

LET US BE CONCERNED FOR OUR BROTHER AND SISTER MINISTERS

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Years ago, when I was a teenager, I was briefly into photography. I had an uncle who had a 'dark room' and taught me how to develop my own black and white photographs. He also showed me how attaching a yellow filter to the lens of my camera could bring out things of which you were not aware – clouds for instance suddenly would appear. I was a great fan of the yellow filter, until I put a colour film into my camera and discovered that suddenly everything was yellow!

When it comes to reading Scripture, all of us come with filters – filters which are the product of our context. Africans, for instance, find it highly significant that the first man to carry a cross for Jesus was an African – Simon of Cyrene. Similarly they love to read the story of another African, the Ethiopian chancellor of the exchequer whom Philip met on the road to Gaza.

Recently I found myself using another filter when reading Hebs 10.24, 25 – the filter of ministry. Perhaps because of my father's influence, I have always had a sense of deep responsibility for my fellow ministers. As a result I have never allowed a pastoral engagement to stop me attending ministers' meetings. Long before the Baptist Union began to speak of ministers entering into a covenant with one another, I felt that the needs of my fellow ministers took precedence even over the needs of my own people.

So for a few moments let me encourage you to use this ministerial filter as we look at a Hebs 10.24,25: "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (NRSV). Hebrews is not a letter addressed to ministers. But just imagine it were addressed to ministers – not just to young ministers straight out from college, but to ministers who had been around for a while, perhaps ministers who were hitting the mid-life blues and were tempted to throw in the towel. I freely confess that this is not an exercise in strict exegesis – but I dare to think that by extension such a reading may be justified.

1. **Let us think about (*katanomen*) those of our brother and sister ministers who need our care.** According to one commentator, Peter O'Brien, it involves 'directing the mind toward and reflecting on'. Within the context of ministry, this means thinking about other ministers in the town or in the neighbourhood. Or it might mean thinking of those with whom we trained and who are now in other parts of the county. I wish to suggest that such a consideration of brothers and sisters in ministry leads to prayer. For over 45 years I have been a member of the Baptist Ministers Fellowship, a fellowship which describes itself as 'a national network of ministers committed to praying for one another'; in particular we were asked to pray for one another every Sunday morning. But Sunday is not the only day for praying – indeed, in my experience on a Sunday morning there is little space for reflective thinking and praying. Instead over the years I have developed a prayer diary in which I list the names of all those ministers for whom I feel some responsibility: the ministers of the

church to which I now belong; the ministers of the church of which I was pastor for 21 years; I list too all the names of those who have served with me in ministry – three from Altrincham days; seven from Chelmsford days. In addition I list the names of all the Board members of Ministry Today UK and of the College of Baptist Ministers. Every week I think of these colleagues in ministry.

2. **Let us provoke one another.** The Greek noun (*paroxune*), from which we get our English word 'paroxysm' and which is present here, is a strong word full of emotion. It appears in only one another place in the New Testament. There in Acts 15.39 it is used of the 'sharp disagreement' which broke out between Paul and Barnabas when they could not agree on taking Mark with them on another missionary journey. The cognate verb (*paroxuno*) appears twice in the New Testament: in Acts 17.16 it is used to describe Paul's exasperation – 'his spirit was provoked' (AV) – at the sight of so much idolatry in Athens, while in 1 Cor 13.4 it describes how love is not easily 'provoked' (NRSV). In all these instances the provocation concerned has a negative sense. However, here the word is used positively. It is about stirring up our colleagues for their good. So the REB translates: "We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others". If we look at these words through a ministerial filter, then by extension we have the thought of provoking or arousing our brother and sister ministers to fulfil their calling. For me this was the motivation to start a weekly blog, *Church Matters*. First and foremost I wanted to stimulate my fellow ministers.
3. **Let us keep meeting together.** I know that in the original context this has to do with Sunday worship, but let's switch filters and apply this to ministers meeting together. Over the years I have belonged to many groups for ministers – some Baptist and some ecumenical. Some have been great fun – but others have been tedious, while yet others have been a forum for unhelpful bragging. When there is so much else to do, it is tempting to give them a miss, but the truth is that 'collegiality' should be part of our ministerial DNA. Even if we feel we are not benefitting from such meeting, nonetheless we owe it to our peers to be there. We have a 'duty of care' for one another. Just as in 1 Cor 12.25 where Paul in describing the church as a body speaks of the members having "the same care for one another", so ministers have a responsibility to care for their fellow ministers of the Gospel – and this in turn means turning up to ministers' meetings, whatever.
4. **Let us encourage (*parakalountes*) one another.** The participle here is from the Greek word *parakaleo* from which the cognate noun *parakletos* is derived. This is the word used of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in John's account of the Upper Room. Literally it means 'one who is called to the side of'. In the context of John 14-16 the underlying Greek word (*parakletos*) has been translated in a number of ways. In the AV, for instance, the Spirit is described as the 'comforter', in the sense of the one who strengthens us and makes us brave (the 17 century word comforter is derived from the Latin *fortis*, brave). In the REB and the NRSV the Spirit is described as the 'advocate', the one who speaks on another's behalf and in their defence. In the RSV & NIV the Spirit is described as the 'counsellor', in the sense of the one who is there to give advice and act as our 'consultant'. As for the GNB, there the Spirit is described as the 'helper', in the sense of the one who is there to help us in our

weakness. To my mind the term 'helper' is the best of all the translations, because it is open to every nuance: the Holy Spirit can draw alongside to help us, giving us courage, defending us, advising us. We in turn, who are called to encourage one another – and by extension ministers who are called to encourage their peers- can help in all these ways too: we can give fresh courage to our peers, stand up for their peers, give advice to our peers, offering whatever help it is they need. As we all know, ministry can be tough – there are times when the church makes a lousy mother. How do we help and encourage one another in practical terms? Through a phone call or through an email – through the offer of a coffee or a meal.

We are called to be concerned for one another – not least for those who for one reason or another are struggling with life in general, but perhaps with ministry in particular. It may be that others are at fault, or it may be that they are at fault. Whatever, there is a need - perhaps, to tell them not only that we care for them and appreciate them, but that God loves them and cares for them even more. May God give us the grace, energy and commitment so to do.