

Sermon Follow-up

9/6/09

Rich Lusk

“Obedience” (Titus. 2:11-14)

I’ve written quite a lot about the place of obedience in the Christian life, much of it in relation to the so-called “federal vision” controversy. I suppose the best treatment I’ve produced is the most recent, namely, my pair of essays found in *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, edited by Andrew Sandlin.

What follows is random, unpolished notes and quotes, as usual.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was deeply afraid that an easy going middle class moralism had replaced the radical ethics of the gospel in the West in the early 20th century. He called this phenomenon the rise of “cheap grace”:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate... It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.... Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God....

[True] grace is costly because it falls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too fear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Dallas Willard (whose *Divine Conspiracy* and *Spirit of the Disciplines* are essential reading on this whole topic):

Jesus knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the kind of person from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow. The apple tree naturally and easily produces apples because of its inner nature.

N. T. Wright:

Paul articulated...*a way of being human* which he saw as the true way. In his ethical teaching, his community development, and above all in his theology and practice of new life through dying and rising with Christ, he zealously articulated, modeled, inculcated, and urged upon his converts a way of life which he saw as being the genuinely human way of life. And he saw this as the way of life to which Judaism had been called, but to which, without the Messiah, Judaism had not attained and could not attain. ...Paul's vision of the renewal of humanity in Christ is not simply a one-dimensional ethic. It is not simply a matter of 'getting saved' and then 'learning how to behave'. It is a multi-textured vision, woven together to meet various specific needs, and promoted with all the energy that, Paul declared, his God had inspired within him.

J. P. Moreland on how sin curves us in on ourselves:

Pursuit of the demands of the empty self and the cultivation of a life of self-denial under Jesus' lordship constitute two very different approaches to life that produce radically different sorts of people. It is here that the two different understandings grab us by the throat, shake us to the core, and demand we make a choice of lifestyle strategies. This choice is as important as any one you will ever make, and that is not religious hype; it is the sober truth.

If pleasurable satisfaction is your goal, then from morning to night your habituated focus will be on three things - "me, myself, and I." You will constantly be monitoring your own happiness temperature, and your activities (job, recreation, church involvement) and other people (friends, spouse, children, and even God himself) will be mere things, objects that simply exist as a means to your own happiness.

You will have great difficulty forming meaningful attachments to other

people. If you are shy, you will withdraw from people - not to find solitude to reenter relationships with solid boundaries and emotional/spiritual refreshment, but to attack them and find safety that keeps you from having to change. You will hide from others and fail to give them what they need from you to grow in spiritual formation and friendship. If you are outgoing, you will repress your fears and shame by becoming socially aggressive. You will talk all the time in social situations and not develop skills as a good listener, or if you don't know how to listen to others, it will be a front to earn the right to turn the conversation back to you at the earliest opportunity.

After several years of this sort of life, you will become a self-absorbed, empty narcissist. A culture of people who live this way will be a culture that elevates celebrities. A celebrity is someone given attention because of his or her image or ability to get others to live their lives vicariously through the celebrity's life, such as it is. This is an ugly form of codependency between trapped empty celebrities and passive empty fans! Empty selves exchange a life of drama for Turkish Delight.

John Calvin:

Moreover, when Scripture intimates that the good works of believers are causes why the Lord does them good, we must still understand the meaning so as to hold unshaken what has previously been said--viz. that the efficient cause of our salvation is placed in the love of God the Father; the material cause in the obedience of the Son; the instrumental cause in the illumination of the Spirit, that is, in faith; and the final cause in the praise of the divine goodness. In this, however, *there is nothing to prevent the Lord from embracing works as inferior causes*. But how so? In this way: Those whom in mercy he has destined for the inheritance of eternal life, he, in his ordinary administration, *introduces to the possession of it by means of good works*. What precedes in the order of administration is called the cause of what follows. For this reason, *he sometimes makes eternal life a consequent of works*; not because it is to be ascribed to them, but because those whom he has elected he justifies, that he may at length glorify (Rom. 8:30); he makes the prior grace to be a kind of cause, because it is a kind of step to that which follows. But whenever the true cause is to be assigned, he enjoins us not to take refuge in works, but to keep our thoughts entirely fixed on the mercy of God; "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life," (Rom. 6:23). Why, as he contrasts life with death, does he

