

January 2004, *Equipping*



How big is your back-pack?

2004: it's here. As leaders, workers and pastors we leave Christmas celebrations behind and again hoist on our back-packs, full of assignments and responsibilities for the new year. The trouble is, how do we know how much to take on? How do we know which burdens are truly ours to carry?

This is not as easy as it first appears. Typically there are plenty of well-meaning people in our churches who want to pack our back-packs for us. If we let them, we will soon be staggering under very giant packs.

More likely, we are the ones who stuff our own packs so full in any given week or month that we end up dealing with serious stress symptoms instead of enjoying our work.

In Galatians 6:1-5, Paul addresses the kind of pastoral care burden that tends to bend our backs as leaders and pastors: what to do when someone is "detected in a transgression." As Paul responds to this problem, he addresses the question of who is to carry which burden.

In verse 2 Paul writes, "Bear one another's burdens..." and in verse 5, "...all must carry their own load." Is he contradicting himself?

Checking out the original Greek translation of the words "burdens" and "load" is illuminating - the word "burdens" used in verse 2 refers to a very big sack, such as a potato sack, that can be carried for only a short time; "load" in verse 5 is the word for a back-pack, like the 'kit bags' each Roman soldier carried as he marched on to his duties as a soldier.

The burden-bearing pattern that Paul presents contains a gracious balancing of responsibility between the individual and community. When a burden too heavy to carry lands on one of us, our brothers and sisters in the church step up. In Paul's words, we are to "bear one another's burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ" (verse 2).

The overwhelming dimensions of the load may be the intensity of some kind of temptation, as in the context of Galatians, or the problem of a bigger load than we can handle. When we observe a sister or brother staggering under their load, we are to come along side and help.

However, the normal every-day pattern is for each individual to take full responsibility for his or her own back-pack. "All must test their own work...for all must carry their own loads"(verses 4,5). This balanced pattern will prevent burn out and collapse by the few who carry too much, and provide joy and fulfillment for each one of us as we take responsibility for our own load.

What are you to take on? That which will fit into your back-pack of responsibility, that you can carry on the journey ahead.

What are you to not squeeze into your pack? Those items, problems and burdens that are to be carried together by our sisters and brothers in the community of faith.

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