

# EDIFICATION

## STRENGTHENING AND BUILDING UP THE BODY

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### INTRODUCTION: BUILDING UP IN AN AGE OF TEARING DOWN

Today, we live in an age where, by words and actions, people seem to enjoy tearing other people down. You see it everywhere, from reality TV shows to the coarse interactions on talk radio, public put-downs of authority figures, bullying at school and on social media, the unseemly antics of our parliamentarians, to downright character assassination. We're witness to a unending spectacle of fellow human beings being torn down—with terrible consequences, for unbeknown to most who perpetrate this evil, the misuse of words and destructive actions can often lead to disaster—physically, emotionally and spiritually.

It's so easy to put someone down, but it takes a lot more effort to build them up, to edify them. Sadly, you can destroy in a moment what may have taken years to build up.

I'm sure we all have a general understanding of what is meant by *edification*. It has to do with *strengthening*, with *building up*. The Scriptures admonish us to edify, or build one another up, based upon the example of our heavenly Father, the Supreme Edifier. In the Old Testament, God reveals His desire to 'build up, and not tear down' His people Israel (Jer 24:6; 42:10; cf. 31:4). He promises renewed strength to those who wait upon Him (Isa 40:31), and, as the Great Shepherd who faithfully feeds His sheep (Isa 40:10-11), will seek out any lost sheep, and strengthen and watch over the weaker of the flock (Ezk 34:15-16). In the same way, as the people of God, we're supposed to both *edifying* and *being edified*, with 'hearts strengthened by grace' (Heb 13:9) and 'in every good deed and word' (2Thes 2:17). The apostle Paul stands out as one of the greatest of edifiers, and time and again, in the Book of Acts, we read of him 'strengthening the churches' (Acts 15:41), or 'strengthening all the disciples' (Acts 18:23). As a model for us all to follow, Paul reminded the Corinthian church, in 2Cor 12:19, that '*everything* we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up'. Imagine having that on your résumé!

Edification is supposed to lead to the spiritual strengthening of the Body of Christ and of its individual members. What are the dynamics behind this process?

Let's begin with a question of sorts, one we'll attempt to answer at the conclusion of this message. It's based on 1Th 5:11, where we read Paul telling the Church:

**1Thes 5:11** (RSV) Therefore encourage one another and build one another up [NKJV: 'edify one another'], just as you are doing.

As you can see, the words 'encourage' and 'edify', or 'build up,' occur together in this one verse, as indeed they do in several other scriptures. They have different Strong's reference numbers ('edify'=Strong's G3618; οἰκοδομέω, oikodomēō). Can we tell the difference between them? Are these two words synonymous, that is, of similar

meaning? Or does one perhaps lack a quality which the other supplies? Barnabas, for example, was called 'Son of Encouragement' in Acts 4:36. He was a great encourager. Was he therefore also a great edifier? Can you be encouraging but not edifying? Or edifying without being encouraging?

There should be a deep sense of personal fulfilment when we've been able to edify a brother or sister. Let's then first consider our *collective* responsibility to edify one another in the Church.

### **MUTUAL EDIFICATION**

**Rom 15:2** (NKJV) Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification.

How does this work in practice? Of course, we should seek to please others rather than just ourselves, just Christ always did what pleased His Father (Jn 8:29). Yet can you please your neighbour for his good, *without* edifying him? Can you do so with ulterior motives? You can, can't you? In fact, the apostle Paul talks in several places about not being a 'people pleaser', seeking human approval or favour (cf. Gal 1:10; Eph 6:6; Col 3:22; 1Thes 2:4). To please or merely gratify our neighbour isn't the end in itself; the aim should be to *build them up*, for their good, their benefit, their enrichment. It's easy to comply with the wishes of others; however, it takes spiritual maturity, and sound, wholesome thinking and action to contribute impactfully to someone's spiritual welfare, without gaining any personal advantage. It's so contrary to the mindset of the world, epitomised so well in a quote from the late Gore Vidal: "Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies." The methodology is akin to Paul's own principle of making himself 'all things to all men', of walking in their shoes (1Cor 9:19-23). It's a great principle of love, limited, of course, not just to our spiritual family, but having universal application.

