

BOOK REVIEW

CROSS-CULTURAL SERVANTHOOD: SERVING THE WORLD IN CHRISTLIKE HUMILITY

By DUANE ELMER

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Reviewed by Cheryl Doss

The moment you spot the term “cross-cultural” in a title of a book or article, you know you may be in for surprises. In the case of “cross-cultural servanthood” many are discovering that the intention to serve people in other cultures is not as easy as it sounds. In fact, their service is often perceived as indicating attitudes of superiority, paternalism or neocolonialism by those who are the recipients of their well-meaning service. The reason for this problem says Duane Elmer, a Professor of International Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, is that cross-cultural servanthood is a complex process that can be easily misunderstood by those serving and those served. Why? Elmer offers three reasons: (1) servanthood is culturally defined, (2) cross-cultural workers usually serve according to their own cultural norms, and (3) many cross-cultural workers, often unconsciously, come with an attitude of superiority. To address these issues, Elmer looks at Scripture, social science research, and how other cultures perceive servanthood. In clear language with careful reasoning Elmer describes how Christians who minister in an increasingly multi-cultural world can choose, as Jesus did, “not the robe but the towel” (p. 22).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part provides basic perspectives on servanthood—the challenge, the need, and the essential attitude of humility. The second part, comprising the major portion of the book, describes principles in the process of servanthood.

Beginning with clear definitions, Elmer shapes each chapter around pertinent biblical teaching and relevant cross-cultural skills, all helpfully illustrated with numerous stories from his and other's mission experiences. The third section of the book looks at specific challenges in servanthood: issues of leadership, power, and mystery. Part three concludes with the story of Joseph, a case study in servanthood.

The process of servanthood that Elmer advocates begins with openness, the ability to welcome people into your presence and make them feel safe. Notice that Elmer sees openness not as a personality trait or temperament, but as an ability that can be learned by a Christian willing to be a servant. In the cross-cultural setting, openness is the ability to give oneself to others in culturally appropriate ways. Many who would characterize themselves as open or open-minded will discover that openness goes against the human tendency to make quick judgments to categorize people based on surveying visible features in an initial encounter. In cross-cultural situations, this automatic response mechanism boycotts our ability to accept others as they are. In contrast to our tendency to judge, Jesus called on his disciples to "stop judging by mere appearances" (John 7:24). Openness thus requires a willingness to suspend judgment and tolerate ambiguity until we can see the pieces of the cultural puzzle fit together.

Acceptance flows from this openness to cultural differences. Cultural differences are often difficult to accept. They affect relationships at a very deep level that is at first difficult to spot. When we encounter patterns of behavior that we are not used to, it is easy to characterize such behaviors as "wrong" or "stupid" (it does not make sense) until we get to know the new culture. In the meantime, we may have to be patient as we commit cultural mistakes in the process of functioning in a new culture. Because God values and accepts all people, cross-cultural servants will communicate acceptance and esteem of others through language learning and fighting personal ethnocentrism. It is this effort to communicate acceptance that is the basis for trust.

Trust is essential for relationship-building. In cross-cultural relationships there are plenty of minefields to undermine trust. Elmer has plenty of good examples that make it very clear how fragile trust actually is. Nevertheless, the Scriptures exhort us to "make every effort to keep the bond of unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Growing trust requires time, emotional risk, and

actions that are trustworthy from the other person's perspective. Relationship building almost always involves some conflict. Utilizing culturally appropriate conflict-resolution trust-repairing strategies (often indirect, requiring a mediator) will help to build trust.

The ability to learn about, from, and with others comprises the fourth step to servanthood. God's common grace gives every person dignity and worth. Learning about another culture, its history and values, its language, practices, and traditions, is a natural step to begin with so we can check and correct our expectations. But it is not enough and, often dangerous because it may blind us. True learning happens in relationships. Cross-cultural workers can only be servants if they affirm others' worth by learning from and with them, leading to authentic partnerships that are culturally sensitive. Such relationships are not possible without learning how to listen deeply, to "build face" through dialogue even when confronted with what looks like a mistake.

Cross-cultural understanding, the fifth step, requires the ability to take the other's perspective, to see the good in the local culture, and to stop comparing in ethnocentric ways. Finally, true service evolves as we are willing to become "like Christ to others" (p. 144), willing to serve with empowering humility. When we are open, accepting and trustworthy, able to learn from and understand others, then the ability to serve can become a reality.

Elmer emphasizes that each of these six steps and practices are abilities, thus can be chosen and developed. While this book is written in a very accessible style, it is not a particularly easy book to read if one absorbs it deeply. To truly become a servant as Elmer describes requires a willingness to critique oneself, humbly and radically relinquishing cherished attitudes and hidden beliefs. Ethnocentrism is deeply rooted and insidious in every human heart.

How does the concept of servanthood apply to Christian leaders? For Elmer this is a problematic question and a topic he would rather avoid. It is only in chapter 11 that he is willing to speak about leadership in relationship to servanthood. Surprisingly, he speaks against the term "servant" in connection with leaders, which he feels has been misused to mask many un-servant-like leadership practices and self-deception in the Christian church. Some leaders who freely use the word "servant" are in fact "tyrants, dictators, self-aggrandizers, and benevolent oppressors" (p. 156). Moreover, Elmer warns against the common

misperception that leadership training and education equips people to be leaders in cross-cultural contexts. Too often such training prepares them only inadequately to fit into the cultural patterns of wise leadership and ignores the patient process of trust building and true cross-cultural learning.

Thus, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood* is truly a challenging book to ponder for Christian leaders. It calls us to practice openness toward people, accept them as they are and to build trust with them as a foundation for revealing Christ to others. As we learn from and with people, they will feel valued and we will discover patterns of meaning we have never seen before, maybe even in our own understanding of God. This is a book not only for cross-cultural workers but for all leaders who seek to become more effective in the increasingly multicultural environments in which we live and work.