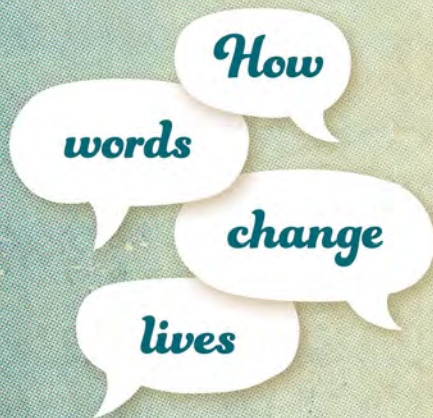


DISCOVER THE DIFFERENCE GOD'S WORDS CAN MAKE
IN THE LIVES OF THOSE AROUND YOU

ENCOURAGEMENT



Gordon Cheng

Guidebooks for Life



INCLUDES
DISCUSSION
GUIDE

What is 'encouragement' exactly?

- Helping a sad person feel happier?
- Helping a happy person stay that way?
- Or is it just one of those bland, over-used 'Christian' words that we use without thinking too much?

According to Gordon Cheng, encouragement is not only central to our church life, it belongs to one of the most powerful themes in the whole of Scripture: the power of God's word to change lives. That powerful word not only changes us as we hear and respond to it; but through us it changes others too.

This warm-hearted book is sprinkled with humour, insight and practical wisdom. It explains not only what encouragement is and how it works, but how all of us can get involved.

About the author



Gordon Cheng is the author of the popular course *Six Steps to Encouragement*. He is married to Fiona and has three daughters. He has studied in psychology and theology, and worked with university students and as a minister in several parishes in Melbourne and Sydney. He is interested in choral and piano music, writing letters to newspapers, and reading church history.

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Gordon Cheng

Guidebooks for Life



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for your Christian journey

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Guidebooks for Life



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Encouragement: How Words Change Lives

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To Fiona

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Chapter 1

WHAT CHRISTIAN ENCOURAGEMENT IS

IF YOU HAVE A NATURALLY SUNNY disposition, you will have picked up this book on encouragement and straight away thought, “Wonderful! This is exactly the sort of thing people need to read.” You realize that you already are an encouraging person, and that this book will help you to do more of the same. Even though you don’t need it yourself, you are drawn to it, in much the same way as an accountant is drawn to a book entitled *Make Your Life Add Up*, my wife is drawn to the garden on a sunny afternoon, and I am drawn to the worm farm when the pressure of life becomes too much to bear (hey, everyone needs something).

If, on the other hand, you have a more cynical cast of mind, you will be aware that ‘encouragement’ is one



of the most overused clichés ever to have arisen within Christian circles. You will suspect that a book about it is intended to make you work harder or feel worse, or probably both, and you have a suspicion that even the bits you agree with won't make much difference.

One of the difficulties for me in writing this book is that neither view is completely wrong. I do want happy, optimistic people to see that encouragement is something that flows naturally, under God, out of who we are. To that extent, this book confirms an idea you may already have sensed to be true. People who genuinely encourage other people are not putting it on. It comes out of who they are—or better, who God has made them.

On the other hand, it is also true that 'encouragement' is an overused word whose meaning can be as vague as a bus driver's brain on a Monday morning. To urge people to 'be encouraging' is to add precisely nothing that might help them work out how to think and relate to others.

Myself, I can relate to the cynic very easily. Being the sort of individual who is able to see a cloud inside every silver lining, I naturally side with the person who expects absolutely nothing. I would expect a book on 'encouragement' to fit comfortably next to the one on the shelf entitled *Why You are a Miserable Failure and How My Expert Knowledge of You Might Help You Overcome This, at Which Point I Will Sell You Another Book*.

Which view does God endorse? In the end, you can see by the existence of this book that I've been convinced by the Bible that this subject really matters, and matters



enough to ask both types of reader to read on. I am not simply out to convince the naturally optimistic and happy person to keep using their innate gifts to make others feel better. Nor do I want to cajole the gloomy individual into trying a bit harder to say and do slightly awkward or uncharacteristic things in order to have an impact on others—even though either outcome might actually be a good thing.

I have a bigger aim than this. I want to change what you think about encouragement, about what it means and how important it is. I want to convince you that ‘encouragement’ belongs to one of the most powerful themes and ideas in the whole of Scripture. And that idea is **the power of God’s word to change lives**. I want to show you that encouragement is not simply helping a sad person feel happier, or a happier person to stay happy. Rather, I am defining **Christian** encouragement in this way:

Christian encouragement is speaking the truth in love, with the aim of building Christians up in Christlikeness, as we wait for the day of judgement. Christian encouragement will likewise involve speaking the truth in love to unbelievers, thus encouraging them to put their trust in Christ for forgiveness and salvation.

This idea of speaking the truth in love is taken straight out of Ephesians 4:15, where Paul tells us Christlike maturity comes through us “speaking the truth in love” to one another. The reminder about the day of judgement



comes from Hebrews 10:25, where we are told that we ought to be “encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near”. “Speaking the truth in love” is an urgent task, because we are getting ready for the day of God’s judgement.

Let’s notice two things in this little phrase “speaking the truth in love”. First, God tells us that we are to speak **the truth**. What we say to each other must line up with the facts as the Bible presents them. Those facts are found, first and foremost, in the gospel of Jesus Christ—the news about what God has done in Jesus’ death and resurrection to bring forgiveness and make us God’s children, so that we are now prepared to meet him on the final day of judgement and salvation.

The other thing to notice is that the speaking is done **in love**. Words can tear down, words can conceal or deceive or mislead, words can offer false comfort and false accusation. But if we really believe that truth can have an impact, we will want to speak in love, that is, with the good of the other person in mind, ahead of our own interests.

Notice that the aim of Christian encouragement—building people to Christlikeness—fits perfectly with what God himself intends for us:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom 8:28-29)



God intends that we grow to be like Christ, and every single event that happens to us should (and does) serve to advance this purpose of his. Speaking to each other is part of this.

Of course, this may or may not mean that we become happier individuals. Sometimes being conformed to the image of Christ will mean being disowned by family and friends, or putting strain on a marriage or a relationship. Also, some people are naturally sad. For them, being like Jesus may not improve their mood in a hurry. But the aim God has for us, happy or sad, is that we will indeed become like the one we have put our trust in. The Apostle Paul puts it like this:

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:8-11)

Note that Paul expects and wants to “share his sufferings” as a necessary part of becoming like Christ in his death and resurrection. My hope in this book is to persuade you to adopt this same aim as your own personal life-



goal: the Christlikeness of yourself and others. My prayer is that you'll see that this is not something reserved for happy optimists or for professional Christians, ministers and Bible study leaders. It's for anyone who has been grabbed by the grace and glory of the gospel of Jesus.

Let's begin, then. Our investigation starts not with the broad notion of encouragement, but with a bit of thinking about speaking and the nature of words.

