



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Mutual Correction
(*Membership*, pp. 57-64)

Suggested Article:

📖 Working in Christ's Body
(*Membership*, pp. 40-43)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Mutual Correction

One of the most significant, difficult, and neglected obligations we owe to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is mutual correction. This practice of giving and accepting counsel, admonishment, and rebuke is a form of spiritual rescue.

Prayer

O God, who came to comfort, anticipating the pain of life in this world, groan for us and with us.

Show us how we are most needed. Teach us to be comforters, to bear one another's burdens, and to pray without words when the words of this world are simply inadequate.

Amen.

Scripture Reading: Galatians 6:1-5

Meditation†

You cannot surrender to God a self you do not know. This was surely in the design of community that we might find ourselves in the mirror of that community. As we share the common life, one unredeemed area after another comes to light. The joy of involvement is interwoven with the pain of it.

Elizabeth O'Connor (1928-1998)

Reflection

"We all want encouragement from those around us, especially those who are close to us," Darin Davis notes. "If we are actually trying to 'put courage in' one another – or perhaps better understood, trying to open one another to God's redemptive grace – then we have to realize that encouragement includes mutual correction. ... For Christians called to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), mutual correction is a profound expression of charity: it is a way of loving others, who, like us, are prone to missteps along the path that God sets before us."

Mutual correction is difficult: on the giving end, we can botch our advice so that it alienates the one we are trying to help, and on the receiving end, it is rarely pleasant to have another person point out our failings. That is why friendship is required for mutual correction. We are more able to *give* good advice to someone whom we love and know well, and it is much easier to *accept* moral counsel and rebuke from a person who loves us.

Davis believes that friends need four virtues – charity (*agape* love), humility, prudence, and courage – in order for their mutual correction to be "truthful, restorative, and truly encouraging."

- ▶ *The motivation should be charity.* "We are called to help our friends in their time of spiritual peril because we love them, we love God, and we see their moral distress as something that thwarts their true happiness," Davis writes. Since "our friends love us, we must receive their correction with the same spirit it is offered." We must resist self-serving motives that creep into advice-giving, like gaining power over others, or shifting attention away from our own moral weaknesses.
- ▶ *Humility lets us recognize our own sin.* Davis notes that "Jesus's teaching about not judging others in Matthew 7:1-5 is not a prohibition of moral correction, but a call to moral self-awareness." Humility lets us stop worrying about how we compare with others



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and allows us to make an honest self-assessment. "When we recognize our place in the created order involves deep equality with other human beings, and we understand how our own striving for God is compromised by sin, then we are likely to have a richer appreciation of the fragility of our own moral character and clearer awareness of the nature of our friend's trouble."

- ▶ *With prudence we can judge what to say and do in individual cases.* What should we say? When and how should we say it? Or, is it better to keep silent? Wise discernment helps us to know. "Sound as my counsel may be, and though it is motivated by charity, it has little chance of the intended effect if I offer it in a way that will embarrass or humiliate my friend."
- ▶ *Courage enables us to find the voice to speak up.* Correction is difficult to give. Even when we are motivated by love and act in humility, we may be tempted to "remain silent, painfully aware that something needs to be said or done."

Davis believes that the sort of spiritual friendship that fosters our willingness to give and receive correction and the virtues we require to do this well "is a profound expression of real encouragement, for it opens us to God's love, which restores all of us, no matter how far we have strayed from his path."

Study Questions

1. How can you tell when correction is truly offered in charity, or *agape* love and humility?
2. How is courage required in giving and receiving correction?
3. Why, according to Davis, is friendship "the right home" for mutual correction? If someone you know needs correction, but is not a friend, how would you proceed?
4. Discuss how Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17 guides our prudence, or wise discernment, in offering correction.
5. In Andrea da Firenze's fantastical fresco, *Allegory of the Active and Triumphant Church and of the Dominican Order*, how do Dominicans serve the body of Christ by offering correction? How can all Christians participate in this form of ministry?

Departing Hymn: "Let Us Bear Each Other's Burdens" (verse 1)

Let us bear each other's burdens
as we struggle on through life;
turn not on the erring members,
add not to their care and strife;
let our hearts beat kindly for them,
for this world with sin is rife.
If their burdens be so heavy
that they stoop beneath the care,
let us bear them, of our vigor,
help them as we well can spare.

J. Van Namee (1881), alt.
Tune: ALL THE WAY

† Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment: The Story of the Church of the Saviour*, Washington, DC (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 93.

