

Chapter 12

Church Life Beyond the Bushel (3)

Matching the Gift to the Need

“Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them...” (Rom. 12:6).

People are forever attempting to rearrange contraptions in order to make them run better. One time my sister tried to rewire a tape recorder. She was an eight-year-old with a roll of scotch tape and a hope that the derelict machine would begin running. Not surprisingly with its innards rerouted, it remained silent with nary a hum or buzz, more hopeless than it was before. On a different occasion my brother attempted to “fix” my dad’s twenty-two caliber pistol. The outcome was a cluster of disassembled parts that to my knowledge, is still in the bottom of a paper sack. Apparently when he tried to put the revolver back together there were parts “left over.” Such are the lessons of assembly and disassembly.

The Body of Christ is an awesome assemblage of parts and processes, of members and joints and ligaments. Each possesses a unique gifting and these gifts differ “according to the grace given to us” (Rom. 12:6). We are all supposed to be conduits that route grace to others: “as each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10). The level of arrangement in the Body of Christ is perfectly suited for

circulating that grace because “God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased” (1 Cor. 12:18).

Men however, in their religious foolishness, are not pleased with what pleases God and therefore try to rewire and reassemble the members. Some of the concepts motivating this scrambling of parts are weird conceptual extremes. One of them states that “If you like what you’re doing, it’s probably not your spirit, but your fallen self-life.” The recommendation is then to “deny the self,” which ultimately translates into denying the thing that brought the joy.

The idea that we shouldn’t do things we like to do and which give us a sense of fulfillment is one of the most backward philosophies resident in the LC Movement. From a balanced standpoint, I agree that new Christians who are learning to serve God should try a number of different service areas in the church. It doesn’t help novice believers to get stuck on one thing too early, especially since they might stop short of finding their ultimate fit. Also, even after many years, seasoned members may still need to do things out of necessity that they prefer not to do (i.e. my gifts have nothing to do with vacuuming meeting hall carpets and arranging chairs, but I occasionally must do them both).

Even so, ill-fitted tasks ought not to dominate the life of a Christian. The Body of Christ runs best according to its native wiring—that is, when believers do what the Holy Spirit means for them to do. We are never so blessed in the assembly as when each pays a premium of attention to his or her prime areas of grace. Hyper-spiritual sentiments tend not to agree with these statements, suspecting joy and fulfillment in the Lord’s work to be soulish fluff. They promote suffering as though it were a virtue to be pursued and pay special honor to those who must force themselves to serve the Lord. It is as though the grinding wheels of duty are the only legitimate way to bring glory to God—serving

but disliking it, ministering but secretly hating it. All are said to be the deeper lessons of the cross. Now obviously our work will not always involve fun feelings, sunshine, and sweet success without inconvenience or depravation or friction. On the contrary, as we pursue ministerial joys we will endure many a dark night even as the Lord Jesus Himself, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). In the meantime though, His ministry was not burdened with His own dislike for what He was doing. There were intense moments when circumstantial pressures made things unpleasant for Him. Yet there was never a moment when He hated healing, teaching, and setting men free. His prayer in the garden revealed His desire for an easier way, but not a desire to abandon His ministry to mankind. The story of Jesus was far from that of long unwilling drudgery. Neither was it about a love of suffering. All that He did was for the sake of “the joy set before him.”

Those who have been taught that the cross only means doing what they don't want to do should perhaps learn an additional lesson. Taking up our cross and following Christ also means honoring our placement in the Body of Christ by functioning according to it, not despising the grace measured to us, and learning how to operate harmoniously with others in the church.

Still, LC “inner life” advocates fear that if a believer does something and does it well, pride might result. Of course when service is excellently delivered, it tends to be appreciated. Some people have the outspoken propensity to let us know whenever they like something that we do, minus the religious reservations. Once after I gave a message a young man was so touched that he said to me, “Dude, you rule!”—raw sentiments, to be sure. I was happy no one else heard them. In the narrow world of some groups, corrective words run rampant. “Pride police” are always ready to dispense “a balancing word.” It starts with the cautious

clearing of a throat and then: “John, you are not a dude, you are a brother and furthermore, it is not you who rules. Jesus does.” True enough. Yet the real coded message is, “You’re nothing special and don’t ever forget it.” Without a doubt these little reminders nuke fleshly pride but they also crush any positive self-esteem or encouragement that might have inadvertently sprouted alongside it. It is a scorched earth policy, a very popular way for LC hardliners to deal with members who might become successful and then be appreciated.