not also contrast righteousness with sin? Why, when setting down sin as the cause of death, *does he not also set down righteousness as the cause of life? The antithesis which would otherwise be complete is somewhat marred by this variation*; but the Apostle employed the comparison to express the fact, that death is due to the deserts of men, but that life was treasured up solely in the mercy of God. In short, by these expressions, the order rather than the cause is noted. The Lord adding grace to grace, takes occasion from a former to add a subsequent, so that he may omit no means of enriching his servants. Still, in following out his liberality, he would have us always look to free election as its source and beginning. For although he loves the gifts which he daily bestows upon us, inasmuch as they proceed from that fountain, still our duty is to hold fast by that gratuitous acceptance, which alone can support our souls; and so to connect the gifts of the Spirit, which he afterwards bestows, with their primary cause, as in no degree to detract from it.

Egbert W. Smith:

To be like Christ is the aim and longing of every true child of God. A growing likeness to Him is the sure proof that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. And to be Christlike we must get away from our selfishness and narrowness. We must emulate the big-heartedness of Him who died for all men. Sympathy with Christ's great heart and purpose is the supreme essential of Christlikeness; not Bible reading; not church-going; not saying prayers; not giving a tenth; not holding an orthodox creed. These are five splendid helps to Christlikeness. But they are not the real thing. Many a time they are substitutes for the real thing. The Pharisees had all five. Yet they showed a total, ghastly, damning unlikeness to Christ. Likeness to Him means sympathy with His great heart and purpose. That way spiritual life lies; that way Christlikeness lies; and no other way.

We may be church members. We may preach in His Name, and in His Name cast out devils, and in His Name do many wonderful works. But we shall never be like Him, so long as we absorb ourselves in some narrow circle and turn a deaf ear to the cry of the unreached.

Because Christ was the very opposite of that.

Thomas Boston on the importance of obedience:

There is a fivefold entering into heaven and life, for which we must labour.... 4. There is an entering by obedience. 'I know,' said Jesus, 'that his commandment is life everlasting.' There is a personal way to heaven, that is, the commands of God, called everlasting life, because they certainly land the soul in heaven, and there is an infallible connection betwixt true obedience and glory. Christ is a captain as well as a Saviour, a king as well as a priest, and must be obeyed as well as believed in, Heb. V. 9. They that would enter heaven, but not by way of obedience, must resolve to get in over the walls, but come not in by the door; that is, they shall never see it; 'for without holiness no man shall see the Lord.' We must follow the footsteps of our blessed Lord and the flock, who all entered heaven this way; though in different respects, he by, and they in, obedience. Our working is the way to the kingdom; not the cause of our reigning; Christ's working was that.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.

Sinclair Ferguson:

Older writers used to speak about the grace of law. In our day we, too, need to understand that obedience to the Lord's commands is not legalism, any more than learning the keys on the piano, or following the composer's score, is a form of musical legalism. Rather, it is the means by which we learn to make music!"

"Evangelical Christians often regard any ongoing importance of the law in the Christian life as 'legalism'. In this context it is interesting to notice that every two years or so the governing body of golf, The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, publishes a 500-plus page volume detailing decisions about how the laws of golf apply in situations that have perplexed golfers during that period. Yet no honest golfer regards following the rules as being 'legalistic'! The rules are essential to the game, and to the enjoyment of it. The Christian no less thinks of God's law - the ten principles applicable to every life situation - as 'the law of liberty' (James 1:25).

Augustine:

Lord, save me from that mortal enemy, myself.

Knox Chamblin:

Whereas obedience is the response to grace, grace is the consequence of law keeping. The merciful will be shown mercy (Matt. 5:7). In response to his children's obedience, the Father gives yet more grace. The righteousness for which believers hope (Gal. 5:5) is no less a gift than that which has embraced them in the gospel (Rom. 1:17; 3:21). At the Final Judgment, those who obey the law will indeed be declared righteous (Rom. 2:13), not as a basis for forgiveness, but as the Father's glad acceptance and approval of what they have done in response to grace (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5; Matt. 25:21; Jas. 2:14:26).