Paul had earlier made the same point in verse 19 of the previous chapter, Rom 14, discussing both those strong as well as those weak in the faith:

**Rom 14:19** (NIV) Let us therefore make every *effort* [it doesn't come naturally!] to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Mutual edification helps build greater peace because we believe that the spiritual health of the other person is the most important consideration. Assuming, of course, that overt sin isn't involved, such peace is produced because our words, attitudes and actions are non-judgemental. No one will stumble over them because we're striving to identify ways to help *build people up*, especially if they're indeed weaker in the faith, the main point Paul was making here. Edification implies that we can all learn something from one another, even from one weaker in the faith. To be lifted in spirit and renewed in faith is a precious outcome.

As has been said, it's very easy to tear down, but so often much harder to build up, because when we *genuinely* seek to be edifying, we may have to, like Paul, place limits on our Christian liberty, by not always insisting on our rights—and we'll consider this a little more later. And it's not just what we *do*, but also what we *say* that may need some curtailing.

**Eph 4:29** (RSV, NRSV) Let no evil [or 'unwholesome'] talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as there is need, that it may impart grace to those who hear.

The Greek here rendered 'evil' literally means 'insipid,' 'without salt,' or 'worthless,' and may well signify not simply bad language but also malicious gossip and slander. Anything that injures others or sparks dissension is covered by the expression. A *blessing* needs to be imparted to those who hear our words, giving them encouragement and direction, so our responsibility is to use wisdom and ensure that we're sensitive to the situation and needs of whomever we're talking to. Col 4:6 tells us that our speech should *'always* be gracious, seasoned with salt.'

When it comes to mutual edification, the apostle Paul again offers us a lovely template to work with.

**Rom 1:11-12** (NRSV) For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you--12 or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

How do these verses speak to you? To me, it's as though Paul, having dictated the first verse, suddenly stopped, realising that he didn't want to come across as sounding spiritually superior in this offering of spiritual gifts; *mutual edification* in the faith was his aim, as it should be ours, and it works *both ways*. Let's always keep that in mind.

### **BUILDING UP THE BODY**

Those of you as old as or older than me may remember being told at school to never mix your metaphors. I guess nobody explained this to the apostle Paul, as he was forever mixing them, for example, using biological and architectural metaphors in His description of the Church in 1Cor 3:9 as both God's field and His building, which ultimately becomes a temple:

**1Cor 3:9** For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. Focusing on the latter metaphor, Paul goes on in the chapter to describe the process by which God's building, the foundation of which is Jesus Christ, is built up to become a spiritual temple in which God Himself dwells (1Cor 3:10-17; cf. Heb 3:6; 1Pe 2:5).

And we, folks, are an integral part of that structure, with *every one of us*—every one of God's scattered people—having a vital role to play in the process of building up this spiritual temple. The NIV rendering of Eph 2:19-22, where Paul talks about the building's *foundation, formation* and *function*, brings out the imagery most clearly and most beautifully.

**Eph 2:19-22** (NIV) Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [NT prophets certainly included; cf. 3:5; 4:11], with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

Then notice the sense of *togetherness* expressed in verses 21-22:

21 In him the whole building...

The sense really means 'all building that's being done', as it's a work in progress.  
....is joined together...

A picture is being painted here of the Roman construction process whereby slave labourers would turn huge rocks around until they fitted each other perfectly—and so helped support the entire edifice. The Greek *συναρμολογουμενε* /, used only here and in Eph 4:16, which we'll refer to shortly, denotes that the various parts of the building are skilfully fitted to each other, *not haphazardly* thrown together. It speaks of *unity* and *symmetry*, doesn't it? *Each of us* has a designated function in helping put together this spiritual, universal temple.

