

## INTERDEPENDENT

How many of you moved during grade school? Do you remember what stepping into a new classroom was like, with a new teacher and a sea of new faces, all of them staring at the new kid? How did you find your place in the group? What strategies did you adopt?

My grade school experience took me to six different schools. Every year I had to make new friends, seek points of entry into the group, and find my niche in the social network.

When we moved into a new housing development in the fourth grade, my whole class was new. We had an entire social network to create. Dennis brought his natural athleticism. He gained instant status and became the informal leader. Art had great verbal skills and was funny. We liked him because he made us laugh. I showed off my stuff, like my Flexible Flyer coaster, illegitimately hoping that what I had could make up for what I wasn't. Gradually we sorted ourselves out.

Think about what it's like for you to walk into a new environment today. You land a new job. A friend invites you to join his softball team. You move and start meeting the neighbors. What's it like to be the new face? What goes on inside your head? How do you establish yourself in a new group?

Think about how our need to fit plays itself out when we come to church. What's it like when the church becomes our reference group for sorting out personal significance and acceptance? Church families easily become stages upon which we seek to be impact players, maybe even power brokers. In ways large and small, broken, sinful parts of ourselves consciously and subconsciously use others to make us feel better about us, bigger than we are.

The fallout from this dynamic is what sometimes turns people off to what they call organized religion. It adds to some people's distaste for "church politics." No wonder the Apostle Paul put it high on his list of mental states needing a make-over. Listen to what Paul says in Rom. 12:1-8.

If our job was to name the sub-heading for these verses in our Bibles, we would gravitate toward *spiritual gifts*. After all, Paul does talk about spiritual gifts, and it is one of four classic passages we turn to when the topic of *charismata*—spiritual gifts—comes up.

But the real issue is life transformation leading to church transformation. Specifically, renewing our minds about our necessary interdependence in the church. The church in Rome had a problem similar to that in Corinth. Believers were using spiritual gifts as a means of establishing themselves in the social hierarchy. These were individuals just like us with a predisposition toward self, wanting to be accepted and affirmed. They used graces God gave them – spiritual capacities for serving others – to get acknowledged and applauded.

Paul, operating out of his own gift—the grace God gave him as an apostle—applies what he has just written about renewing our minds to distorted attitudes and practices in the body life of the church in Rome. Look at v. 3 again.

Paul uses a very difficult phrase to identify our spiritual gifts: "...the measure of faith God has given you." Scholars wrestle with what he meant. It seems most probable to me that Paul describes God-given capacities for service in terms of the faith necessary to exercise those capacities. This means that a spiritual gift includes not only a Spirit-empowered ability, but also the necessary faith to use it.

For instance, I don't have the gift of exhortation. Those who have that gift can get next to us or stand in front of us and give us a spiritual kick in the seat of the pants in such a way that we

turn around and say: “Thanks, I needed that!” When I exhort out of my teaching gift, it sounds more like scolding. I have to work hard to make a challenge encouraging. And I am never quite sure if I can pull it off. I don’t have that faith.

But I can trust God for teaching. I can believe that God will enable me to help you make sense out of what the Bible says. God has apportioned to me a measure of faith to believe he will use me as a teacher.

In the same way, many of you with gifts of mercy or helps would be terrified if you had to stand up here and talk about what a passage means. You don’t believe God could use you in that capacity.

The problem in Rome was that some of the members were claiming gifts they didn’t have in order to gain status they didn’t deserve.

How many of you are familiar with Tim Tebow? Tim is the Heisman Trophy winner this year. He plays quarterback for the Florida Gators.

I played football with his dad, Bob Tebow, in seminary. Bob was a great athlete. He quarterbacked our seminary flag football team.

We had another seminary student who came out for the team who had never played football. He wanted to be the quarterback. We let him run a few plays, but his lack of skill was painfully obvious. He refused to try any other position and finally quit the team deeply offended because he couldn’t have what he wanted.

That happens in churches too. People sometimes aspire to ministries or positions for which they are not suited because they seem to offer a public showcase that will earn them recognition. But if they get the position, they’re off-balance, out of synch. And if they aren’t thinking clearly, they will blame others or the church system for what is really an attempt to function beyond what they can trust God for.

