

Reflection for preaching and teaching



In the church, we often talk about the virtues of “servant leadership.” At its best, that term encourages church leaders to model their ministry after Jesus, who stooped to wash the feet of his disciples, who served them at the table, and who prayed for them faithfully even in his final hours.

God invites each of us to lead by serving, to share freely of our gifts so that God may work through us. Indeed, the word translated as “servant” in 1 Cor. 3: 5 in the NIV is “diakonos,” the root of the term “deacon.” Paul uses the term to describe someone whose work may be of benefit to others. Specifically in this context, he describes someone whose efforts God may use as a channel for good and growth. In choosing to humbly give their gifts, servant-leaders” become channels of God’s healing love, so that all may enjoy the powerful experience of shared value, worth, and investment.

When we work and share our gifts together, none of us has to be Paul or Apollos, or any famous spiritual leader, in order to be faithful to the responsibilities we have been given. None of us is expected to solve all the problems of the world alone, or even as individual churches. Rather, we are called to use the time, talent, and resources we have been given for the opportunities before us. In so doing, we have the joyful opportunity to participate in the growth God is already up to in the world.

The Church of the Brethren works with partners around the world, so that none of us has to do this work alone. Strong relationships are at the heart of this shared ministry, recognizing that true servant leadership empowers each person and community to use the gifts they’ve been given.

The Greek word translated as “co-workers” in 1 Cor. 3:9 in the NIV is “synergoi.” It shares a root with the English word synergy, meaning the interaction of two contributions—which, when combined, produce a greater effect than the simple sum of those contributions. When we give to One Great Hour of Sharing, our gifts join with others and the effects multiply exponentially as God gives growth.

The growth of any garden depends on the soil in which it grows. Different plants give and take different nutrients from the soil. Good gardeners are careful to balance plant varieties so that everything growing in the garden will have what it needs to thrive and bear fruit. If the balance of the soil nutrients is thrown off, all the plants in the garden may suffer. Keeping that balance does not mean treating all plants the same. Rather, it means giving each plant what it needs. As co-workers in God’s garden, when we share in the work of Church of the Brethren, we make an investment in the future and receive abundant blessing in return.

Unlike with the stock market or a retirement account, we do not invest in God's growth to receive a benefit to ourselves. Rather, we give, receive, plant, and water in the service of the future for which God yearns. A little-known band called Yurtfolk set to music the words of the Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves's quote: "We must live for the love of what we may never see." The song tells the story of an old man who plants a date tree in whose shade he will never sit, and whose fruit he will never eat. Why would he do that? Simply—for the love of what he may never see.

In this letter from Paul, the Jesus-followers in Corinth are encouraged to give and grow without undue attachment or ownership to the end result. It matters little who takes credit for the good fruits borne by the faith community in Corinth—Paul or Apollos. What's important is that they bear the fruit God has called them to grow.

Church leaders may want to reflect on how our churches learn to live for the love of what we may never see. How might we invest in futures, trusting that even if we may never see it, God indeed will give abundant growth?

*Written by Katie Shaw Thompson, pastor of Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren (Ill.)
for One Great Hour of Sharing of the Church of the Brethren, 2020.*