

United We Stand

by Steve Zeisler

"The church is the only army in the world that has a reputation for deserting its wounded," is the sad indictment that all too often has been laid at the door of the church of Jesus Christ. Armies have fought wars from time immemorial, and part of an army's commitment is to not leave its wounded behind when it is forced to retreat, or to abandon the fallen when advancing. An army will always seek some means of rescuing those who have fallen in battle. Yet the church has often been accused, with some justification, of abandoning its wounded in times of failure and hardship, times of defeat and hurt.

Our passage in the book of Galatians today will have some very important points to make about that issue. The question that is supreme for our consideration in the next two weeks is, 'How do we respond and what should be our attitude toward Christians who have been caught in sin; and how should we respond to Christians who are crushed by heavy burdens?' The Democratic Party just concluded its national convention in San Francisco. The brilliant oratory of several of the speakers at that convention has been the subject of widespread praise. There is no question that some remarkably powerful speeches were delivered. On a number of occasions I found myself wishing I could communicate so clearly and powerfully. For Christians, however, the acid test is not how good we sound; nor is it the slogans, the doctrine, or the politics we espouse. No, the test for Christians is not what we say, but what we do. Do our lives reflect the slogans we very properly claim?

Today we will look at a section of Galatians where the apostle appeals to the believers in Galatia to help those who are struggling in their spiritual walk. Next week we will look at one of the most chilling warnings in Scripture, addressed to those who are themselves headed into sin, those who are 'sowing to the flesh.' Some very important questions will arise, and we will find ourselves being tested.

Galatians 5:25:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

In verse 16 of chapter 5 we saw that Paul also urged Christians to 'walk by the Spirit,' but here in 5:25, although he seems to be issuing the same command, he is not repeating himself. There is an important difference in the Greek words that are translated 'to walk,' in both of these verses. In 5:16 he used the common word for putting one foot before the other in the ordinary process of walking. The word that is used here in verse 25, however, means 'to get in line with,' 'to follow after,' as it is sometimes translated. Here Paul views Christians not so much as a group of individuals, each of whom is seeking to walk in the Spirit. Rather, here he compares Christians to an army marching in line. Thus we are not only responsible to care for ourselves, but also for each other, and we will make progress only as we march together. A group of people cannot march properly and successfully as a group if someone in front is stumbling, or someone behind is falling to one side. We cannot make progress unless we are walking together in the Spirit. We are responsible for each other. We must all try to march together, realizing that we either all make it together or we don't make it at all.

Verse 26 follows naturally, then. The opposite of fulfilling our responsibilities for one another is boastfulness, vainglory, a proud turning of our attention on ourselves so that we are caught up thinking only of ourselves. John Stott says about the word that is translated 'boastful': 'This word denotes somebody who has an opinion of himself which is empty, vain or false. He is cherishing an illusion about himself.'

This kind of pride may express itself by challenging others. It seeks out those who are less well off and strikes at them to make them look bad. It puts down those who cannot fight back effectively. We had a bully in my neighborhood when I was young. He could not compete with his peers, therefore he picked on younger kids, challenging them, irritating and provoking them in an effort to gain attention for himself. As Christians we

cannot advance, marching together, if we involve ourselves in this kind of behavior.

There is another way in which vainglory can exhibit itself. Rather than provoking those whom you consider to be inferior to you, you can, on the other hand, envy those who appear to be superior to you. That inward-looking, heart-eating kind of envy comes from boastfulness as well, from a view of life that is self-focused. So whether you react with envy toward those whom you consider superior to you, or with provocation toward those whom you consider to be inferior, in either case your problem is that you are caught up with yourself. If that is so, we will never march as an army. We will never make progress in the Christian life. These are the issues which the apostle raises here. We have to march together, to be in line with one another, following the Spirit. We must reject self-centeredness because that is the deadly enemy of concern for each other.

Let us now consider practical application of these truths. 6:1

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.

There are two ways in which we ought to be about the business of helping one another. First, Paul mentions those 'caught in any trespass,' and secondly, those who are weighed down by burdens. How should we react to Christians who find themselves caught in such circumstances?

The two best known parables of Jesus are the story of the prodigal son and the story of the good Samaritan. Even people who know little else of the teachings of Jesus have heard those stories and are familiar with the issues he raised in them. The first is a poignant account of a father who was willing to forgive and restore his son in spite of the son's rebellion and blatant sin. It is easy to appreciate that story of forgiveness and restoration of one caught in a trespass. The story of the good Samaritan also strikes a chord deep inside us. The Samaritan cared for one who had been beaten and left for dead. Galatians 6 urges us to minister in the same two areas-- restoring sinners and caring for those who have been beaten down by excessive burdens.

