if five people were to thank you, that would be a red-letter day.

So how can we encourage leaders?  
Hebrews 13 offers two suggestions:

1. Telling the preacher when God has spoken to you through their preaching  
“**Remember your.... leaders who spoke God’s message to you**” (Hebs 13.7).

The very first suggestion on a web-site list of six ways in which church members could encourage their pastors reads: “*Let your pastor know specifically how you learned from his sermon*”. Wow! That’s a challenge! According to the ‘Jolly Blogger’ ‘*Nice sermon pastor’ and ‘you’re a good pastor’ are wonderful to hear but what we really want to hear is that you are growing in your walk with Christ*

2. Responding positively to the lead pastors & deacons may offer

Listen to these words from Hebs 13.17: “**Obey your leaders and follow their orders. They watch over your souls without resting, since they must give God an account of their service. If you obey them, they will do their work gladly; if not, they will do it with sadness, and that would be of no help to you**”. Wow, “obey your leaders” – that’s a bit strong. The underlying Greek verb however does not imply unthinking obedience. Rather, it implies being open to reasoned persuasion.

Eugene Peterson adopts the following paraphrase: “*Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. They are alert to the condition of your lives and work under the strict supervision of God. Contribute to the joy of their leadership, not its drudgery. Why would you want to make things harder for them?*”

I thank God for the positive spirit in which time and again this church has followed the leadership I have sought to offer. You have certainly greatly encouraged me.

These are not the only ways in which you might encourage your leaders  
At this point let me quote not from the Letter to the Hebrews, but from the remaining five suggestions I found on the web

1. Help your pastor have a date night with his wife ... Give him a gift certificate to a favourite restaurant
2. Confront one of the pastor’s perpetual critics... It’s not the critics who bother him as do the members who are unwilling and fearful of standing up to the critics
3. Give him a book he would love to have
4. Speak publicly on behalf of the pastor
5. Pray for your pastor... In one of the churches I served, someone organized an intercessory prayer team on my behalf. Each member of the nearly 100 church members committed to pray for me at a specific time of day for five minutes

The fact is that ministers are human beings like anybody else. They need encouragement!

Here then is the second challenge of the day!

### 3. LET US ENCOURAGE FUTURE LEADERS

Has it ever occurred to you that we owe the Apostle Paul to a man called Barnabas. It was Barnabas who was responsible for spotting the potential of the Apostle Paul and then acting as his mentor.

Luke tells us that the name Barnabas means ‘*the son of encouragement*’ or ‘**One who encourages**’ (Acts 4.36) – and Barnabas lived up to his name.

We too need to be encouragers, who spot potential – and encourage not least younger people to ‘step up to the plate’.

Next week we begin the process of electing new deacons.

The word ‘*deacon*’ literally means a ‘*servant*’, and in a Baptist church the service deacons offer is that of leadership.

Three of our deacons are standing down after six years of service – and are not eligible for re-election. In addition, we have two other vacancies. In other words, we can elect five new deacons, five new leaders.

But what are the qualities which deacons need?

Clearly, it is not enough that they be likeable – although that is desirable!

They need other qualities too.

On the basis of Hebrews 13.7,17 I suggest we need to look for people with the following five qualities:

1. They need to be ***men and women with leadership potential***. “**Remember your... leaders**” (13.7); “**be responsive to your leaders**” (13.17 Peterson). Not everybody is a leader. It has been estimated that only some 5% of people have leadership qualities. Interestingly in some experiments concerned with the effect of overcrowding among rats, a certain Dr John Calhoun of the US National Institute of Mental Health, discovered that the ‘dominant’ rats numbered 5% of the total!
2. They need to be ***spiritual men and women***, whose lives are rooted in God’s word. “**Remember your former leaders who spoke God’s message to you**”; literally who spoke “**God’s word**” to you (13.7). The reference is here not just to preachers: God’s word can be spoken within the context of a small group or within a one-to-one conversation. To speak God’s word is to be able to apply principles from God’s word to the life of the church.
3. They need to be ***men and women of integrity***. “**Think back on how they lived and died**” (13.7): they not only spoke the word of God, but also lived out the word of God. Their lives matched their message. It is because our lives are so important that Paul in his lists of qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy says nothing about gifting, but everything about character. Future leaders, for instance, need to be whole-hearted in their commitment, positive in their attitude to others, who open their homes to others.
4. They need to be ***men & women of bold faith***. “**Imitate their faith**” (13.7). Faith according to the author of Hebrews must always issue in action. In Hebs 11 we have a list of men and woman whose faith in God led them to do great things for God. Deacons should have something in common with the SAS: ‘*Who dares, wins*’

5. They need to be *men & women with a concern for others*. “**They watch over your souls without resting**” –or in the words of the REB, they need to be “*tireless in their concern for*” others. They may not be members of the pastoral team, but they must certainly be concerned for individuals, as well as for the big picture.

Here is the third challenge of the day – encourage future leaders.

But please don’t rush at encouraging any old Tom, Dick and Harry to stand as a deacon.

Nor should anybody lightly accept nomination.

As you will see from the new *TeamTalk* I am suggesting that people considering making or accepting nominations should consult with the ministers of the church, as together we seek to discover who God would have us lead his church.

In summary, the theme of today’s sermon is ‘true love encourages one another’.

Let us rise to the challenge of encouraging one another, encouraging the leaders of the church, and encouraging future leaders of the church.

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