

**Beyond the Pulpit:
Two Ways Ordinary Believers Minister to the Church**

by Timothy R. Nichols

Introduction

The public teaching of Scripture from the pulpit is vital to the spiritual health of the church. But Christians frequently forget that the object of the pulpit ministry is not merely to minister to the hearers, but to prepare the hearers to minister to each other. Ephesians 4:11–16 clearly states that pastors and teachers equip the saints for the work of the ministry. But *how* do the members of the body minister to one another? This paper presents two vital concepts for Christian ministry that believers frequently disregard in doctrine and practice. Few people in the pew know these concepts. Those who have heard them before are usually unaware that they have a biblical basis, and few have any model they can look up to as an example of how to apply them. Fewer still have someone training them to develop skill in applying these truths.

Encouragement in Hebrews

The first of these concepts has to do with fellowship and comes from the book of Hebrews. The author, audience, and purpose of Hebrews have all been hotly contested, so a few words about the larger context of the book are in order.

The author's identity is unknown, although he states that he had no first-hand experience of Christ. He and his audience were second-generation believers: they relied on the accounts of those who had been with Jesus Himself.¹ From the extensive references to the Tabernacle service, it appears that they were Jewish and had familiarity with the Law. They were believers.² They were eternally secure, not only because

¹ Heb. 2:3. Paul does not fit this description (cf. Gal. 1:11–12).

² In 3:1 the author addresses his readers as *holy brethren*, and he continues to use *brethren* to address them throughout the book. What does he mean by this word? In the preceding paragraph, he describes the relationship between Christ, God's Son, and other children of God: *Now both He who sanctifies [Christ] and those who are sanctified are all of one [that is, all from one Father], for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren* (2:11). Two things must be mentioned here. First, the basis for calling someone a *brother* is having God as the common Father. Second, *sanctify* means "to make holy," so we may translate the passage thus: "Now both He who makes (them) holy and those who are made holy are all of one." When the author goes on in the very next paragraph to address his readers as *holy brethren*, he means those words in the way he has just defined them: fellow children of God. See John H. Niemelä, "No More Sacrifice," pt. 1, *CTS Journal* 4 (October–December 1998): 2–17. It is also

all believers are, but because the book itself treats them as such.³ The occasion of the letter is a state of spiritual decline among the audience. They had initially been faithful⁴ and in certain respects remained faithful,⁵ but had failed to mature⁶ and were in danger of drifting away from the faith entirely.⁷ In keeping with that situation, the book seeks to encourage the audience to have endurance and to strengthen what is weak, so that they may receive a full reward and escape God's judgment.

The practical section that begins in 3:7⁸ focuses particularly on fellowship. The author starts by quoting Psalm 95:7b-11, which is God's commentary on the rebellion of the Exodus generation. What follows is the author's commentary on what went wrong at Kadesh Barnea and how his audience can avoid making the same mistake.

noteworthy that the repetition of *brethren* in 2:11, 3:1 and 3:13 indicates that the audience for the warning passages is the same as the audience for the rest of the book.

³ Chapter 2 indicates that those who are *sanctified* are the children of God. The author tells us in 10:12-14 that those who are sanctified (i.e., believers) are *perpetually perfected* by Christ's single sacrifice offered once for all. Now, if they are perpetually perfected, can they lose this perfection? No! If they could, it would not be perpetual.

⁴ Heb. 10:32-39.

⁵ Heb. 6:10.

⁶ Heb. 5:12-14.

⁷ Heb. 2:1; 3:12; 10:25.

⁸ The epistle of Hebrews divides into five sections, each of which subdivides into a doctrinal discussion followed by a practical discussion, as follows:

Section One: 1:1-2:4

Doctrine: 1:1-14

Practice: 2:1-4

Section Two: 2:5-4:13

Doctrine: 2:5-3:6

Practice: 3:7-4:13

Section Three: 4:14-6:20

Doctrine: 4:14-5:10

Practice: 5:11-6:20

Section Four: 7:1-10:39

Doctrine: 7:1-10:18

Practice: 10:19-39

Section Five: 11:1-13:25

Doctrine: 11:1-40

Practice₁: 12:1-29

Practice₂: 13:1-25

See Niemelä, "No More Sacrifice," for further discussion.

