



# The art of REBUKING

Whether it's the thought of having to rebuke someone or - worse - being the recipient of a rebuke, there are few areas of the Christian life which make us more nervous. Mention the topic of rebuking and retorts like "who are you to judge?", "stop being holier-than-thou", "mind your own business" come to mind. And yet the New Testament repeatedly instructs us to rebuke each other.

To help us with this tricky topic, **Geoff Lin** looks at three aspects of the Christian rebuke: the when, the goal and the how-to.

## WHEN SHOULD YOU REBUKE?

One situation is to combat heresy amongst God's people. Take Paul's final charge to his protégé Timothy:

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

2 Timothy 4:1-5

Misconduct (ie sin) amongst God's people also calls for a rebuke:

*But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.*

Luke 3:19-20

A third situation takes Paul's logic in 1 Corinthians 6:12 ("Everything is permissible for me" - but not everything is beneficial") to imply that we ought to rebuke a brother or sister who is engaged in non-beneficial or "unwise behaviour." This is not so much sinful behaviour as stupid behaviour - although it is, of course, the hardest situation to identify!<sup>1</sup> Much wisdom for the rebuker is required, both in identifying unwise conduct and in formulating an appropriate response.

## WHAT'S THE GOAL OF A REBUKE?

Firstly, to save Christians from eternal judgment. Unchecked sin will lead to (spiritual) death and so an effective rebuke will bring them back to eternal life:

*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

James 5:19-20

Secondly, so that Christians might grow in godliness:

*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.<sup>2</sup>*

Colossians 1:28

Either reason is a noble, lofty and worthwhile basis for "biting the bullet" and rebuking each other.



webSalt  
24/09/07  
edited by  
Rebecca Jee

all content  
copyright  
AFES 2007

# HOW TO REBUKE

Much more could be said than this, but here are seven principles for rebuking.

## PRINCIPLE 1: "NOT WHAT I SAY, BUT WHAT GOD SAYS"

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:14-17

Scripture can make us wise for salvation (v15) ... but equally if it is God breathed it useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" in terms of both what to say and how to say it. In other words, the criteria for and conduct of a rebuke must always be governed by Scripture. So the best way to be ready to rebuke (and to do so appropriately) is to read your Bible more, that you might know what God says in any given situation.

This is particularly important when the person you are rebuking is older than you ...

## PRINCIPLE 2: REBUKE + ENCOURAGE

*Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father.*

1 Timothy 5:1

Timothy was a young pastor and yet Paul says he is to rebuke older men in his congregation. No doubt this would have been awkward for everyone, and so Paul carefully instructs Timothy in the manner of his rebuke. He doesn't say, "never rebuke an older man"; rather, he says "just don't do so harshly", and the model he gives is to "exhort" him as your father. I find it hard to imagine ever rebuking my Dad (or envisage the time when my 4 year old son might rebuke me!); so if ever I have to do so, it will be with gentleness.

In fact, our emphasis is to be on encouragement: focussing on the positives, not negatives; highlighting the upside, not the downside. In 1 Timothy 5:1 the word "exhort" is normally translated "encourage", and it's surely no co-incidence that the command to rebuke is so often paired with one to encourage (eg Colossians 1:28 (above); Titus 2:15 "encourage and rebuke with all authority").

In the final analysis, would you rather be known as a "rebuker" or an "encourager"? Can you imagine the evangelistic potential of our communities if they were full of the latter?!

## PRINCIPLE 3: "WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT ANYWAY?"

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom ...*

Colossians 3:16

We've already seen that those with authority in the church are to rebuke. And yet the Bible insists that we are ALL to rebuke each other. The reason is because heresy, misconduct and unwise behaviour are contagious: they spread and



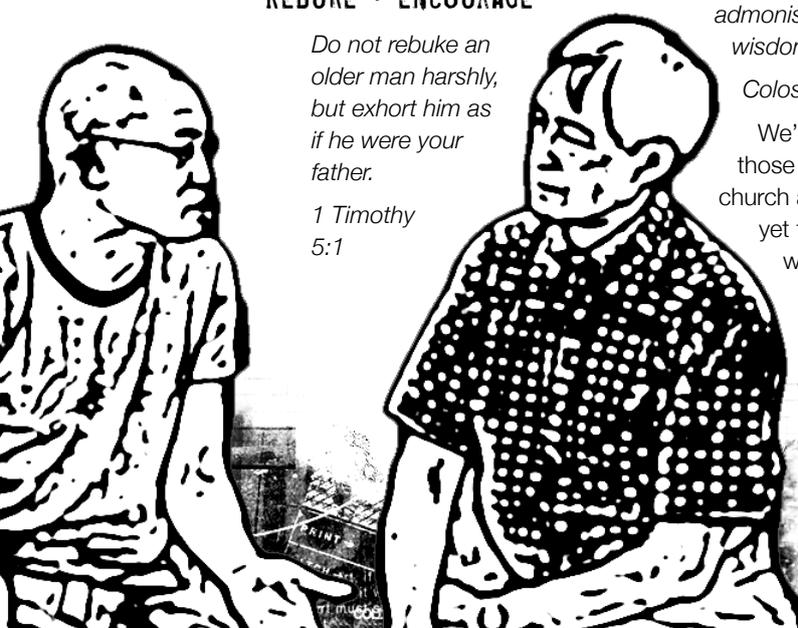
[T]he criteria for and conduct of a rebuke must always be governed by Scripture. So the best way to be ready to rebuke (and to do so appropriately) is to read your Bible more, that you might know what God says in any given situation.

infect others, and so it's everyone's responsibility to preserve and protect our community. Don't just leave the task for someone else to deal with.

