

CHAPTER TEN

Keeping the Body Healthy

Josiah Henson was born into slavery in the American South. As a young boy, he saw members of his own family worked to death, beaten to death, and sold to other slave-owners. He was able to escape to the North, where he became a well-known public speaker and a leader in the movement to abolish slavery. Some years after the Civil War brought an end to slavery, Henson took a trip to England, where he gave a speech that was heard by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop was impressed by the stately bearing and eloquent speaking ability of this former slave. Introducing himself to Henson after the conclusion of the black man's speech, the Archbishop asked what university Henson had attended.

"The University of Adversity," Henson replied.

Today, millions of people are unhappy students in the University of Adversity. This is a world filled with poverty, pain, oppression, injustice, and suffering. All of this adversity in the world is our opportunity for ministry. The work God has given us is directed toward a suffering and desperate world. Our Lord Jesus Christ requires every member of His body to accomplish this task effectively, with resurrection power, as God intended it to be done. This means that the members of the body must be spiritually healthy and vibrant with the life of Christ, who indwells all Christians through His Spirit.

No athlete spends all his time running races or playing the game for which he is trained. He must also spend many hours keeping himself in shape and developing his skills to a high degree. The same is true of the body of Christ.

The work of the ministry cannot be effectively carried out in a weak and unhealthy church--a church that is torn with internal pains, and wracked by spiritual diseases. So it is no surprise that the pattern of the Holy Spirit for the operation of Christ's body includes not only a plan for "shaping up" the saints, but also a plan for keeping the saints healthy. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers exist not only to equip the members of the body to do ministry, but also to build them up and support them in a mutual ministry to each other, so that the entire body will be vibrant, vital, and effective.

Unhealthy saints

Great damage has been done to the cause of Christ by unhealthy saints who attempted to carry out evangelistic or social ministry with great zeal but without true spiritual health. Burdened with unsolved problems in their own lives, often displaying unhealthy (and unrecognized) hypocrisy and prejudice, these Christians bring the body of Christ and the Gospel of Christ into disrepute in the world. Their worship has become a dull, lifeless, predictable ritual. They display more reverence for their own religious traditions than for biblical truth. They talk about superficial matters around the coffeepot after church, and they call it "fellowship" and "Christian love"--even though there is little if any real involvement in each others' lives.

What is terribly missing in all too many churches is the experience of "body life"--that warm fellowship of Christian with Christian which the New Testament calls *koinonia*, and which was an essential part of early Christianity. The New Testament lays heavy emphasis upon the need for Christians to know each other, closely and intimately enough to be able to bear one another's burdens, confess faults one to another, encourage, exhort, and admonish one another; and minister to one another with the Word, song, and prayer. As we carry out the various "one another" ministries of New Testament-style body life, we will come to comprehend "with all saints," as the apostle Paul says, "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:18,19).

There are over fifty "one another" statements and commands in the New Testament, and these call us to a special kind of life together--what in this book we call "body life." These statements and commands are:

- "Be at peace with each other" (Mark 9:50).
- "Wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).
- "Love one another" (John 13:34).
- "Love one another" (John 13:35).
- "Love each other" (John 15:12).
- "Love each other" (John 15:17).
- "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (Romans 12:10).
- "Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10).
- "Live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:16).
- "Love one another" (Romans 13:8).
- "Stop passing judgment on one another" (Romans 14:13).
- "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 15:7).
- "Instruct one another" (Romans 15:14).
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16).
- "When you come together to eat, wait for each other" (1 Corinthians 11:33).
- "Have equal concern for each other" (1 Corinthians 12:25).
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Corinthians 16:20).
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (2 Corinthians 13:12).
- "Serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13).

- "If you keep on biting and devouring each other you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15).

- "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (Galatians 5:26).
- "Carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2).
- "Be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2).
- "Be kind and compassionate to one another" (Ephesians 4:32).
- "Forgiving each other" (Ephesians 4:32).
- "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19).
- "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).
- "In humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).
- "Do not lie to each other" (Colossians 3:9).
- "Bear with each other" (Colossians 3:13).

- "Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another" (Colossians 3:13).