This methodology makes the Movement itself one of the least friendly environments toward emerging gifts and ministries. The old crab-in-a-bucket analogy fits perfectly. For as one crab climbs up the side of the bucket, another will instinctively clamp onto it in order to pull it back down. One man I know who is a tremendously gifted speaker but humble in bearing was asked to begin traveling to Central America. His ministry was so appreciated that the believers there asked him to return. However, an LSM headquarters person heard about it, became alarmed, and began making snide remarks about how no one should build with wood, hay, and stubble—all because someone had been appreciated and valued! The gifted man in question was “nicely” encouraged to terminate his visitation schedule. Spiritual sounding phraseology is a favorite LC tool for dealing with the perceived pride in others. Unfortunately those who wield it with the greatest skill are often blind to their own petty jealousies.

Probably the people most concerned with pride in others are the most proud themselves. Why is a man so adept at noticing the splinter in his brother’s eye? The splinter in his brother’s eye is the same in nature as the *beam* in his own eye. He sees it at a distance, recognizes it, and lashes out at it. Nothing good usually results. Proud men attempting to adjust proud men will only lead to scandalous situations. Jesus told us that

the blind could not lead the blind without both of them falling into a ditch. Only the Lord knows how to deliberately and directly measure His cross to His children. Those who presumptuously usurp His job will damage the very ones they think they are perfecting. I have seen good-hearted believers take this kind of treatment for protracted periods before finally experiencing emotional meltdowns. A number of them were gifted people whose only mistake was to be appreciated. As with David of old, it was a “sin” that had earned them the smoldering hatred of the “Sauls” around them.

Envy in the ranks of LC leaders has often masqueraded as concerns that the gifts of another might be natural or that they might attract attention away from Christ or promote division. Even where such things might have been the case, it is inexcusable to assault the talents of believers to the point of crippling them or rendering them inoperable.

Gifts in the Church

Any church larger than thirty in attendance will begin to implode if the members are not being helped to find their God-given placement. This may well be one of the weakest areas of attention in the local church with the prevailing attitude toward gifts being “Que sera sera—whatever will be will be.” Typically a default setting of moods, desires, and turn-taking governs all ministry efforts. None of them are very beneficial.

When mood is the controlling factor of how gifts operate, it means that a person who is more or less committed to a particular function one week will mysteriously lose his interest the next. He may completely disappear for a while and decline active involvement. After a hiatus, the missing person then shows up, ready once again to hold center stage as “the” burdened person. Members of very small, inner-life

oriented churches defend this habit of service as spiritual—"the wind blows where it wills" (John 3:8). A planned approach, it is suspected, is under the control of a "Christianity" arrangement and not the Holy Spirit. But free wheeling spontaneity often has more to do with personal moods than genuine spirituality. Local churches, house churches, and stunted congregations that cater to this bad form of gifts "here today, gone tomorrow," typically flounder throughout their entire existence. They live in a world where the "hand" functions sometimes but not at other times; the "feet" disappear now, then reappear later. How could the members of our physical body render any reliable service to us if we couldn't "religiously" count on them from one day to the next? Moody spontaneity most often fails to lead anywhere productive.

The second problematic arrangement has to do with church services ruled by personal desires. In that situation believers feel called to certain spiritual functions without the necessary gifting for them. Some Christians who feel that they are great preachers or musicians may not possess any talent in the area they have roped off as their own. The result is an embarrassing mediocrity that emerges on Sunday morning as someone butchers a guitar piece or as a speaker manages to confuse and bore everyone.