...and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

The Greek *naos* is referencing the inner sanctuary, the Most Holy Place.

22 And in him you too *are being built together* to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The apostle Peter, in 1Pe 2:4-5, paints similar imagery of the Body of Christ as composed of living stones being built into a spiritual house. We have the firmest of foundations. And each of us has a specific place in the building for which we're *exactly suited*, supporting each other to make the Church a 'dwelling place of God in the Spirit'.

Do we then believe what the apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, that 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1Cor 12:7)? There's *no one* in the Body of Christ who isn't endowed with a spiritual gift of some sort that can be harnessed for the common good of others in the Body—that is, for their edification. And there's no such thing as a 'private gift' (Rom 12:6-8)!

Paul then goes on, in verses 8-11 of 1Cor 12, to list the spiritual gifts that can result as the power of God's Holy Spirit is manifested in His saints.

Now some gifts stand out more than others, it seems, when it comes to the building up the Church, and we can tend to focus on these, often inordinately so. Paul revisits the topic in Eph 4. Let's note verses 11-14 first.

**Eph 4:11-14,16** And His [the reference is to Jesus Christ] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers...

Please note Paul's use of the word 'gifts'. This should be the focus word in consideration of these 'offices' here delineated. When we read about God 'appointing' individuals to these offices, also described in 1Cor 12:28 onwards, too many people place the full focus on the *offices*, rather than on the spiritual gifts that validate the *appointments* to the offices; even 1Cor 12, containing the 'God appointed...' section (1Cor 12:27-31), begins with a discussion of spiritual gifts. And that's where the emphasis should lie; not on notions of modern-day apostolic or prophetic appointments, of individuals deemed answerable only to God. I dare say that most of us have experienced such men at work, and the resultant bad fruits. There are *no* apostles or prophets today, directly appointed by God. The only place where you can find the original apostolic church structure in operation is in the Scriptures. But there are *teachers*. Yet even then the apostle James tells us to be mindful that if we seek to teach, we are more accountable (Jas 3:1). Why are teachers so important?

12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry [NIV: 'to prepare God's people for works of service'], for building up the body of Christ...

The purpose of the original apostolic structure and of the ongoing work of teaching and instructing are here defined. The aim is to edify the Church.

... 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature [spiritual] manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

And, as the next verse then points out, such edification or building up should help bring about spiritual discernment in God's people.

14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Then notice verse 16:

16 (NIV) From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, *as each part does its work.*

The sense is that individual each part is to be working properly, in harmony. And it's our *collective* responsibility to ensure that this indeed is what happens.

We'll revisit verse 16 of Eph 4 later.

As we're all aware, the Corinthian church was greatly gifted, as we note in summary form in 1Co 14:26.

**1Cor 14:26** What then, brethren? When you come together [in their worship services], each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. *Let all things be done for edification.*

Yet, as we also know, the Corinthians often *misused* the spiritual gifts with which they were endowed because they lost sight of the primary goal: to edify. This was most clearly demonstrated in their pursuit of the gift of tongues over that of prophesying. Paul made the contrast quite clear, if we go back to verses 3-5 of 1Cor 14:

**1Cor 14:3-5** (NIV) But everyone who prophesies [that is, expounds the Word of God] speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

And, in like manner, when it comes to instructing each other, we probably all have subjects in mind whose exposition we feel would be especially edifying. But will they edify *others* besides ourselves? Is the common good always the primary motivation behind any instruction? As an example, I'm sure that most of us have experienced the frustration of having to listen to holy day or festival messages that have failed to focus on an appropriate theme. You come away feeling somewhat betrayed, don't you? An opportunity to receive edification has been lost.

5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater [Wow!] than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

So the apostle Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church is still applicable for us today: 'Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church', he told them in 1Cor 14:12 (NIV).

