

Why 'Servant Leadership' Is Not Enough

In Consideration of the Administrative Approach of the Past, a New Approach has gained Appeal among a certain few Ministers. One rightly claimed to have been Appropriate all along! This study explains WHY this approach, by itself, is insufficient.

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In recent months, I've been writing a lot of articles addressing the subject of Church administration. Recipients of these articles have noticed and have commented on it being my current 'passion'.

Defensive Reactions

What I'm finding is that what I'm saying is being interpreted from a point of view that our peoples might be expected to take. They are considering the matter from the point of view that we have traditionally operated under, not necessarily the Biblical model. This explains why their reactions are somewhat defensive and negative. They want to defend the ministry's authority position, and I can't fault them for that. I do defend the ministry also, but from a more comprehensive approach, while faulting certain extremes of degree to which things were taken in the past. This will be explained in later paragraphs.

My primary goal is to **elevate the stature of the general membership** to its proper God-ordained role. Based on former thinking, that is interpreted by some as an attack on the ministry. It isn't really, though it may seem that way based on our conceptions of decades past.

WHO IS the Greatest?

Jesus Himself set the general membership in the higher regard. We can see that clearly when we review passages such as Luke 22:24-27. There He placed His called-out ones (the members) in the higher position, equating them with honored guests at a banquet or the elders within a family. The ministry (the servants of those guests or elders) is placed in a lower position: This in direct response to His Disciples' contentions as to who among them was to be regarded as 'the greatest'.

From His own statements, we can see that Jesus views the **general membership** of the Church as the primary focus of His ministry, and thus of all who serve them as they serve Him. We, on the other hand, have traditionally focused on the ministry as receiving our primary regard, with some of them alleging that it is our purpose to serve them and their needs for recognition and esteem. It has been our habit of over-exalting the ministerial class that has caused so many divisions and other internal problems. We almost forgot that 'minister' actually means 'servant'.

The characteristic of identifying with and exalting one minister above another is addressed in the first three chapters of 1st Corinthians. It is there labeled as 'carnality' and is recognized for its divisiveness. We, unfortunately, ramped that action up to the level of 'organizational carnality'. We created in our minds that there are 'ranks' among our servant class, and then set them above us in pre-eminence.

The regard for the membership was then relegated to a lowered state (in some cases near contempt) and then we denied ourselves our God-given responsibilities. We were to evaluate the services being rendered to the membership. We were told we could 'know them (our servants) by their fruits'. We were admonished to exercise our senses of discernment (Heb. 5:14). We were admonished to 'speak often one with another (Mal. 3:16). We were given examples where the congregations evaluated their brethren and even their 'apostles' (Rev. 2:2). But all of that was rendered irrelevant, even deemed as inappropriate, despite the many New Testament examples of the membership being involved in appointments and in administrative decisions being made. One notable passage (1st

Cor. 6:1-8) faults them for not employing the judgment skills of the members, especially those of least regard! There can be no mistake that it was intended that the members exercise their senses of discernment in a positive way. It was 'by reason of use' that their senses were to be honed, for use in the Kingdom. (Mal. 3:16-18).

A Way NOT to Be!

All of that notwithstanding, we pursued the same approach as is common in human organizations, setting up an authority structure where the servants are set up to lord over the people, the very opposite approach to what Jesus set before His Disciples. (Lk. 22:25-26) He told them that they were to **not** be that way! But in doing that very thing, we made two mistakes. One was the setting up of an authority structure (ranks), the other was the reversal of regard, putting the servants on top and the membership (the Church) on the bottom! A system referred to as 'Nicolaitanism', which is a transliterated form of a Greek language term indicating 'the conquest of the laity'.

Jesus is clearly on record as hating what we find as that Nicolaitan approach. We never did do due diligence in defining exactly what that approach is. We suffer the inevitable consequences as a result. That way of doing things produces predictable results. That's why Jesus hates it. We should as well. It suppresses the functions God gave to His Saints individually and collectively, it creates lines of division between members and their 'ministry', and it functions to impose doctrines without the consent of the Church, (the ecclesia), who are cited as having God's Spirit and being specifically identified as the 'pillars and grounds of Truth'. We have both an early example and a modern example of a serious doctrinal overthrow that resulted from this organizational role reversal.

It is when we restore the mandated function to the membership, as a functional balance to the authority of the ministry, that we will see the stability and steadfastness restored to God's Church and to His Truth that He desires. Our way is repeatedly proven to be divisive and erosive of Truth.

