

## Chapter Two

# A Ministry of the Saints

### The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians:

We who are *strong* ought to bear with the failings of the *weak* and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me" (Rom. 15:1-3, italics mine).

This word of instruction tells us that Christians who are strong (speaking of those who are resting in the sufficiency of a strong Lord) ought to bear the infirmities of the weak. This is another way of saying we need to "bear one another's burdens." It says that our aim in life should be for each of us "to please his neighbor for his good, to edify him." That's some statement, isn't it? What a great world it would be if we all took that word seriously!

The word "edify" here is an interesting word in the Greek text; it is literally "home-building." But whose home are we to be building? Ephesians tells us that Christ longs to "*settle down and be at home* in our hearts through our faith" (Eph. 3:17, freely translated). Therefore, we are to be helping one another to make each of us a comfortable place for Jesus Christ to live. This is God's "home-building" program.

Paul, speaking to these early Roman Christians (who, you may remember, were fairly new in the Christian family), goes on to say: "I myself am satisfied about you, my brethren, that you yourselves are *full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another*" (Rom. 15:14, italics mine).

Note the progression of ideas here: full of goodness . full of knowledge...able to instruct.

### Full of Goodness?

The Apostle says to these relatively young believers, "I am satisfied about you, my brethren, that you yourselves are full of goodness..." In a recent speech, the President of the United States said he was persuaded that most politicians are good. Unfortunately, Mr. President, there is another, more authoritative voice, the Lord himself, who says politicians *aren't* good--and, of course, he includes not only politicians, but all of mankind. The Lord Jesus said, "there is none good but...God" (Mark 10:18, KJV). So how can we understand what Paul says to the Romans, "I am persuaded you are full of goodness"? According to our Lord, men are not *naturally* good--so where did they get this goodness? Paul is talking about the goodness God alone can give. It is part of the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *goodness*, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law" (italics mine).

What does this say about Christian believers and their being qualified to counsel? It says that the counselor, first of all, has to be shaped-up himself. It says he must be in right relationship to the Lord, drawing on his goodness. Thus he will be a good person, or, to put it another way, a well-adjusted person. As long as I am part of the problem, I'll never be able to contribute much toward the solution. If I am mixed up, my counselee is probably going to be mixed up. Paul starts with, "I am persuaded that you are full of goodness." So, with us, the first step is getting our own head on straight, being sure that we have a good basis of operation in relating to our Lord--from which we are *then* able to help people.

## Filled with Knowledge

The next step in the progression is: "filled with all knowledge." This means that in order to help someone, I have to *know* something. And Paul is clearly implying that I'm not to rely on my own puny wisdom for counseling. If I did that, I would feel sorry for my counselee, for then he would be shut up to the same hang-ups I have. But I have knowledge that comes from God through his Word. And Paul surely has in view the information he has just imparted in this letter to the Romans. For fourteen chapters he has laid out the *basis* of human problems--and the *remedy*. He expects us to use this information.

## Able to Counsel

As we are obediently following the Lord's lead (full of goodness), and depending on his wisdom through his Word (filled with knowledge), *then* we are "able to instruct one another." Here is a significant statement relating to the subject of counseling. The key word here in the New Testament Greek is the word translated "instruct." It is a compound word made up of two parts: the Greek word for "mind" and a word meaning "to place." It is thus a word which means "to place in mind." Or to put it in more modern phraseology, we might say, "to lay to heart." It is usually translated "admonish" in the older English versions, a good translation if we understand what it means. Or, we could translate it "counsel," which would fit better into our modern concept of its meaning: you are "able to *counsel* one another."

The Greek word has two connotations, a negative and a positive. On the negative side, it has the sense of warning (and it is sometimes translated "warning" in the English text, but that brings out only half of its meaning). It also has, in the positive sense, the idea of encouragement. In practice, this means that when someone comes to us for help, we can confront him with the alternatives. First, we can show him what the end result is likely to be if he continues in the direction he's moving (if he's not obeying God's Word)--this is the warning aspect. Then, we can encourage him by clearly stating the Lord's alternative. Since he's unhappy with the situation as it stands, he may be receptive to the idea that there's a better way.