- "Teach [one another]" (Colossians 3:16).
- "Admonish one another" (Colossians 3:16).
- "Make your love increase and overflow for each other" (1 Thessalonians 3:12).
- "Love each other" (1 Thessalonians 4:9).
- "Encourage each other" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).
- "Encourage one another" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

- "Build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- "Encourage one another daily" (Hebrews 3:13).
- "Spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).
- "Encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:25).
- "Do not slander one another" (James 4:11).
- "Don't grumble against each other" (James 5:9).
- "Confess your sins to each other" (James 5:16).
- "Pray for each other" (James 5:16).
- "Love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

"Live in harmony with one another" (1 Peter 3:8).
"Love each other deeply" (1 Peter 4:8).
"Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:9).

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" (1 Peter 4:10).

"Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5).
"Greet one another with a kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14).
"Love one another" (1 John 3:11).
"Love one another" (1 John 3:23).
"Love one another" (1 John 4:7).
"Love one another" (1 John 4:11).
"Love one another" (1 John 4:12).
"Love one another" (2 John 5).

Obviously, the "one another" ministries in the body of Christ are extremely important to God, since He speaks of them so frequently in His word. So the question we must ask ourselves is: "Where, in the usual, traditional church structure of the church is this kind of interchange possible? What provision is made by church leaders to encourage it and guide its expression through scriptural teaching and wise admonitions?"

In many churches, you can find some expression of body life taking place in private gatherings of Christians, usually in someone's home. But then, all too often, the church leaders find out about it, brand the gatherings as "divisive," and discourage body life from taking place! Authentic body life doesn't threaten the unity of the church--it is the very thing that the church is supposed to be about, according to the New Testament!

In the early church, as we see it described in the New Testament, we see a rhythm of body life evident in the way Christians gathered together in homes to instruct one another, study and pray together, and share the ministry of spiritual gifts. Then they would go out into the world to let the warmth and glow of their love-filled lives overflow into a spontaneous Christian witness that drew love-starved pagans into the church like hungry children into candy store.

This was exactly in line with the exhortation of Jesus to his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34,35).

The early church relied upon a two-fold witness as the means of reaching and impressing a cynical and unbelieving world: *kerygma* (proclamation) and *koinonia* (fellowship). It was the combination of these two which made the church's witness so powerful and effective. "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established" (Matt. 18:16). Pagans could easily shrug off the proclamation as simply another "teaching" among many; but they found it much more difficult to reject the evidence of *koinonia*. The concern of Christians for each other, and the way they shared their lives in the same great family of God, left the pagan world craving and envying this new experience called *koinonia*. It prompted the much-quoted remark of a pagan writer: "How these Christians love one another!"

The present-day church has managed to do away with true New Testament *koinonia* almost completely, reducing the witness of the church to proclamation (*kerygma*) alone. It has thus succeeded in doing two things simultaneously: removing the major safeguard to the health of the church from within, and greatly weakening its effective witness before the world without. It is little wonder, therefore, that the church has fallen on evil days and is regarded as irrelevant and useless by so many in the world.

Fulfilling Christ's law

It is time to take seriously again certain admonitions of Scripture which have somehow been passed over lightly, even by so-called Bible-believing Christians. Let's take a closer look at some of the "one another" passages which call us to a body life way of living.

Take, for instance, this strong word from Galatians 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Note that the apostle indicates that this is the way by which the fundamental law of the Christian life is fulfilled. That law is the "new commandment" of Jesus: "love one another" (John 13:34). The law of love is fulfilled only by bearing one another's burdens. But how can we bear each other's burdens if we don't know what those burdens are? Some way of sharing these burdens with others is obviously called for.

Koinoinia calls for honesty and openness with other Christians, and a mutual recognition that it is neither abnormal nor unspiritual to have burdens and problems in our day-to-day Christian experience. Somehow the masks have to come off. The facades that say "everything is all right" when everything is anything but right have to fall. Often this can best be done in small groups, meeting in homes--though we have found at Peninsula Bible Church that the sharing of burdens and the experience of loving, non-judgmental acceptance and caring can take place in larger meetings, including worship services. Many people fear rejection or giving rise to scandal in such settings, yet we have found that body life can take place in safety, even in a gathering of a thousand people or more. (See Chapter Twelve for a complete discussion and updating of body life at Peninsula Bible Church.)

Bearing one another's burdens at the very least means to uphold one another in prayer. It also means to be willing to spend time with another person, so that you can thoroughly understand that person's feelings and problems. It means committing yourself to an authentic effort to relieve that person's pressures or discouragement, offering intense prayer, practical help, or wise counsel, not just a superficial word of "I'll pray for you."

