

The Hidden Power of a Servanthood Culture

Do people in your community think of your church as an outward-focused, service-minded organization?

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SERVANTHOOD = OUTWARD FOCUS

Servanthood—an outward focus that makes us willing to help others—is a vital element of any healthy church. Servanthood is inextricably connected with an outward-focus approach to life.

Servanthood is critical for two reasons, one practical and one philosophical.

Practically, a service mindset is critical because people expect it, especially from churches.

Today, servanthood is critical even for for-profit corporations. See how long your business stays open if your customers think you're only about making money. Nobody cares whether your company makes money except you. In fact, the rest of us would rather you didn't so we can get more for less.

Same with churches. People who don't go to your church don't care whether your church is great for the people who go there. They care about the difference you're making for them and their community.

Philosophically, servanthood is critical because Christ expects it. Jesus' life and death set the ultimate example of self-sacrifice, and he calls his followers to do the same.

The Bible has no concept of a church that exists to edify its individual members. No church has any reason to exist apart from its commission to be the Body of Christ—the means which Jesus continues to reach and serve the world.

Churches must cultivate a culture of service to ensure that

- they fulfill their biblical calling to model God's grace and Christ's love in tangible ways;
- they fulfill their social responsibility, improving their communities;
- individual believers have opportunities to imitate Christ by serving others.

BREAKING THE 80/20 RULE

Most of us are familiar with the “Pareto Principle,” more commonly referred to as the “80/20 Rule.” This theorem states that 80% of effects are generated by 20% of causes.

The “Law of the Vital Few” is named after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923). Pareto conducted a study in the 1890s that demonstrated that 80% of the productive land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population. Curious to see whether this balance might apply in other areas of life, Pareto discovered that 20% of the peapods in his backyard garden produced 80% of the peas.

Since then, the Pareto Principle has been tested in a wide range of settings. It’s become proverbial in the business world that 20% of clients will generate 80% of revenue. And of course, Pareto’s principle applies to churches as well. Typically, 20% of any congregation will do 80% of the work and give 80% of the money.

There are at least two reasons for this. Both must be overcome to create a church-wide culture of servanthood.


First, some churches don’t encourage people to serve. In fact, they discourage it.

On the surface, they stress the “priesthood of all believers” and teach that God can use anyone to do great things. But underneath, they promote a culture of specialization where only certain people are qualified to do things “the right way.”

Excellence is an important theological principle. God deserves the best we can give. But allowing this principle to create an environment where people feel “I don’t really need to get involved because someone else could probably do it better” is sinful for a different reason.

Second, telling someone they need to serve and providing them with training and opportunities to do so are two different things. Modeling service is important, but simply doing something in front of someone isn’t “modeling.” It’s performing. Entertainment.

The church must ensure that its messaging consistently calls people to serve while its programming prepares people to respond to that call. Until it does, the 80/20 Rule will remain in full effect.



Does your church call, equip, and empower people to serve?

THE SECRET POWER OF SERVANTHOOD

Servanthood is not just a critical element of a healthy church. Service is central to the church's identity and mission. Integrity, passion, and imagination are critical to your church's success. Servanthood is the reason it exists in the first place.

Servanthood is important not only because Jesus calls us to serve, but also because service works. It accomplishes what the church is called to do in a unique way. Service makes a theological point that can't be refuted.

We can preach to our co-workers all day long, and they can counter our best arguments with things they saw on the internet. We can rant about the moral decline of society on social media, and people will just ignore us.

Helping someone pick up a stack of papers that they've just dropped, or working overtime because someone called in sick, are theological statements that cannot be refuted. Meeting the needs of others touches them on a deeply emotional and personal level, one that overcomes intellectual barriers.

This aspect of service—its power to overcome intellectual barriers—is doubtless the reason servanthood was central to Jesus' program. In case you haven't noticed, Jesus didn't do things just to attract people. He did things that demonstrated how God wants the world to be.