Unfortunately, even tactfully, compassionately confronting them often won't work. Rather than facing up to the possibility that they are trying to force themselves into an area where they don't belong, some aspiring singers/songwriters/public speakers/etc., pout or threaten to leave the church or complain that they are not loved or appreciated. Others may even attempt to use money or other subtle forms of manipulation to guarantee their continuation in an ill-fitted place in the church. But a believer ought to function for the good of others and not just for his own satisfaction. His desire should not trump the benefit of everyone else. This is

why 1 Corinthians chapter 13, Paul's famous "love" chapter, is sandwiched between chapters 12 and 14, both of which deal heavily with gifts and their use.

The last and most diplomatic of all the bad arrangements is to coordinate functions in the church as though it were an equal time, equal opportunity situation. For instance, when five leaders rotate in and out of preaching roles and three of them are clearly not gifted for speaking (or even burdened), it means the church will regularly suffer during those three weeks while the Spirit's placement is ignored. Taking turns will definitely give the impression of fairness and spare everyone from hurt feelings, but the loser ends up being the congregation. Church members want a reliable level of excellence, something they can count on from week to week. If they know their team's strengths will be present come rain or shine, morale will rise. They will invite new people to attend meetings. Other ministries in the congregation will confidently build themselves around those strengths, further improving the overall power of the church.

However, even an evangelist will become dispirited if after leading his neighbors to Christ, he brings them to church only to find everything in a "down rhythm." Those who can barely tolerate kids are staffing children's service this week. The usher is cold, almost rude. Someone plays music who is basically trying out the piano for the first time. And a teacher attempts to open a passage of the word that he himself is not clear about. What is worse, this pattern continues for weeks until the new folks disappear. The week after they decide not to come anymore, the service schedule reloads. Debbie and her super-duper children's service staff is on duty. The usher is Greg, the warmest, most helpful guy in the church. The music is from the sensational Smith family. The teaching is by Jerry and Fred, who are superb communicators and love the Bible. It's too bad the new folks couldn't have been there on

Sundays like these. They might have hung around. None of the gifted believers in my illustration represent world-class talent, just folks in the congregation who are the best in their particular areas. But when they are scrambled around out of their God-given placement on a regular basis, the church will have a difficult time trusting its own ability to carry out serious ministry week after week.

Every assembly has a rhythm of ministry that comes from God's organic wiring schema. Doing things according to that arrangement is far more rewarding than rewiring it according to moods, desires, or simple mindless rotation.

Finding the Sweet Spot

The question emerges concerning how to determine one's place and thus locate that holy "sweet spot." This is a concept that was infrequently ridiculed in the Local Church Movement. The whole question of determining personal gifts seemed artificially introspective, ridiculously "individual." And perhaps to an extent, the wooden emphasis that some Christians placed on it did lend some support to that criticism. Yet as time passed I observed the downside of individuals not knowing the path they were supposed to pursue. Brothers began to round the bend of middle age, still attempting to be a Jack-of-all trades and a master of none. The least defined area of their life was their spiritual function. Many had a clearer idea of what they did in the office than what they did in the universal enterprise of Christ and the church. As spiritual identity and individual purpose were left murky, church teamwork suffered. Meetings began to look like a tired gathering of people whose function had been homogenized to that of two-minute prophets on Sunday morning.

Recent attempts have been made to assist Christians in considering their placement in the body of Christ, like Rick Warren's acronym, SHAPE. Regardless of whether you like Rick Warren or acronyms, his developed thought, (while admittedly not perfect), still merits serious regard:

S = Spiritual gifting; the talent you received at the time of salvation. What areas of service do you tend toward that brings you grace and gives grace to those with you?

H = Heart level motivations. What makes you happy, drives you, makes you dream?

A = Abilities. What skills have you, under the Lord's sovereignty, been caused to learn?

P = Personality. What kind of native temperament and tendencies has God formed in you (e.g., outgoing, academic, introverted, etc.).

E = Experience. What unique education have you received because of the life pathway God has caused you to travel?

