

The Seven Pillars of Counselling

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This article is about the ministry of mutual admonition, or mutual personal help and encouragement

‘And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another’ (*Romans 15.14*).

Over the last 40 years, there has come in among Christians a great craze for counselling borrowed from the ideas of secular psychology, largely formulated by militant atheists holding a view of human personality and morality altogether opposed to biblical teaching. It is astonishing that even evangelical groups have enthusiastically adopted their systems, larger churches hiring teams of counsellors to ‘heal’ Christians who need biblical advice, not psychological therapy.

The so-called biblical counselling movement has abandoned the doctrine of the absolute sufficiency of the Bible for guidance and sanctification of believers, but we must cling to the inspired Word alone, and keep to traditional scriptural methodology when advising on personal problems, whether of depression or of behaviour.

Of course, we acknowledge that when it comes to very serious and painful depression, or irrational and delusional behaviour, the problem lies outside the troubles of ‘normal’ life. The afflicted person is ill and in need of medical help. The disaster of the ‘counselling movement’, however, is that it treats all believers as if they were psychologically ill, which is humanistic foolishness.

In a company of a hundred Christians, there will usually be three or four people at the most who will suffer the level of depression or other mental illness that requires psychiatric help and medication. If someone is really sick in mind, or has a breakdown of such a kind that they lose touch with reality, or are likely to do themselves or others considerable harm, then, sadly, they are ill, and need appropriate help.

We are not talking about such needs in this article. When we mention ‘depression’ we have in mind the kind which most people have at some time, perhaps involving sorrow, regret, distress, worry, anxiety, frustration, and even panic, all of which are within the normal experience of life. In the past the trials of life were never placed into the category of illness, requiring psychological therapy, and Christians believed that the Lord had given the riches of the Word to enable his people to draw close to him, and to be strengthened and comforted.

What does today’s ‘Christian’ counselling do? As Dr Martin Bobgan points out in several books analysing the techniques of ‘Christian’ pseudo-psychology, it attempts to deal with problems not with people. The Bible is exactly the other way round. If we have a marriage difficulty, the Bible does not tell us to complete a questionnaire detailing all our tastes and tiffs, and then find a counsellor to work through each problem. The Bible goes directly to the person, reforming us, making us more holy, and showing us how to live by the power of the Spirit, so that we manifest kindness and understanding, putting the other person first.

According to the Bible, if we become better people, then the marital problems will soon be dissolved. While the counselling books deal endlessly with the symptoms, the Bible reforms the people.

The Christian counselling movement is now a large industry, and the number of books produced is phenomenal. We should reject virtually all of these, even though many of the authors are evangelical, because they have capitulated to the anti-biblical ideas of atheistic psychology.

We shall now turn to the positive side of how all Christians should participate, as need arises, in the ministry of mutual admonition or mutual personal helpfulness, beginning with a very brief review of the texts that urge us to do this. Subsequently we shall look at biblical exhortations about the right attitude and approach, and then consider the seven great objectives or pillars of this precious ministry.

The Command to Mutually Admonish

Our *Romans 15.14* text presents the duty and the rules of true counselling, Paul writing: 'I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.'

The Greek word for 'admonish' means 'to place in the mind'. It may be an exhortation, or a warning in the form of a warm, friendly urging to honour some duty or objective. We often connect admonition with words of reproof, but the Greek term has a broader use than that. What is placed in the mind may certainly be a caution or reproof, but it may equally be the gentlest suggestion or encouragement.

Three other verses on the place of admonition should also influence us, the first being *Colossians 3.16*:

'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.'

Noted exegetes say that the semi-colon in this verse rightly belongs after the words 'one another', for we admonish by the Word. So, for example, if we see some friend who is not attending meetings regularly, or if we see another sliding into covetousness, then prayerfully we get alongside to bring the standards of the Word, for we all have a part in the ministry of admonishing one another.

We may look also at the letter to the *Hebrews*, chapter 3, and verses 12-13 –

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. but exhort one another daily, while it is called to day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.'

Here is the duty of believers to help each other check any decline. We are to intervene and assist wherever necessary and wherever possible.

Of course, we have to cultivate the right spirit, and we will touch on that in a moment, but first we read from *Hebrews 10.23-24*:

'Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works.'

The admonition term is not used here (or in the other Hebrews verse), but it is the same thought. We have a duty of mutual ministering.

