

## **Call Back Your Encouragement**

We're in this together ... and I mean that literally. We know and serve Jesus together, not as separate and individual entities. This is why Jesus began the Lord's Prayer with "*Our Father*." He wanted to point out that we share a common gene pool. We're all sons and daughters of God by new birth, and as a result, belong to the same family.

When we read what they wrote to one another in the New Testament, we can see that the apostles were faithful to put Jesus' teaching on this matter into practice. Peter refers to "our beloved brother Paul" in 2 Peter 3:15 and mentions Silvanus in 1 Peter 5:12, calling him "a faithful brother unto you."

Paul mentions Quartus, Sosthenes, Apollos, Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, and Onesimus (Philemon's former slave) as "a brother," "our brother," or "my brother." Sometimes he adds other descriptions as well—"a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord," "my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier." The apostle John, writing on the isle of Patmos, refers to himself as the readers' brother: "*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus...*" (Revelation 1:9). He didn't feel alone in his suffering—his fellow believers shared the experience with him, even at a distance. They were in it together.

I've read that every great revival period in the church is marked by a return to this biblical idea of a shared brotherhood in Christ. Fellow believers begin to call each other "brother Fred" and "sister Margaret" rather than simply using given names. The value of this practice is obvious: It reminds us of our special relationship and our need to treat one another with special consideration because of it.

The reason God designed the church the way He did is because He knows how important it is for every individual to be a part of a larger whole. In community, we help and encourage one another. The old instruct the young, the strong support the weak, the healthy ones care for the sick among them, and everyone shares the workload because of their love and loyalty to the family. It may not always be fun, but the team approach works wonderfully—"all for one and one for all."

Here's how Paul described the goal of Christian community: "*To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ... Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work*" (Ephesians 4:12-13, 15-16).

Many of us have been brought up in North America and therefore struggle with this idea of communal faith. We've been taught that our individual faith in Jesus Christ is all that matters. As the old country song said, "Me and Jesus, we've got a good thing goin.' Me and Jesus, we've got it all worked out." We're happy to have others come along for the ride, if they want to, but it doesn't really matter if they don't. After all, he who travels farthest travels alone, right? Wrong. In God's eyes, we're less likely to succeed spiritually when we try to go it alone. Traveling alone actually slows down our discipleship process.

As independent and strong-willed as he was, Paul didn't go it alone. He ministered with other believers on his missionary journeys. At times, his very life depended upon their help in getting him away from a dangerous situation. In Acts, we can see the principle working for the benefit of individual Christians over and over again. Peter and John were bolder as they faced the Pharisees together. On another occasion, Peter was literally prayed out of jail by his Christian family. The persecutor of the church, Saul, was finally welcomed into the Christian community because of Barnabas, a brother who believed his account of conversion on the Damascus Road. The needs of widows and orphans were met through the church family, and new converts found refuge from the hostile culture around them in the company of fellow believers.

If you don't have a group of Christians you interact with as family, you're missing out on one of the greatest blessings of new birth. Going to a worship service on Sunday is *not* what I'm talking about. This small group of fellow disciples will "be there" for you—encouraging and praying for you when you fall down spiritually or just grow weary in your walk; when you need a sympathetic shoulder to cry on; when you want to share your spiritual victories; when you want to impart to someone else the new truths you've learned from the Holy Spirit. This kind of relationship isn't easily forged, but it's worth the effort. We need to be intentional about it, making the time to get together with them and being willing to share our lives with openness and honesty.

I remember one lady I met when I was undergoing chemotherapy. I was surprised when she shared with me that only a couple of people in her church knew that she had cancer and was undergoing treatment for it. I might have chalked up her reluctance to disclose this to her being a very shy personality who didn't want to draw any attention to herself. But I don't think that's the reason. She seemed quite poised and self-confident to me, and she mentioned that her husband was the senior pastor of the church she attended.

Of course, there's always some reticence in all of us to share every aspect of our lives with everyone around us. We don't know how certain ones we don't know well will respond to our confessions. So we hold back out of fear. But in this lady's case, I found it hard to believe that in her life as the pastor's wife she hadn't invested in the most important part of church life: finding a group of brothers and sisters within her larger church body with whom she could bear her soul—people who would care about her well-being, pray for her recovery, and offer love and moral support.

She was always alone when she came for her chemo treatment, and I can assure you, this is never a quick in and out experience. We were in that treatment room for at least 5 hours every time we went. Sitting in chairs next to one another, we struck up an easy conversation about our cancer journey. She seemed eager to talk, but she was always quick to caution me about not sharing anything about her to anyone else. Our lives were unlikely to overlap outside of that room, but she wanted to make sure that nothing she shared would get back to anyone in her congregation.

I found this profoundly sad, because I was so aware of how my brothers and sisters in Christ were helping to keep my spirits buoyed up throughout my cancer treatments. I knew that she needed these close relationships in the body as much as I did ... but for some reason she had cut herself off from them. Perhaps it was out of fear, or hurts in the past. Or perhaps it was her own pride that kept her from disclosing her personal struggles. Whatever the reason, she was missing out on all that God planned for her to enjoy in the spiritual family He had provided.

There are times when we need to hear about the struggles and victories of another to keep us moving forward. When I was a brand new Christian, I remember how much I looked up to the older saints around me. Their confidence in God reassured me that I could trust Him for the long haul. And their concern for me brought comfort and encouragement on the days I felt discouraged. I needed them to “call back” to me what they had learned in their walk with the Lord so I could find the courage to persevere. Now that I’ve walked a while with Jesus, I’m expected to do the same for the new believers coming up behind me, lest they “grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3).

So don’t delay. Take the time to become a part of a small group of encouragers who will intentionally “be there” for each other in good times and bad. Here is where you will receive and learn to give the love that Jesus wanted for His disciples: “**By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another**” (John 13:35). Like any family, our Christian community may not always be harmonious or enjoyable. But that’s no reason to try to go it alone. We need each other, and we please our Father when we seek to live at peace and build each other up.

Out of the strength of our loving relationships with one another, we can confidently go out into a hurting world to share the benefits of being in Christ with those around us. People are lonely and disconnected. They yearn for a place to belong. Once they make their personal decision to invite Jesus Christ into their hearts, they will need the support and encouragement of their brothers and sisters to become rooted and grounded in Him. This is why we need to embrace the value of community. It’s God’s great plan for every individual disciple, so we can find the joy of serving Him *together*.

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“If you have gone a little way ahead of me, call back—  
It will cheer my heart and help my feet along the stony track;  
And if, perhaps, Faith’s light is dim, because the oil is low,  
Your call will guide my lagging course as wearily I go.

Call back, and tell me that He went with you into the storm;  
Call back, and say He kept you when the forest's roots were torn;  
That, when the heavens thunder and the earthquake shook the hill,  
He bore you up and held you where the lofty air was still.

If you'll say He heard you when your prayer was but a cry,  
And if you'll say He saw you through the night's sin-darkened sky—  
If you have gone a little way ahead, O friend, call back—  
It will cheer my heart and help my feet along the stony track.”

*Streams in the Desert* by L.B. Cowman, December 19<sup>th</sup> reading