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.⁹

The core problem the author wishes to address is unbelief, which involves hardness of heart, as he demonstrates in the following verses. He holds out the promise of reward to his readers: "For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end." This reward can motivate them to endurance if they note—and not follow—the example of the Exodus generation. The Exodus generation also heard,¹⁰ but they hardened their hearts. Consequently, the promise they heard did not benefit them because they did not believe it and therefore did not obey. The author goes on, in 4:2-11, to demonstrate that rest remains available to God's people if they believe and obey.

So if the pitfall is unbelief (or hardheartedness), what is the preventive measure? The author urges: "But exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today.'" Two features about this are particularly interesting. First, it is a command believers fulfill with "one another," which means they give exhortation as well as receive it. This is not something tied to a particular spiritual gift or position in the church: every believer can and should obey the command to exhort. Second, this reciprocal exhortation should happen daily—not at the monthly potluck, not every Sunday, not even Sunday morning and Wednesday night—*daily*.

I have to admit that upon first hearing this idea, I was shocked. My initial response was, "But I'm not getting anything close to daily encouragement, and I'm doing fine." (Does that sound like unbelief?) Upon reflection, I was not fine. In fact, my definition of "fine" had degraded considerably during my period of comparative isolation. One might call that degraded definition "being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." And as I have shared this truth with other believers, I have found very few people who have not responded to isolation in the same way. It should not surprise believers that when they neglect the divinely appointed safeguard against unbelief, it sneaks in unnoticed.

The author of Hebrews does not say that someone who lacks daily encouragement will *necessarily* drift into unbelief. A believer marooned on a desert island is not thereby doomed to spiritual mediocrity. If God

⁹ Heb. 3:12–13. Block Scripture quotes in this article are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Nelson, 1982).

¹⁰ Heb. 4:16.

has providentially isolated one of His children, He will provide for his spiritual well-being.¹¹ But for a believer to isolate himself from fellow believers is another matter. Someone who willfully goes without daily reciprocal encouragement is missing a divinely ordained safeguard for his spiritual life, and his spiritual failure should not come as a surprise.

The author does not address this theme of fellowship again until chapter 10. Pastors regularly quote Hebrews 10:25 to rebuke people for skipping church, but the command involves much more than church attendance.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.¹²

The context of the command is a challenge to faithfulness in the Christian life, based on the faithfulness of Christ as our High Priest. The content of the command itself does not emphasize the part pastors tend to emphasize. The main clause in the command is “consider one another.” That is where the emphasis lies. Moreover, the Greek word *consider* refers to study or scrutiny. “Scrutinize each other” would be a good translation. What is the purpose of scrutiny? “To stir up love and good works.” The idea is that I would look at another believer and think to myself, “What can I do or say for this person that will stimulate him to be more loving and to do more good works?” and that he would look at me and think the same way.

Fulfilling this command assumes a certain knowledge of the person. That is why scrutiny is necessary. Some Christians need a smack on the head, some need a gentle word, some just need an example to follow. It is possible to hit a whole group of people with a well-timed exhortation (which is what the author of Hebrews is doing with this letter),¹³ but often this needs to be individual.¹⁴ The latter is in view in this passage, since this is not a charge to pastors and teachers about how they choose sermon topics, but rather instruction to individual believers about how they should handle the time they spend with each other.

Careful individual exhortation is the main thought here. Modifying that thought is verse 10:25: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves

¹¹ The author also tells his readers that God “is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

¹² Heb. 10:24–25 (emphasis added).

¹³ Note 10:32–39 and 13:22.