So what's our personal spiritual gift or gifts? Do we know? We need to, don't you think, if we're to follow God's directive and use our gift or gifts to help edify others and build up the Body? So, if we're still not sure, let's consider, mediate, probe, ask others—and so discover. It's well worth the effort.

### **SELF-EDIFICATION: TREES, BUILDINGS & GOD'S WORD**

However, we're probably not always going to be in an environment where such direct mutual edification is always possible, and even if we were to be, at day's end, we do need to stand on our own two feet. So let's now note some spiritual principles and ingredients vital for *self-edification*.

The apostle Jude, making a contrast with the efforts of false teachers seeking to cause division and separation—the very *opposite* of edification—gives us a powerful exhortation to help us to *personally* strengthen our faith. In verses 20-21, he lists three spiritual tools we all have at our disposal; I just want to focus on the first two of these, in verse 20.

**Jude 1:20** But you, beloved, build yourselves up...

Although the 'you' is plural here, the admonition also needs to be taken personally. The Greek is in the present continuous tense. This, again, is a process that needs to be ongoing.

....in your most holy faith....

The Greek *epoikodomountes*, for 'build up', again depicts growth using the familiar figure of the erection of a house or temple. Our faith has already been laid as a foundation, and we're called upon to continue to work to strengthen this, by building upon it. And if our faith has a strong foundation, we can build vibrant, stable godly character upon it.

And it might sound trite to say this, but there are things we do need to do *ourselves* and *for ourselves* as we continue our spiritual journey in the wilderness. Many of us have no doubt known people who expect to always be spiritually fed, externally, by *others*, and who therefore may display what you might call limited spiritual *nous*, or common sense. We can't be like this. Php 2:12 tells us to 'work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling'; while 2Pe 3:18 exhorts us to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. And at times this can be a hard, lonely process: the history of the scatterings of God's Church from Acts 8 onwards attests to this. However, personal edification comes as our faith grows. We all should be able bear witnesses to this in our spirits and in our lives.

Then Jude gives us a vital tool to help build ourselves up. Prayer.

....and pray in the Holy Spirit. (cf. Eph 6:18)

Of course, collective prayer is powerfully edifying, as we see in Acts 4:23-31, where the community of believers prayed together and was spiritually strengthened after the

release of the apostles Peter and John. However, we should never underestimate the power of personal prayer and its value in this process of self-edification. Even if we're standing alone, communication with our Creator must serve to empower and edify us. If it doesn't, there's something amiss. In Rom 8:26-27, apostle Paul writes of how God's Spirit actually works to help to strengthen us—to build us up—interceding 'with groans that words cannot express,' when we're struggling in our prayers. We might consider how this works.

You know, when our body's under attack through sickness or disease, we wisely take steps to strengthen our immune system, don't we? Well, we're always under attack by the Evil One, so our spiritual immune system has to be constantly built up and fortified. We can never let down.

Let's note some more spiritual tools to aid us in our personal edification. Again, even where people are addressed *collectively*, there's a *personal* application for each of us.

As you'd expect, the apostle Paul also discusses this process of self-edification that is to be part of our individual walk with Jesus Christ. He employs several metaphors in his description, again including those of *planting* and *building*.

**Col 2:6-7** So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live [or 'walk'] in him....

The word 'walk' is often used of the Christian life. It speaks of action and progress. We can't walk and remain in the same place, can we? We're either going forward or backward. And we need to be going forward.

....7 rooted...

Yet just like a tree, we're also to be 'rooted', standing firmly on our own two feet; the Greek verb tense here describes a *completed* action: we're spiritually unmovable. The next three verbs, 'built up', 'strengthened', and 'overflowing', are in the *present* tense, showing the continual growth that should characterise our walk with Christ.

....and built up in him....

The metaphor is again changed to a building that's being gradually put up, layer upon layer.

