

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 10, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 12:6,8

“We have different gifts, according to
the grace given us.... If a person’s
gift is exhortation, let him exhort.”

ON ROOSTERS AND PREACHERS

Some of the old mediaeval Latin manuscripts found in European monasteries contain wry and gentle humor. There is one that says, “The Church is very similar to Noah’s Ark; if it weren’t for the storm outside, you couldn’t stand the smell inside!” According to another, roosters and preachers have many similarities. For example, the rooster crows at certain hours, the preacher likewise. The rooster has a tendency to strut, just like the preacher! And so on...

Perhaps this rooster-preacher comparison fits the concept that many people have of pulpiteers, especially those of the exhorting type. I must confess that when, once in a while, I listen to some of the TV preachers, I am appalled by their braggart style. Indeed, it is ironic that one of them has a name that rhymes with braggart! There he stands, clutching a large open Bible in one outstretched hand, while with the other he shakes an accusing finger at his congregation, all the while shouting at the top of his lungs.

Is this what is meant by the gift of exhortation, of which our text speaks? I think not.

The dictionary definition of “exhort” is “to urge or warn earnestly”; but the Greek word translated “exhort” in the New Testament does not imply being bombastic or noisy. It is a very interesting word — it is “parakaleo.” Now “kaleo” means to “call” and “para” means “alongside.” So, an “exhorter,” a “paraclete,” is literally “one whom you call alongside you to help and encourage you.” The Latin equivalent of “parakaleo” is “advoco”; “voco” means to “call,” and “ad” means “alongside”; and from this Latin verb “advoco” we derive our English word “advocate,” which is one name for a lawyer. You are hauled into court to answer charges, and your “advocate” is the one whom you call to stand alongside you to help you by pleading your case before the judge and jury.

So, this word “parakaleo,” “exhort,” means to comfort, to counsel, to encourage. I understand that the British Navy has a regulation which says that “no officer shall speak discouragingly to any other officer about any undertaking in which he is engaged.” Real exhortation is not designed to frighten the wits out of a person, but rather to spur him on to experience the joy of life in Christ.

It is interesting to note that the word “Paraclete” or “Advocate” is a title that is given both to the Holy Spirit and to the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 14:16 our Lord, before His passion, said, to the disciples, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Paraclete (another

Counselor) to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.” And in 1 John 2:1 the apostle says, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father,” or, as the New International Version translates it, “we have One Who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”

So, you see, the Holy Spirit has been called to our side to assist, strengthen, encourage and counsel us; and the Lord Jesus Christ has been called to represent us before the Father. You can see, can you not, that this gift of exhortation or encouragement involves the supernatural ability to come alongside some fellow believer to help and encourage him or her, to strengthen the weak, reassure the wavering, buttress the buffeted, steady the faltering, console the troubled, and encourage those who are disappointed and dispirited. Just as the Holy Spirit is an instrument of help, so the same Holy Spirit uses those with this gift as instruments of encouragement to fellow Christians.

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the famous New York preacher of the last generation, was also gifted in the ministry of encouragement, and people came from all over the country to receive his counsel and help. In his autobiography, he tells of a young black Baptist pastor from the South who wrote and asked to see him. His young wife had recently died, his pastoral duties were draining him emotionally and spiritually, and he was seriously considering giving up the ministry. After his meeting with Dr. Fosdick, someone asked him about the interview, and he said this beautiful thing. He said, “I went into that office knowing that every star had fallen out of my sky. But Dr. Fosdick took them one by one and put them back again!”

Dr. J. B. Phillips gives us, I think, the finest English translation of our text. Listen to this: “If our gift be the stimulating of the faith of others, let us set ourselves to do it” -- and that truly captures the spirit of the Greek word “parakaleo.”

It is a gracious gift, this ability to encourage fellow believers. It uses healing words rather than sharp admonition. It challenges, but it does so with compassion. If a person admits to some sin that is gaining mastery over him, the exhorter will help his friend see how he can overcome. He will open up the Scripture to him and show him how the Word of God gives us the blueprint for godly conduct.

It is significant that the gift of exhortation follows immediately after the gift of teaching here in Romans 12. Now the immediate purpose of teaching is to impart doctrine, whereas the immediate purpose of exhortation is to show how doctrine should be applied to life, so that the believer may be edified and encouraged. Exhortation is meant to help fellow Christians to live out their obedience to the Gospel. Exhortation is the pastoral application of the Gospel to a particular situation faced by a fellow Christian, the exhorter shows how doctrine should be applied to life, so that the believer may grow more Christ-like in character and conduct.

Throughout Scripture the ministry of exhortation has a double meaning -- it involves encouragement and admonition. The Bible, in more than one place, reminds us that a godly father engages in this twofold form of exhortation: he encourages his children in all that is good, but he also urges and admonishes them to avoid the pitfalls into which they may so easily fall. And the Apostle Paul uses this very father image in writing to the Christians at Thessalonica. He

says, “You know that we dealt with each of you as a father, deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God Who calls you into His Kingdom and glory.” (1 Thessalonians 2:11,12). In other words, Paul encouraged them, but he also challenged them to put the Gospel into practice in the marketplace of life. So today the exhorter will encourage and challenge the fellow believer to whom he ministers, but always in the context of loving concern for that individual.

So, we might define the gift of exhortation as the special ability that God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ to minister words of comfort, consolation, counsel, encouragement and challenge to other members of the Body in such a way that they feel helped and healed by being shown how Scripture relates to conduct.