¹⁴ E.g., the exhortation required by Matthew 18:15.

together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” This is common sense: how are believers going to scrutinize each other to stir up love and good works if they do not spend time with each other? So they must not forsake the assembly. In the assembly, they are to *exhort each other*. The verse does not say, “Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, but listening to teaching.” Teaching is vital, but the assembly the author of Hebrews has in mind is one where believers are *encouraging each other*—this is at the very least a major part of the activity. Once again, the regular reciprocal encouragement is not tied to any particular gift or position in the church. *It is for everyone to do.*

The author has one more thing to say on his subject:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.¹⁵

What is the willful sin the author has in mind in the context? Throughout the whole book, the author hammers on the need for faithfulness. He does the same in this passage, giving his audience a specific exhortation to reciprocal encouragement and assembly for that purpose. The willful sin is unfaithfulness: abandoning fellowship with God and failing to encourage one another and to assemble for that purpose. God takes that failure seriously.¹⁶

This is the first of the two vital concepts relating to how ordinary believers minister to the body of Christ: they encourage each other every day.

¹⁵ Heb. 10:26–31.

¹⁶ We have to bear in mind that these are eternally secure believers. They are in great danger of severe judgment from God, but they have been “perpetually perfected” by Christ’s single offering which He offered “once for all” (Heb. 10:10–14). That cannot be taken away. For further information on this passage, see John Niemelä, “No More Sacrifice,” pts. 1 and 2, *CTS Journal* 4 (October 1998): 2–17; 5 (January 1999): 22–45.

Discipleship in Matthew

The second concept relating to every believer's ministry comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Two particular features of Matthew's structure are important for this discussion. First, Matthew arranges his narrative material around five major sections of teaching.¹⁷ The narrative that precedes each teaching section prepares the reader for the teaching and reinforces it. Second, Matthew is not writing a balanced, slice-of-life account of Jesus' ministry. Instead, he focuses on a particular facet of it. A comparison of the early portions of all four gospels shows that everything from John 1:19 to 4:43 occurs between Matthew 4:11 and 4:12.¹⁸ In John 1:19–4:43, the reader encounters an evangelistic facet of Jesus' ministry that is almost wholly absent from Matthew, including evangelistic contact with the men called by the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 4:18–22. The first time Matthew's reader encounters these men, Jesus is calling them to be His disciples. Matthew assumes and John confirms that they had already believed in His Messiahship; the portrayal in Matthew focuses on their discipleship.¹⁹ This focus continues throughout the book and culminates in a command to these very same men to make more disciples. This structure suggests, and a closer examination of the book confirms, that Matthew is a manual for discipleship.

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to consider the definition of disciple. There is some tension between the qualifications for being a disciple (as Jesus states them) and the Gospel writers' use of the word. On the one hand, discipleship is a demanding calling. Jesus says, "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."²⁰ Luke records a similar, but more pointed statement: "Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."²¹ On the other hand, we have the conduct of the people actually called disciples by the Gospel authors. What did the disciples do in the Garden of Gethsemane? Their behavior bore no resemblance to bearing the cross.

The resolution is this: there is a generic use of *disciple* that refers to "learners" or "followers." That usage is all over the gospels and, on the evidence, does not attach any particular virtue to the people it describes.

¹⁷ Roughly, ch. 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 24–25.

¹⁸ In fact, all three Synoptics skip over this material that John covers.

¹⁹ Further proof of this is that we know for sure from John's account that two of the men called by the sea are already believers at that point.

²⁰ Matt. 16:24.

²¹ Luke 14:27.

Even Judas Iscariot is described as a disciple.²² In the generic sense, disciples were people who learned from or followed Jesus in some sense. However, the qualifications for discipleship that Jesus himself stated go far beyond that, so there is also a more specific sense of the word. John's gospel refers to those who fit the more specific sense as *disciples indeed*,²³ that is, genuine disciples. While this article borrows the verbiage from John's gospel, the category is present in Matthew as well.