Are good works necessary for salvation?

Yes, you do have to do good works to be accepted at the last day. Those works themselves are gifts of grace, worked in us by God's Spirit, and only accepted by the Father through Christ's mediation (note the Trinitarian structure here!!). But they are still necessary.

The claim that works only relate to rewards, and not salvation itself, is the teaching of dispensationalism (with its "carnal Christian"/no-lordship theory) and not of Reformed theology. The Bible is clear on page after page that you *must* love, obey, repent, etc., if you desire to be saved.

See, e.g., the two ways described in the sermon on the mount in Mt. 5-7, Mt. 25:31ff, Rom. 2:1-16, Rom. 8:13, 1 Jn., etc. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Cor. 6:9). There's nothing in the Bible that comforts an unrepentant person. The Bible makes it clear that the final verdict is "according to" the things done in this life (2 Cor. 5:8ff).

See also WCF 15.3 on the necessity of repentance in order to receive forgiveness.

Sadly because these truths are either ignored or outright rejected in most evangelical and Reformed churches today, we have lots of people who expect pardon apart from repentance.

WCF 16 and WSC 85 are very relevant.

John Armstrong:

What We Do Really Matters

What we do in this life truly matters. Many Christians live and act as if this were not so. Somehow we have so severed faith from real life that we have millions of evangelicals who now insist that they are Christians based upon a once-in-time decision. This must be one reason why we see the high numbers of evangelicals in all the polls who demonstrate no consequent connection between what they believe and what they actually do. We really do not live as if "faith without deeds is useless" as James clearly teaches. To some extent, maybe to a very large extent, mistaken and incorrect evangelical teaching is responsible for this huge problem.

A biblical scholar, and good friend, recently pointed out to me that with the possible exception of Philemon every book in the New Testament makes eternal salvation or damnation contingent upon what we actually do in this life. See, for example, passages like Matthew 6:15; 7:21; Luke 13:3, 5; Romans 2:13, 16; Galatians 6:8; Hebrews 10:36 and James 2:24. These types of passages once troubled me profoundly because they seemed, at the time, to be saying that our salvation was based upon our human merit, or good works. The question, put simply, is this: How can such passages be handled properly and reconciled with the doctrine that we are saved by Christ alone, by grace alone, and through faith alone?

The answer, I believe, is not that complex. Amazingly, it takes three theologians to come up with four views, to make this excessively complex. The Protestant answer has always been that the faith which is alone the instrument of salvation is never alone, but rather produces good works.

This

is, of course, quite true. But to put this in more biblical terms we should say what James says, namely that we are justified by a living, vital faith that is really alive, not dead. Many fear saying this because they believe they will give away too much to the Catholic arguments made in the 16th century and right down to the present day. (By the way, a careful reading of

the Catholic-Lutheran accord of just a few years ago will show just how close biblical scholars, acting under official mandate, came to reaching a meaningful common explanation.)

The real issue, to my mind, is better put this way: What is the kind of faith that saves us? Saving faith, it seems so clear to me, is active in accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone and thus it inherently embraces obedience to God's commandments and works out one's salvation "with

fear and trembling." But the present context is so poisoned by hot debates that wish to cut this all up and parcel it out. We have writers making complex arguments about passive and active faith, as if the first brought justification and the second brought sanctification. (Such academic nonsense abounds in some quarters.)

Some apologists will even appeal to ideas like a "nanosecond" that must necessarily expire between justifying faith and sanctifying faith. I personally think they do this to sincerely protect saving faith from the intrusion of human works, works that end up being the real cause of our final salvation. I agree with them in their sincerity but not in their argument. Such fear is not warranted if we rely on the Bible. And this fear is often rooted in terms and conditions that ordinary Christians find quite useless and confusing, precisely because they really are useless and confusing.