Though many possessed the gift of exhortation in apostolic times, one New Testament character stands out as the very epitome of this ability. His name is Barnabas. His name crops up here and there in the record of the early Church; but the interesting thing is that every time he appears in the narrative he is encouraging someone, or he is saving a situation. He was a Jew, born on the island of Cyprus. Tradition says that he studied at Tarsus University with Paul, and later attended the theological seminary in Jerusalem under the great teacher Gamaliel. He owned large tracts of land on the island of Cyprus and was a rich and influential man.

1. Notice how he encouraged and endorsed a suspected man, an unwelcome convert.

Picture Paul’s predicament after his conversion. His old Jewish friends considered him a renegade and a traitor. On the other hand, to the Christians, the name “Saul of Tarsus” meant what the name “Adolf Hitler” meant to the Jews of Europe during the “Holocaust.” For one who had made such havoc of the Church suddenly to become an ardent devotee of Christ seemed unbelievable. Was this man trying to infiltrate their ranks as a spy? Might his “conversion” not be a pretense designed for obtaining a full list of Christians to be rounded up for martyrdom?

But Barnabas opened his home to Saul, and encouraged him in his newfound faith, and actually arranged for Paul to meet the leaders of the church at Jerusalem. We read, “He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus Saul had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9:27). Barnabas sponsored Paul with such success that the suspected spy was able to “move about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (verse 28). What a boost Barnabas’ gift of encouragement must have given Paul!

2. He accepted and counselled and encouraged alien believers.

Some of the little band of Christians at Jerusalem made their way to Antioch to evangelize the Jews there. Some of these missionaries preached to the Greeks in Antioch as well as to the Jews, and many of these Gentiles were soundly converted, and a flourishing church grew up. But the church at Jerusalem grew suspicious and sent Barnabas to investigate the situation. And listen to what we read: “When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Acts 11:23). You see, his exhortation contained both encouragement and challenge. He threw his full support into the work, staying more than a year to consolidate the ministry. Interestingly enough, we are told that “the disciples were called ‘Christians’ first at Antioch” (verse 26). It was also the Antioch church which sent

out the missionaries who first brought the Gospel to Europe. What far-reaching results from the faithful exercise of his gift of encouragement and challenge!

3. Through encouragement he helped restore a youthful deserter. You remember how Barnabas and Paul teamed up to go on their first missionary journey. Recognizing in his nephew John Mark a potential Christian leader just as he had in Paul, Barnabas had used his influence to have Mark taken with them as their assistant. But before the journey was half over, up in the bandit-infested, dangerous terrain of Asia Minor, Mark defected. He was young, and the rigors of the mission proved to be too much for him. Perhaps he was homesick and afraid. At any rate he returned home, and Barnabas was disappointed, but Paul was angry. However, the young man was soon overcome with shame and remorse for what he had done in letting Christ down. He sincerely repented and begged for another chance to prove his loyalty to the Savior.

So, when the time came to start the next missionary tour, strong disagreement arose between Paul and Barnabas over taking John Mark with them. Barnabas said, "Surely this promising young Christian should be given another chance." But Paul said, "No way. Why should we endanger the success of the mission by the presence of a man who failed us last time?" This was one of the few shameful episodes in Paul's life. How sad to think of him acting in such an Un-Christlike and self-righteous fashion. Had he forgotten that he was once in the same position as Mark -- suspected and scorned? Paul had absolutely no right to treat Mark, a brother in Christ, as he did.

The result was that Paul and Barnabas parted company. Paul took Silas with him on his second missionary journey, and Barnabas went off evangelizing in Cyprus with Mark. I suspect that Paul's refusal to give him a second chance made Mark realize that he would somehow have to redeem himself; and Barnabas' encouragement, demonstrated by his willingness to take Mark along even if it meant rupturing his friendship with Paul, must have made Mark determined to prove himself. Barnabas' willingness to give Mark another chance helped rescue that young man from despondency and despair, and no doubt restored his self-esteem. Barnabas, the sensitive and caring exhorter, saw Mark's potential for ministry, and by his encouragement and challenge made sure that this man's life would not be wasted. The story has a brighter ending, for apparently in later years, Paul realized what a fine young champion for Christ Mark really was, and he renewed his fellowship with him. And when Paul, a prisoner in Rome, wrote to Timothy, he said, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11).

Did you ever realize that if Barnabas had not used his gift of exhortation and encouragement we might be missing half the New Testament books? He went to bat for Paul when no one else would touch him with a 10-foot pole, and as a result he rescued the man who wrote thirteen of the New Testament letters. Through his salvaging of John Mark, Barnabas saved for the Church down the centuries the man who wrote one of the four Gospels, the Gospel according to Mark, possibly the first of the four Gospels to be written. Here is something quite remarkable. Barnabas never wrote a book that found its way into Holy Scripture, but he encouraged two men who, between them, wrote fourteen books, over half of the twenty-seven New Testament writings! How much we owe to this sensitive, caring, self-effacing exhorter, Barnabas!

All Christians, of course, have the responsibility of caring for one another. Hebrews 3:13 says, "Encourage one another daily." The life style of Christians in contact with one another should be to counsel and share and encourage and challenge lovingly at all times. But over and above this, some Christians have a special gift of counseling that should become recognized to the extent that people in the church who are hurting know where to go to find help and encouragement. When this happens, the Body of Christ is in good health.

Do you care about people? Is the love of Christ reflected in your attitude toward and concern for fellow Christians? Are you endeavoring every day to gain more knowledge of Scripture so that you may use divine truth to help others to build it into their life and conduct? If so, then perhaps you have this wonderful gift of exhortation -- so that you can encourage and lovingly challenge others to a closer walk with God. No greater joy can come to a Christian than to help the hurting find their healing in Christ!

AMEN.