In His final command to make more disciples, Jesus uses the term *disciple* in the more restrictive sense.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.²⁴

In verse 18 the Lord gives the basis for his command: He has been given all authority. The Greek participle, *poreuthentes* ("going"), which leads off the command, has been variously rendered. Depending on the translator, it will read "Go," "As you are going," "Having gone," etc. Regardless of which translation one takes,²⁵ the focus of the command is in the following clause: *make disciples of all nations*. Jesus then gives two clauses that explain how one goes about making disciples: (1) baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and (2) teaching them to *do* all things He commanded the disciples. He closes with the promise to be with them always.

Of particular interest is the second clause in the instructions for making disciples: *teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you*. First of all, it should be noted that this is teaching *to do*, not just teaching *to know*. This is a consistent thread throughout the Scriptures.²⁶ Moreover, what are disciples supposed to do? "All things that I have commanded you." The more demanding definition of *disciple* is clearly in view here.

²² E.g., Matt. 10:1–4 and Luke 6:13–16.

²³ John 8:31.

²⁴ Matt. 28:18–20

²⁵ Even if the participle has no imperatival force, one must ask how Christians can fulfill a command to make disciples of all the nations without *actually going there*. If the going is not stated, it is assumed.

²⁶ Cf. Josh. 1:8, Ps. 119:9, 15–17, James 1:22.

Now what does “all things I have commanded you” include? Naturally, Matthew is thinking of the five major teaching sections of the book, but is that the extent of the commands that he has in mind? Of course not—he said, “*All things.*” There are other commands to the disciples scattered throughout the narrative sections of the book, and they are included as well. Most significantly, the command that we are discussing is included. “All things that I have commanded you” includes “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Teaching disciples to obey all the commands of Christ includes teaching them to make more disciples. The Great Commission includes itself!

All believers ought to be disciples, and it is the leaders’ job to help them become disciples. The process of making disciples, according to Christ’s command, includes making them disciple-makers. Every believer should be a disciple, and every disciple should be a disciple-maker. This is not a matter of spiritual gifting or position in the church; it is for everyone.

Implications

What are the implications of these principles of reciprocal daily fellowship and disciple-making? In more conservative circles, believers routinely deride market-driven churches for treating their congregants like consumers. They correctly point out that such methodology inevitably precludes treating unbelievers like sinful unbelievers. They have not been slow to notice that it also causes church leadership to wink at sin among believers and to tolerate blatant carnality instead of naming it the rebellion that it is. (The customer, after all, is always right.) They criticize the leadership of these churches for making their congregants feel comfortable when there is no biblical reason for comfort.

The same people have been much slower to notice that more traditional churches tend to treat their congregants like employees. If they attend regularly and do their part for the organization—which usually means giving regularly, helping out with Sunday School, planting flowers out front, and perhaps some regular Bible study or memory work—then they are made to feel comfortable. *They should not be.*

Maintaining a high-quality Christian life involves taking preventive measures against the subtle pressures of sin and unbelief, and one of those measures is daily reciprocal encouragement among believers. If the people in a church are not encouraging each other *daily*, they should be concerned, not comfortable. The church leaders who willingly allow

people in this condition to be comfortable are setting their people up for failure.

Furthermore, being a disciple requires that one make disciples. If the people in a church are not actively involved in making disciples, they should be concerned, not comfortable. In addition, if church leaders willingly allow people in this condition to be comfortable, then the church leaders are not teaching their disciples to obey *all* the commands of Christ.

Implementation

Communicating these truths from the pulpit is important. People need to know this information. But they also need someone to model obedience to the command. There is biblical precedent for this. Paul offered himself on several occasions as an example of various practices²⁷ and commanded Timothy (a disciple he trained) to be an example as well.²⁸ It is well to note that examples are visible by definition. If congregants are not close enough to their leaders to see these truths in the leaders' lifestyle, then *they are not close enough*. In that case, leaders need to encourage their people to spend more time with them and observe them more closely.²⁹

The congregants also need training. (As Jim Myers said, "Teaching is impartation of information; training is impartation of skill."³⁰) Modeling and teaching lay the foundation for training, but the coaching that helps people develop skill in applying these truths is a separate activity. Pastors cannot simply lecture and live and hope their people get it through osmosis. They can do better than that.

