



ONE ANOTHER

Some of the New Testament's teaching
on how Christians should relate to each
other as members of the church

John Benton

CONTENTS

	Page number
1. Members of one another	3
2. Love one another	5
3. Forgive one another	7
4. Encourage one another	9
5. Accept one another	11
6. Honour one another	13
7. Build up one another	15

© 2018 John Benton

Cover image: iStock

1: Members of one another

Today when we say someone is a ‘member’ of something we usually have in mind something like a member of a sports club, or a society or even a member of Parliament.

But when the apostle Paul used the word it did not have that connotation. It was a medical term relating usually to the human anatomy, Romans 12.4,5. It was a general word for a limb or organ of the body – an arm or a leg or an eye etc. It is this picture which is in mind when the New Testament speaks of Christians as ‘members’ of Christ or of the body of Christ e.g. in Ephesians 4.16. When we see this we will get a proper grasp of the Biblical idea of ‘fellowship.’ The word fellowship (*koinonia*) means ‘shared life’. Just as different organs of the body share and participate in the life of the body, so are Christians in the fellowship of a church to share their lives with one another.

Members of the body of Christ

As Christians we are, through faith, ‘in Christ’. This is how we are saved. He covers all our sins and his righteousness is counted ours because we are ‘in him’, cf. Romans 8.1.

But being ‘in Christ’ also provides the logic for our fellowship, 1 Corinthians 12.12, 13. Because we are all ‘in him’, we are seen as all members or parts of the same body, sharing the same life, which is the life of the Spirit. So the local church is Christ’s body, 1 Corinthians 12.27.

It is worth tabulating the differences between being members of a club and members of a church.

	Club	Church (body of Christ)
Bond	Common interest	Common life (of the Holy Spirit)
Belonging	To the ‘club’	To Christ and each other
Focus	An activity	Relationship
Purpose	Enjoyment	Service

And the idea of the church as the body of Christ is more than a mere picture or analogy. There is a profound reality to it. Paul (while still Saul of Tarsus) learned this when Christ appeared to him on the Damascus Road. He had been persecuting the church. But the risen Lord Jesus confronted him with the striking words, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?' Acts 9.4.

Just as a man and his wife are 'one flesh', so the profound mystery is that Christ and his church are 'one flesh' too, Ephesians 5.31, 32. This bestows immense dignity upon the church. We really are the body of Christ on earth.

One another in practice

This shared life is meant to find expression in mutual care and service. As the different organs of a human body function for the good of the whole – hands washing the face, eyes helping us avoid bumping into brick walls etc – so the members of a church should help one another and the church as a whole.

- The Holy Spirit gives us a new nature and produces his fruit in our lives each aspect of which helps us to relate better towards other people, Galatians 5.22,23 (cf. Galatians 5.19, 20).
- The Holy Spirit also gives us different spiritual gifts which are not meant to be for our own *kudos* but to build up and help other people, Romans 12.4-6; 1 Corinthians 12.28-31; 1 Peter 4.10,11.

It is with this background that we find a number of 'one another' commands in the New Testament. We investigate some of these in this booklet. The bottom line is that we are bound up together. Your life as a Christian is actually dependent on the lives of others in the church and the quality of their spiritual lives is dependent on you also, Romans 12.5. The normal Christian life is meant to be a corporate venture.

2. Love one another

The new command of the Lord Jesus Christ is a 'one another' command. 'As I have loved you, so you must love one another,' John 13.34 The sacrificial affection which Christ displayed for us, must also be evident among Christians and therefore especially in the local church.

The power of love

John takes up this command in the most astonishing way. In 1 John 4.12 he writes: 'No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us'.

This verse is remarkable when we set it alongside the only other verse which begins in the same way. 'No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known', John 1.18. Today many people ask, 'Where is your God? We can't see him'. To that challenge, John has two answers. The *first* is in John 1.18. No, you can't see God, but if you had been around in first century Palestine you would have seen him – Jesus, John 14.9. But the *second* answer is breathtaking. The Lord Jesus is now in heaven until his return. But you can 'see God' today. Comparing John 1.18 and 1 John 4.12, the answer shocks us but is quite clear. The living God can be 'seen' today in a church where God's people love each other. If we love one another 'God lives in us'.

In many ways, this is the forgotten strategy of the church. Programmes and plans have their place. But they will not take us very far in today's hardened secular society. People need to encounter the living God. And John says they will do so in a church where the members love each other. John is not saying there needs to be nothing else in the church. Of course, there must be Bible truth, and prayer and holiness and much more. But when Christians love one another as Christ has loved us, 1 Corinthians 13.1-8a, it has an effect out of all proportion to what we might imagine, because God is there.