.....strengthened [or 'established'] in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

An attitude of thankfulness has to co-exist with our growing faith. A thankful spirit speaks volumes about our spiritual maturity. Paul so often emphasises the need for gratitude and thanksgiving in his epistles. (Cf. Rom 1:21; 14:6; 2Cor 1:11; 4:15; 9:11-12; Eph 5:20; 1Ti 2:1), especially in Colossians, where the exhortation is for us to *abound* in thanksgiving, that is, to always give thanks to God and to be thankful for our blessings (Col 1:12; 3:15,17; 4:2). We've all heard of the need for an 'attitude of gratitude', haven't we? Continually expressing our gratitude to God, from our hearts, in words and in prayer, works to build us up and strengthen us in our faith. And, of course, the *lack* of a deep sense of thankfulness to God leaves us far more susceptible to doubt and spiritual floundering, as opposed to being built up.

So again, just to refocus: we're talking about how we personally contribute to our spiritual edification, or strengthening. In Ephesians 3, the apostle Paul speaks of God's *power* working in us to build us up.

**Eph 3:16-19** (NIV, NKJV) I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being (cf. Rom 7:22; 2Cor 4:16).

Do we ask God for this spiritual power?

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts [that is, in our *total personality*, in the most inner chambers of our psyche] through faith.

Now when someone 'dwells' somewhere, they've *settled down* there, haven't they? Jesus Christ wants to see such faith in our hearts that He can settle down, feel completely at home, there. (cf. Jn 14:23; Gal 4:19; Rev 3:20). Does He? Has He found a permanent residence in our personalities, or is He just received as an occasional visitor?

And I pray that you, being rooted [there's that word again!] and grounded in love....

So we find Paul yet again mixing his metaphors, once more borrowing words from the worlds of botany and building. And it's not a problem, for Christ Himself used the imagery of trees and buildings to teach valuable lessons (Mt 7:15-20,24-27). The word 'rooted' here once again brings to mind the image of our tree, its roots striking down deeper and deeper into the soil of love; 'grounded', that of our building whose groundwork is the foundation on which it rests, in this case also defined as love.

18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Try to visualise this lovely imagery conjured up by Paul here, of being edified or firmly established in the faith—for images can so powerfully impact us. Can we picture ourselves as trees whose roots lie deep in the soil of the love of God, or as buildings with strong foundations laid on the rock of this same love (cf. Col 1:23; 1Pe 5:10)?

Of course, it's stating the obvious that the Word of God is the *greatest* tool available to us for our individual—as it is for our collective—spiritual edification, as attested to by the parting words of the apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus. No longer to be there to *personally* edify them, he commits them to God and to the Scriptures so that the process could continue.

**Acts 20:32** And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able *to build you up* and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

King David, in Ps 119, used similar words during his time of distress. "Strengthen me according to Your word", he cried out to God (Ps 119:28 [NIV]).

Now of course there are many ways in which studying God's Word serves to edify us. The whole Gospel message, said Paul in Rom 16:25, is able to 'strengthen' or 'establish' us, and 'all Scripture', as we know from 2Ti 3:16, is profitable 'for instruction



in righteousness'. In Rom 15:4, the apostle Paul powerfully reinforces the value of the Scriptures in edifying God's people:

**Rom 15:4** For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction...

Isn't that amazing? 'Everything', as the NIV renders it, written in the Word of God is personally instructive, and expressly meant for us today! Even *bad* examples, such as the failings of ancient Israel, as Paul tells us in 1Cor 10, can serve as positive object lessons for us. Do we believe that? Notice then how this instruction should lead to edification and encouragement.

.....that by steadfastness [other versions: *perseverance, endurance, patience*] and by the encouragement [NKJV: 'comfort'] of the scriptures we might have hope.