Both warning and encouragement are here: "Here is the way the Lord maps out for you. You can go that way; it's your choice. You're at the crossroads. You can go the way you're headed and ask for more of the trouble you've already experienced; you can also change your course and head in the other direction. What do you say? How about going God's way?"

That is a biblical approach to counseling--*admonishing*, or calling to mind. It is bringing the alternatives to light, presenting them, and leaving the choice with the individual. In this way we are able to help one another choose the right course of action, thus allowing the Lord to shape up our lives. Counseling is really just helping someone to live that abundant life which the Lord Jesus offers us.

But doesn't a person need to have special gifts to counsel? I don't think so, for Paul's declaration here is addressed to the *brethren*, the whole body of believers at Rome. There *are* spiritual gifts which are useful in counseling: discernment, wisdom, knowledge, exhortation, and so on; but here Paul is talking of a ministry for all Christians.

## What Do We Say?

Where do we start? What must we learn in order to be equipped to counsel effectively? What, after all, do we have to say to people? In a key passage regarding the aim of Christian life and ministry, we read:

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning every man ["Warning" is that same Greek word for "counseling" or "admonishing." If we substitute *counseling*, it says something more.]..."counseling" every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me (Col. 1:27-29).

Here in this expression of the purpose of God in our lives (his aim is to present every man mature in Christ)

this word about counseling comes up again. "Him we proclaim, 'counseling' every man..." Notice here that the content of our counsel is *Christ*--"*Him* we proclaim." So we have a clear directive as to the focus of our message. What are we to declare about him? Is it not his indwelling presence and power? We are to proclaim *Christ in you*, the hope of glory. "Glory" refers to the fulfillment of our manhood or womanhood--only possible through an indwelling Christ. God is satisfied with nothing less than our complete fulfillment, and Christ living in us is the basis on which it is designed to take place; so Paul is dealing here with essential *life in Christ*.

It is significant that we find in this text the phrase "*counseling* every man and teaching every man," as the means by which that maturing and fulfillment are to be achieved. But this counseling and teaching is to be *in all wisdom*. We do not just decide we are the great reformer of the saints--starting to buttonhole each other and saying, "I know what you need; you've got to stop operating in the flesh." No, counseling is not going around "shaping up the saints," but it is operating the way God operates--in all wisdom, drawing on his available wisdom. This means a gracious, sensitive, and firm-but loving application of truth, not an officious, blunderbuss approach. Counseling in wisdom is obviously basic, for we see another passage connecting these two expressions: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish [counsel] one another *in all wisdom*, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16, italics mine). Counseling in all wisdom requires our being filled with *the word of Christ*. This is the word *from* Christ and *about* Christ. The apostle desires that *this* word may dwell in us richly. The *word* of Christ is that essential information which tells us of the person of Christ. It is not just *doctrinal* truth, but truth designed to relate us personally and directly to the living Lord who is able to fill our needs.

In both these references from Colossians notice that "admonishing and teaching" are coupled together. The use of these two words together is very significant. "Admonishing" is, as we have described it, calling to mind, laying to heart. "Teaching" is part of that process, since information must be given to form the operating basis for decisions and actions. So admonishing and teaching are a team; they go together. Our remedial and redemptive content is *Christ* and *the word of Christ*; the process is *admonishing* and *teaching*. Thus counseling becomes a matter of:

- 1) Learning to identify the problem from the word of Christ.
- 2) Knowing or finding the truth about Christ that will resolve the problem.
- 3) Helping our counselee discover and apply that truth.
- 4) Rejoicing together in the new-found liberty in Christ.

This may sound overly simplified, but quite often it's just that simple. This doesn't mean that *every* case will be decided in favor of the Lord's way, but *many* will respond to his redemptive truth. Even those who refuse the Lord's way at the time you present it may change their mind later, upon reflection, even though they may at first reject the proposed solution.

## **Wisdom and Power**

But all the while, we need to be checking out our resources of available wisdom and power. Remember the key principle: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant..." (2 Cor. 3:5). The new covenant is *Christ in you*, with all that means in available resources. He is the basis of any confidence we have that we can help people find answers to life's problems. But we need wisdom, that's for sure. And we have it in Christ. In a great word about wisdom, Paul says, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom..." (1 Cor. 1:30). Did you catch that? Christ Jesus has been made our wisdom. He is the source of our life and our wisdom--from God. And that source ought to be wholly adequate. Remember also that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

But how are we to gain access to all this great treasure of wisdom? It's very simple really. James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives to all men generously and without reproaching" (James 1:5).