Returning to *Romans 15.14*, we are given some of the qualifications for this ministry, Paul saying that the people were full of goodness, and filled with all knowledge.

Goodness (meaning the qualities of kindness and consideration) is essential if we are to counsel others.

Equally it is vital to be ‘filled with all knowledge’, which refers to knowledge of the Bible, not of human wisdom.

Make no mistake, however, this is a dangerous ministry, with the potential, if mishandled, to destroy precious friendships, and even whole fellowships. For this reason we must spend a short time taking a kind of bath, and considering some of the qualifications we require, and the spirit in which we should go about this ministry.

Counsel 1

Our first counsel comes from the words of Christ recorded in *Luke 6.37* and *41*,

‘Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven . . . And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?’

This caution highlights the disaster of a superior spirit, or a critical spirit, in helping one another. Admonition must be approached with humility, considering (or examining) ourselves, ‘lest thou also be tempted’ (*Galatians 6.1*).

We all have many sins, failings, weaknesses and difficulties, of which we should be deeply aware. We will ourselves fall in some respect, and need the help and even the reproof of others, and we are to approach one another in that humble spirit of awareness. This humility is very apparent to the person we seek to help, and makes our admonition acceptable, whereas the person who hands out advice from a dizzy height is seldom acceptable.

Counsel 2

A second counsel from the words of the Lord urges us to be ready to share our own spiritual lessons and experiences. *Luke 6.45* reads:

‘A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man . . . that which is evil.’

This verse refers to gracious deeds and uplifting, edifying conversations, but when applied to the ministry of admonition, the ‘good man’ naturally urges and comforts from the treasure of his experience of God’s grace toward him.

Giving admonition can be a very humbling experience. If we see someone heading into a problem that we ourselves once had, we must be ready to acknowledge that we did that same foolish thing and fell into a snare. ‘I am afraid,’ we may say, ‘that you are doing the same.’

Admonition, as we have noted, is not from a dizzy height. Our counsel will come from the Bible, and be supplemented from our own experience of failure and recovery, and we must be ready for this.

Counsel 3

In *Luke 17.1-2* there is a remarkably serious caution, and while it primarily applies to children, it surely applies also to all God’s spiritual children. The Lord said to the disciples,

‘It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.’

The caution for the ministry of personal admonition is that there should be no callous, rough handling.

We have to be very careful, fair and well-moderated in this ministry, and not go for a person, hitting this way and that. For one thing, the problem we think we see in that person may not be the true picture, and we may have misread the apparent 'evidence'. The person may be entirely innocent, or there may be factors which greatly reduce any blame. Further, the 'straying' person may have been spoken to by others already, and will feel caught in an avalanche of criticism.

Admonition never sets out to inflict pain, dislike, irritation or vengeance, and if it does, according to Christ's caution, the admonisher becomes the guilty party. So we deal with one another as respected and valued fellow believers, and never in a rough, cavalier kind of way.

Counsel 4

Our fourth counsel is from *Luke 17.3-4*:

'Take heed to yourselves: if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.'

The key point here is that motive matters. To be qualified to engage in mutual shepherding we must possess a sincere desire to see advance, rather than to be seen as 'the instructor' or anything of that kind. What is our motive? Is it really to help, and to see the Lord glorified and his work speeded forward? Is there true sympathy in our heart? In *Romans 12.15*, Paul writes, 'Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.' This is the spirit of mutual personal ministry.

Counsel 5

Here is another qualification for admonition, drawn from *Romans 15.14* and *Colossians 3.16*: 'Teaching and admonishing one another.' The question for us is this: Are we willing to be admonished, warned, urged, or helped by others? If we are not, we are certainly not qualified to admonish. If we are too touchy, prickly, proud or sensitive to have someone say to us: 'Brother, sister, you should not have done that,' then we should not try giving admonition ourselves. Personal ministry is a two-way traffic, and a lack of humility to receive it is quickly detected. The one we seek to help or correct can see perfectly well that we are not the kind of person who would take kindly to returned admonition.

Counsel 6

The sixth counsel is this: A bond is the best basis for admonition. We find this in *Colossians 3.14* – 'And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.' These words occur just two verses before the exhortation to engage in mutual admonition, and there is obviously a connection.