Or 'keep on having hope' (cf. Rom 5:3-5). Through patient endurance and the comfort and encouragement of Scripture, we come to understand the true reality of the hope we have. *Hope* has to be more than just a word to us! The biblical examples of others who won God's approval by faithfully persevering should motivate us to endure and be comforted here and now, as we look ahead in confident hope to the future God has in store for us. And we're going to need this confident hope given what lies ahead of us in these perilous times. We need only ponder the passage of the past few months!

The Scriptures are God's gift to us for our instruction and edification. Do we derive strength and comfort from them as God intends?

I mentioned earlier of the sad lack of spiritual *nous* we can witness at times, and the resultant floundering in faith that can paralyse our growth. No doubt this often sets in because of a neglect of the study of God's Word. There has to be a love for the Word of God and a preparedness to regularly study it, to become, as Paul put it, workers 'correctly handling the word of truth' (2Ti 2:15).

So do we, as the apostle Peter urges us, truly 'desire the pure milk of the word, that [we] may grow thereby'—that we may be edified (1Pe 2:2 [NKJV])?

## **RESTORATION AND CORRECTION**

Of course, our own personal and collective edification and strengthening then enables us to reach out to help edify, correct and restore others. Let's now briefly consider this.

Borrowing the language of Isa 35:3, the author of the Book of Hebrews admonishes his readers—and us—to renew their spiritual strength so that they can continue to run the race set before them with perseverance (see v.1). Once again, try to visualise the imagery being portrayed here.

**Heb 12:12-13** Therefore lift your drooping hands...

The literal reading is 'straighten the hands that hang down'. Hands represent strength, don't they?, so tired hands indicate weakness—spiritual weakness and fatigue that have set in.

....and strengthen your weak knees....

The Greek has the sense that the knees are almost paralysed.

13 ....and make straight paths...

The literal meaning is 'wheel tracks', that is, tracks that will also be easy for *others* to follow.

....for your feet [Prov 4:26, LXX is being quoted here], so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

The implication is that these Christians being addressed here were acting as though they were spiritually paralysed and so were being called upon to exert themselves, build up their spiritual strength, and make the path that leads to righteousness clear both for themselves and for others, so no one would stumble. Strengthening themselves would help strengthen others, especially those who were 'lame', the weaker among them. They, too, might now recover as they proceeded to walk upright again. It's another lovely picture of personal and mutual edification. If our Christian life is in any way 'out of joint', we must take steps to remedy it and help others by our positive action and example. It reminds me of an old saying: "If you want to fly, give up everything that weighs you down."

Jesus Christ gives us a touching example of this process of being restored and strengthened in order to then help strengthen others.

We no doubt all recall these words of Christ to Simon Peter, spoken with the foreknowledge that he would very shortly afterwards deny His Master.

**Lk 22:31-32** (NKJV) And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. 32 But I have prayed for you [*singular*—Peter specifically is in mind], that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

Christ's tender concern for His beloved disciples motivated Him to pray to His Father that Peter's faith would not be overwhelmed by the ordeal he would go through in denying Christ, but instead that he would be so strengthened by this bitter experience to be empowered to act to fortify the faith of his weaker brethren. It's a lovely lesson about edification for us to ponder and learn from.

Sometimes, unfortunately, more overt *correction* may be required as part of the process of restoration, so let's look at this in the context of this topic of edification.

Again, we're told that Scripture, correctly applied, of course—as opposed to *human interpretation*—is meant to serve as the basis for correction and reproof.

**2Ti 3:16-17** All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

And, by the way, do we know the difference between *correction* and *reproof*? (*Reproof*, it seems, involves more severe criticism and censure.)

In the first instance, such correction is to occur in a 'spirit of gentleness', and of self-examination.

**Gal 6:1-2** Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens [we have an obligation to help], and so fulfil the law of Christ.

However, as most of us can probably attest to, all too often such 'correction' takes the form of rebuke, and is carried out harshly, sometimes ruthlessly, frequently with the mindset that "I'm right, so you must be wrong!"

