



Editor's Note

We have completed three years of ShopNotes and have been amazed at the response. If you recently joined us, you have missed 18 issues packed with "bite-sized" practical help for elders. All back issues are archived on our web-site.

We need your help & feedback, though. As our subscriber list grows, so does the expense to keep publishing. We want to keep this publication on a free will basis, yet we also want to be good stewards of the Lord's resources.

Many of you have sent financial support, for which we are very thankful. Your gifts have made ESN possible. Many have offered encouragement to keep publishing.

We made a commitment that we would continue publishing as long as the Lord provides

through His people. However, our expenses this past year outran the gifts coming in for ESN. So we need your input. How should we continue? Should we make the financial need known on a more regular basis? Should we include a yearly reminder? Is a suggested \$12/year per subscription too much?

If you see a "RESP NEEDED" on the label of your envelope or on your e-mail subject line, that means we haven't heard from you in a while. Do you wish to continue receiving ESN? We don't want ESN to be junk mail.

Please write and give us your feedback. Most of all, keep looking to the Lord.



Practical Ministry

Handling Handouts

by Chuck Gianotti

The phone rings, his story tugs at your heart. A young man's car broke down while traveling cross country to visit his sick mother for Christmas. He has no money left, and doesn't know what to do. Can the church help? A woman with two sick children calls, her government support check is late—her baby is sick and she can't afford the needed medicine.

Such calls are common, especially if you have your phone number listed with the church, or happen to be at the church building frequently during the weekdays. Some down-and-outers are known to make the circuit of churches asking for handouts, knowing that many religious leaders will soften with a good story.

However, genuinely needy people exist out there, without family or institutional support of any kind. We dare not imitate those who found

convenient reason to bypass the half-dead destitute of Luke 10:30-35. Much rather we emulate the Good Samaritan. Further, some callers could perchance be of the Hebrew 13:2 variety, angels in disguise.

As an elder, you have a genuine care for people and the last thing you want to do is turn away a genuinely needy person. Yet, you don't want to be an easy target for the con artist. There is probably not a formula for always doing the right thing, but here are some ideas that may help stimulate your thinking.

1. Understand God's love for all people, especially those in great need. Israel fell short in this area, incurring God's displeasure, when the prophet Isaiah railed against them for their many sins: "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). These were just some of the sins for which God invites them to "'Come now, let us reason together', says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like

scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.'" God has not changed and He is still concerned about needy people. His heart echoes the end time judgment, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35).

2. Be cautious and wise. There is a proliferation of people making their living by concocting hard-luck stories, preying on the unsuspecting churches. Don't assume all callers are con-artists. Some may simply have nowhere to turn, or are unaware of resources available (like inner city missions, soup kitchens, etc.).

3. Ask for the phone number and address of the caller, and what organizations he or she has already called.

4. Get to know your local food bank, soup kitchen and city missions. As a church, support one or more of these organizations. They are usually well equipped to not only evaluate and meet such needs, but also to provide longer term help. If you are going to direct your caller to such places like these, then it would be a matter of integrity to help financially support their work. It is not the heart of Christ to simply slough needy people off to other ministries and wash your hands of it.

5. Sometimes a caller will complain that he or she has tried all of those organizations, but to no avail. A few phone calls may clarify this concern. One time I was alerted about my caller

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Hopefully, the foregoing material (see the previous three issues of ESN) has provided enough basics about small groups to get started. Now, lest anyone think that all will be smooth sailing, it's time to survey some of the problems that can arise.

As a general guideline, it will be helpful if elders can distinguish among three types of problems: 1) Objections – honest or misguided concerns, often raised at the beginning; 2) Design Flaws – significant weaknesses in key areas of layout or execution; and 3) Little Foxes – small snags that require minor course corrections. Let's think about each and what can be done to overcome them.

Objections

Often coming from sincere individuals, these are usually based on ignorance or fear. Like all groups, brethren assemblies have their traditions, and change does not come easily. Elders must provide clear communication on the needs of the body for increased fellowship and outreach while patiently helping the believers to take small steps forward. The elders should pave the way with studies from Scripture on the many facets of fellowship, opportunities for ministry, and the responsibilities described in scores of "one-another" passages that come alive when lived out practically.