A church should have three dimensions to its activity which we can label IOU: Inwardly, Outwardly, Upwardly. Inwardly there is fellowship, Outwardly there is witness; Upwardly there is worship. All three are necessary and all three are transformed as we love each other.

Inwardly – fellowship

According to John, when the members of a church love one another God's 'love is made complete in us', 1 John 4.12. He is not saying that we add to God's grace at the cross – that is the finished work of Christ. But God's love, which originates in himself, 1 John 4.7,8, and was manifested in his Son, 1 John 4.9,10, is completed in his people – comes to full fruition in a practical and tangible way among us. When that Christian gives money to a needy brother or sister, God's love is fulfilled practically. When that lonely Christian feels the warmth of the love of the church, God's love is displayed. If we don't love one another, we are depriving each other of the full version of God's love. When we do love one another, we enjoy God's love more fully.

Outwardly – witness

Our society is secular. It is enslaved by personal pleasure (hedonism), personal choice (consumerism) and personal opinion (relativism). There is nothing worth living or dying for except pleasing yourself. This is a hard nut to crack. But it is vulnerable to true Christian love, because in a church which loves one another a secular visitor will not just hear an argument about God, he or she will meet God, 1 John 4.12.

The spiritual destitution, moral disintegration and social isolation that characterize secular society makes it obvious that secularism leads nowhere but to destruction. But people can't see it. However, an encounter with the living God will open their eyes.

Upwardly – worship

You can go to some churches which have great music and all the latest worship songs with wonderful musicians and yet it just feels like a concert. Something is missing. You can go to other churches which stick to the old worship styles and sing Wesley and Watts, but it feels like an evangelical ritual. What is missing in both cases? It is the felt presence of God. We may use the language of awe and reverence, Revelation 5.12-14, but unless we encounter God it is all mere words, Mark 7.6. We need God to touch our hearts and John has promised that when we truly love one another, God himself will be present in the church.

So we should think practically about how to love one another as Jesus loved us.

3. Forgive one another

The Holy-Spirit-inspired shared life of fellowship in a church is hindered when our relationships between one another are not as they should be.

We sometimes don't communicate with each other as clearly as we ought and, perhaps in doing a job in the church, accidentally irritate each other. Also, though we are saved, we are still 'works in progress' having to battle against sin in our lives which is still a part of us, Galatians 5.17, 18. A church is a group of (saved) sinners and often we sin against one another. Therefore, one of the most important 'one another' commands of the New Testament concerns forgiveness. 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you', Ephesians 4.32.

The rationale of forgiveness

The reason we should forgive one another in the church is, of course, the gospel. Through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross our sins have been justly dealt with, Romans 3.25, 26, and therefore the holy God is able to justly forgive us, 1 John 1.9.

The parable in Matthew 18:21-35 teaches us that having been forgiven it is incumbent upon us to forgive others. A servant who has been forgiven a huge debt has no place in demanding that the small debts of others *must* be paid. It simply will not do.

If God could sacrifice his righteous anger for us to be forgiven, then surely we (sinners) must do the same when others sin against us. Jesus makes it clear that we must forgive and that the efficacy of our prayers is linked to this.

Immediately after teaching the Lord's Prayer in which he tells us to ask for forgiveness from God our Father, he says: 'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins', Matthew 6.14,15

We ask God to deal with us in grace, not according to what we deserve. But if, as we ask God for forgiveness, we fail to forgive others, we are acting as hypocrites. We are in effect saying to God, 'I am forgivable', while at the same time saying 'that other person is not forgivable'. In other words, we are asking God to forgive us because we are more deserving than them. This is not grace. In doing this, we have left the gospel behind and reverted to a works based approach to God.

Why we find it hard to forgive

Having said that, nevertheless, most of us still find it hard to forgive others – especially when they have hurt us. We may put up a show of ‘niceness’ but our hearts are still vengeful, or we simply try to avoid them. This is not how Jesus wants us to handle things. We find it hard to forgive for at least three reasons.

