

Like apples of gold in settings of silver
Is a word spoken in right circumstances.
Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold
Is a wise reprover to a listening ear.

Proverbs 25:11-12



Someone Alongside

YOU SEE, I HAVE THIS PROBLEM:
No matter how proficient I may be at any mechanical task, when performing it with other people around my logic and skills fail me. My brain cells vibrate in spastic disunion, my reasoning skills turn to tapioca pudding, and everything I know from practice and experience detaches itself from my person. My fingers fumble for the wrong tool, I drop things, and I repeatedly knock my noggin against the underside of whatever I am beneath.

Monday last found me doing some light plumbing for a friend. Nothing exotic. Nothing I hadn't done many times before. I even have a modest reputation in some quarters as the go-to guy when faucets need to be replaced, or feed lines need to be sweated (and I am sure this is not the least bit influenced by the fact that I work for free).

Anyway there I was, lying on my back, my upper torso lost beneath the old kitchen sink I was removing, when people started showing up. And my common sense fluttered out the window. Suddenly I couldn't figure out how to detach the garbage disposal. I loosened connections that didn't need to be

loosened and forgot to loosen connections that did, and got sprayed with water when I missed one crucial shut-off.

Later, while preparing the new sink and faucet for installation, blithely smearing the wrong substance on the wrong surface of one of the new drain baskets, a friend from church sidled out to where I was working.

"Do you always do it that way?" He graciously inquired.

His query suddenly made me realize that the substance I was applying would do no earthly good there, but needed to be, instead, on the underside of the top flange. I began wiping it off. "But do I put it on this rubber gasket or this paper thingy?" I stammered, staring at the object in my hand. "That doesn't make sense."

"No, those go *below* the sink," he kindly pointed out. "See the diagram?"

"Oh, right. Of course," I flushed, feeling quite the bumbling fool.

"But do you always use pipe dope there?" He asked gently. "I think plumber's putty would be better," he said, reaching for the container of putty in my tool box.

Now, when I had replaced the sink and faucets in our laundry room at home I had not made any of these silly mistakes. But suddenly, with others around, I was making one stupid move after another. As I wiped off the pipe dope for the second time, I realized that along with debilitating embarrassment I was feeling... gratitude. I not only didn't resent his advice, but was glad he was there to catch my bumbling efforts before it was too late—before everything was installed and corrections would be considerably more bothersome. More than that, I was grateful for his gracious demeanor. He wasn't there to make me out the fool (I was doing a splendid job of that all by myself), but just to help a friend where needed.

And I certainly needed.

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor...

Romans 12:10

The older I get the better I understand the wisdom of God's counsel regarding the church. There was a time, long ago, when I favored a more solitary path of faith, persuaded that others in the family of God were of limited, or even detrimental value to me. They, individually or in the aggregate, seemed to be inconvenient in the extreme, more bother than blessing. And I thought I was better off without them.

But then, I also used to be an idiot.

I am a better person, a better man, and certainly a better Christian because I have around me those who consider me a brother. More than that, I have around me those to whom I can *be* a brother. For, you see,

God's church is not an institution or business, but a *family*.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

1 Peter 5:1-3

It is probably beside the point that the one who so unselfishly assisted me last Monday also happens to be one of our church elders. Remembering the exchange, I would not say that his behavior was the result of his being a leader in the church (*I'm a church elder, so I'd better behave properly.*), but rather the other way around: He is a leader in the church precisely *because* he is a person who behaves this way.

Here is the beauty of Christ's design for His church. When we need help He sends someone alongside to be His hands, His voice, His heart. The one sent need not be an elder, or deacon; in fact, most often he or she is not. But built into His design are those who have devoted their lives not just to their Lord, but to His people. They are still mere men; they haven't the Lord's perfection. But they have made themselves available to Him to serve as a shepherd to His flock. They have, in a more formal way than the rest of us, agreed that the lives of others are more important than their own.



Christians in concert are an abridgement of heaven, shining like a firmament of bright stars.

George Swinnock