Do we have a bond with the person whom we intend to draw alongside for admonition? Is there a basis of friendship and respect, or is the person relatively unknown to us – in which case it would be better to let another, better placed, person do the work. Love covers a multitude of sins in various applications, and a wayward believer, or one in need of advice, will receive help most readily from someone who values and knows him.

Counsel 7

The seventh counsel comes from *1 Peter 5.2-3*, and it is another qualification, namely – Have we set an example? Peter's words are primarily to ministers, but they apply to all in the ministry of mutual admonition:

'Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being

ensamples [patterns] to the flock.’

Have we set an example before we speak? Are we clear in the matter ourselves? If our own walk is inconsistent, and we have conspicuous, unaddressed faults, we obviously cannot help others.

To extend this point, in *1 Timothy 4.16* we read: ‘Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them.’ We are to take heed concerning ourselves first of all. We should check our repentance, for example, asking if we repent every day in the same general way, instead of examining our hearts. Do we pray to the Lord for progress on real sins that have been clustering round us, whether sins of word or deed?

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Following these counsels and cautions we come to the seven great pillars of personal ministry. If readers are familiar with the new genre of counselling books, chiefly drawn from secular ‘insights’, they will notice at once that these pillars are about changing people, not behaviour.

The advice offered here is not novel, but very old, the kind of aims and objectives that believers would have been given in Reformation times, in Puritan times, and in Victorian times, in fact, right up until the 1970s when secular psychology suddenly became more attractive to many evangelicals than their Bibles.

The Seven Pillars

1 Holiness is the Goal

The first and the most obvious aim of personal ministry is that of promoting holiness and character. Our *Romans 15.14* text contains the words – ‘full of goodness’ – this not only being a qualification for mutual admonition, but its main aim. Take marriage problems, the example referred to earlier in this article. Should we convene a number of counselling sessions giving time for much digging and delving, setting of homework and assignments, and all the other elaborations of the counselling books? Or should we urge couples to godliness, so that they change as people?

All the rules for marriage are found in the magnificent thirteenth chapter of *1 Corinthians*, and also in *Ephesians 4* and *5*. They are the great standards for Christian godliness, and if only we can commend these to those in trouble, their marriages would repair and blossom gloriously.

Take *1 Peter 3.7*, where we learn that a spouse should be held in honour, meaning in esteem, with dignity, care and love. In effect, husbands and wives must be precious to one another, each showing appreciation, kindness and consideration, all of which flow from godly character. If only they can build up godly character in themselves, by the help of God, they will become much nicer people, and their marriage will be wonderful. Each will be considerate, and will do for the other everything they ought to do. It is the person or people that we must change, and problems will then be resolved. We should be encouraging and helping one another to build character and to manifest all the wonderful fruits that are described in the sublime character passages of the New Testament. A good book on marriage will be one that simply expounds these passages.

The characteristics of love in *1 Corinthians 13* are the best and the most profound statements on the subject in all human literature, and this is so because they are of divine origin. Here are challenges that define real love, and if we can respond to them with the help of God, then we will build character. So the first pillar of personal ministry is to urge one another to character and godliness, and not to intrude into details of private behaviour, which, in the case of marriage, means that the ‘counselor’ betrays and fractures the bond of marital privacy and intimacy.

2 Trust Promoted

Our second pillar of personal ministry is the building of faith, as expressed in Romans 15.13: 'Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.'

This is a life of faith, and we are to be advancing in trust in God. Is someone very low, troubled or anxious? Then that believer needs to be encouraged to trust the Lord no matter what; to trust in his providential dealings, to commit his all to the Lord, and to pray for the strength to go through difficult situations.

In mutual admonition we help each other not to fall into self-pity, grumbling and groaning, and considering ourselves badly dealt with. We exhort to faith, for we are the Lord's, and know that he will not let things happen to us which we cannot deal with by his help. Through every situation of life he is training us, perhaps even chastising us, but he is at work, and we must trust him.

The task of bringing one another to deeper trust, laying hold on the Lord, and praying and rejoicing in his love, is the second great aim or pillar of personal, mutual shepherding.

If only we can persuade one another of these things we will never be crushed. No situation will damage and corrupt our spiritual disposition and wellbeing while we walk by faith, and bring all matters before the throne of grace. The rule of Scripture is: 'Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.'

