



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### The Church God had in Mind: Pillars of the Church

Exodus 17:8-13

By Matt Hook

**Pastoral Call** A pastor went visiting an old lady who had one of the pillars of the church. It was a good visit, reminiscing and sharing, all the while eating the lady's peanuts out of that little glass bowl that all old ladies have on their coffee tables. After they shared a prayer together, the pastor stood up and apologized for eating most of the peanuts. The old saint leaned forward "What'd you say, Pastor?" "I've eaten almost all your peanuts." Whereupon the dear old pillar of the church replied, "That's all right. Now that I ain't got no teeth no more, all I can do is lick the chocolate off."

**Getting "hugged"** A young woman named Linda was driving alone through the lonely area from Alberta, Canada to the Yukon. She spent one night in one of the rare hotels in the area. The next morning in the breakfast area she was seated near two truckers. They asked where she was going. She said "Whitehorse." "In that little civic?" they asked. "It's dangerous this time of year in this kind of weather." Linda replied, "Well, I'm determined to try." "In that case," one of the truckers said, "We're just going to have to hug you." Linda drew back and said "You're not going to touch me." The truckers laughed and said, "Not like that. We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains." And so they did.

**Most of us Christians need to be hugged along life's pathway.** With fellow Christians up front who know the way and can lead, and with others behind, gently encouraging, we too can pass safely.

**Small Group Appeal:** Most of us need a small support group of Christians who will meet with us regularly. Jesus said, "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*" Do you see? Jesus is the dynamic secret of the small group. Jesus is there in a special way. Because he is there, his Spirit permeates the fellowship and makes scripture leap off the pages into real life. Small group participants are powerfully equipped to comfort, encourage, and even challenge each other. A Christian can survive without a small group, but in order to thrive, a small group is essential.

**Being in a small group can make all the difference. Let us look at two men: John Wesley and George Whitefield.** Both lived in the 1700s. Both preached to hundreds of thousands. George Whitefield was so dynamic that his preaching is linked to the Christian movement in America called the First Great Awakening: a revival that swept the colonies. Several times he preached to crowds of over 20,000 – without a microphone! His followers never were able to form into a movement, though.

John Wesley, a friend of George Whitefield, was also a dynamic communicator. But John Wesley, after every sermon he preached, organized his people into classes in which people cared for one another and held one another up. The difference? George Whitefield's movement didn't last, while John Wesley's followers became the people called Methodists, a movement some 70 million people strong today. You see, everybody needs a group.

**Pillars:** Have you ever been called a pillar of the church? (Or maybe you're like me, and more people call you the pill of the church☺) It is a high compliment. (Pillar, that is.) It does not mean necessarily that one is a big wheel or the giver of large financial gifts. Think about what a pillar does in the structure of a church building. It holds part of the building up, while it also is being held up by the other pillars.

**Every Christian ought to be a pillar of the church.** That is, each of us ought to hold up at least a few other Christians with our love and prayers. And each of us needs to be upheld by a few other pillars of the church.

There is safety in the group. Have you ever noticed the ember that jumps out of the fire cools off quickly, while those in the fire remain hot for hours?

**Individualism:** George Gallup, the famous pollster, points out that Americans are physically detached from each other. We change places of residence frequently. With automatic garage doors and air conditioning, most of us don't know the names of our neighbors. There is a kind of isolation and individualism in every city and town. Thoreau said it over 150 years ago: "people lead lives of quiet desperation." Loneliness is a problem of epidemic proportion today. **Perhaps that is the reason the small group movement is exploding across America.** One of the central needs of our time is intimate and healing community.

American men, even more than women, need a group. We men have many acquaintances but few real friends. Society trains us to be loners who bottle up far too much inside. That's one of the reasons we die earlier than women do.

**Scripture: Let's set the scene. The year is about 1420 B.C.** The Hebrew people had just left Egypt, where they had been enslaved by Pharaoh. God raised up Moses to be their liberator. They had just seen the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, and water come from a rock, all while slowly traveling across the Sinai peninsula from Egypt to Canaan (the Promised Land). Palestine today. They encounter a large Bedouin tribe called the Amalekites. War breaks out. It was a tough fight, lasting all day long.

**The Amalekites descended from Esau's eldest son.** They may have even known about the promise God gave to Esau's twin brother Jacob, thus they should not have been threatened. They should have let the Hebrew nation pass through. If they had taken this promise seriously, they would have known that the promise was a means of blessing them as well. They made 2 fatal mistakes: failing to recognize God's hand and plan in Israel's life, and targeting first the sick, aged, and tired of Israel who lagged behind the line of march.