Common concerns include misconceptions about format ("sharing") and formation of cliques or splinter groups. Counter these by emphasizing the goals of getting to know people and getting them involved. Help them understand that the composition of the groups will change at times and that group leaders will meet regularly with the elders to monitor activities and ensure unity.

At times, a small group will grow too large to be effective and may need to divide into two smaller groups. Some may resist breaking up a "good thing." I have often reminded groups that when a young couple announces that the wife is pregnant, there is instantaneous joy at the thought of an "addition." No one laments that a friend will "divide into two"! So should it be with small groups. When the worry is raised about a group growing large and breaking away from the assembly, our elders' immediate response is "Go for it; we'll help and support you; we need lots of new assemblies." The objection disappears quickly.

Design Flaws

Three major barriers to blessing are:

1) *Poor Leadership*. This is seen when

elders are unable to develop a desire in the group leaders to work together, or in the assembly to give small groups a try. It can also be seen within a small group when no one is prepared to give guidance. There must be shepherding, and the sheep must know who the shepherds are. Elders and group leaders must have a good working relationship. Training, ongoing support, and a clear sense of mission are critical. By sharing in the pastoral care of the flock, leaders can relieve tired elders while preparing for the day when they themselves will be recognized as elders.

2) *Unclear Purpose*. Problems are inevitable when the impression is given that small groups are just another optional "program," rather than the primary fellowship meeting of the assembly. Because it is natural for the intellect to dominate, fellowship can be squeezed out as the group becomes a *Bible study*. To emphasize fellowship, choose names that reflect goals like "care groups" or

Every group will be unique in its outworking of fellowship and outreach.

"shepherd groups." I strongly suspect that those who are most opposed to intimate fellowship, demanding *only* Bible study, may be threatened by the prospect of having bitter relationships exposed.

3) *Too Structured*. The sign of healthy groups is not strict controls and puppet-like subordination to the elders. The needs of people are unpredictable and unscheduled. If a group design lacks flexibility and cannot adjust to changing needs, people become servants to the group rather than the group being a servant to the people. Well-run groups will be characterized by order and respect for spiritual authority. Signs of health are individual and group growth, as barriers crumble through the entrance of truth and light in an atmosphere of love and trust, i.e., a family.

Little Foxes

As parents (and farmers) can testify, growth is not always neat. "Where no oxen are, the crib is clean..... (Proverbs 14:4). Babies will spill their milk, but thank God for the babies! Here are a few tips in dealing with the small issues that crop up:

- Don't be afraid to ask for help and ideas. Others have been enjoying small groups for years..

- Be creative in problem solving. For example, if some people favor small groups and others prefer a combined meeting, alter-

nate between the two for awhile.

- Listen to concerns and deal with problems early as did the Apostles in Acts 6

- Don't live in fear of problems. Rare is the problem that can escape the notice of the core people in an assembly where open communication exists. Every elder, deacon, small group leader, host or hostess is a pair of eyes to take note of needs. The small group leader meeting is a place to discuss, pray, and plan strategy.

- Emphasize family spirit, training, equipping, outreach and spiritual gifts for service so that the group does not stagnate.

- Encourage the women and young people to get involved, remembering that men do the speaking and leading when the assembly gathers as a whole.


- Welcome visitors warmly but let them look on as the group carries out the functions of a family.

- Encourage accountability because that's the point at which growth often begins. There is a wide difference between cult accountability ("I want you to be accountable to me,"), and healthy accountability ("I'll help with accountability concerning what you are convinced God wants you to do").

Conclusion

Elders should cultivate clear troubleshooting, which is the ability to discern and correct problems in the early stages. Because the principle of small groups is biblical, no obstacle can permanently cripple where a humble, teachable, positive spirit is found. Indeed, history is filled with examples of how the church under persecution laid aside imposing structures and flourished in small companies gathering quietly in family-sized groups.

Because small groups are geared to individual assemblies and believers, every group will be unique in its outworking of fellowship and outreach. But if nurtured by prayer, good leadership and plenty of love, small group ministry holds tremendous potential for growth and blessing. It will take some time to fine tune details to your needs locally, but the rewards will more than compensate the investment of time and labor.

