

Reflections On Congregational Life

FEATURES TELL, BENEFITS SELL®

by
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A pharmaceutical representative puts it this way: Features tell, benefits sell. Features are the chemicals and compounds in a particular drug. Benefits are the end results the buyer can expect from taking the drug. Features and benefits can be adapted as a model the church can use to present itself to believers and non-believers. For the church, features are the reason the church exists. Benefits are what the church offer to its members.

Features

Systematic theologians define the church's features through the church's ecclesiology; the church is the body of Christ. It is through the church that God is primarily revealed to the world.

The Latin church has defined the church's features by connecting church and state since the 300s CE; i.e., the state protects the church and its ministry and the church prays for the state. This connection is obvious in the evangelization of northern Europe. As the Gospel spreads northward, the thinking was that being a Christian was the same as being a good Roman. Some turned the statement around; being a good Roman is the same as being a good Christian. The connection between church and state is so ingrained in us that in the 20th century a small town in the Cascade Mountains elected a Jewish store owner as its Christian Of The Year because he was such a good citizen. Good citizenship and Christianity are often seen as one and the same.

I think combining these two perspectives is one way to define the "features" of the church: The church is the Body of Christ that calls for its members to be good citizens in the world.

Benefits: What the church offers

We live in a world where describing the features of the church is not enough to attract people to engage in the Gospel, worship the triune God, or commit to becoming disciples of Jesus. We live in a world that asks, What benefits does the church offer me? Many church leaders are put off by this question, but the church rejects or ignores this question at its own peril. Therefore, this edition of Reflections defines four benefits the church offers to those who know the Lord, worship on a regular basis, and love Jesus by serving others.

Benefit 1: the church is only place where an individual can expect to hear the Gospel proclaimed. The church would never deny that God can and does reveal who God is through majestic mountains, picturesque lakes, and memorable scenes of nature. God's revelation can and does come through personal conversations between believers and non-believers. God's mercy can and does come, on occasion, on the golf course or a backyard baseball game. The church would also quickly point out that few, if any, go to the mountains or a lake, enter a personal conversation, or swing a golf club with the expectation of engaging the Good News of the Triune God.

The first benefit the church offers is that within its community of faith, the worshiper and believer can expect to engage the living God through the reading of the scriptures, in the receiving of the sacraments, in vocal and instrumental music, and in a sermon that offers practical advice on connecting God's desire for our lives and the world in which we live. The church is the only place where these expectations have a reasonable chance of being fulfilled.

Benefit 2: the church is a fellowship of believers. We live in a world which encourages isolation and loneliness. For examples, homes with multiple televisions beg for family members to watch their favorite show or sporting event on different screens. Sports Illustrated wrote about how the use of ipods by individual players discourages building relationships among teammates as they travel together. The use of texting by college students removes the impetus to say hello to a student who is not like them when sitting next to that student. Modern technology has not only opened the world through access to great amounts of information at one's finger tips, it also has reduced the world in terms of personal contacts.

The second benefit of the church is that it is a corporate community which connects its members one to the other. As a whole community, the church praises God and prays together. A great example of this community is revealed in the life of Martin Luther. When his daughter, Magdalene, died at the age of 13, Luther said to his congregation the Sunday after her death, "I cannot sing God's praises today so you will sing them for me and when you cannot sing God's praises I will sing them for you." Through praise and prayers, the community of faith supports its members in times of crisis

and sorrow as well as rejoices with them in times of achievements and joys.

In 1989, Ray Oldenburg's book *THE GREAT GOOD PLACE* was published. This book argued that every individual needs three places in order to live a healthy life; namely, home, work, and a social gathering place where friends are greeted. In the third place, everyone knows your name. This insight was later adopted as the theme song of "Cheers." In the church, the third place is a choir, a Bible study, a youth group, a group that meets every Monday morning to do needed maintenance on the church building, standing committees that take time to pray for each other, fellowship groups, etc. In these places, support and celebrations are on a more intimate level than in the congregation as a whole.

The second benefit the church offers is the love and support of a whole community and individual care delivered through small groups.

Benefit 3: the church can change the world. Many congregations, through the power of the Holy Spirit, have changed the world internationally, nationally, and locally. Some churches are organized around international change. They are dedicated to building hospitals in the Sudan, providing missionary support in Tanzania, and working with church partners in Europe.

Some congregation emphasize the "Social Gospel" as a way to change the world. One of the best known leaders of the Social Gospel was Walter Rauschenbush who worked tirelessly with the downtrodden in New York City. The Social Gospel continues today in food pantries and shelters for the homeless.

Some congregations work to change individual lives. This change occurs through such ministries as Marriage Encounter, 12 Step Groups, Christ Renews His Parish, and fellowship events.

The third great benefit the church offers is the opportunity for disciples of Jesus to come together to change the world. This is accomplished through committees and task forces who assume the assignment to help eliminate malaria in the world, feed the hungry, house the homeless, provide support groups to those struggling with addictions, and help individuals build strong relationships with family and friends. Boomers, Busters, and Millennials are open to joining a team approach to making a difference. This is especially true if the team successfully meets its goals.

Benefit 4: feeling good about doing what God says to do. I base the fourth benefit on the writings of psychiatrist William Glasser. Doctor Glasser argues that behavior determines feeling. If an individual does what he or she knows is right, that individual will feel good about himself or herself. Noting the insights of Dr. Glasser, the church can assert the high probability that when an individual worships on a regular basis, fellowships with believers, and works to make a difference in Jesus' name, that individual will have inner peace and contentment. The fourth benefit is a constant in the testimonials of those who are active members of the church.

Responsibilities

Before reading David Platt's book *RADICAL*, I would have ended this Reflections with a summary of the four benefits of being part of a congregation defined above. After reading *RADICAL*, to end with the benefits would be encouraging cheap grace as defined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The Gospel always requires a response. The response is a change in the relationship with the three persons of the Trinity, with other human beings, and with the value system which governs life.

Using the benefits defined above, I add Pastor Platt's challenges to all who enjoy the benefits of regular worship and church membership. Pastor Platt's challenges are: 1. Pray on a regular basis for the entire world that all might know the saving grace of Jesus. 2. Read the entire Bible in a year. 3. Sacrifice your money for a specific purpose; i.e., beside your regular contributions to the church, put a face on your giving by supporting a specific ministry to help others. 4. Spend time in another context; i.e., give 2% of your time (one week) to a mission trip in a different context than your church or home. 5. Commit to be part of a church that preaches God's grace and takes seriously God's command to go beyond the church's walls to reach non-believers in Christ's name.

Conclusion

In presenting the church to the world, church leaders and members need to have a clear understanding of who and what the church is and the benefits it has to offer those who worship and participate in its ministries. Sharing the features of the church and its benefits leads to defining the expectations and responsibilities of those who are part of a Christian faith community.

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