**Moses didn't try to lead the people alone.** Moses commissioned Joshua to muster an army while Moses would stand on the hill overlooking. Both elements were operating: 1. The sword in Joshua's hand and the staff in Moses' hand. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility were linked in carrying out the will of God.

Moses, the top leader, accompanied by Aaron, the high priest, and Hur, a top elder, went up on a mountain above the fight. Moses carried his staff which was known as the "banner of Yahweh." As long as he held that banner high, the battle went well for the Israelites. But if he lowered the banner, the Amalekites gained ground. Moses was an old man and began to grow weary. So, Aaron and Hur found a large rock for him to sit on. They stood beside Moses and held up his arms so that the banner remained high. Before the sun set that day, Israel had won its first war.

**This was Israel's first battle.** But look what Moses, the leader, did: he prayed, and he wasn't alone. The praying intercessors on the mountain were playing an integral role. Rather than prayer playing a last ditch effort or last resort when everything else fails, we must put prayer first. Prayer may be the greatest resource we have. Prayer is often the place where people rediscover faith and reestablish confidence in God and in themselves. It's a battlefield where struggles for right desire are fought, because in prayer all desires are known and no secrets are hidden.

Aaron and Hur represent for us those people of every generation who hold other people up. Remember, the power to defeat Israel's enemies did not come from Aaron and Hur. Nor did it come from Moses. The power came from God. But Aaron and Hur held up Moses so that he could be a channel of God's power.

How does this unusual passage apply in our lives? **First, remember, no matter how much faith or how many victories we may have, life puts us through a series of tests, some of them painful and full of stress.** James reminds the Christians to "Count it joy *when* you face various trials." He doesn't say "Count it joy *if* you face various trials," because the trials will come. And God doesn't want you to find yourself alone as you go through them.

My grandma was one of those praying grandmas. She just died a year ago at age 95, and she prayed for me every day of my life. She told me, when she was about 85, that in all her life, God had either made her strong enough to face whatever she was going through, or God put someone in her life to see her through it. She

was never alone. God always provided. And she was right. Thanks be to God, we have help. We Christians live in community. That means we are supposed to hold each other up as surely as Aaron and Hur held up the arms of Moses. At times you will have to carry me. On other occasions I will carry you. But we are a team in Christ Jesus. We hold each other up.

**Second, who are your Aarons and Hurs?** Who are the people who hold you up? Do you have a few people with whom you meet regularly for prayer, sharing of scripture, mutual accountability, and fellowship? Do you have a small group in which you can celebrate victories and receive comfort in times of pain? Do you have anyone with whom you can share almost anything? **I hope that you have a small group of people who serve as Aarons and Hurs for you.** Such groups are absolutely essential in churches. If we don't have a small group within a good sized church like this one, we may become only spectators.

**Third, for whom are you an Aaron or Hur?** Are there some people who can count on you to hold them up? **Horse Illustration:** I've learned from a credible source that one horse can pull approximately one ton. But two horses can pull 23 tons. The difference is synergy, which is the increased capacity of people and animals when a task is shared. Five of us Christians can do far more together than the five of us can do separately. **Geese Illustration:** Even the geese know this principle by instinct. They fly in a "V" formation because the lead goose takes the brunt of the wind resistance and makes it easier for the others. They take turns flying up front. They also honk as they fly, encouraging the lead goose. We humans can use in small groups what geese teach us. **Weightlifting Illustration:** You can lift a lot more weight with a spotter. In bench pressing, good spotters don't lift the weight for you, but they know just the right spot to step in with just the right amount of help and support. You can take on more weight, you can try longer and harder with a spotter. Life is meant to have spotters. I want to challenge you to try a small group when the opportunity comes up.

**Personal Discipline:** Let me tell you about a major revelation God gave me last year, which answered a question nagging me for all of my adult life. It happened about 6:05am, on a cold and rainy dark morning, while I was running around the track at Asbury College. I have always wanted to be more self-disciplined. I have wanted to study more, work out more, pray more, read more, write more, lead more, and show people I care more. I beat myself up pretty badly over these issues. But last year, I learned something about myself: I realized it was time to face the music. This was it. I was as self-disciplined as I was ever going to be. If I wanted to go "beyond myself" to where God wanted me, I would need to motivate myself through other people. People motivate me. If I want to be more well-read, in better shape, more spiritually sound, more connected with people around me, and more loving, then I need to have people waiting for me in each of those areas. People who will ask me the tough questions. People who will stand by me, when I fall and when I succeed. Perhaps you are frustrated with yourself, as I was. Please, take time to invest in others for their sakes.

People in the church that God had in mind support one another throughout life. They take the initiative to surround themselves with a few close friends who will see them through. **Who has been holding you up? Whom are you holding up?** I pray you'll be a pillar of strength and support, even as those around you hold you fast.