How, specifically, do we go about this business of being involved with someone who is 'caught in a trespass?' (or 'overtaken in sin,' as other translations have it.) Notice the apostle is not referring here to someone whose life is characterized by sin. No, what Paul is talking about is someone who is marching with the army of Christ, someone whose heart has been transformed by Christ, who finds himself caught, to the surprise of everyone, in a trespass.

Our response should be one of restoration, not removal. We should not put them down because they have fallen into sin. Nor should our response be one of pity, of feeling sorry for them. Nor should we cover up their sin and hope that it will all go away. 'Restore' them, Paul counsels. Set about the task of getting them back on their feet again so they can march with the army, so they can get in line again and follow the Spirit of God.

This word 'restore' was used in secular literature of Paul's day for a surgeon who set broken bones, one who would take a broken, misshapen leg and set the bones back together so that the limb was useful again. I have had knee surgery twice. The first time the procedure was fairly serious, so serious that I had to wear a full leg cast for a number of weeks. The knee had been damaged and it had to be repaired. The restoration process was no picnic. I had to undergo surgery. then I had to hobble around on crutches with all the restrictions that entailed. Then, following the removal of the cast, I found that the muscles in my leg had atrophied. It was painful even to bend it. The rehabilitation process was hard work. In the same way, the rehabilitation process for one caught in a trespass also is painful. It may require periods of restrictions and learning new habits. But that is what we are called to do: to restore those who are caught in a trespass, not to feel sorry for them, not to cover up their misdeeds, but to restore them, to become involved with them so they are set on their feet again.

Christians are also told how to go about this restoring process: we are to do it 'in a spirit of gentleness: looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.' It is to be done by those who are 'spiritual.' Paul is not talking here about super-saints. He is referring to anyone who is spiritual in the sense he has just been describing,

one in whom the fruits of the spirit are evident, one who manifests the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. They are the ones who are qualified to 'restore' one caught in a trespass. It doesn't matter whether they are officially in leadership in the church, whether anyone notices them or not, the issue is: are they men and women who are themselves being transformed by the spirit of God? If so then they are 'spiritual,' and they have the necessary qualifications. And they must do any restoring in a spirit of gentleness.' They will not seek to hurt, they will be fully aware that they themselves are capable of any sin, thus they will be on their guard against temptation.

Alcoholics Anonymous sets a good example in this area of restoring people. A.A. is a group of ordinary people who know what is to be restored themselves, thus they are gentle with someone they have just rescued from a drunken binge. They know the temptation, they know their own weakness, and they are willing to admit that they themselves are capable of falling into the same temptation. Yet they are willing to go through the process of restoring fellow alcoholics and supporting them afterwards. Christians can learn from this type of attitude of loving restoration, not rejection, of those caught in a trespass. Real Christians will show concern, not condemnation for fellow marchers who have stumbled and fallen.

A second area where Christians are called upon to be committed to their brethren is to those who are carrying a crushing weight, those who are burdened by circumstances of life. That is how the Samaritan responded in the story told by Jesus.

A lawyer asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" wishing to justify himself. And Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead." [burdened, crushed, fallen to the ground, unable to rise.] "And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' "

There are people in this congregation who are living with terrible hurts. I was at a meeting last week in which we prayed for a young couple. The husband is wasting away from cancer that, apart from a miracle of God, will kill him shortly. Both husband and wife are frustrated depression has descended upon them to such an extent that they often find communication difficult. There is a burden that is too much to bear alone. I was grateful to hear them report that there are people in the church who are spending time with them, ministering to their needs.

There are seasons when bereavement, sickness, sorrow, poverty and depression become too much, times when Christians are weighed down by such heavy burdens that they need support and encouragement; they need people to help them bear their burdens. Those are the times when we need to be willing to shoulder their burdens with them. We can't let them fall. If we do not march together, we do not march at all.

I spoke recently with a woman whose marriage is falling apart. Her husband, as far as I can tell, is committed to a course of inflicting pain on all who come near him. At times this woman gives way to uncontrollable fits of tears. She does not know where to turn, how to act or where to go. She needs help. Thankfully, there are people around her who are helping her. Her ordeal is not going to last forever. The Lord is not going to require the evil day to go on without end. There are, however, times when such brothers and sisters need help in bearing their burdens. 'Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.'