Of course, we don't want to become a community of self-appointed morals crusaders who actually enjoy running around handing out theological red cards at the slightest infraction (if you've ever met someone like that you know that dying on every hill makes you sound a lot like a sheep crying wolf)<sup>3</sup>. Conversely our tendency in our highly individualistic and privatized 21st century western churches is to avoid conflict rather than confront it ("it's none of my business ..."). If that's your default position, hear the strength of Paul's exhortation in Col 3:16 ... otherwise, those who aren't very good at rebuking will end up being the ones who do, while those who should be doing so remain silent.

## PRINCIPLE 4: IN PUBLIC, NOT IN PRIVATE (WHERE APPROPRIATE)

*The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or*



three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

1 Timothy 5:17-20

Because sin is contagious then sometimes a public response is called for. This is particularly the case for church leaders: just as they are entitled to public honour, so are they to be subjected to public rebuke.

The key is 'where appropriate'! When I discussed this principle with members of my congregation (of which I am the pastor) some observed that given I'm far from perfect every Sunday could turn into a "rebuke Geoff publicly" session! However, 1 Timothy 5:19 indicates that an accusation must be both substantiated and (by implication) serious ... but if it is, then a public rebuke is necessary "that others may take warning."

As an aside, Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 speak of more extremes matters and processes of church disciple (eg "handing someone over to Satan"). I'm not going to look at them ... except to mention that the goal in each case is that the offender might be saved from eternal judgment and brought to eternal life (see goal 1 above).

**PRINCIPLE 5: "WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?"**

*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

1 Timothy 4:16

*Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.*

1 Timothy 5:1-2

One way to prevent frivolous accusations against elders is to remember that "he who is without sin may cast the first stone." In

other words, rebuke only after examining yourself first. I suspect that's why Paul's command to rebuke in 1 Timothy 5:1 comes after Paul has urged Timothy to "watch his own life and doctrine closely".

Does that mean you can't rebuke anyone until your own life is perfect? Clearly not; the New Testament expects we will rebuke. Rather this is a reminder (dare I say 'encouragement'?! ) that before you try to remove the speck from your brother's eye, make sure you've got the log out of your own ... if for no other reason than it will make eye surgery a lot easier.

**PRINCIPLE 6: REBUKING ... AND BEING REBUKED**

*Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.*

Proverbs 9:7-8

To take Principle 5 further: are you prepared to ask others to rebuke you? If you want to be wise (remember 2 Timothy 3:14-17?) then you should want to be rebuked! In fact - and this is harder still - will you love the person who rebukes you ... because if you do, you are a wise person indeed!<sup>4</sup>

**PRINCIPLE 7: "THIS HURTS ME MORE THAN IT HURTS YOU"**

*So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

Acts 20:31

The final and most important principle in rebuking is to remember that your tone of voice will often be heard more clearly than what you actually say. A rebuke delivered with compassion is far more likely to change someone's heart than one delivered coldly or condescendingly. And so, is your concern painfully evident?

That's why the most effective rebuke comes from a close friend, not a complete stranger or a church elder. If you must rebuke a friend (with compassion) and your friend realizes you are so concerned for them and their salvation and their godliness you're even putting your friendship on the line, then if they are (in this regard!) wise, they might just turn from the error of their ways.

**Geoff Lin**

- 1 There are some case studies below ... although it seems to me they generally fall into 1 of 3 categories: attitude, behaviour and doctrine
- 2 Paul must be referring to progressive sanctification, not to justification (Col 1:22 says that was secured for us at the cross)
- 3 Apologies for the 3 mixed metaphors!
- 4 cf 1 Thess 5:12 - 13 "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work ..."



**Read each point below and ask: is this a case for rebuke? What are the issues? What would you say? How would you say it?**

1. A good friend is always complaining about how financially poor they are
2. Someone in your homegroup is constantly talking about advancing their career
3. Even though he never sleeps there, a guy in your church is always at his girlfriend's house (who lives alone)
4. A member of your homegroup insists that "those who don't hear about Jesus can be saved according to what they do know about God"
5. A self-professing Christian friend only comes to church when s/he 'feels' like it
6. A newly-married couple who are about to start work want to buy a house (saying "rent is wasted money")

**FOR DISCUSSION**