- *Justice:* We feel (rightly) it is simply not fair that people get away with what they have done. But remember God is the judge (not us) and he will inevitably deal justly. If that person is a Christian, Jesus has paid the debt to justice due for their sins. Can you look into the eyes of Jesus and demand, ‘I want more’? If the person who has sinned against you is not a Christian, though you are right to be angry, realize that God says, ‘It is mine to avenge, I will repay’, Romans 12.19. Therefore, forgive and leave it with God.
- *Pride:* Very often the root of our failure to forgive is our own dented pride – and pride is a sin, 2 Timothy 2.2. We are meant to follow Christ in humility, 1 Peter 2.21-23.
- *Blindness:* To hold on to accusations is to be like Satan, the great accuser. But to forgive is to imitate God, Ephesians 4.32-5.1. We can be blind to the opportunity God is giving us to become more like him. Let’s take the opportunity by forgiving as he forgives.

Helping each other to forgive

There are things we can do to help one another to be forgiving people.

- If we have sinned against someone, it really helps to say ‘Sorry’ and in a humble way, Luke 15.21. Do people say ‘sorry’ in your church? It will also help if we make reparation in some way to those we have wronged.
- If someone asks for forgiveness, forgive them in a gracious and loving way, Luke 15.22-24. Continually reminding one another of God’s great love in the gospel will help us.

4. Encourage one another

We all influence each other in various ways. The New Testament tells us to intentionally and positively try to influence one another for good in the church. You cannot grow to Christian maturity in isolation (a 'Jesus And Me' mentality).

The idea of encouraging one another is a central theme in the New Testament, Acts 16.40; Romans 1.12; 1 Thessalonians 5.11. We will centre our teaching on Hebrews 3.13 which says, 'But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness'.

Encouragement – its biblical scope

In contemporary society, the idea of encouraging someone has been reduced to simply getting them to feel better about themselves or their situation. But what does the NT mean by the word?

The context of Hebrews is one of potential apostasy. Jewish folk who had made a profession of faith in Christ were under extreme pressure from their Jewish friends and relatives to give up on Christ and return to Judaism. They were wavering under the stress. They were in danger, like OT Israel, v7-11, of no longer walking in God's ways. 'No,' says the writer (to paraphrase), 'don't let that happen. Rather encourage one another so that you won't turn away'.

So the central idea of NT encouragement is not primarily about making others feel good, but about stimulating each other to do God's will. This inference can also be drawn from the writer's reference to 'Today'. Now, 'Today', they have the opportunity to obey God's voice and so prove themselves genuine believers. But 'Today' will be succeeded by another day, the Day of the Lord, when that opportunity will have passed.

So NT encouragement is to be distinguished from some modern psychological views of help, where people in trouble have chosen a course of action that might be completely unhelpful, but nevertheless friends decide to support them in it in a non-directive way. Such 'encouragement' is for friends simply to act as some kind of security blanket. 'We are with you whatever you choose.'
We certainly need to do all we can to hang in with people. But in the NT encouragement is directive. We might define it thus: 'Encouragement is that which helps a Christian to embark upon or to continue in obeying the will of God'. We find God's will in the Scriptures, of course.

Once we understand this, we can see that the scope of NT encouragement is quite broad and takes on different colours of meaning according to circumstances. One Christian might be going through very painful difficulties. They are tempted to think, 'God doesn't love me. What's the point of carrying on?' They need gentle, tender, practical kindness. They need encouragement by way of comfort and consolation, Romans 12.15. But here's another Christian and her business has really taken off, she is making tons of money, everybody wants her, and despite friendly challenges, she is drifting and is rarely at church on Sundays. She is becoming hardened to Christ. She needs encouragement of a different sort – a sharp warning and rebuke. To walk out on Jesus is to be lost and prove false, Matthew 6.24.

Encouragement – its ongoing necessity

Hebrews 3.13 tells us that we need frequent encouragement 'so that none of you will be hardened by sin's deceitfulness'.

We get taken in by sins which are tailor made for us. We fool ourselves into thinking it is okay. But another person, standing outside the situation, can see through it all in a way we can't. That's why we need their 'encouraging' input. A Christian might be struggling with a besetting sin and Satan has told him that he can never win. The Christian is discouraged and becomes hardened. 'God only loves perfect Christians, and I can never be one, so there's no point carrying on!' he says to himself. He needs someone to come alongside and gently remind him of God's grace, that God loves sinners, and that sin is not all-powerful, Christ is. Can you think of other ways sin deceives us? We need to help each other.

However, the NT points out that we need to be careful as we seek to help one another in this way. Jesus warns us against hypocrisy: 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eyes,' Matthew 7.3. Paul warns us against falling ourselves, 'Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted', Galatians 6.1.