3 Worship & Reflection Deepened

The third pillar of our mutual personal encouragement is the promotion of sincere worship and reflection, referred to in *Romans 15.6*: 'That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Paul goes on to speak of God's promises that the Gentiles would praise him (verses 10 and 11). We could refer again to *Colossians 3.16*, where the exhortation to mutual admonition flows into the use of hymns, psalms and spiritual songs.

Without doubt the promotion of the twin activities of worship and reflection should be a major pillar of personal counselling. So much of the discomfort of believers may be relieved by worship and gratitude for all that God is, and all that he has done. This is the way to lift up the soul and to trample down discouragement and difficulty.

Thanksgiving, coupled with intelligent reflection on the ways and promises of God in the Word, and his past blessings to us, more than anything else dispels sadness, anxiety, and insecurity. Certainly it dispels vindictiveness, selfishness and worldliness.

This is why worship should never be worldly in character, borrowing the polluted styles of worldly entertainment. True worship is an antidote to all this, lifting the soul far above the self-centred, sin-centred thinking and emotionalism of a fallen world.

Is a believer angry with someone who has offended him? The answer is to engage in worship and praise to God for all his amazing kindness, and the unworthy anger is shamed away. Self-pity withers and dies before a glorious Saviour, therefore we urge one another to reflective praise, thanksgiving and adoration. A good traditional book on worship would be worth a thousand counselling books, if it brought us to reflect personally and deeply on wonderful truths and sentiments in Scripture, as well as on hymns that sustain the blessing.

4 Scripture – for Knowledge & Happiness

Pillar number four for personal ministry is the study of the Bible, so that all may be:

‘ . . . filled with all knowledge’ (*Romans 15.14*). One of the great aims of inter-personal ministry should be the promotion and encouragement of individual Bible study.

Paul emphatically identifies Scripture as the source of all comfort, saying, ‘For whatsoever things were written aforetime [the Old Testament] were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope’ (*Romans 15.4*).

We therefore urge one another to be great learners, to read the Word of God, together with Matthew Henry, or whatever commentator helps our understanding. Believers should always have to hand a commentary which assists with difficult verses, such as Matthew Poole (available in three volumes), who is one of the best and most concise of the Puritan commentators for resolving difficulties. One factor that impedes Bible study is the number of verses that people simply don’t understand, but Matthew Poole frequently resolves them in a few plain words.

Many years ago my wife and I frequently had tea with a very aged lady who would tax us to the limit, because she was always studying the Scripture. She would raise many interesting problems, saving them up for our visits. She would ask how one passage could be reconciled with another, and what this or that prophetic statement meant. We were often caught out by her astute questions, and it was clear that she was a great student of the Word, and that it kept her bright and alive and full of love for the Lord. It was her life to be studying the Word in her advancing years, and we would hope to be like her, great learners right to the end of life’s journey.

Is someone inclined to be sad and troubled in their mind? There is no book that imparts happiness like the Word of God, sincerely studied. Even at a technical level it is so very wonderful, so consistent, so profound, and so comprehensive in scope.

I have known many other elderly people who have been great lovers and students of the Word, and whose grasp of its riches furnished and thrilled their minds and hearts through all the vicissitudes of life. It is so inspiring to interact with those who have been great learners of the Book divine throughout their earthly pilgrimage.

If we are crushed by life’s burdens, tired of other people, and of ourselves, spiritually cold and cast down, despairing of Heaven, overcome by some besetting sin, or overwhelmed by some problem, it is likely we have stopped feeding on the glorious Word of the living God.

The authors of hordes of counselling books seem to think that they can do better than the Word of Life, but they have forsaken the fountain of living waters and hewn for themselves broken cisterns in the ever-shifting ground of human psychology, and their counsels take people away from reliance on the Lord, and from seeking joy in spiritual truth and blessing.

Therefore, our fourth pillar is to always be promoting and stimulating the study and learning of God’s Word and showing one another how it can be the source of knowledge, power, happiness and fulfilment for us all, in the service of God.

5 Sacrifice & Service

Any treatment of the importance of sacrifice and service – our fifth aim or pillar – is generally absent from counselling books, yet the former are essential to the spiritual well-being of believers, for this is what we were saved for. In *Romans 15.16* Paul makes a seemingly mysterious statement, and speaks in an almost priestly manner, saying that God made him – ‘the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable.’ He seems to say, ‘In evangelising Gentiles I am offering them up as a priest does, making an offering in the Temple.’

Paul tells us what he means in chapter 12: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.'

