

SERVANTS

By

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“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your servant.” (Matthew 20:25, 26)

When Jesus said, “I will build my church” it is doubtful that He had in mind the kind of institution which we know today as the church, with its various officers, committees, professionals, regularly scheduled business meetings, etc. This kind of corporate organization has been copied from the world and put in place as a substitute for the real function of Christians as servants of Christ.

The early church was a functioning body in which all were to serve according to each one’s ability. There were no “officers” The word translated deacon is a word meaning servant and indicates that some were given special jobs to perform. The elders were the men older in the faith. The “office” to which some were appointed, in the Greek is praxis, meaning function, not a place of superior power. The Greek word for authority, “exousia” is never used in the New Testament in connection with elders. The elders were to lead by example and service, not by exercising authority over the rest of the people. They were pastors and shepherds, protecting and feeding the sheep, not driving them nor coercing them by authoritative power.

There were no professionals in the early church. Even the apostles held no titles but were called simply peter, John, Paul, etc. Every Christian was a minister, which is another word for servant. There was no distinction of clergy and laity; all were on the same level in Christ. Their purpose was simple: to live Godly lives and make the gospel known to others. This they did so well that it was said that they “turned the world upside down” and the sound of the gospel went out to the whole world (Acts 17:6; Romans 10:18).

The modern church, including the centrally controlled denominations as well as those who think of themselves as “independent,” has become a bureaucratic system, run by professionals and organized after the order of the secular state or business corporation. The servant role is the exception rather than the rule. Congregations employ preachers to represent the church to the community and to minister to the sick, the needy, and to make the gospel known. There are several reasons for employing a professional to do the serving. One is our mistaken idea of the weekly worship service. Instead of meeting to edify one another it has become a program to be performed. We want to see the program done well, to go smoothly, no hitches, everything up to snuff. Not every Christian can do that; in fact, not very many. Once when asked to give the communion meditation, an elder said to me, “You can do this better than I, or any of us. You are trained for it. I would rather you do it.” Just how many other activities are refused by sincere Christians because they think the professional can do them better? Is worship of God more pleasing

to Him when directed in a more sophisticated manner? Have we made the simple communion a ritual that requires professional training for participation?

Another factor contributing to professionalism is laziness. Even to sing a song of praise requires at least some exercise and practice. Why shouldn't every Christian be willing to make the effort to learn the songs? But, instead, such praise is assigned to the choir. In some churches I have attended if one enters fully into the singing he will stand out like a sore thumb because the choir does the singing with only a few others mouthing the words with as little volume as possible. Instead of worshippers we become spectators, and the bigger the crowd the less the personal participation.

We are an entertainment oriented society. We are accustomed to expecting the spectacular in sports, in politics and in church. The worship hour is often a time for a performance by talented musicians and becomes a production far removed from anything we read in scripture about the assembly of the saints. I am a great lover of music and see music as a means of praising God and inspiring fellow saints, but also I am aware of the temptation it affords to present a performance in order to gain personal recognition and praise.

In its pressing desire to grow, the church competes for attendance and seeks a powerful pulpiteer with charisma that will bring in the crowds. He becomes their star, and the strength and witness of the church depends upon him. It is then perceived by believers that their chief duty is to be faithful pew-fillers and contributors to maintain the plant and support the star, so he can perform before bigger and bigger audiences. The more popular the star "minister" the more he is seen as master rather than servant. In many places he clothes himself in a special uniform or robe to further distinguish him apart from the rest. The people fall into the habit of inviting others to come hear their star, rather than telling others the message of Christ. It is understandable how the preacher may succumb to the temptation to build his own personal dynasty. As the flock grows, more staff is hired, and the preacher becomes the Senior Minister. (How does "senior servant" strike you?) Even though he may have the desire to be no more than a humble servant, if he is to succeed in the modern church system, he must accept a professional title and position as chief.

In the words of Ray Downing in *Viewpoint*, "Minister as a title means servant. It's appropriate for EVERY member of every Christian congregation. We need no CHIEF servant, however, and properly admire and serve with older sisters and brothers who may do the work of an evangelist or a pastor or teacher. No title should be acceptable to set aside a professional clergy in the Lord's church..."

Another reason for abandoning personal service and leaving it for the professionals is our fear of controversy. The early Christians were not afraid of confrontation. They went straight to the synagogue to tell the people that their religious system was no longer valid! They "went everywhere preaching the gospel" in the face of bitter opposition.

We don't like to run the risk of controversy. Even Jesus fell into disfavor with many of his disciples when he got into a heated controversy with the Pharisees (John 6:26-66).