The terms "ability," "personality," and "experience" are bound to elicit accusations. Some Christian groups view basic human equipment as being merely natural, unspiritual and therefore worthless in the Lord's service. Certainly there are dangers related to unspiritual people who seek to work for God apart from His direction and influence. But it is both silly and extreme to despise everything in our lives previous to salvation. Yes, Paul labeled all such things as "rubbish" (Phil 3:8) but only as objects of pursuit (Christ was his passion and goal), as a realm in which to live and as the basis of His relationship with God. It is difficult to imagine that the apostle would have labeled education and life experience in and of themselves, as things that were pointless.

The parable in Matthew chapter 25 is extremely instructive, illustrating the delivery of redemptive gifts to the Lord's disciples. There we find an interesting phrase that governs how Christ distributes talents to His slaves—"...He gave...to each according to his own *ability*" (v.15). The "ability" in this passage, which exists prior to the redemptive talent, is apparently a composition of created equipment—possibly disposition, skills, temperament, experiences, etc. It forms the foundational basis upon which spiritual talents are given.

God's gift to us correlates with His creative work. He does not sovereignly configure us throughout our early lives and then deliver a mismatched gift later, after salvation. This would be like training us to be artists, but then bestowing upon us a mechanical engineering degree. As an unsaved man, Paul went from city to city, persecuting the Lord's people (Acts 26:11). After salvation he went from city to city edifying them. He had been a rising teacher in Judaism, he became the foremost one in the Christian church. Certainly from the old creation to new, his motivation, goal, and realm of work all changed. Yet something about his driven personality deeply remained. God apparently keeps a significant amount of our past form, contrary to those who zealously deny the worth of pre-salvation humanity.

Self-checks such as SHAPE could go a long way toward settling which path of operation a believer ought to pursue. Otherwise, without an awareness of individual ministry, the church will lose its distinctive ministries. Only a few humdrum possibilities will remain for those who want to serve, making service itself as morose and colorless as having your spouse or career field pre-chosen for you.

Prophesying Back in Balance

The diversity of New Testament ministry is much too elaborate for detailed exploration in this short chapter. I will therefore confine my attention to a few obvious gifts that influence Sunday morning gatherings. One of them, prophesying (or what has been called prophesying) ranks at the peak of Local Church function. The emphasis on this particular exercise has gained tremendous horsepower due to the LC understanding of “he who prophesies is greater” (1 Cor. 14:5). It is a very common Movement belief that in 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle was on a crusade to promote that particular gift. Actually His more strategic concern was that visitors to a Christian meeting would understand what was being said there. He used prophesying only as an excellent example of accomplishing that goal. When it came to a choice between a gift that edified and one that seemed to do it less, he advised them to “desire earnestly to prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:39).

Most of the determined promotion of prophesying by Witness Lee and company consistently overlooked the larger reading of 1 Corinthians 14:5, where Paul wrote “Greater is he who prophesies than he who speaks in tongues, *unless he interprets.*” That last short phrase actually places tongues speaking (with interpretation) on an even playing field with prophesying, proving that the point of the chapter is to promote *any* gift that stimulates understanding and edification. I am not a tongues-speaker myself, and do not have an agenda for promoting it, but as a student of the Bible I must be true to what Paul wrote there without personal preference.

Real prophesying according to the Bible is a great thing. The Old Testament portrays it as the opening of God’s heart and the delivery of His

sentiments through spoken words (with some foretelling). In the New Testament, it is a very profitable means of building up the church. Somehow in the LC Movement though, the primary reality of prophesying was lost and something else took its place. Mention the term today and LC faithful will immediately interpret it as holding a little book and reciting highlighted points out of it—a glorious practice to them but to outsiders something ridiculously artificial and as unintelligible as tongue-speaking.

As this mauled version of the gift slowly became a hot commodity in the nineties, LC people were typically encouraged and sometimes all but forced to stand up and speak in meetings. The activity became hopelessly confused with the biblical truth of everyone having a “portion” and “You can all prophesy one by one.” At the time very few of us realized that to have a portion might have meant more than public speaking. And for me personally, the jury is still out about whether the statement “you all can prophesy one by one” (1 Cor. 14:31) is addressed to the prophets or to all the believers. I have a difficult time believing that it applies equally to all, as I have seen some who are personally pressured even to illness at the prospect of speaking in public. Is a person meant to function in an area that intimidates them so badly that they vomit and have diarrhea before a meeting?

