



Servant Structures Before Service Structures

Service structures are systems set up to provide a service, sometimes without much regard for the ones being served. Servant structures put a premium on the character of those providing the service and the inherent worth of those receiving the service.

What do you get when you see a relationship where one partner is manipulative, coercive, and intimidating and the other partner is fearful, brow beaten and painfully passive? You get what psychologists call a co-dependent relationship. The bottom line of any co-dependent relationship is the cyclical tyranny of power and powerlessness that it perpetuates. When applied to an institutional setting we get what we call "service structures." A service structure is a system that exists for and is driven by the insatiable hunger of human need. The service structure, having all the resources to meet the need, holds all the power. The huddled masses who come to the service structure to have their needs met have only their vulnerability and "quiet desperation" to cling to. Just spend 5 minutes in any human service department. Observe the cold indifference of those sitting behind the glassed-off counters and those standing in line or waiting for their numbers to be called. The point will be made clear. When applied to the church we get something bordering on the blasphemous. Many churches in America are driven by human need as well. Just spend 5 minutes in any church committee meeting and observe what is covered. Discussion will center around important issues such as "cutting edge" ways to increase the attendance in the church, how to acquire the necessary funds to expand the church parking lot, the start up of new programs to address the ever expanding demands of the growing church, the pressure to hire new staff to administrate the new programs, etc. etc. Those who attend the church will also be perceived as the source of funding for the church, to keep the machine running so to speak. The cycle of co-dependence is perpetuated and the Holy Spirit quenched.

If scripture is true then we know every human soul was born with a need to be in relationship with God. Only God alone can satisfy each rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But the amazing truth about God is that even though He holds all the power of the universe and beyond, he doesn't use that power to manipulate, coerce or intimidate us to believe in Him, to depend on Him. Even when He came to earth to usher in his kingdom "a bruised reed he did not break, and a smoldering wick he did not snuff out." (Isa.42:3) What's more, Christ did not come primarily to meet our perceived needs. We demand bread; he gave us the Bread of Life. We demand shelter; he goes to prepare a place for us in his father's house. We scream for the healing of our bodies; he knows that the time in our earthly bodies is momentary and that we shall one day see him face to face in our glorified bodies. And so he is not in a panic or frenzy to establish service structures to meet our needs. To do so would be to create the kind of dependence that he deplors. Christ sees us as more than the sum total of our needs. We would play the role of the servile, groveling wretch, begging with trembling outstretched hands for scraps from the master's table. He would have us standing with the glow of grace in our eyes, strong and sure of our faith in the One who gives us our freedom to be and act like Him. Christ came to serve, not to be served because He couldn't help it. He was the fullest expression of the Father's heart, and to its core the Father's heart is a heart that serves freely and lovingly and deeply. Look at the birds of the air and lily's of the field. Who do you think feeds and clothes them? The church is supposed to be the visible

expression of the Father's heart in the world. It is called to be His hands and feet and mouth in the world. In other words, it is called primarily to be a "servant structure" rather than a "service structure." That means that we who are of the Father must see the inherent worth of anyone, regardless of perceived need or power, who would enter our gates. It is our inward call to be like the Father, not the outward draw of a secure need-based position, that we do what we do. Servant structures cannot help but address needs, both real and perceived, but they are not driven by them. When a service structure cannot meet a need, it says, "Sorry. You're in the wrong line. Next!" When a servant structure cannot meet a perceived need, it says, "Brother, I'm not sure if I can meet your need, but I know someone who can. If you have the time, I'll introduce you to Him." Servant structures put people before program. Servant structures pursue care before cure. Servant structures are more concerned with faithfulness rather than success. What then is a servant structure? It is simply the visible expression of the Father's servant heart hidden within the hearts of His children. The question for us all is which sort of structure do we belong to?

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45