

More cowbell... “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a **noisy gong** or a **clanging COWBELL**. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” 1 Cor. 13:1-2

It doesn't matter how gifted you are, if you are not using your gifts in community for the benefit of others then you are NOTHING. Love is the greatest commandment. Love, by definition, is not a solo performance. Love is rooted in the settled conviction that I am on this planet to benefit others. You are called and you are gifted not for your own sake but for the glory of God and the good of others. You are called but it is impossible to discover your calling apart from community. You are gifted but your gifts and your calling emerge over time and in community. When you exercise your gifts in community you bless the world in four ways:

Benefit #1 - God is made visible. God is invisible. We can't see Him so how do we know what He is like? The God of the Bible has existed eternally in a community relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So it is no surprise that people, made in His image, would thrive in relationships. Unfortunately in our modern complex world we have substituted proximity for intimacy and connection for communion. “The subculture teaches us to practice superficiality rather than honesty, to share competencies, not weaknesses, and to hide skillfully rather than seek genuine trust.” (Labberton, p. 85) This is not the way it's supposed to be. The calling of every church is to make God visible to an unbelieving world. To do that we have to get off our islands. It's not good to be alone.

Six times in Genesis 1, we read that “God saw that it was good.” The chapter closes with, “God saw all that He had made and behold it was very good.” 1:31. Then in chapter 2 we discover that there is a condition that is NOT good. “It is not good to be alone.” 2:18. Why is that? Because we were created in the image and likeness of God. God has existed in community from eternity past. One God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means that we were made for community. This means that we need each other. This is particularly true when it comes to identifying and using our spiritual gifts.

To show the world what God is like requires all shapes and sizes, ages and ethnicity to reflect His love for diversity. Furthermore Jesus decides who our fellow disciples will be and, if the NT is any indication, it will be an unlikely group of people. All the evidence of the NT is that we are being formed into a community of the unexpected. If this church were made up of the same sociological group we would naturally choose then we would have good reason to ask if we are truly responding to God's call for a new community. The church is not a circle of friends but the family of God. When the church mimics the culture we surrender our call to show Christ to the world.

One of the things I love about Fellowship is our diversity. But diversity is not natural – it's supernatural! People say they want to be part of an ethnically and economically diverse congregation but that makes church a lot more complicated.

Benefit #2 - We encourage one another. Paul said to the Christians at Rome, “For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established (strengthened); that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.” Ro. 1:11-12. When you offer your gifts in community you encourage others to do the same.

One of the most rewarding benefits of being part of a church is the inspiration and encouragement we receive observing others use their gifts for the benefit of the Body. I am inspired by those of you who have the gift of administration or hospitality or helps. Even though I don’t have those gifts I am encouraged to be better at those things when I see someone do it well.

It reminds me of a line from Donald Miller’s book, *Blue Like Jazz*: “I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn’t resolve. But I was outside the Baghdad Theater in Portland one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for fifteen minutes, and he never opened his eyes. After that I liked jazz music. Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.”

Benefit #3 - The church is built up. 1 Cor. 14 Paul explains that merely exercising your spiritual gifts does not make you spiritual. 14:20 warns, “Stop thinking like children.” A child thinks that he/she is the very center of the universe. The emphasis in this chapter is in building up the body. “One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.” (14:4). Also in v. 12, “since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.” Paul is saying that our gifts should be used in a way that builds up the church. That won’t happen if I’m self-focused.

The church is described in the NT using collective nouns like a building that is made up of many bricks or stones and a body that consists of many members. In Ephesians 2, Paul uses the image of a building to emphasize the importance of all the pieces fitting together. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” Eph. 2:19-22

In Ephesians 4, he uses the example of a human body to emphasize the importance of each and every part. “But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” Eph. 4:15-16

How the pieces fit together insures the strength and permanence of the structure. Just ask the taxpayers in Allen about their \$60 million high school football stadium.

Benefit #4 - The city gets a taste of shalom. Living as strangers and exiles in a strange land means providing an essential good for the benefit of the surrounding community. When the people of God were in exile in Babylon God sent them a message: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.” Jer. 29:7

Churches are less and less welcome in large American cities today. “That’s because the culture is becoming more godless right?” Not so fast. Before we go there we might want to turn the mirror around. We sit on large tracts of land and pay no taxes putting nothing back into the infrastructure and essential services that cities are required to provide. We often convey a sort of tribalism in which we huddle together to escape the evil influences of the secular city. Why wouldn’t city leaders be skeptical? The good news is that a change is coming. We recently had a Movement Day where thousands of church leaders, city leaders and business leaders met to discuss how we could work together to improve the quality of life in our city. It is impossible to measure the impact of Movement Day but I can tell you that just the fact that people from a diversity of backgrounds and interests came together to seek the welfare of the city was a taste of what shalom is all about. I have been meeting with an ethnically diverse group of pastors to talk about insuring the shalom of our city. One of our observations is that the church was at the forefront of the civil right movement but seemed to be absent in the wake of events in Ferguson, Missouri. We want our churches to be a testimony to the peace and unity that is possible through Jesus.

God is putting together a symphony and we each have a part to play...triangle. There may be nothing remarkable about being part of an orchestra but if your faith is grounded in radical experiences then you will spend your life looking for repeat performances.

So get off your island. Avoid individualism. Give up your delusion of self-sovereignty. Stop playing solos on your cowbell or your triangle. Get serious about your commitment to the people of God. Join this church. Become a covenant member. It’s time for restless spirits to submit to the encouragement and correction of the body. We need you to play the music of the gospel as Jesus draws all men to himself.