Paul urges us: use your renewed mind to think soberly about your place in the Body of Christ. What has God enabled you to trust him for? How can you serve in ways that you believe God will use to make a difference. In all humility of faith, do that very thing.

And then, Paul says, recognize our necessary interdependence—v. 4-6a.

Paul draws on the metaphor of our physical bodies—single organisms with many parts. Hands flex, grip and manipulate. Legs lift and carry. Eyes watch. Tongues communicate. And in normal healthy individuals, the whole body works as a unit. Wrists don’t flop about at will. Knees don’t decide to take a break in the middle of a run.

The church is like that, Paul says. Just as God has apportioned to each of us a measure of faith, a capacity to trust him for spiritual impact, he has also given us *differing* functions—spiritual gifts—grace enablements for specific service. He has linked us inseparably in one body. Note the words: “...each member belongs to all the others.”

That’s a lot more personal than saying we all belong to the body. I can take that word “body” and neutralize it to mean “generic organization,” or “religious institution.” But when Paul says “...each member belongs to all the others,” that means my life and my God-given spiritual capacities belong to each and every one of you. I have to put names and faces to my thinking about this. We are vitally interconnected. When my grace-capacity – my ministry gift – goes AWOL, it affects Terry, Cheri, Gary, Perry, Jerry, Larry, Mary, Barry, Carey, and every other Tom, Dick and Harry in the place.

We each belong to all the others. We are interdependent members of a living organism inhabited by God’s Holy Spirit. Paul wants this truth renovate our thinking about our place in Christ’s church. We really do need each other. We all need your God-given spiritual capacity in order to function as a whole, healthy body in this world.

That’s why Paul is so business-like in v. 6-8. He’s not giving us a list of gifts for us to

check off in our inventory. He's not trying to define the gifts, or provide an owner's manual. He is applying everything he has just said:

- don't use gifts inappropriately to puff yourself up
- do get off your duff and serve each and every other member of your body.

If you have the gift of prophecy, the ability to receive and pass on direct messages from God, make sure that what you say agrees with the received teachings about Jesus. Don't add flourishes that make you sound super-spiritual. Don't use prophecy to make a name for yourself.

If your gift is serving – serve. I have come to believe that roughly 80% of believers have the gift of helps or service. It is the most common because it is the most necessary. We don't need a church full of leaders. That gets nuts! Everybody would be charging off in a different direction. And you can only sit under so many teachers. But there are always diapers to change, lawns to mow, foodstuffs to deliver, programs to staff, snow to shovel, chairs to put away, etc. If God has given you the faith to believe you can make a difference by helping out, help out.

If you are a teacher, teach. If you can encourage and exhort, encourage and exhort. Give us that necessary push toward obedience and faithfulness. Put us back in courage when we falter.

If you have the gift of giving, give with simple generosity—no strings attached; no names announced, no wall plaques declaring your largesse.

If you have a leadership gift, able to stand before others and energize them to action, do it with diligence. We need your energy and direction.

If you have gift of mercy, be cheerful. The Greek word is *hilaroteti*. It comes down to us as hilarity. Use your God-given empathy but don't drown in the sorrows of others. Remember joy.

Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Think carefully and soberly about your role in the Body of Christ—the church. Be content to function—to serve—within that area of giftedness in which you have faith to believe God will use you.

And renovate your thinking about serving. We're not just cogs in religious machinery, filling slots to keep programs in operation. Our participation isn't something we can treat as optional. We are interdependent servants whose individual gifts and capacities are essential and properly belong to all the others. We are hands and elbows and toes and backs and ears and eyes that make up one body—the fulness of Jesus in this world.

Our theme for this series is *Transforming our Lives: Transforming our Church*. Our transformed lives cast a shadow that transforms our church family. If we want to become the kind of church we've always dreamed of, we've must become the kind of people we most want to meet in our dream church. Changing us personally is a necessary pre-condition to changing our church.

For Paul, that transformation starts with something fundamental to the proper functioning of a local church family: using our special spiritual capacities for the sake of all the others. What is it that God has equipped you to do? For what tasks has he given you desire and the ability? Where can you trust him for the power to make a difference?

In the words of a popular athletic apparel company: "Just do it!"