I once asked a prominent theological writer if he felt the major problem in our evangelical churches was that people believed that they were saved based

upon a false faith that had been created by teaching that missed these salient biblical points about the relationship of faith to obedience? His answer was that he believed a better, and more pristine, teaching of justification by faith alone (understood in the terms of this debate and very narrowly) was the real answer. I appealed to German Christianity in the mid-20th century, where a Lutheran understanding had influenced a whole nation, and to Bonhoeffer's concept of "cheap grace." He said these issues had little to do with the American context. I disagreed with him then and still do, even more so, now.

There is no conflict between James, Jesus and Paul. The answer to this vexing question is not that difficult and many can see why this is so with their open Bible before them. No artificial schemes of interpretation are needed to resolve this issue. We are saved only through faith in Christ alone, and this through God's grace alone. But the faith which saves us is a living and real faith that relies upon Christ, trusts him, and follows him in loving, humble obedience. Often ordinary, non-technically trained, Christian believers can see this far more easily than some scholars. I happen to think that we should listen to ordinary folks sometimes since some scholars make the saving grace of God into real confusion when it is not needed.

More John Armstrong:

Evangelicals are clearly committed to the evangel, the gospel. Their desire to make Christ known throughout the world, and to making new followers of the Savior, is a hallmark of their great contribution to the body of Christ. We evangelicals believe it is imperative that we evangelize. And when other Christians want to learn how to share the gospel, how to impact people with the good news, they come to us. As is very often the case a movement, any movement, will have both strengths and weaknesses. Ours is no exception. One of our weaknesses is in an area that I am addressing this academic term by teaching a class in the Grad School at Wheaton College. I refer to the subject of *spiritual formation*. While evangelicals have stressed activities like faithful church

attendance, personal Bible study, quiet times and witnessing, they have generally failed to teach formation as an intentional, and disciplined, work associated with sanctification and growth. Simply put, our tendency is to think that once you have been converted, you will rather automatically mature if you get into a sound church (whatever that is), attend special conferences and events, witness to your friends, and just be around the right (godly) people. Our movement tends to also be suspicious of anything remotely associated with “self denial” since this is seen as a form of asceticism or ritualism in many cases. Fearing new forms of legalism we tend to run away from Christian tradition and what it can teach us about how we become mature.

In one of Paul’s grandest texts he tells first-century believers that they were “predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). Our tendency is to assume that this happens with no hard work, or human intentionality. Yet the same apostle tells another congregation “to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). None of these kinds of texts suggests that anyone will grow up into Christ without discipline, determination and dedication. But in emphasizing justification as the gospel we have missed a central fact of biblical theology, namely that God never works *for us* without also bringing us to *work with him*.

Spiritual formation is perhaps best understood as integral formation. I use the word integral because it refers to “that which is necessary for completeness.” Formation refers to the way something is arranged, or structured, thus integral formation means to become whole, or complete (“the new man”) we need an arrangement whereby we can be made whole, or formed. This is a way of saying we must prepare ourselves to be more like Christ and if we prepare ourselves we will more effectively impact the world for Christ in the process.

It is a fact that Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions have a much deeper interest in this subject. What is not known is that early Protestantism did *not* reject this tradition the way many later evangelicals did. (John Wesley never rejected spiritual formation since Methodism was a very definite form of spiritual formation that was birthed within an evangelical revival for the very purpose of preserving the fruit of that revival and for making new [mostly Anglican] converts into mature Christians.)

I have come to believe that *integral formation* is a very good way of stating this matter. I have come to this conclusion by reading the literature of early Protestant, and solid Catholic, writers on this subject. And I have

come to believe that *integral formation* includes four essential areas that are necessary for shaping a whole person into “the image of Christ.”

First, there must be **intellectual formation**. Jesus was asked, more than once, what was the greatest commandment. He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). We must put a great deal more stress upon loving God with our minds if we would be spiritually whole. A form of popular evangelicalism in America has long stressed that the heart is primarily important, thus the intellect can’t really be trusted. Intellectual growth is not to be pursued in the same way as growth in piety. In some circles formal education is even seen as the enemy of the gospel. Even where we establish Christian schools they are often formed to stand primarily in opposition to secular schools.