[Editor's note: If you are interested in learning more about small groups or are having difficulties in implementing small groups in your church, you can contact Jack Spender at jonalansp@juno.com or (203) 393-0078. Or you can contact him through  Elders' ShopNotes—see back panel.]

[Editor's Note: While we believe in an elder form of leadership, this article speaks to us elders—we must learn to receive rebuke well.]

Pastoring my first church, things were going rather well, I thought. Perhaps that contributed to my hubris as I stood in the pulpit one Sunday morning and told the church that God wanted us to commit to a wonderful missions project that would cost \$6,000 over and above our budget. The money would have to be gathered within a month, I told them, and I was grateful in advance for what they were going to do.

Somewhere I'd heard that visionaries do this sort of thing...and that people love it.

Walking into the church's board meeting the next night, I honestly expected to be affirmed for my bold leadership. So I was taken off guard when the chairman opened the meeting and immediately turned to Ernest Krost, the highly respected 75-year-old father-figure of the congregation.

"Mr. Krost has a comment," the chairman said.

"Brother Gordon," he said, "I have a rebuke for you."

As I sucked in my breath, Mr. Krost began: "You may have thought that your announcement yesterday morning was a worthy

cause. But this board wants you to never again go to this congregation and ask for money without consulting us first.

"We want to stand with you in your leadership, but we cannot do it when you surprise us the way you did yesterday. We have a budget in this church, and we can always expand it if God wills. But you are not permitted to do that by yourself.

"Now we will back you on this project, but we will only do so this one time. Have you heard what I have said?"

I heard him, and told him so. And I never played the role of solo-visionary again.

When I was a 16 year old, a track coach had told me, "It looks to me as if you will always have to learn things the hard way." This on the heels of a defeat in a race I should have won if I had followed the coach's instructions. I had walked off the track that day vowing, "That's the last time I learn something the hard way."

Unfortunately, it was far from the last time. My life is paved with rebukes. From my father, from teachers, friends, critics, and from the people in my four congregations.

I like to think that each of the rebukes stuck and affected my character and my behavior. But no doubt some sailed right

over my head and denied me their benefits.

What rebukes are and aren't

Generally defined, to rebuke means to confront someone with the wrongness of an action or attitude and to help them see the consequences.

This is different from what often happens in church. I know what unsigned letters look like. I have had my motives, my integrity, my theology, and my politics unkindly questioned. I have had people talk warmly to my face and coldly behind my back. These are not rebukes.

A rebuke is different. A genuine rebuke is a noble communication; its intention is to free a person for growth and effectiveness by speaking, as Paul puts it, "truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). In the Bible, such rebukes were often tough.

Samuel to Saul: "You acted foolishly.... You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time...but now your kingdom will not endure" (1 Sam. 13:13-14).

Jesus to Simon Peter: "You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:23).

Paul to the Corinthians: "Brothers, I could

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Wives' Corner

Becoming Characterized by Faith

by Mary Gianotti

This new year, as a woman, mother and elder's wife, I want to become characterized by faith in God. Hopefully, you do as well. There are three foundational truths that will help us as women on the road to attaining this goal. The inspired writer James clearly outlines them in his first chapter: we can expect trials, there will be temptations and we can anticipate good gifts. At first this list can seem rather depressing, but God wants to do a work in our lives in this new year. We need to believe He has a plan for us and is at work in our lives.

First, there will be trials. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance..." James 1:1-5. In general we don't want to have troubles in our lives—we prefer a clear, smooth path. The work that God wants to do requires the tool of trials. This is not to make us miserable but to develop our faith in Him. If a problem arises in your local fellowship, you can be sure that God is at work. In the process, He wants to change you.

Let me ask a question: do you handle con-

flict or disappointment better now than a few years ago? The only way to grow in this regard is by believing that God is in control and that He will provide as much wisdom as you need in any circumstance. God's wisdom is available but you need to ask for it. It always comes back to a relationship. He loves you so much that He will provide trials that will require you to lean back in His loving arms, asking Him for advice and help. If you stay in His arms and don't bolt, He will mature you and strengthen your faith.