At any rate, the misguided quest to turn everyone into prophets failed to achieve that end. Local Church meetings became staging areas for terminology-laden mechanical sermonettes. The setting became similar to other places where Christians tried to make everyone speak in tongues. And even if the meetings were spectacularly bad—boring and hard to follow for visitors—we just kept trying harder to reproduce them. Gatherings grew longer, dryer, and more disjointed. The prophets started warming the benches more often because they didn’t want to be accused of being clergy.

The effort to make everyone equal ended up producing a kind of counterproductive arena, where in a bizarre twist, the least gifted began dominating the place of public speaking ministry. The result was hardly that of unbelievers convicted, confessing “God is truly among you!” (1 Cor. 14:25).

It was not the first time church history had seen such a thing. H.A. Ironside said of the Brethren assemblies that the same arrangement among them “[had] proven a dismal failure, the most illiterate and ignorant men often pushing to the front and insisting to be heard, while godlier and better instructed servants of Christ shrink into the background and keep in retirement” (Ironside 137).

The renown brethren teacher G. H. Lang, who himself was no proponent of arranged speakers, adds “The democratic idea that everyone has equal right to minister...has necessarily given opportunity for unedifying speaking. Well merited is Spurgeon’s keen comment that while the whole is *mouth* the result is *vacuum*.” (Lang 44).

As though locating a newfound toy, believers in LC meetings were at first excited about the equality of “everyone speaks.” Eventually though, even those who had been elevated to equal status became bored with it and wished that people with actual speaking gifts would function more. We found out that even if it were true that all may prophesy, not all are prophets. F.F. Bruce, another Brethren notable commented on this by mentioning “speakers who begin by saying, ‘I’m no preacher,’ and spend the next half hour proving the truth of this statement.” (Shuff 72).

It was not only regular meeting attendants who noticed the loss of quality substance. Even the rare newcomer who found “all prophesying” to be novel would eventually grow weary of it. One woman entered a local church meeting and spoke of how she felt the concept was groundbreaking—the first few weeks she

was there. When she began disappearing on a regular basis, someone asked her why she was not coming, especially since she had given such golden reviews of the meetings. “I had to go somewhere to get fed,” she said, sheepishly. “Everyone speaking is interesting, but I need something directional and understandable.” Over the years I have heard numerous similar complaints.

Overcoming this problem is largely a matter of identifying the teachers and prophets in the assembly and encouraging them to take a more central role in Sunday morning ministry. Understandably, this will not fly well in a system that yields the floor to anyone who loves to talk. But speakers ought to operate upon a broader premise than whether they experience personal grace and find fulfillment in prophesying, teaching, or other public applications. They must also pay attention to whether those surrounding them are receiving grace from their exercise. Without this complete loop of concord between individual and Body, congregations will continue to be victims of prophet wannabe’s and time-wasters. As Paul instructed, “When the whole church comes together,” (1 Cor. 14:23) and prophecy occurs, it must be done unto edification (c.f. 1 Cor. 14:26).

This does not mean that a gag order ought to be placed on less gifted meeting attendants. We can encourage participatory speaking in many different ways. Historically, one chief way of doing it was by utilizing “testimony time.” This section of the gathering followed a spoken message, giving listeners a chance to stand up and offer further input. Unlike “prophecies,” the testimony ideally gravitated to a central message, buoying it with personal experiences and perhaps an extra point or two of truth. But as a solution, even “testimony time” has its complications. When it is not done well, it can become dreadfully boring to visitors. A multitude of speakers still potentially means a

multitude of directions and emphases, which tend to dilute the overall impact. Few visitors have either the practice or the patience to sort through additional speaking, find the nuggets hidden there, and put them together in a further coherent word.

Listener fatigue is not an empty complaint. I have observed and considered the LC testimonial pattern for decades. Just because it follows a message (even one well executed), does not mean it will deliver spiritual goods. Those giving testimonies may not be clear about what was preached, yet want to offer commentary anyway. Then there are those who were occupied with an unrelated subject and are just waiting for their turn to stand up and talk about it. Some members clearly understood the message but add points that needlessly complicate what was said. Still others have something worthwhile to say but present it in a monotone, expressionless fashion, mired in too many details. Even those who score a good extra point or two can simply speak for too long, extending the meeting beyond the appetite of new visitors.