Many Christians see other Christians in need and think, "Well, that's what the welfare department is for," or, "That's what unemployment insurance is for," or, "That's why I pay taxes." But Christians should never transfer their biblical "one another" responsibilities to an unfeeling, non-Christian government program or bureaucracy. Yes, help from government sources can be welcomed and utilized when needs arise, as can assistance from charitable agencies such as the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, or the United Way. But none of these agencies is a substitute for genuine Christian caring, expressed through an act of love, an affirming embrace, a word of encouragement, or a time of prayer.

Another direct exhortation from the Word is that of James 5:16: "Confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Confessing faults means to admit weaknesses and to acknowledge failures in our Christian lives. It is often difficult to get Christians to do this, despite the clear counsel of God's Word. It goes against the grain to give an image of oneself that is anything less than perfect. Many Christians fear that they will be rejected by others if they admit to any faults. But nothing could be more destructive to authentic Christian koinonia and body life than the common practice today of pretending not to have any problems.

Many Christian families are suffering with conflict, sickness, dysfunctional behavior, addictions, pain, employment problems, and the like--yet those same families project an image of warm-fuzzy, idyllic Christian perfection. To make matters worse, this tragic conspiracy of silence is regarded as the "Christian" thing to do, and the hypocrisy it presents to the outside world is considered a necessary part of a family's "witness." How helpful and healing it would be if our Christian families--and our collective church family--would honestly confess the pain and problems that exist so that restoration can take place. It is especially helpful if husbands and fathers--who have the spiritual leadership role in Christian families--would honestly admit in a gathering of fellow Christians that there is struggle and pain, so that prayers and counsel can be offered.

This kind of honesty would also be helpful and healing to the individual family members. People need to hear that other Christians have the same kinds of problems. They need to hear other Christians say, "I really admire your honesty in sharing this issue, and your courage in taking this step toward healing." They need to have their issues and problems mirrored back to them by other believers, so that they can see their own problems more clearly. They need to receive the counsel and prayers of other believers, so that the healing power of God can be released in their midst.

Frederick the Great, King of Prussia during the mid-1700s, once toured a Berlin prison. As he entered one large, lower dungeon of the prison, a group of prisoners--about a dozen in all--fell on their knees before him.

"Have mercy on us, Your Majesty!" they pleaded. "We are innocent! We have been falsely imprisoned!"

"All of you are innocent?" asked the king, surprised.

"Yes!" they insisted, every last man.

Then King Frederick noticed a man who stood off by himself in a dark corner of the dungeon. "You there," said the king, "Why are you in this prison?"

"I was convicted of armed robbery, Your Majesty."

"Are you guilty?"

The man hung his head. "Yes, Your Majesty. Guilty and ashamed. I deserve to be in this place."

"Guard!" King Frederick called. "Guard! See that man in the corner? Take him out of here and release him at once!" Then, indicating the dozen men who had claimed to be unjustly imprisoned, he said, "I will not have these fine, innocent men corrupted by one guilty wretch!"

You and I are like that guilty prisoner. It is not our facade of goodness, but *the honest confession of our sin* which sets us free! "Confess your faults to one another," says James 5:16, "and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects."

Restoration of koinonia

It's significant that whenever spiritual awakenings have occurred throughout Christian history, they have always been accompanied by a restoration of *koinonia* -fellowship, including the confession of faults, and the bearing of one another's burdens. During the Wesleyan awakening in eighteenth century England, the great evangelist George Whitefield wrote to his converts:

"My brethren ... let us plainly and freely tell one another what God has done for our souls. To this end you would do well, as others have done, to form yourselves into little companies of four or five each, and meet once a week to tell each other what is in your hearts; that you may then also pray for and comfort each other as need shall require. None but those who have experienced it can tell the unspeakable advantages of such a union and communion of souls.

...

None I think that truly loves his own soul, and his brethren as himself, will be shy of opening his heart, in order to have their advice, reproof, admonition, and prayers, as occasions require. A sincere person will esteem it one of the greatest blessings. (1)

When this kind of sharing and burden bearing takes place in a church, the elders and pastors will be relieved of much of the counseling and crisis intervention burden they might otherwise be forced to do. Many spiritual, emotional, and even mental problems could be solved at the beginning if caring Christians would accept their biblical responsibility to show genuine Christian love and concern for their brothers and sisters in the body. In fact, modern techniques of group therapy are built on this basic body life principle that had its beginnings in the early church.