A distinctively Christian mind must be developed as the goal of Christian maturity. Intellectual formation takes seriously that we should acquire logic, assimilate the content of culture, and develop thoughtful faith, all in conversation with the mind. Christians should not be known for anti-intellectualism, but rather for inquiry into the deepest mysteries of creation. Even the simplest of formally untrained believers must use their mind to glorify God if the great commandment is to be practiced. Integral formation will stress this aspect of Christian maturity.

Second, if we would grow into the image of Christ we must be shaped by **character formation**. Saving grace does not build on nothing. It takes the nature of a person, what they are over the course of their human development, and works with it. If a person is to be like Christ it will require holiness and there can be no holiness without human integrity. Human integrity includes things like honesty, consistency, and a sense of responsibility. This will also include developing the habits of hard work and perseverance. Each of these will help to shape the total character of a person.

Because evangelicals have not stressed character change adequately we have lots of converts whose lives do not look much like Christ in simple ordinary ways. The world looks at these zealous talkers and finds them quite unattractive. Until the church takes character formation seriously this will never change on its own. Most of the Christian Education programs, at least the ones I see in large evangelical churches, have very little to do with this aspect of formation. We could learn a great deal if we studied other traditions and borrowed appropriately.

Third, we need to form the whole person **missionally**. In Catholic tradition this is what is called apostolic formation. This covers both the

various ministries and works of evangelism and charity (love). It has as its goal, however, not just activities. We aim at the heart. We want to create "missional hearts" that are willing to serve, give, and become involved in the world. Evangelicals do a bit better at this emphasis but there is still the tendency to think that "sharing Christ" is a routinized sort of ministry that only our evangelists do. Our goal should be to make disciples who are formed in missional thinking and living so that they wonderfully and faithfully engage the world as a part of growing into the image of Christ. Finally, there must be **spiritual formation** if we would grow fully into Christ's image. The heart of this emphasis is consecration and complete dedication. A true spiritual life will be rooted in the three great virtues of faith, hope and love. And will be keenly aware of fighting against the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth) as a way of life. It will also draw strength from the sacraments and from sacred reading and disciplined application of the Scripture to the whole soul. The goal is transformation and this will result in intimate communion with God in Jesus Christ.

Until we train our leaders to put proper stress upon each of these four areas I am convinced we will not see the renewal so needed in our evangelical churches. I urge all pastors, indeed every person from all walks of life, to make it their goal in life to be like Jesus. Once you become serious about this goal you soon realize that you need help. This cry for help will require us to plumb the depth of Christian tradition for all the help we can find. This will result in a renewal of the classic work of spiritual formation in the whole church.

George Grant on service:

The Cult of Self

Selfishness is epidemic in our day. We are systematically taught from our earliest days to "look out for number one," to "pamper ourselves," and to "encourage self-actualization, self-awareness, and self-esteem." As a result we have become self-absorbed, self-concerned, and self-consumed. Oddly, we have also become supremely unhappy and unfulfilled. As psychologist Paul Kellerman has pointed out, this is precisely because "The only path to genuine happiness and fulfillment is through service to others. It is only as we give ourselves away that we can truly discover ourselves."

The cult of self-service and self-satisfaction is contradicted by the whole of history. The great lessons of the past are invariably told through the lives and work of men and women who put the interests of other before their own, who put the safety of others before their own, and who put the happiness of others before their own. Compare the life stories of men like George Washington, Patrick Henry, John Quincy Adams, and Teddy Roosevelt with our modern day obsession with self. The contrast is immediate and enormous. The heroes of the past were always those who resisted the siren's song of self. They fought for justice, they cared for the needy, they worked for mercy, they fed the hungry, and they rescued the perishing. Their greatest accomplishments were always the result of their comprehension that servanthood was ultimately the key to significance and success.

The modern cult of self beckons us to "find ourselves" by turning inward. It entices to "satisfy ourselves" by "being true to ourselves." But one of the most basic principles of sociology is that satisfaction, purposefulness, contentment, and success are all directly connected to selfless service. In other words, authority ultimately resolves itself upon the servant not upon the tyrant.

This basic concept of social development is understood all too well by the administrators of many of our contemporary social service institutions. They recognize that whatever agency serves the needs of the people will ultimately gain the allegiance of the people. So, they serve. And, as a result of the entitlements they bestow upon others, they gain more and more authority.