Perhaps a more effective arena for the testimonial approach is the smaller setting in homes and cell groups. Speakers are more prone to pay attention to the body language of those around them in these less formal places. Glassy-eyes, shifting, yawning, or laughter and intense eye-to-eye contact are all indications of how someone is doing. For those who cannot translate these non-verbal cues, small meetings are ideal for tactful, constructive interruptions (not the rude kind) that can abbreviate a long-winded speaker.

Still, testimonies in public gatherings can be extremely effective, touching, funny, and can make up points that a message neglected—*when they are done well*. If not, the sum total will seem to be little more than enthusiastic rambling. Extra speaking can be risky in settings where we hope to engage visitors. Attendants shouldn't leave feeling that whatever inspiration they

gained earlier in the meeting was undone because we thought more was better. In the final analysis, whether it is called prophecy or testimony, Paul's suggestion is probably best: "let two or at the most three prophets speak" (1 Cor. 14:29).

The Power of Administration

For a guy like me, the idea of church administration was never particularly attractive. It seemed vested with the unpleasant savor of filing cabinets, planning sessions, and attempts at persuading uncooperative church members to volunteer. In my world, the coin of the realm was preaching and in earlier days three out of four ambitious young local churchmen would have agreed.

It wasn't until I attempted to help lead a comeback church and then later to plant a brand new one that I realized "administrations" (c.f., 1 Cor. 12:28) were more important than I had ever imagined. In fact, it became clear that even with a powerful spoken ministry, a church and its diverse ministries would quickly collapse without planning and order.

Although administrations in the church sound like something hidden in a back office, they are clearly on exhibit every time there is a public meeting of the church. The actual structure of a gathering, its location, appearance, duration, and a host of other particulars must be determined. Will there be information collection from new people? How will it be handled? Will there be greeters at the front door to greet new people? Who will it be and how will it be handled? Will there be snacks? How much and what kind? Will there be musical accompaniment during the singing in the meeting? If so, what kind of instruments and how loud? Then there are the issues related to audio, video and lighting. Again, which way, how much and who? In every case people, or more specifically, administrations,

must make numerous intuitive decisions to lead these activities.

If we regularly leave a multitude of details to blind spontaneity we will produce the blandest and most unproductive forms of meeting life. At the very least, it can become embarrassing. We may find ourselves trying to explain why “the Spirit” never leads anyone to clean the meeting place or why meetings themselves turn into three-hour marathon events every week. Or why when we “let life take care of it,” we end up collecting visitor data as an afterthought, trying to get guests to jot personal info on a scrap of notebook paper. We should not credit the Spirit for sloppiness, especially when He has done so much to obtain the opposite result.

God has placed different kinds of administrations in the church, ranging from the area of children’s service all the way over to the general leadership of the church embodied in the eldership. No matter what size or shape, they don’t come cheaply. Administrators are God-produced and God-placed. A wrong fit will become thorns in the side of any congregation.

There are plenty of horror stories floating around about church people who desired administrative responsibilities for all the wrong reasons. They fancied the limelight that fell upon its more visible aspects, and the feeling of being in charge. Wherever these people hold sway, power struggles will develop as they defend their turf from potential rivals. The service team is their “baby.”

But real administrative ministry takes the higher road of teamwork, creativity, planning, and executing plans. People who are gifted in this way are motivated by the positive effect that they have on the operational life of the church. Their divine placement is not a drag to them. It is their passion. Though they might become fatigued and frequently get frustrated, their eventual orientation will always be toward

galvanizing the believers and bringing coordination among them.

One of the worst things that church elders could do is reserve all decision making for themselves. Burn-out is almost certain to strike them as they are routinely interrupted with questions like what kind of post-meeting refreshments ought to be made (Oatmeal raisin or chocolate chip?). Not only will leaders be driven to distraction by these things, but intra church administrations that should handle such matters will eventually atrophy through disuse. Administrations thrive on responsibility. Empower individuals and groups to lead the congregation in its manifold ways and the church will flourish.