5. Accept one another

One of the great glories of the gospel is that it is for the whole world and brings to God people of every race and background. In the church there may be, by God's grace, people brought together who are naturally enemies or don't mix with each other, but are now one in Christ Jesus.

The classic example of this in the NT is where churches were composed of both Jews and Gentiles. It was like this in the church in Rome, Romans 1.16. Apart from the obvious ethnic differences, the Jews tended to have had a strict religious upbringing while Gentiles had a much more *laissez faire* approach to life before they came to Christ.

For all the major issues concerning how to live, the Bible gives clear commands. But there are some areas where, God having given us principles, we must use our wisdom and our consciences to decide what to do. This means that people of different backgrounds, within this limited area, may come to different conclusions. In Rome this led to tensions within the congregation. What was to be done? Paul addresses this crucial subject in Romans 14.1-15.13 and the thrust of his teaching is that Christians from different backgrounds and with different sensitivities of conscience must learn to accept one another. At the conclusion of his argument he writes: 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God', Romans 15.7.

Paul labels those with very sensitive consciences 'the weak' and those with faith enough to give their consciences more liberty as 'the strong', 14.1,2. Paul himself, though a Jew, is 'strong', 15.1. His guidelines for this situation are challenging to both the 'weak' and the 'strong.' We might find them surprising.

It is in matters where we can honestly differ from each other that members of a church can sometimes fall out, by insisting on their own personal preferences. This can especially be the case where a congregation is seeking to decide practical policies.

The weak must stop judging others 14.3-13

It is easy for those with sensitive consciences to point the finger at others who don't quite see things their way. This brings a dreadful judgmental atmosphere to a church. But they must stop this. Paul gives a number of reasons:

- Because those other Christians have been accepted by God v3,4
- Because those other Christians are sincerely seeking to serve God v5-9
- Because those other Christians answer not to you, but to God, v10-12

The strong must stop stumbling others 14.14-23

‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs!’ It is easy for those whose consciences don’t register other people’s foibles, not to care about how their behavior might upset others, even causing them to doubt the faith and so be hindered spiritually. Paul pleads with the strong not to do this. They must:

- Recognize, as Christians, that their behavior does affect others v14-18
- Recognize that their priority, as Christians, is to build others up v19-21
- Recognize that in disputable matters, we should keep our personal convictions to ourselves v22,23

We must stop pleasing ourselves, and aim to build up others 15.1-13

The strong should not try to steamroller the weak into seeing things their way. Nor should the weak use their sensitivities to try to hold the church to ransom. In disputable matters, to threaten, ‘If you do that, I’ll leave the church’, is to be guilty of blackmail. Instead, we must follow the pattern set by the Lord Jesus.

- Jesus did not seek to please himself, but to live for God’s glory 15.2-4
- Just as Jesus served both Jews and Gentiles in what he did, we should do the same where we differ from each other 15.7-12

Such an attitude will bring unity in the church and so make the church a more encouraging place and give strength to everyone in the church, to the glory of God, 15.5,6. Such a unified church will know the power of the Holy Spirit, 15.13.

6. Honour one another

What makes a musician a good accompanist? It is not just having a great competence on the keyboard. What is required is the ability to draw the best out of the soloist or the congregation who are singing. It is being able to lead others to give a great performance.

Thinking on Paul's instruction to the people of the church, 'Honour one another above yourselves', Romans 12.10, brings the illustration of the accompanist to mind. Every Christian in the church, not just musicians, should strive to make their brothers and sisters 'look and sound good.' We should be seeking, in humility, to promote others and to do this out of having a high regard for one another.

When this happens, a church will function well as the body of Christ, and be a happy place where Christians grow and excel in serving Christ.

Prefer one another

The original language of the text of Romans 12.10 is reminiscent of what is said concerning the ministry of John the Baptist in John 1.30. John speaks of one (the Lord Jesus) who comes after him but has surpassed him or is preferred before him. John, you remember, prepared the way for the Jesus, the Son of God, Mark 1.3, John 1.23. John both spoke appreciatively of Jesus, John 1.26, and was prepared to hand the advantage to Jesus, John 3.30. John the Baptist, in his humility, sets us an example of how we should treat one another.

The famous words of Paul to the Philippians encourage us to put others in the church first, to give them preference if you like: 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only on your own interests, but also on the interests of others', Philippians 2.3,4. Here Paul points to the Lord Jesus himself as setting the example which we should follow in our relationships in the church. He, being in very nature God, humbled himself in the service of God and us, Philippians 2.6-11. He was prepared to go even to the cross and sacrifice himself for us, 1 John 3.16.