Obviously there are certain matters that should not be voiced in an open meeting--matters of an intimate or scandalous nature, for example. Some types of sharing should be done privately between only two or three individuals who are trustworthy and mature in their insights. But no Christian should bear a heavy burden alone. Those with the gift of encouragement should make themselves available to others for this ministry, and any who appear withdrawn, troubled, or downcast should be gently encouraged to unload. The gift of a listening ear and an understanding heart is sometimes the greatest gift one Christian can give another.

The essential admonition in Scripture regarding the ministry of building up and edifying one another in the

body of Christ is Ephesians 4:15: "speaking the truth in love." In the Greek, the verb "speaking" does not appear. More literally, this verse says simply "truthing in love." It conveys a sense not merely of speaking the truth but demonstrating the truth through our lifestyle and behavior in every area of life.

Unloving silence

Most of us tend to shy away from confrontational situations--and understandably so. Confrontation is unpleasant. But in the church, confrontation is sometimes necessary for the health of the church. This is an area where Christians often fail one another, and allow the body of Christ to become unhealthy and ineffective.

If someone has an unpleasant or irritating habit, we're quick enough to discuss it with others--but are we willing to say something directly to that person? If we do, it is usually only when we have been angered or annoyed to the point of unloading on that person in a destructive way! Why are we so reluctant to deal with our complaints and objections face to face? We tell ourselves, "I don't want to hurt his feelings," or, "I don't want to make her feel bad." But we're just fooling ourselves.

The fact is, we don't want to pay the price of "speaking the truth in love." We don't want to risk having to deal with an unpleasant or uncomfortable situation. We don't want to have to deal with that other person's tears, anger, or resistance. It's so much easier to simply gripe behind that person's back rather than to lovingly confront their sin or flaw. The problem: In our silence and timidity, we do that person a great deal of harm. We condemn that person to go on offending others and suffering rejection, when we could allow God to use us to produce positive change in that person's life! Worst of all: we "baptize" our silence, convincing ourselves that our cowardly avoidance of confrontation is actually a mark of "Christian love."

Christians who have lived in an authentic atmosphere of koinonia and body life will tell you: They are grateful beyond words that another Christian has cared enough to illuminate their blind spot, and to help them become more mature and more like Jesus Christ. Confrontation is painful and unpleasant for everyone involved--but it is the pain of health-giving surgery, not the pain of a damaging injury. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" says Proverbs 27:6.

Of course, confrontation must always be undertaken in a spirit of humility and gentleness, in the full knowledge that we ourselves are vulnerable to errors and blindspots, and someday it will be our turn to be confronted. There are, of course, a few people in almost every church who love to confront others, who arrogantly take it upon themselves to run other peoples lives. These are the Diotrephes-type church bosses--and we must continually purify our motives to make sure we don't take prideful pleasure in "setting other Christians straight." We must take seriously the words of Galatians 6:1: "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.

This is the ministry of washing one another's feet, which Jesus said was absolutely necessary among His disciples: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14,15). That He meant this to be taken symbolically and not literally is seen in His words, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand" (John 13:7).

One can never perform the ministry of footwashing without taking the place of a servant as our Lord did. And--as Dr. H. A. Ironside used to say--it helps to be careful of the temperature of the water we use! Some come to wash the feet of others with icy cold water, saying, "Stick your feet in here!" Their cold, forbidding attitude arouses only resentment. Others are so angry and upset within themselves that they offer to wash the feet of other people in boiling water, right out of the microwave oven! The only way to truly serve others by washing their feet is to come with pleasingly warm water, making the unpleasant task of footwashing as pleasurable as possible. The one thing we must *not* do is to turn away and leave the offending person unrestored and unhelped.

A healthy body is necessary to perform effective work. To attempt evangelism while the body of Christ is sick and afflicted is worse than useless. It is not difficult to keep a body of Christians healthy and vital if the

members of that body--and especially the leaders--are diligent to bear one another's burdens, confess their faults to one another, instruct one another, and admonish one another in love, by means of the Word of God.

As we work to maintain the health and vitality of the church, we enable the body to become all God designed it to be: "a church ... in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27).

[Body Life](#), [Table of Contents](#) | [Next Chapter](#) | [The Ray Stedman Library Index Page](#) | [Biography of Ray Stedman](#) | [Peninsula Bible Church](#)

Copyright 1996 by Elaine C. Stedman. All Rights Reserved. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery House Publishers, Box 3566, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.