Now you have an unbeatable combination: the source and supplier of all wisdom, Jesus Christ, and the channel of access--just ask! God doesn't operate in the way we do. We say, "Hey, stupid, how come you don't know that?" God says, "I'm glad you asked, because I've just been waiting to tell you," which is enough to make us *want* to ask!

If there is anything a counselor needs besides wisdom, it's power; there is no helping people without wisdom and no changing lives without power. Have you found that out? Have you tried to change anyone lately? Sometimes you feel like trying to blast a person loose, but that won't work. Dynamite is a different kind of power, a destructive kind. But Christ, our redemptive resource, is called both "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). Operating in wisdom, God's power is able to *put together* the broken pieces--not fragment and destroy, as destructive powers do.

If the wisdom and power of God aren't enough, consider, "...we have the mind of *Christ*" (1 Cor. 2:16). To me that is a startling statement. It doesn't mean, of course, that we always act like we have his mind, or that we always use what we have in Christ. But it means we *do* have access to the same thought processes, the same wisdom that Christ himself has. We can, through the gracious ministry of our Lord, see each situation and problem from God's perspective and apply his redemptive solution.

We need to remember, of course, that God wrote the book on the subject of man and his problems--the Bible--the book that goes with man. It is fitting that he should give us the first book on psychology, for after all, it was he who invented the human soul. He, like nobody else, knows how we operate. So if we have him as our counselor and his textbook in our hands, we have inside information (pun intended) and, therefore, all that we need to engage in a counseling ministry.

This premise assumes, of course, that we have a dependent, not a "cocky" attitude and that we do our homework, using every resource God has made available to us.

### **Strength--But from Where?**

"But wait a minute," you ask, "I'm often struggling with certain areas of weakness, and Paul says that it's the *strong* ones who should bear the iniquities of the weak. How can I Counsel someone if I'm weak in the same area?" The answer is: that it has very little to do with our own strengths and weaknesses. The strength we operate from is in *Christ Jesus*. As I understand it, when Paul speaks of "we who are strong" (Rom. 15:1), he is speaking of those who are relatively spiritually mature, who have gained a degree of equilibrium. *These* are to bear up the weaker ones. Obviously, as the Volkswagen ad says--nobody's perfect. If we wait until we have arrived at perfection, we will never start. So, the word "strong" here is a relative term and is really referring us back to the strength that is in Christ, the power that comes from him.

Haven't you discovered that God will often bring you together with someone who is having the same struggle in which you have recently experienced his victory? It is not so that you can strengthen that friend, but so you can *share* the reality of God's strength in your common weakness. If we are rightly related to him, we are drawing on his strength; it isn't ours, it is a borrowed strength. You are weak, I am weak, we're all weak, since we all share the same frail humanity. That's one of the features which makes us suited to counsel. If we are up on a pedestal of spiritual superiority, shooting our thunderbolts of judgmental censure down on the poor peons below, then we are already out of the business. It is the recognition of the common humanity we share which makes us ready and able to counsel.

One of the first things necessary in counseling is to identify with the problem of the person before us. We must be able to say, "I've been there, too, but I have discovered an answer to my frailty in that particular area of failure, and I would like to share that answer with you." There is an old saying which says, "A Christian is just one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." That's the idea; we don't preach ourselves, but Jesus as Lord, and thereby we offer the liberty that his Lordship brings--to us and to any who will let him be Lord.

Because we do identify with others in their weakness, there is no more demanding and draining ministry than counseling. This is partly because the Lord will get to you, the counselor, in the process (and show you where

you are not making it). The counselor is always part of the target area in the Lord's character-building program, and that always takes an emotional toll. But in addition to that, we hurt with those who are hurting. It's part of the process.

All of this does not imply that we will always see the answers and that referrals are not sometimes indicated and necessary. There should be the recognition that our weaknesses sometimes limit our insight into truth and that we may find an area where we cannot help but someone else can. Making referrals and using other resource people is thus both valid and sensible. Conferring with other (perhaps more mature and more experienced) counselors is wise procedure, if for no other reason than to confirm the validity of one's own analysis and approach to the problem.

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