What simple things can we do for one another in the church to 'prefer one another'?

Value one another

We are to 'prefer' one another because we are each seen as valuable by God.

- Every human being is made in the image of God, Genesis 1.26, 27
- Not even all the riches of the world is as valuable as a human soul, Mark 8.36
- Christ valued us so much that he laid down his life for us, Romans 14.15b
- Each one of us in Christ is God's workmanship, Ephesians 2.10
- Each one of us in Christ will be made glorious in heaven, Hebrews 12.23

Christ can say the unimaginable to his disciples: 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you', John 15.9.

Practical considerations

Is this matter of seeking to honour other Christians actually a part of your life? Here are a couple of things to think through.

Motives: Some people do 'honour' others but only as a technique to manipulate them. They have ulterior motives. This is the way of the world – seeking promotion at work etc. It is the way of the Pharisees, John 5.44. We are to honour each other because we love each other. We are not to go in for flattery.

Maturity: Are you mature enough to praise others? Many can't stand to hear others given appreciation. You remember that King Saul was like this. He could not stomach David being praised more than him and so began to persecute him, 1 Samuel 18.7, 8.

On the other hand some people are not mature enough to be able to receive appreciation from others. We come to a position of freedom to accept appreciation when we are not holding our lives together by deprecating ourselves, but by accepting and rejoicing in God's love for us.

7. Build up one another

God created the world by his word. He spoke and a whole new wonderful reality sprang into existence, Genesis 1.3, 6, 9 etc.

And there is a sense in which our words create a world for those around us. Unkind and harsh words create 'an atmosphere you can cut with a knife' and everyone is affected. But kind and encouraging words, for example, have a great power to lift everyone.

It is in the context of our language and choice of words that Paul gives us the 'one another' command about building each other up: 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption', Ephesians 4.29, 30.

What kind of talk?

Paul's command breaks into two parts – a negative and a positive. He tells of the kind of talk he doesn't want to come from a Christian's mouth and the kind of talk he does.

- *Negatively:* He doesn't want 'unwholesome' talk. The word 'unwholesome' has the meaning in the original of rotten or putrid. It might refer to some meat that is long past its sell-by-date, stinks and is full of harmful bacteria which will make people sick. Paul could be targeting bad language - obscenities or swear words. But in the light of v31 he probably has something else in mind. 'Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice', Ephesians 4.31. It may not be flagrant bitterness. It could be simply a sneering, whispered comment like, 'Well, what do you expect in this church!' Stop it.
- *Positively:* Paul wants us to choose our words to others so that what we say to them has the specific purpose of encouraging them, and in particular of strengthening them in their Christian faith, Romans 1.12. He wants us to say what is 'helpful' and will 'benefit' them. In order to do this we must know each other well so we can say things which are appropriate 'according to their needs'.

Some people have found a little acronym useful. We need to THINK before we speak. So we ask 5 questions about what we are going to say. 'Is it True?'; 'Is it Helpful?'; 'Is it Intelligible – to this person?'; 'Is it Necessary?'; 'Is it Kind?' It's not a bad rule to follow.

What is at stake?

We do love our brothers and sisters in the church and want to encourage them. But the context of Paul's words in Ephesians 4 indicates that there is something even bigger to bear in mind. Malicious and unhelpful talk grieves the Holy Spirit, 4.32. So when we hear bitter, untrue or unkind words in church it is as if we can hear the footsteps of the Holy Spirit walking towards the exit. And a church without the Spirit is useless.

The 19th century American theologian Charles Hodge wrote: 'All malicious and impure language, not only injures others but grieves the Holy Spirit. As the OT temple was sacred and everything that profaned it was an offence to God, so the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the people of God (the church) is made the reason why we should treat them with reverence'.

What do this mean?

Church leaders: There is a great deal in the world to discourage Christians, so the general tenor of teaching and preaching from the pulpit should be such as to build up believers by rightly explaining the gospel – the 'good news'.

Church members: Paul's command should make us all to prayerfully think through the people we are likely to meet at church on Sunday and what we can honestly say to them to help them and build them up in Christ. In particular we should think about how we can bring the gospel of God's love into the conversation.

The topics covered here do not cover all the 'one another' commands in the New Testament. It would be a good exercise, using a Bible concordance, to track down the others. Every one of them would make a very worthwhile study.