The second thing we can expect this new year is temptations (1:13-15). The desire to speak too harshly, make judgments, show favoritisms, ignore the needy and not show love are just a few areas of temptation. The problem is that we so quick justify our thoughts, giving into them by acting in a sinful manner. One way to fight temptation this year is to be aware of these tendencies and that acting on them is sin—and then ask God to show us His faithfulness by revealing "a way out, so that you will be able to stand up under it." (1 Cor. 10: 13). This is faith in action, turning to God in your time of temp-

tation.

Finally, there will be good gifts in this new year. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father..." James 1:17. When there is harmony in the fellowship, love is being shown to one another. This blessing is from the Lord. Thank our heavenly Father; He is the one who has done this. On a personal level the Lord may bless you spiritually, financially, with health and family. Again, thank our heavenly Father, He is the one who has done this. So often we forget to be thankful or think we deserve to be blessed. Our faith will grow strong if we give God the credit for everything good in our lives no matter how small it may be.

We can anticipate trials, temptations and good gifts in this new year. Each one of these will be a tool to develop faith, a faith in the God we serve.



Handouts (cont. from page 1)

being a “professional” beggar who refused opportunities to work. Keep in mind these organizations are usually much better equipped to determine the genuineness of the needs.

6. Keep in mind, the caller needs Christ, regardless of his or her motive.


7. Ask the caller to meet you at the church or some other designated public place. This requires the individual to make an effort to prove his genuineness. Also, this gives you

a chance to get to know and assess his need better. You might then take him out for a couple bags of groceries. I have found that those who are simply looking for an easy handout, never show up.

8. Bring another person with you when you go to meet someone.

9. Set up a benevolence committee, whose job it is to check out such requests.

10. You may be fooled by a great sounding story. It has happened to me on a

number of occasions. All is not lost, for one of three things may have taken place: a) We were not wise, but have been provided a wonderful opportunity to learn wisdom, b) God was testing our sincerity in the face of doubt. Better to give a handout once too often, than withhold Samaritan grace once too often, c) God may use our kindness to speak to the con artist. 

Rebuke (cont. from page 3)

not address you as spiritual, but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it” (1 Cor. 3:1-2).

Not all rebukes were welcomed. King Ahab, for example, discouraged an appearance from the prophet Micaiah, saying, “I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad” (1 Kings 22:8).

I worry for the leader who doesn't want to hear hard things, who surrounds himself or herself with people who only say pleasant, positive things. Sooner or later, such leaders neutralize themselves.

A good rebuke is issue-specific. Words are not minced, and the hearer has no question about what is being said. A good rebuke does not normally come off the top of someone's head; rather it is thought through carefully. It is framed in prayer and sometimes in tears. If the rebuker finds the task easy, the rebuker may need a rebuke of another kind.

One of the most remarkable rebukes in the Bible came when God spoke in cross-examination form to a whining Job. After a tour-de-force through the universe, as it were, Job gets God's point and stands rebuked.

“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3-6).

I can't think of a better response to a rebuke than Job's.

In his diary, dated November 22, 1722, Jonathan Edwards ponders the value of rebuke with these words:

“Considering that bystanders always espy some faults which we don't see ourselves... there are many secret workings of corruption which escape our sight, and others only are sensible of: resolve therefore, that I will, if I can by any convenient means, learn what faults others find in me, or what things they see in me, that appear anyway blame-worthy, unlovely, or unbecoming.”

My hero, nineteenth-century Anglican pastor Charles Simeon, struggled with ego. A close friend called this tendency to his attention. A day later Simeon wrote to his mentor, Henry Venn:


“What a blessing—an inestimable blessing is it to have a faithful friend! Satan is ready enough to point out whatever good we have; but it is only a faithful friend that will

screen that from your sight, and show you your deficiencies.

“Our great apostasy seems to consist primarily in making a god of self; and he is the most valuable friend who will draw us most from self-seeking—self-pleasing—and self-dependence and help us to restore to God the authority we have robbed him of.”

A rebuke is designed to develop spiritual insight, character, or capability. Or it is meant to halt something that is destructive or detrimental to larger interests.

(To be continued next issue ...)

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Feedback & comments are welcomed along with suggestions for future articles.

“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers ...” 1 Peter 5:2a NIV