Lay People: Servants Not Spectators

Scripture: Matthew 7:26–27; Acts 6:4; Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7; 1 Corinthians 12:15–26; Ephesians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 4:14–15; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7–17; James 1:22–25
Code: A196

I have often spoken out against all the pragmatic and "seeker-sensitive" approaches to contemporary worship because they tend to diminish the proper place of preaching and replace it with quasi-spiritual forms of sheer entertainment (music, comedy, drama, and whatnot). Any trend that threatens the centrality of God's Word in our corporate worship is a dangerous trend.

But one of the most disturbing side effects of the seeker-sensitive fad is something I haven't said as much about: When one of the main aims of a ministry philosophy is to keep people entertained, church members inevitably become mere spectators. The architects of the modern megachurches admit that they have deliberately redesigned the worship service in order to make as few demands as possible on the person in the pew. After all, they don't want the "unchurched" to be intimidated by appeals for personal involvement in ministry. That's the very opposite of "seeker sensitivity."

Such thinking is spiritually deadly. Christianity is not a spectator sport. Practically the worst thing any churchgoer can do is be a hearer but not a doer (James 1:22-25). Christ himself pronounced doom on religious people who want to be mere bystanders (Matthew 7:26-27).

Something is seriously wrong in a church where the staff does all the "ministry" and people are made to feel comfortable as mere observers. One of the pastor's main duties is to equip *the saints* to do the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:12). Every believer is called to be a minister of some sort, with each of us using the unique gifts given us by God for the edification of the whole church (Romans 12:6-8).

That's why Scripture portrays the church as a body—an organism with many organs (1 Corinthians 12:14), where each member has a unique role (1 Corinthians 12:15-25), and all contribute something important to the life of the body. "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

I can't read that verse without thinking of Dizzy Dean. He was a Hall-of-Fame baseball pitcher, whose career peaked in the 1930s. Dean won thirty games that year in his 1934 season, an astounding feat that has been repeated only one other time in baseball history (31 games in 1968 by Denny McLain). In the 1937 All-Star game, he took a hard line drive off his toe, and the toe was broken. It should not have been a career-ending injury, but Dean was rushed back into the lineup before the fracture was completely healed, and he pitched several games favoring the sore toe. That led to an unnatural delivery that seriously injured his pitching arm. The arm never fully recovered. Dizzy Dean's major-league career was essentially over in four years.

Something similar happens in any church where there are non-functioning members. The active members of the body become overextended, and the effectiveness of the whole body suffers greatly.

Even the most insignificant member, like a toe, is designed to play a vital role.

That truth has been one of the main foundations of my approach to ministry for many years. When I first became pastor of Grace Community Church in 1969, I taught a series on Ephesians, and we spent a great deal of time studying the principle of Ephesians 4:11—that the pastor's duty is to equip the saints, and it is *their* duty to shoulder the work of the ministry.

Our people quickly embraced that simple idea, and it transformed our church in a remarkable way. For one thing, we began to see dramatic growth. Within a matter of months, attendance on Sundays had ballooned to almost 1,000. About that same time, a well-known evangelical magazine asked a reporter to write an article about the growth of our church. He visited our services for several weeks, carefully observed how the ministry functioned, interviewed scores of people, and then wrote an article titled "The Church with 900 Ministers."

That title perfectly summarized what has made Grace Church unique for all these years. Nowadays we have several thousand ministers, but the principle is still the same. Everyone is expected and encouraged to be involved in active ministry. Almost no one in our church would ever view ministry as the exclusive domain of professional clergy. If you want to be comfortable as a mere spectator, Grace Church is not the church for you.

I am not making a case for egalitarianism. Much less would I argue against the need for full-time vocational pastors who devote their whole lives to prayer, the study of the Word of God, and the training and equipping of the saints (cf. Acts 6:4; 1 Timothy 4:14-15; 5:17). The church needs leaders, and God has specifically called men to leadership and set them in places of authority in the church (cf. Hebrews 13:7, 17).

But the New Testament pattern is clear and inescapable: *Every* Christian is gifted and called *to ministry*. The spiritual gifts we are given are not for our own sake, but for the benefit of the whole body (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them*" (Romans 12:6, emphasis added).

In my experience, it is not difficult to motivate gifted people to minister. The gift of mercy, for example, might practically be defined as the *desire* combined with the *ability* to show mercy. A person truly gifted to teach *wants* to teach. All the average person needs is encouragement and opportunities to employ his or her gifts. If faithful leaders properly train, equip, and guide people to the right ministry opportunities, the church will flourish.

If you are a church leader, I hope you have embraced your duty to equip people for ministry. It is, after all, one of your main duties—if not the single most important task for leaders in today's church.

If you're a lay person, I hope you'll find a place where you can use your gift in the work of the ministry. Maybe you'll be used by the Lord to start an epidemic of lay ministry in your congregation.

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