Correction has to be measured, keeping in mind both sin committed and sinner. The first and ultimate aim is *restoration*, the edification that should come when rebuke is accepted. For instance, Paul instructed Timothy, in 1Ti 5:1, not to rebuke an older man harshly, rather to *appeal* to him as to a father. And, if you read both verses 1 and 2, it seems clear that appeal or exhortation is the *first* tool or avenue in any form of rebuke.

In stark contrast, harshness in rebuke or correction should be the very *last* measure, as the apostle Paul, who'd been directly appointed by Jesus Christ, pointed out when discussing his use of the apostolic authority given to him.

**2Cor 13:10** (NIV) This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

In our introduction, we noted that this is precisely God's desire for His people (Jer 24:6; 42:10): to employ the former, and avoid having to use the latter. In 1Cor 4:21, Paul intimated that his wish was to come 'in love and with a gentle spirit' to effect the needed correction. That would certainly result in edification. And remember, this was God's true apostle, invested with full authority by Jesus Christ. Too many Church leaders, it seems, are prepared to illegitimately appropriate to themselves such authority. In reality, there's no one today who should ever presume to act with notions of apostolic authority.

Indeed, in Ezk 34, God condemns the shepherds who've scattered His sheep by such ruthless treatment. Notice verse 4, which speaks of their failure to treat their flock in a tender manner that brings edification and strengthening, especially of the weaker members.

**Ezk 34:4** "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them."

And how many self-appointed Church leaders genuinely take this to heart?

Some of you may have heard or even be familiar with the term 'restorative justice', where the aim is not just to hold people accountable, but also to work to *restore relationships* in the wake of inappropriate, harmful or even criminal behaviour; the philosophy has made its way into many classrooms under the title of 'restorative practices'. Similarly, students are held accountable for their misbehaviour towards those who've been harmed, but there's also a focus on solving the problem as opposed

to simply punishing the guilty. It's an attempt to involve the offending student in the corrective decision-making process, while maintaining an atmosphere of care, compassion and respect that preserves individuals' dignity, as well as emphasising expectations and responsibilities. *Relationships* are again the key to this restorative model, which seeks to encourage behaviour change in an environment that promotes growth. You seek to do things *with*, rather than *to*, the misbehaving student.

To me, in the first instance, such should be the nature of correction in the Body of Christ. As a general rule, even when seeking justice for wrong that has been done, there should always be a desire to maintain, or restore, where it's been damaged, an atmosphere of mutual respect, of fairness, and a wish to nurture and encourage, to affirm and re-affirm brotherly relationships—in short, to seek, as the final outcome, to bring about restoration and edification.

For too long, the catchword in the leadership of the Churches of God when faced with a reluctance by someone to accept 'correction' has been, to perhaps coin a new word, *disfellowshipment*. However, scripturally, that's only ever the last resort, as evidenced in 1Cor 5. As a guide for us today, notice what the apostle Paul instructed the Church at Thessalonica to do in such cases.

**2Thes 3:14-15** (NIV) If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

When have you ever seen that carried out in any of the Churches of God?

Do we see the desire to restore, to edify, behind such a methodology of correction? The aim should always be to ensure that no one is left hurt or harmed when restoration is effected. Again, the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians.

**2Cor 7:8-10** (NIV) Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—9 yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so *were not harmed in any way by us*. 10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Discipline is to be exercised with kindness, even when it has to be quite severe. The mindset is always a restorative one. We see this in the apostle Paul's response when he voiced his concern over the failure of the Church to act to restore the now repentant sinner. Reading only verses 6-8 of 2Cor:

**2Cor 2:6-8** (NIV) The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

And in re-affirmation of this nature there is indeed great edification.

Let's consider, finally, the dangers of failing to edify one another when the opportunity arises.

### **THE DANGERS OF FAILING TO EDIFY**

We earlier noted verse 19 of Ro 14. Let's look at the next two verses. I'm sure you recall their context.