Jesus never walked into the middle of a crowded street and levitated. Jesus never pointed to a boulder and lifted it into the air without touching it. Jesus never disappeared in front of the Pharisees and teleported to the top of a nearby house. He could have done any of those things, but he did not. In fact, on one occasion when Satan encouraged Jesus to do things like this—"Turn these stones to bread"; "Jump off the top of the temple" (Matthew 4:2-7)—he refused.

Instead, Jesus did things that *met the needs of others*. He used his power for the good of other people.

Jesus made blind people see. He made lepers clean. He made cripples walk. Jesus brought dead people back to life. He fed hungry people. He turned water to wine at a wedding so the groom wouldn't be ashamed. Jesus walked on water, but he didn't do that to impress people. He did it to save his disciples from drowning (Mark 6:43-53). And he made them walk on water, too (Matthew 14:22-34).

Jesus was in the business of serving others, and in the business of changing the world through service. When people look beyond themselves and serve others, the way that Jesus did, God's Kingdom comes and His will is done, and this earth begins to look like heaven.

No-one can argue with that.



What are some ways your church is witnessing to the world through service?

WHAT IF WED NEVER?

Every Christmas, various cable channels inundate us with reruns of “It’s A Wonderful Life.” In that movie, an angel gives a man who’s about to kill himself the opportunity to see what the world would have been like if he had never lived. Through this process, the hero realizes that his community would be a very different place without him.

So if an angel offered to show you what the world would be like if your church had never existed, what would you see? Would it look much different? For who, and how?

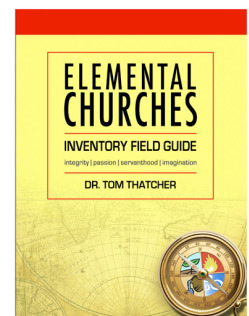
These questions touch on the essence of “servanthood.” If your church is serving people, it makes a huge difference whether you exist or not. Seeing the impact of your efforts on people’s lives gives you the strength to keep going when times are tough. But if your church is mainly serving itself, it probably doesn’t matter much whether you keep going.

How would you answer the following questions about your church’s Servanthood index?

- If our church had never existed, how would things be different for our community? How has our existence made a difference in our neighborhood?
- If our church closed tomorrow, which neighborhoods, civic organizations (schools, parks, medical centers, not-for-profits, etc.), and businesses would be impacted, and how? How long would it take for them to notice we were gone?
- What neighborhoods, organizations, or businesses might be targets for your church’s service efforts over the next year? How could you positively make a difference by serving?

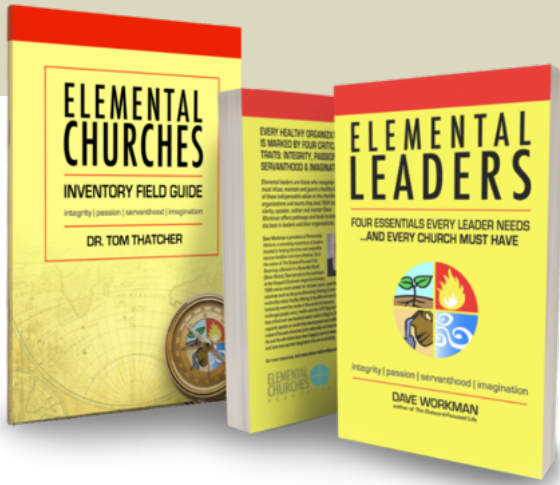
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*Excerpted from the **Elemental Churches Field Guide** by Tom Thatcher. Tom is Co-Founder and Executive Director at The Elemental Group, a consulting team devoted to developing tools to help organizations become healthier and more effective. The **Field Guide** is part of an inventory to measure church health and effectiveness through a comprehensive team-based audit. For a **free 12-page summary** of the **Elemental Leaders book the Field Guide** is based on, visit www.elementalgroup.org.*



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