Appropriate Ministerial Esteem

Now, as to the esteem that we are to show toward

the ministry, there IS an esteem that is appropriate. It is seen as being our proper response toward those who serve the membership properly. It's mentioned expressly in regard to those who are local, serving among us: Those who know us and who labor on our behalf, teaching, motivating, exhorting, and when necessary, separating destructive elements out from among us. Such esteem is not specifically mentioned as being more appropriate to those who serve in a more 'at large' capacity, who don't really know us personally. Love is personal. To exhibit greater love toward someone that doesn't know us and whom we don't really know, only on the basis of their perceived 'superior office' is unjustified. We are told to show higher regard for those who labor among us. (1st Thes. 5:12) We are to do so for their works sake, not blindly just on account of their declared 'rank'. And, knowing their works puts a burden upon the ones being served to consider those works, to know and to evaluate those works and to regard their servants accordingly. If there are no good fruits, there is no obligation to remain in their service sphere, or to allow them to continue to under-serve or mis-serve the brethren there in that congregation.

The Ephesians were highly commended for their evaluative circumspection. They didn't bear those who were 'evil'. They exposed the 'false apostles'. It doesn't say they quietly stood-by under such individuals. They clearly were involved and were duly activist! (Rev. 2:2-6) At least at first, until the Nicolaitan movement gained inroads.

Not the Modern Approach

Now granted, this is inconsistent with our traditional approach, but it is consistent with the structure and examples of the early New Testament Church. It was our slide into an acceptance of the Nicolaitan system that we set ourselves up for our organizational demise. We at one time, in our later experience, came to the point of alleging that "the only thing the Catholic Church has right is government"! At that point, we were in effect praising the Nicolaitan authority structure in other churches. Is it any wonder, then, what resulted?

God was not pleased, and we shouldn't imagine that He is going to intervene and restore such an organization to its former stature or usefulness.

There are still many ‘offshoot groups’ who are determined to preserve or to restore that structure, while to their credit retaining former teachings. Interestingly, this restored authority structure is the condition that is, in places, proving to be the underlying cause of the ongoing divisiveness we’re seeing. It isn’t so much the result of differences in teachings. There is a component built-into it that has predictable results. God well knows of that and as a result, in interest of maintaining unity and stability, established His Church differently!

But, in certain situations, where as a result of these break-ups, congregations are achieving a degree of autonomy, the members are again being allowed their evaluative function and the say that they were long denied under their authoritarian past.

Servant Leadership

Now, in some quarters, the Church administrations are considering employing more of a ‘servant leadership’ approach than they have in the past. Good as far as it goes, IF it goes, but if it doesn’t restore the general membership to their God-given role of monitoring the conditions within their congregations, we still have a formula destined to hinder productive growth.

As history has proven, and we should well know by now, we can’t rely on any hierarchy to preserve the Truth, to maintain unity or to provide the environment for spiritual growth that ought to be present. The rigid ‘minister / follower’ approach (clergy / laity) doesn’t provide the opportunity or proper encouragement to each and every member to be all of what God wants him to be. The ministry more often functions to inhibit use of God-given Talents rather than help each member to develop them! Rather than serve as motivating influences, encouraging members to develop their usefulness to God, they function more as blockers and bouncers in their congregations. In other words, they promote a culture that yields a crop of ‘unprofitable servants’. (Defined as a class which does no more than the minimum required of them!) The absence of growth and vibrancy within our congregations reflects that cultural condition.

But, here’s the question. Is a more servant-oriented leadership approach all that is needed? Will the

congregations always be well-served by this change of approach? In the cases where the local minister is doing all things well, there is a good chance that there’ll be dramatic improvements. But among those who retain all control, even if only locally, members remain subject to a situation like we see in the Epistle of 3rd John, where Diotrephes in his obsession with his personal preeminence, affected ‘his’ people in a detrimental way.

When the minister is doing things right, being a servant-leader type is commendable. But, when not – and being human, few are perfect – another factor needs to exist. One Jesus placed in His Church: a means of administrative counterbalance.

Members Must Oversee

The ministers were told to regard themselves all as ‘brethren’: (Matt. 23:8)

They were to not be ‘overlords’: (Matt. 20:25-28; 1st Pet 5:2-3)

Members were to know them by their fruits, not by their elevated offices: (Matt. 7:16-20)

Members were admonished to hear His voice over theirs’: (John 10:3-5)

Members were to speak often with and to exhort one another: (Mal. 3:16-18; Heb. 3:13)

The poor results we’re seeing are the legacy of not following God’s dedicated approach to service. We see polarizations around one ministry over another, we see exclusivism, we see a form of contempt toward brethren who have God’s Spirit and who believe largely the same, based primarily on ones’ chosen affiliation, we see barriers to open fellowship on a similar basis, and incessant divisions.

With the Church itself – the entire body of believers – being regarded as **the prime entity** and as the focus of our service, the functional scene changes. The Church is the Body of Christ, His future Bride. All things done by Him are in interest of supplying her members with the best environment possible for spiritual growth and Talent development. All things done should be in interest of promoting the brethren, not enhancing the stature of the leadership. But without alert members keeping watch on the conditions, we remain at risk of reverting to the overlording Nicloaitan way! 