A Little Gift with a Big Impact

One of the most general gifts in any line-up is bound to be the ubiquitous “helps” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28. “Helps” effectively describe any service to the church that is not otherwise specifically mentioned. Indeed, for many people who have gone on to develop into different areas of ministry, “helps” was an on-ramp for them. They started in “Moving Service” or “Chair arrangement” or “Lawn Care” before slowly discovering their placement elsewhere. A good number, though, found that they had the “help” gene, and happily remained there, continuing to offer assistance whenever they hear of a need in the church.

In meetings this often takes the shape of ushering, greeting, placing bulletins on chairs, bringing snacks, providing music or leading it. Neither can these items be viewed as merely being “practical stuff.” Quality help on Sunday morning directly impacts a visitor’s feelings about the church and whether they will want to come back—before they ever sing a song or hear a message. Entire books have been written on the subject, such as *First Impressions* by Mark Waltz.

Back when I was still active among Movement churches, I remember entering one Local Church in the southwest. No one there knew my wife or me. We were in town visiting relatives and thought to drop by for the Sunday morning meeting. The facility was the ugliest thing on the street—not necessarily from the structural point of view, which because of limited funds might not be anyone’s fault, but its cosmetic appearance was plain, dour, and institutional. There was no paint, no sign, no landscaping, and no indication that there was anything remotely friendly inside. Once we were in the door, I got the strongest impression of indifference and from a few, barely concealed disdain. This was before anyone was aware that I was from the dreaded “Great Lakes area.” As far as they knew, I had simply wandered in off the street. Later, my speaking during the testimony time was met with vacant stares. When the meeting adjourned my wife and I were given a few half-hearted handshakes and then completely ignored. I was eighty percent clear that I never wanted to return there. The following year when we returned and got the same treatment, I vowed never to shadow their doorway again. What led me to that conclusion was not some Midwest-Southwest rivalry (that was still years away from erupting). No, it was the complete absence of “helps.”

While visiting the same city a few years later I took the plunge and attended another meeting across town that had been branded by LC Movement people as divisive and leprous. It was only vaguely Local Church in its orientation and since it had received such scathing press, I was reluctant to go there. Upon pulling into the driveway, immediately I noticed the inviting grounds warm colors, and cut grass. Friendly men greeted us outside the building. Inside the facility the carpet was clean, there were books situated professionally at the rear of the meeting room—all carefully picked from both classic and contemporary Christianity. Everything

about the décor seemed tastefully conservative without being sterile. The music and message seemed okay, but were not particularly captivating. I gave a testimony (which was also okay, but not particularly captivating). The meeting attendants there seemed thrilled nonetheless that I had stood up, and supported my every word with rapt attention and nods. Afterwards, my wife and I met a dozen friendly people and then had lunch with some of them at a Mexican restaurant down the street, where we laughed, spoke of the Lord, and ate tamales. It was a totally different experience than at the LSM-endorsed location, largely thanks to “helps.”

For years after, when I visited my family, I made it a point to go visit that little church. Eventually we got on such good terms that I began ministering there when I was in town and my extended family started getting up on Sunday and driving in to hear me. But they were less likely to enthuse over my messages than they were the friendly people, music and great food at the potlucks. As a preacher, I was never so happy to be trumped by “helps” especially when it was my family that benefited. In the overall ministry effort, every little bit counts, especially as human beings crave warmth and a multitude of special touches. Making room for “helps” allows this to happen.

Church leaders conceptually agree with the much-lauded “priesthood of the believers,” but fording that river is another story. In actual practice it involves helping people self-identify what they are and where they belong. It also requires a gentle hand of support. In times of ministerial victory, the master builder, Paul, instructed us to “rejoice with those who rejoice.” In failure, we “weep with those who weep.” In this way the saints of God will always feel that those who lead them are their greatest fans. In an atmosphere charged with such positive morale, a Sunday morning gathering will

come alive as myriad parts work together unto the glory to God.