Gentiles are being won for the Lord to sacrifice themselves to his service, to live and witness for him, and be entirely at his disposal. This is the great fifth pillar of all personal ministry, the urging of each other to be wholly offered up and given up to the Lord's service. We are intended to be the acceptable offering of the Gentiles.

I hope readers will not find this over-critical, but I notice that the so-called mega-churches in the USA (and some here), which have hired professional counsellors, sometimes having teams of a dozen and more paid therapists, have a characteristic in common. The members of these churches barely do anything. If the church wants something done, they simply hire staff. They have a minister (and his staff), a worship minister (and staff), a bus minister, a this minister, a that minister, a minister or staff member for everything.

The members mostly attend only the morning worship (plus church concerts and banquets) and spend the best of their energies living comfortable, self-indulgent lives; indeed, one might say, mildly sanitised worldly lives. What matters is that family, house, car, education, college, and all these things must be as splendid as possible.

Why do such church members need so much professional counselling? The answer is – their lives are not applied to the great goal of Christian service. If they are truly converted, and yet have been denied their calling as people sacrificed to the Lord and his service, it is not surprising that their lives lack spiritual fulfilment. They are missing the blessing of having serving priorities, answers to prayer, special upholding by the Lord, fruit and fulfilment. They are not what God meant them to be.

If, as believers, our chief priority is the Lord's service, we forget about our aches and pains, offences, difficulties and problems, rejoicing in our calling and forgiving one another.

I remember Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones once saying – I don't know where he got the figure from – that during the years of World War II, consultations with psychiatrists plummeted, because people had something greater to engage their minds than the pressures of everyday life. Similarly as believers, if our hearts are in the Lord's work, then our priorities are right. If evangelisation, children's Sunday School work, and other activities for Christ concern us, then we get all other matters in perspective, seeing them for what they are, and processing them with Christian calm.

If Christ comes first, then all other things fall into place, which is partly what the Saviour meant when he said: 'Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? . . . But seek ye first the kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added unto you' (*Matthew 6.31-33*).

To encourage each other to live lives of sacrifice and service for the Lord is a vital pillar of the ministry of admonition.

6 The Outgoing, Caring Lifestyle Advanced

This pillar of personal ministry – that we should press and urge one another to be an outgoing and caring people – is seen strongly in the words of *Romans 15.1-3*:

'We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, the reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.'

The Puritan Richard Baxter's great cure for depression (or melancholy as it was then called) was to advise sufferers to do things for other people.

If we were more outgoing as people, then we would be less inclined to take our woes and knocks so seriously. There are many people in our family circle, our church, and beyond who need encouragement from us. There are both children and elderly friends to care for, Christian workers to pray and provide for, newcomers to the church to befriend and assimilate – a never ending list – beside the concern we have for lost souls. We should have no time and no spare emotion for self-pity or emotional self-indulgence.

We recall what happened to the mother of Charlie Chaplin. This name is closely connected with the area around the Tabernacle, because Chaplin was born in East Street at the end of the 1880s. His father was a drunkard who abandoned his wife and boys. They lived in various rented rooms in little back streets behind the Kennington Park Road. They are lovely little houses now, but they were crumbling slums then. Their mother earned what she could through relentless labour, but they were desperately short.

Although the boys knew about hunger they never starved, for it was their mother who starved, going without constantly. The lads were too young to quite realise what was going on, but the years of malnutrition later affected their mother's mind, and she was committed to a grim mental hospital.

When the boys were adults, and successful, they took her to the United States, where she died, a very sick woman, in the 1920s.

But here is the point. Mrs Chaplin was a regular worshipper at a Bible-believing church.

It was not the Tabernacle, I am thankful to say, but we cannot criticise the church because Christians can be very disappointing, and this can happen anywhere. She attended *Christ Church*, just opposite the Lambeth North underground station, which was then, of course, the church of F B Meyer. (Today it has lost its spiritual heritage and is an 'emerging church', denying some of the fundamentals of the faith.) Mrs Chaplin worshipped there, covering up as far as she could her poverty.

The church folk did not realise that she had eaten nothing for days on end, but if anyone had been sensitive enough to notice this hollow-cheeked, gaunt, emaciated lady, surely they would have grasped what was happening.

It is said that one of the reasons why Charlie Chaplin put up a barricade against God, was his resentment at how a church failed to help his mother, one of their regular worshippers. They took no notice. They did not seem to care about her. She was just one of the poor.