**Rom 14:20-21** (NRSV) Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

Strong words indeed! We need to be careful that our words or actions don't serve as a stumbling-block to *anyone*. It's very easy to misuse the liberty God has granted us, namely the knowledge of the truth. Addressing the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1Cor 8:1)." Knowledge acted upon without love as its motivator can easily become knowledge that 'puffs up', producing an arrogance that is detrimental to the edification motivated by love. We can be *wrong* even when we're *right!* And it can be very destructive! Paul continued the theme in verses 10-13 of 1Cor 8.

**1Cor 8:10-13** (NRSV) For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

And, in this context, we might wonder why Paul simply didn't just fully expound the Scriptures to show the utter folly of idolatry and so ease the concerns of those weak in the faith about food offered to idols? Instead, he appealed to the consciences of Christians *strong* in the faith to remember the core principles behind edification.

**1Cor 10:23-24** (NRSV) "All things are lawful," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. 24 Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.

And that, my friends, must surely be one of the hardest things to do!

However, if we fail to take heed and neglect the call to always aim for mutual edification, the consequences can be disastrous.

**Heb 3:13** But exhort [NIV/NASB: 'encourage'] one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Cf. Heb 10:25)

The expression 'as long as it is called today' alludes to the 'today' in Ps 95:7 and means something like 'while you still have opportunity.' 'Today' doesn't last forever, does it? It's a call for swift action to deal with sin.

It's very easy to rationalise our way around sin and so avoid addressing and forsaking it. And this brand of deception that so hardens the heart can paralyse an entire

congregation! My wife and I chose to sever ties with our former fellowship because abuse meted out from the pulpit in the guise of correction wasn't recognised for what it was—lacking in any of the principles of edification—and promptly addressed. Other factors were deemed more important than people taking action as demanded by the Scriptures. The result was that sin enfeebled, and paralysed, the thinking processes of many, with tragic results. We have an obligation to encourage and exhort one another to recognise and deal with sin's deceptiveness. And the beauty is that when we do help others in this way we so often also help ourselves. That's the power of exhortation and edification. Let's think about how that would work for each of us personally.

Do we have a spirit of mutual concern and a preparedness to admonish when necessary to help others deal with sin and deception, and so prevent any hardening of the heart?

### **CONCLUSION: EDIFICATION, LOVE AND ENCOURAGEMENT**

I began by questioning the difference between *edification* and *encouragement*, based on 1Thes 5:11. Let's close by now considering this.

While we can argue, using dictionary definitions, that to 'edify' someone is to build or uplift them, especially morally or spiritually, while to 'encourage' them is to inspire them with courage or confidence, to offer mental support, at day's end, for all of us, they both stand together in the Scriptures, linked by Christian love. The Amplified Bible renders 1Thes 5:11 as:

**1Thes 5:11** (Amplified Bible) Therefore encourage (admonish, exhort) one another and edify (strengthen and build up) one another, just as you are doing.

I'd like you to notice the link between edification, love and encouragement as we quickly revisit Eph 4, where we see what can happen when the Body of Christ is functioning as it should be:

**Eph 4:15-16** Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...

Then let's reread verse 16, to finish.

16 ...from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. (See also 1Thes 3:2-3 and Acts 15:32, where edification and encouragement are mentioned as working together).

The NRSV translates the last phrase as 'promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.' It's a lovely picture of a Church growing in faith and love, as each member contributes to the edification of the Body as a whole. Let's never underestimate the value of our words. 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue', we're told in Prov 18:21.

So in these perilous times when society beckons us to join it in destroying, uprooting and disparaging, let's strive instead to be both great edifiers and encouragers of one another; like Paul and Barnabas, who 'strengthened [*edified*] the souls of the disciples

and *encouraged* them to continue in the faith, saying, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22).

For to edify someone is the most edifying thing you can do!