Mutual Correction

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how mutual correction can become part of the encouragement we give one another in the contexts of friendship, family, and congregational life.
2. To discuss why friendship is required for mutual correction.
3. To understand why the virtues of charity, humility, prudence, and courage are required for mutual correction that is truly encouraging and restorative.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Membership (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Let Us Bear Each Other’s Burdens” locate the familiar tune ALL THE WAY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Darin Davis recalls, “A student of mine came to see me recently to talk about friendship. He began by asking questions about the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas that we were reading in class, but soon he was asking questions about friendship in his own life.

“He described a close friend who is abusing alcohol. The friend’s academic work was beginning to suffer, and his relationships with family and friends were beginning to fray. My student was greatly concerned about his friend’s drinking. ‘I am worried something terrible may happen,’ he told me. ‘I know I need to do something, but I am worried that if I say or do the wrong thing, my friend will turn against me, and then what?’

“And then my student said, ‘People always talk about friends encouraging one another, but we don’t talk much about correcting each other’s ways. It seems like Christians hardly ever talk about that.’” (*Membership*, 57)

In this study Davis explores the role of mutual correction in encouraging our friends and outlines the virtues that we need in order to offer and receive correction faithfully and well.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Galatians 6:1-5 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to “bear one another’s burdens,” and this includes reproving, restoring, and encouraging one another when we stray from the way of Christ. In this study, we consider the

sort of people we must be in order to give and receive this sort of correction faithfully. The correction, forgiveness, and restoration of church leaders when they fail can be especially difficult. For more resources on this topic, see Robert B. Kruschwitz, "Failing Leaders," in the *Forgiveness* issue of *Christian Reflection*, pp. 71-77. This is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Study Questions

1. When correction arises from charity and is offered in humility, it is done for the right reason, at the right time, and in the right way. Only then can its outcome be "truthful, restorative, and truly encouraging," Darin Davis notes. The right reason is "to help our friends in their time of spiritual peril because we love them, we love God, and we see their moral distress as something that thwarts their true happiness," he writes. "This has nothing to do with being in some kind of morally superior and justifiable position to offer correction to someone else."
2. In receiving correction, we may be afraid of knowing the extent of our own moral disorder, losing our reputation for goodness, having our disorder revealed by a person we envy, losing the love of the person who corrects us, and so on. In giving correction, we may be afraid of losing the friendship of the person we are correcting, discouraging the person and turning her against goodness itself, and so on. Davis explains, "Without courage, the charity that rightly motivates our care and concern for a wayward friend may remain hidden, unexpressed. With courage, we can find the voice to speak up, even when it is difficult."
3. Davis situates mutual correction in the context of friendship for two reasons. First, "it is doubtful that we will receive well and embrace moral counsel or rebuke from persons we only casually know. Our first and legitimate reaction would likely be: what business is this of yours? Even when it is well-intended, such blind moral correction easily can make matters much worse." Second, the "deep knowledge of one another's character, history, hopes, desires, fears, and struggles" required by mutual correction is only possible among friends. "Without truly knowing one another, we have no idea how even to approach one another, let alone how to receive counsel or rebuke."
Both reasons suggest that we should be very careful in correcting a stranger. Perhaps it would be wiser for us to encourage someone who knows the person and situation better to correct the person, or for us to instruct the person indirectly in another way (e.g., through teaching or preaching). Davis believes, "We are called first to offer correction to those closest to us, for it is our duty to attend to their good in a special way. Only as the opportunity arises (and surely such cases will be rare indeed) should we be concerned with correcting those distantly related to us."
4. Summarizing Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17, Davis writes: "Because sin threatens both a person's conscience and his reputation, the first step of moral correction is to appeal to a friend's conscience. Accordingly, we should attempt to correct our friend in private before we involve others. If our friend does not respond to this confidential effort, it is advisable to involve a few others—preferably, other mutual friends—to help call his attention to the sin. Last, and only when all else has failed, such correction should be made in public."
5. Heidi Hornik writes, "The Dominicans are present in both the heavenly and earthly realms of this fantastical fresco." They offer guidance three ways—through preaching, teaching, and hearing confession. Their preaching is depicted as "a fierce fight between a pack of wolves that are trying to snatch sheep and the black and white dogs that are protecting them." The wolves are heretics, the sheep are congregants, and the dogs are ministers who bark sound, sacred doctrine. Their teaching role is instanced by a leading Dominican university teacher and writer, Thomas Aquinas, who is poised holding a book beside the dogs chasing away the wolves. Finally, their role in hearing confession and offering individualized counsel to penitents is shown by a "figure kneeling before a Dominican [who] receives absolution just to the right of Dominic directing the faithful...from earth to heaven." Consider how all members of the body of Christ may take on these roles of preaching to, teaching, and correcting one another.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.