

Becoming a servant...serving God on His terms

Dan Evans

I have been in lay ministry since before I left Bible college in 1973, serving many pastors, churches and other ministries with few interruptions.

I once served under a pastor for which I developed a growing disappointment because of a position he took on a particular issue relating to the life of his church. I still, even after all these years, maturity and the objectivity gained through distance and time, disagree with his position. It was not a huge theological issue or moral problem though, at the time, I'm sure I felt it was.

We never debated or argued the issue. Had I expressed my two-cents to him, it would have been appreciated for the value it had at that stage of my Christian maturity – two cents. When the time came for me to move on, we went our separate ways with our friendship and my overall respect for him intact.

When you begin to lose confidence in a pastor (or anyone), you are subject to feelings and emotions that can reduce your attention to or respect for what that person says. Such was my experience in this particular church. I found it hard not to over-scrutinize his ministry and teachings. That often made my Sunday experience less than blessed, but that was my own failure, not his.

Breakthrough

On a certain Sunday morning, however, my pastor delivered a sermon that has been branded onto my heart and mind because of its righteous content. Despite the scrutiny I applied to everything the man said during that period, a simple and profound truth came cutting through that morning that dramatically changed my ministry, attitude and behavior. Pastor spoke that morning with an unusual urgency, conviction and honesty. His topic: servanthood.

Now, I have been in the church since before I have memories. I have never wandered from the church or from God. The testimony of my spiritual journey would put you to sleep because it is not littered with accounts of a life before Christ, or drugs, or rebellion or any other exotic attributes of a life apart from God. I've heard Sunday school teachers, pastors and evangelists discuss servanthood in the context of Christianity all my life. But this occasion was different. At least, it affected me in a far greater way.

My pastor on that Sunday morning many years ago, stepped out from behind his pulpit and addressed his congregation in an uncommonly firm and direct manner. He spoke about his personal struggle with people in the church who were self-appointed landlords of the building (after all, it was their labor and offerings that built it), or who "owned" their ministry or who were willing to serve in the church only on "their terms."

I felt like my heart was being opened with a meat hook. My eyes focused on my pastor's lips and every word he spoke seemed directed at me. I was among those he was talking

about. I was involved in a ministry for which I had assumed ownership. I had not been asked to do so, nor had I prayed about the manner in which my church could best benefit from my talents. I had simply taken charge of a ministry that I felt needed my attention, and for which no one else was qualified or willing.

I was, in fact, qualified for the technical demands of that job. But my motives were all wrong. In fact, I doubt that my pastor even realized that I found myself among those he was addressing. My misplaced motives were probably not all that obvious. However, the Holy Spirit knew my heart and opened my ears to that message from God. It was a turning point for me.

Motives, agendas

Personal motives play a major role in the decisions we make, the words we speak and in our personal beliefs and convictions. At times our lives are driven entirely by motives. We seek acceptance, try to make points, win affection, find favor, be recognized for sacrifice (which makes it self-serving sacrifice).

But with God, we don't win or lose the game based on accumulated points; we simply win or lose based on the merits of our performance. It might seem that God is a very subjective referee, if it weren't for the fact that the game rules and criteria for winning are clearly published in the handbook – the Bible.

My pastor laid it out clearly and simply. He said “if you want to participate in ministry in this church you must do so on God's terms and my terms, not your own.”

He had had his fill of gratuitous giving and sacrifice. He was willing to risk going forward with less help. If only a few helpers remained who were devoted to God's work rather than their own personal objectives, it would be worth it to him.

I had to evaluate for the first time why I was there. It didn't take long. Even as the pastor spoke, the Holy Spirit made it clear to me that I was ministering on my terms, not God's. I made a personal commitment at that very moment to submit myself to the leadership of those that God placed in authority within the church, namely the pastors, or to the people that a pastor appointed to leadership positions (the second part took me a little longer to grasp and accept).

The next week, I offered to train others to take my place and to make myself available for any other ministry in which they might desire to place me. That's a tough step to make and commit to. What if they need a nursery worker or a third grade teacher or tidy toilet bowl man? As it turned out, the pastor thanked me and affirmed his need for me to remain in the ministry in which I was working, which I did. I did, however, recruit and train others and as circumstances would have it, as soon as my trainees were capable of doing those jobs, God moved me on to another ministry in another city.

Application

The lesson I learned about being a servant, transformed me. I went on to leadership roles in other churches and ministries. To this day, I work with various Christian groups and train workers in a variety of specialties. And, when I conduct workshops, seminars or classes, I always integrate the teaching I received on servanthood.

I also make it a personal practice to periodically re-evaluate my Christian service to ensure that I'm making myself available to those in leadership on their terms, rather than mine. Sometimes I find that my motives have gone a little askew and then I have to re-align them to maintain a proper focus and attitude. But I always seem to come back to the important principle of serving God on His terms.

Perhaps the single most prevalent problem I have observed in 32 years of ministry, is the misguided motives of those who serve; from pastors to janitors, from choir members to ushers. It is intrinsically difficult for any of us to fully submit ourselves to the authority of others. The military recognizes this, which is why it has boot camps and basic training.

It is certainly not appropriate for churches to conduct boot camps. That's the territory of cults. But if we study and apply the concepts of scripture, we learn that a spiritual boot camp is exactly what we are experiencing all of our Christian lives. God normally takes a gentler, more sensitive, more patient approach to get our attention than does the Army. While military basic training graduates emerge as submissive order takers, spiritual trainees are crafted into successful and satisfied servants.

The word "servant" has acquired many negative connotations in several thousand years of the human experience. Many people inherently associate it with slavery, others with mindless obedience, some with degraded employment. But, in terms of our lives in the family of Christ, becoming a servant is the highest order of achievement. Serving God and man in humility and respect, represents the greatest good.

Learning to be a servant, requires that we give up our personal motives and agendas. It requires us to recognize and react in a way that is not instinctual for most of us, though some seem to enter the world with this mindset. We only need to apply the SHUSH principle:

- **S**top and allow God and His Holy Spirit to change us
- **H**ear what the Word of God is telling us
- **U**nderstand our motives and how they contrast with Gods'
- **S**ubmit to Christ and His agenda for us
- **H**onor Him and the church with an organic spirit of servanthood

In-service training

I must often recall my commitment to the servant concept. At times it is a challenge to submit to someone with whom I don't totally agree. I have learned, however, to remind myself that a ministry leader is in his or her position because God made a special appointment. That person may be immature or undeveloped. Rough edges and

inexperience may be grotesquely out of balance with ability. That person's personal motives and agenda may be very out of balance and their leadership skills nonexistent.

I remind myself that God placed the individual there. That makes it easier to contribute my own maturity and experience, in partnership with God, to allow that leader to become all that God wants him or her to be. And, when I do that, God blesses me with a special satisfaction.

It is a high calling to be a servant. It is much simpler to leverage our personal motives and agenda to win favor and control people. The servant concept is just as applicable to marriage, friendship, community, business and career, as it is to ministry. Learning how to become a servant in ministry, can reap huge dividends in all aspects of our lives and relationships.