

HABITS (5)

A forgotten habit?

A. Introduction

1. Two things we are called to do as followers of Jesus are to keep going and to keep growing.

To keep going means that we keep trusting in Jesus and don't give up.

To keep growing means that we become more and more like the Lord Jesus.

The way we keep going is as we keep growing.

"Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever! Amen." (2 Peter 3:17-18)

2. How do we keep going and growing?

Ultimately it is God who keeps His people going and growing.

"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

However, there are paths through which God works so that we survive, grow, and flourish and we are to walk these paths to keep going and growing.

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Philippians 2:12-13)

These paths are known as 'spiritual disciplines' or 'means of grace' or 'habits'.

"A means of grace is a tool or instrument that God uses to strengthen and nurture us so that we grow in conformity to Christ." (RC Sproul)

3. What are these habits that help us to keep going and keep growing?

"Whilst there's no final and complete list of such practices, the long tally of helpful habits can be clustered underneath three main principles: hearing God's voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body. Or simply: word, prayer, and fellowship." (David Mathis)

"The 'means of grace' are such as Bible reading, private prayer, and regularly worshipping God in Church, wherein one hears the Word taught and participates in the Lord's Supper. I lay it down as a simple matter of fact that no one who is careless about such things must ever expect to make much progress in sanctification. I can find no record of an eminent saint who ever neglected them." (JC Ryle)

To keep going and keep growing we need to cultivate the habits of hearing God's voice, having God's ear, and belonging to God's body.

This was certainly what the early church did, as they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to prayers and to the fellowship.

4. But what about...?

Often you find in lists of spiritual disciplines (e.g. Don Whitney's Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life) evangelism, serving and giving.

Should they be included here?

I haven't included them because I think all of these things will happen when we are hearing God's voice, having His ear and belonging to His body.

But there is a habit that has been forgotten which is worth rediscovering.

5. The Puritan practice of conference – a forgotten habit – but one to be rediscovered.

B. Rediscovering the Puritan practice of conference

1. What is a conference?

Today we use the word 'conference' to describe a meeting of a number of people to discuss or listen to a discussion about a certain topic in a particular field.

In the sixteenth century, the term was used to describe 'conferring or taking counsel on an important or serious subject'.

For the Puritans, a conference, was when a small number of individuals met, to talk about the state of one another's souls, and to nurture spiritual growth.

Everyone in the church was expected to have a person to conference with, and this was a way for them to apply some of the 'one another' passages in Scripture.

"I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." (Romans 15:14)

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

"See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." (Hebrews 3:12-13)

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16)

A conference was a serious conversation about the weighty matter of a person's soul.

2. What were the different types of conferences?

Two broad categories of conferences have been identified: Ministerial and Lay.

Ministerial conferences can be divided into two subcategories.

- i) Professional.

This is when pastors would gather together to exchange ideas, and for advice, support and fellowship.

Sometimes more experienced pastors would invest time and attention into the lives of younger pastors.

- ii) Pastoral.

This is when pastors would meet with members of their congregations.

To address doubts, answer questions, and give instruction to the unconverted.

To increase Biblical knowledge of members, to better know how to watch over them, to pray for them, become aware of any particular needs, or to apply counsel for a spiritual problem.

In some instances, it took the form of a weekly forum open to all church members, where they would discuss or dispute the sermon preached with the pastor.

Mortem Obire was when the pastor would meet with those facing immediate death to either warn or comfort.

Lay conferences can also be divided into two subcategories.

i) Household.

William Perkins described the family as being like a little church, with the father being the pastor to his flock.

A household conference was when the father would instruct and counsel their households.

“Fathers... bring them [your children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4)

ii) Community.

This was where members of the church would conference together and care for each other’s spiritual health.

“You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the word of God. Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled.” (Titus 2:1-6)

3. Isn’t “Conference” just an old-fashioned term for a minister’s fraternal, pastoral visiting, family worship and a home group?

It can be, but there is something in the Puritan Conferences that is generally missing from the above.

4. How did a conference work?

There were two elements to it:

A sermon discussion – where those who were conferring would usually discuss the last sermon they heard (although it could also be to study a passage of Scripture).

A heart discussion – where those who were conferring would discuss what was happening in their hearts as they listened and thought over what they heard. They would confess any struggles they had with what Scripture taught and also the ways the truths should be applied to their lives.

5. What are the benefits of the conference?

It helped the pastors and elders know their flock in order to better care for them.

It helped to increase biblical literacy – it encouraged the congregation to listen carefully and take notes to help them remember what was said in the sermon. Even if they believed that the preacher had faithfully taught the passage, they had to be able to prove it and so forced them to engage with the text.

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11)

It helped the people to apply God’s Word to their lives.

6. How can we use this habit today?

By meeting with someone to discuss two questions¹:

i) Was the preacher right?

ii) What did your heart do when you heard the sermon?