On a personal note, I have presented these two truths from Scripture because I believe them and regard them as important. This does not mean that I have worked out all the ways to apply them, or that I have extensive experience in helping churches develop application of these truths. I am new at helping people to implement these truths. As I have said to the people of Grace Chapel on several occasions, no one will be

²⁷ Phil. 3:17, 2 Thess. 3:7–10,

²⁸ 1 Tim. 4:12.

²⁹ Thus, the much-lamented "living-in-a-fishbowl" situation is not merely unavoidable, but at times desirable, if one is to be an example. (Having lived in the fishbowl almost my whole life, as a pastor's kid and Christian schoolteacher's kid and now as an assistant pastor and seminary instructor, I do understand the implications of that statement.)

³⁰ James F. Myers, "Sending and Where Missionaries Come From" (presentation, 2004 CTS Pastors Conference, Irvine, CA, March 8, 2004).

more surprised than I if everything I try actually works. All I can tell you is what I have tried so far. But first, I will tell you one thing I am *not* doing. I am not creating a program. If disciple-making is about anything at all, it is about building people, a few at a time. Build a program to make disciples, and it will fall apart without the right person to run it. Build a person into a genuine disciple, and he will make more disciples, with or without a program and with or without the support of his mentor. But on to what I *am* doing

Daily Encouragement: I speak weekly to two mentors for the purpose of reciprocal encouragement in the faith. I spend time with my wife dedicated to that purpose. I use “chatting time” after church services as a chance to do this same thing with people in the church. There are several other people that I call or see regularly. The net result? It is a rare day when I do not exchange encouragement with another member of the body of Christ.

Disciple-Making:³¹ I have identified a handful of people with whom I have an opportunity to have a regular influence. I am actively seeking to bring them to the point of genuine discipleship or, for some, to encourage them to continue in it. One of the ways I seek to accomplish this is by using my time with them for spiritual encouragement. I find that stirring up others to love and good works tends to stimulate them to do the same.

More officially, I have also begun a training group that includes several people who would otherwise be outside my circle of influence. They are learning what it means to be a genuine disciple—including making disciples. My short-term goal is to prepare them to start another training group, which they will lead (I will be present as a resource, but they will hold the reins). My long-term goal is for this process of disciple-making to take on a life of its own, in whatever form.

³¹ Disciple-making does not have to take the form of three one-on-one early-morning meetings a week. There is nothing wrong with that model, but it is by no means the only possibility. Within the sphere of His wider ministry, Jesus Himself worked especially with a group of twelve picked men, and a sub-group of three selected from among the twelve. Paul regularly traveled with a small group of men he was training. John Mark learned at various times under Paul, Barnabas, and Peter. The assembly spoken of everywhere in the NT is generally of small groups, not often of pairs. So it need not be the one-on-one arrangement that many are accustomed to.

Conclusion

Christ calls all believers to minister to each other. Yet many Bible-believing churches have no concept of the extent to which this is the case. Every believer should have daily encouragement, and every believer should be a disciple and a disciple-maker. If church leaders can teach their people why they should do these things, show them by example how to live them out in modern society, and train them in their ability to do the same, then churches will grow not merely in numbers but in quality.

Timothy R. Nichols received his most significant biblical education from his father, Rev. Edd Nichols. He went on to spend three years at Florida Bible College, and completed his B.S. at Southeastern Bible College in 1997. After a brief interlude, Tim continued his education at Chafer Theological Seminary, graduating with a Th.M. in 2004. Tim presently ministers as an assistant pastor at Grace Chapel in Orange, CA, and as an instructor at Chafer Theological Seminary. His e-mail address is tnich77@yahoo.com.