

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God*

IN CHRIST JESUS.

(Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

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BRETHREN

As we read the New Testament and particularly Paul's letters, we discover leadership in general is not emphasized (taken up in an upcoming issue). By contrast, we discover that the Greek word *adelphoi*, which translates as *brethren* or *brother*, appears over 340 times in the New Testament and over 130 times in Paul's epistles. Now this should catch our attention, because if the Bible emphasizes a word over and over again, it has some significance to us and we must learn what that is.

What does *brethren* mean? There is general agreement that the word *brethren* refers to all the believers in the church; men and women; brothers and sisters *in* Christ. By reading Paul's letters, we find that he often addressed them to the saints or to the ecclesia to which he was writing. He would write to all the saints in the ecclesia. Paul addressed the letter to the Philippians to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons." As we can see, when Paul wanted to specifically include leaders, he did so; but seldom did he single them out as a group. Paul's emphasis was always on all the saints. In the same manner, when he wrote his letters and he referenced the brethren, he addressed all the saints to which he was writing the letter. So the emphasis of the early writings was on the brethren, all the brothers and sisters in a local assembly.

Why does the word of God emphasize the brethren? To understand the answer, we must understand Paul's vision of the ecclesia. Through the revelation given to Paul, we see that the ecclesia is the body of Christ and it is compared to a physical, natural body that is made up of many members. We have human bodies with many different parts, all designed with specific functions that are necessary for the body to live a healthy, normal life. We could say that the ecclesia of Christ is the spiritual representation of the human body. When we were born from above, we became members of the body of Christ and were given gifts to operate in a certain way so that the body can live and grow. In other words, every believer is gifted, that is, has a ministry or service to perform. The concept that we see in the ecclesia today of professional ministers who have their own ministry to the exclusion of the rest of the body is not scriptural. It is true that some are called into special ministries, as Paul was, but we all are called to minister according to the gifts given by the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul told the Corinthians.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all {persons.} But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12.4-7 NASB)

To each one is given; this means that all believers are gifted in some measure for one purpose—the common good of the body. It is not that saints are gifted to show off how spiritual they are or how gifted they are. Never! It is only for the building up of the body. It is for the common good of all. Another way of saying this is that it is for the health and maturing of the body that Christ would be glorified in His body. Gifts are to be manifested in a living way.

In Ephesians, Paul gives us another indication of each member doing the work of ministry. According to Paul's words, all the members of the body are to do the work of ministry or service.

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4.12 KJV)

It seems that the church of today is out of focus with its emphasis on ecclesiastical titles and clergy. Paul knew nothing of this in his day. Instead, he saw the body of Christ as a gathering together of many members, all given a place in the body to support and help build itself up in love. **It is to be life springing forth from the many members in a living love relationship with the Head, our Lord Jesus, and in a brotherly love relationship with one another.** We all are called to be responsible believers. When we all do not join together in a living way, then the body is not healthy but weak and sick.

If we all are to do the work of ministry or service and all are gifted, then what does this mean? It means that we all are to have some form of responsibility for pastoral care and ministry in the ecclesia. It rests squarely upon the shoulders of all the brethren! Does this shock you? Have you believed that only so-called “church leaders” are to do all the pastoral care of the body of Christ? Don’t be dismayed; it seems that many today believe this way. But because many believe it or do it does not make it right according to Scripture. In fact, we need to be challenged by the question: Is this why the ecclesia today seems to be so weak and out of focus in so many places? We find professional clergy who are paid to minister to the people who do little but sit and be ministered to. This is not Biblical! Or we find a group that has a little more light, so they have elders who are in charge of the local assembly, but they still do all the ministry. They teach, they pray, and they tell the congregation what they have decided for the assembly. Or maybe they don’t do the public ministry of speaking, so they designate (or hire) someone to be a pastor to do the public ministering.

Dear brethren, it is time to wake up. The ecclesia is a body; a living, breathing organism, not an organization like we see in the world. All the members of the body must work together out of the life of Christ that dwells in them. No one member is to be left out if we are to mature.

The New Testament clearly teaches us that all the believers are responsible. We are given much light in this area through two words—*one another*. Throughout the New Testament, we find these two words or a similar set of words—*each other*—in many places. In each case, it is a matter of all the believers ministering in and to the body of Christ. The following Scripture references tell us what we all are called to do:

Admonish and teach one another (Romans 15.14; Colossians 3.16), Serve one another (Galatians 5.13), Bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6.2), Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12.25), Wash one another’s feet (John 13.14-15), Love one another (John 13.34-35; 15.12,17; Romans 13.8; 1 Thessalonians 4.9), Be devoted to one another (Romans 12.10), Show kindness and compassion to one another (Ephesians 4.32), Edify one another (Romans 14.19; 1 Thessalonians 5.11b), Bear with one another (Ephesians 4.2; Colossians 3.13), Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5.11a; Hebrews 3.13; 10.25), Incite one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10.24), Pray for one another (James 5.16), Offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4.9), Fellowship with one another (1 John 1.7), Confess sins to one another (James 5.16)

What a list of *one anothers*! But this is only a partial list of what we find in the New Testament. Is there any doubt of the vital importance of this matter? How can we ignore what the word of God so clearly spells out to us? You are encouraged to read your Bible and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the many other examples of *one another* in the body of Christ.

Let us live as we are called. We are called as **brethren**, brothers and sisters in Christ related because we have one Head, and we are part of one body, the body of Christ.