I mention this for our benefit. Are we 'depressed'? Then we should look out to help someone else! We should pray to God for a sensitive, outgoing heart to notice the needs of others, and draw alongside. Then we would cure our depression and help someone else at the same time. So this is one of the great pillars of personal counselling – 'to provoke unto love and to good works,' and to be increasingly outgoing as a people.

This is echoed in the appealing words of *Galatians 6.9-10*:

'Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.'

Modern counselling ministry books are all about us and our needs, whereas the Bible turns our gaze outwards, and makes us more Christ-like as people.

7 Friendship & Cheer

Our concluding pillar of inter-personal ministry is as fundamental and essential as the others – the duty of imparting friendship and cheer. As we are looking at *Romans 15* we will find this in the penultimate verse – verse 32: ‘That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed.’

It will be so good to be with you, Paul says, for it will cheer my heart no end, and refresh my spirit to have the fellowship of you, dear friends. We must be keen to urge one another to provide friendship and cheer; it is our duty, as well as a most uplifting activity. We say to husbands and wives at wedding services – you have a duty to cheer each other up. And we all have this duty, whether friends or fellow labourers. We have a duty to encourage and uplift those around us, and not to inflict upon them our heavy moods and despondent thoughts, let alone our complaints and miseries.

Forty-five years ago I knew a man who wished to be a pastor and to preach the Word, but he had a problem. He did not know how to smile, or at least I never saw him doing so. He had such an unlined face you imagined it would crack if he smiled. He was solemn to the point of gloominess, but if you asked, ‘Aren’t you happy?’ he would insist that he was. He was happy being gloomy, and there are people who are like that, and often do not realise how they appear to others. Like all of us, they must come to see that they have a duty to extend some cheer and warmth, especially as believers.

This young man and I both knew an older lady who had spent her professional life training opera singers to present their voices. Having retired, she would give voice presentation advice to aspiring ministers. My friend went to see her, and she told him that his trouble was never smiling, and if only he smiled more, his face would become more elastic and his words would be better presented.

How can you be a pastor or a personal shepherd among believers, if you are inclined to depress people?

We have a duty to cheer others with genuine friendliness, with the things of God, and with the blessings that we have received. Increasing gas and electricity prices may well be mentioned between us, but such themes should never dominate our conversation. If it is necessary to mention negative matters, we should always be ready to mention also positive matters, because we are spreading happiness in the Lord. An old hymn of William Cowper is seldom sung, but should be often read, because it makes the point so well. It is about prayer, but has these two verses which apply to the present point.

Have we no words, ah, think again!

Words flow apace when we complain
And fill our fellow-creature’s ear
With the sad tale of all our care.

Were half the breath thus vainly spent
To Heaven in supplication sent,
Our cheerful song would oftener be,
‘Hear what the Lord has done for me.’

There is a challenging proverb that says: ‘A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly’ (*Proverbs 18.24*). It cuts two ways, the first meaning being this: if a person wants to have friends, he had better show himself friendly. But it can run the other way also, meaning: a person who has friends, has a duty to be friendly to them also, or if he fails to pull his weight and return their goodness

to him, he may even drive them away. The believer who is always needing and taking comfort and help will always need it, while the person who gives out friendship or cheer will be happy and fulfilled in doing so. And this is all the more true when it is done in the name of the Lord, and with his help and inspiration.

Here, then, are our seven pillars for the ministry of mutual help and admonition. They are so different from the complex human treatments of the modern counselling movement:—

- 1.** Character – we are here to exhort one another to build character, with the Word of God in our hands.
- 2.** Trust, prayer, faith – we are to encourage one another to pray and to exercise faith.
- 3.** Worship and reflection – we are to encourage one another to worship with all our hearts, and practise constant thanksgiving.
- 4.** Learning – we are to encourage one another to love and study the Word as our favourite pastime.
- 5.** Sacrifice and service – we are to promote commitment to service for the Lord.
- 6.** Outgoing and caring – we are to spread the blessedness of an outgoing, caring lifestyle.
- 7.** To provide friendship and cheer – we are to give an example of, and promote in others, the practice of cheering up those around us.

Personal ministry is not playing at pseudo-psychoanalysis, and digging and delving into the lives of others. ‘I myself also,’ says Paul, ‘am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.’