Jesus agreed with the young lawyer's analysis that the law of God was summed up in the words, 'Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.' That is the law of Christ: love for God and love for neighbor. Paul is saying that if we bear each other's burdens we fulfill the law as reiterated by Christ. And Jesus said that that kind of love would be demonstrated by lifting up the fallen one and seeing to it that he was

helped.

In the following verses, Paul goes on to say why some Christians are unlikely to get involved. Here he will analyze the hardheartedness that many of us discover in ourselves when these issues are raised. Verse 3:

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load.

Sometimes we find ourselves unwilling to help needy people because we think we're above all that; that others ought to do things that are unpleasant and difficult. We begin to think of ourselves in that way because we have an exalted opinion of ourselves; we feel that our ministry ought to be on a cerebral level, not slugging it out in the trenches. That frame of mind, the apostle says, comes because we are comparing ourselves with others. We look around and think we're better than most Christians we know, and we adopt a superior attitude. But that is the wrong way to draw the analysis.

Jesus declared, 'To whom much is given, much will be required.' All of us have different strengths, different intellectual capacities. What good will it do me if I compare myself with someone who has had less opportunity than I? That's foolishness. If that is the kind of thing that's keeping us from helping needy people, then we are deceived and foolish. Last week two other fathers and I took our eight--year--old sons on a backpack trip. Each father carried 40--pound backpacks, while our sons carried about five pounds each. But all of us experienced the same hardship and difficulty during our six--mile hike: we all became thirsty about the same time; we all felt tired and irritable about the same time. How foolish I would have been to have felt proud that I was carrying much more than my son! Of course I should be able to carry more than an eight--year--old boy.

That is exactly the point Paul makes in verse 5: 'Each one shall bear his own load'--his own assignment from God. That does not in any sense contradict verse 2, where the Greek word used means a crushing, heavy burden. But here the apostle is reminding us that Christian responsibility is everybody's lot. All of us, like soldiers, are given a backpack. We all must carry something. We are given our own set of responsibilities, our own set of expectations from the Lord, and we have got to carry them. We should not feel proud just because we are capable of carrying a little more than someone else.

If you are going to boast, compare yourself with the kind of person you would be if the Lord Jesus had full control of you, without any hesitation on your part. Given your advantages, your background, your memories, your strengths, compare yourself to the kind of person you could have been if you had never resisted God. If you are going to boast, boast on that basis. But do not compare yourself with others. The pride that compares itself with someone else is one of the things that keeps us from helping those who are burdened. If we are humbled by seeing what remains to be done in us, what territory the Lord has yet to capture in our thinking, we are much more likely to help somebody else who is in need.

Verse 6 is a last call to humility in this section; humility that is willing to help those who stumble and those who are burdened. Verse 6:

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.

Paul once asked the proud, arrogant, self--impressed Christians of Corinth, 'What do you have that you did not receive?' What are you good at that somebody did not help you with? Not much, is the implied answer. Every one of us who teaches, who is respected and looked to by others for leadership, has been taught by someone. Everybody started out ignorant and had to be taught by others. Everybody began life foolish and childish and uninformed. We are much more likely to be gracious and helpful toward others if we remember that no matter how far along spiritually we now are, somebody once took the time, somebody once believed in us enough to help us, listen to us and shape us. Everybody was taught the Word at some point in his life.

If, on the other hand, we are of a mind set that says, 'Look how many people depend on me, how many people look up to me,' we will find it very difficult to extend a helping hand to burdened brothers and sisters. There are people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude that I cannot ever repay, Christians who did nothing but

give of themselves to me. Let us remember and share our resources with those who have taught us. Let us be counted among the givers, not among those who insist on having things their own way and, as a result, are unwilling to give.

If we live by the Spirit, let us together march by the Spirit. We cannot make it by ourselves. Part of our responsibility is to see that we are all progressing at the same time. Inevitably there are going to be those who are overtaken and surprisingly caught in a trespass. Let us help them gently, looking to ourselves, as Paul warns. There are others who at times will be crushed by circumstances, downtrodden by the hard things in life. They too need help. We as a body of believers ought to be willing to test ourselves in these areas, to examine not only what we say, but to look for consistent evidence that we care for people who need to be cared for.

The book of Galatians is a magnificent theological document. It has been called the "Magna Carta of Christian freedom." But neither learning nor freedom are intended by God to bring about isolation. Let us commit ourselves to supporting one another and marching forward together.

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Fourteenth message
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