This is what Jesus taught His disciples as long ago as the first century:

"And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors. But not so among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.

But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon

Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'" (Luke 22:25-30)

Sadly, all too many of us have not fully comprehended this link between charity and authority, between mercy and influence, between kindness and leadership. We have not fully understood that power comes through service not through ambition. When people are needy, or fearful, or desperate, they will seek out protection. They will seek out benefactors. They will seek out leaders with whom they can exchange allegiance for security.

Early in our nation's history it was largely the church which operated the hospitals, orphanages, alms houses, rescue missions, hostels, soup kitchens, welfare agencies, schools, and universities. The church was a home to the homeless and a refuge to the rejected. The church willingly took up the mantle of servanthood. As a result, the church had cultural authority. It was able to demonstrate its cultural significance. It tasted genuine success. It earned its place of leadership by loving the unloved and the unlovely.

Canvassing neighborhoods is fine. Registering voters is good. Evaluating candidates is important. Mobilizing phone banks, and direct mail centers, and media campaigns are all necessary. But, if we really want to make a difference in our nation and our culture, we must not simply organize ourselves socially, economically, and politically. Instead we must begin to authentically care for those around us. We must offer sanctuary to the poor, the aged, the handicapped, the unborn, the abused, the marginalized, the lonely, the sick, the stigmatized, and the needy.

The way to cultural reformation is through a practical, Biblical rebuke of the cult of self--in both word and deed.

The Old Testament prophet said it well: "If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your souls in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you

shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In." (Isaiah 58:10-12)

More from Grant:

The heroine of *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle, captured the sentiment of most of us when she complained: "Words, words, words; I am so sick of words. I get words all day through, first from him, now from you. Is that all you blighters can do?" She was tired of empty rhetoric, as high sounding as it was. Instead, she wanted to see something real.

Talk is cheap. Promises are a dime a dozen. Most of us have just about had all of the spin-controlled sound-bites it can stand. We've heard just about all the hollow rhetoric we can stand. We all know that actions speak louder than words.

That is a universal truth--no less valid in love or politics or religion as in friendship or business or technology. Good intentions are not sufficient in any area of life. There has to be follow through. There has to be substance.

Love is something you do, not just something you feel. Mercy is something that you extend not just something that you intend. Hope is something you must act on not just something you harbor. That is why a posture of servanthood is one of the most powerful inducements to both success and significance in life.

After all, it really is "more blessed to give than to receive." The sooner we realize that the better off we will be.

It is not surprising then to discover that the idea of servanthood is showing up just about everywhere--even in places you might least expect it.

Many business and management consultants for instance, are beginning to see the importance of a life of selfless service as the key to prosperity and progress. Servanthood is a much ballyhooed concept in the burgeoning literature of business success and personal management. We are told for instance, that our dominant industrial economy has been almost completely transformed into a service economy by the advent of the information age. The service factor is the new by-word for success in the

crowded global marketplace. Good service guarantees customer loyalty, management efficiency, and employee morale. It provides a competitive edge for companies in an increasingly cut-throat business environment. It is the means toward empowerment, flexibility, and innovation at a time when those qualities are essential for business survival. It prepares ordinary men and women to out-sell, out-manage, out-motivate, and out-negotiate their competition. It enables them to "swim with the sharks without being eaten alive."

According to Jack Eckerd and Chuck Colson, service on the job and in the workplace can mean many things, "Valuing workers. Managing from the trenches. Communicating. Inspiring excellence. Training. Using profits to motivate."

Virtually all the corporate prognosticators, strategic forecasters, motivational pundits, and management consultants agree--from Tom Peters, John Naisbitt, and Stephen Covey to Richard Foster, Michael Gerber, and Zig Ziglar. They all say that servanthood is an indispensable key to success in business or success in life.

These analysts have begun to grasp the fact that selfless service is essentially a complex combination of common courtesy, customer satisfaction, and the spirit of enterprise. It is simply realizing that the customer is always right and then going the extra mile. It is a principle-centered approach to human relationships and community responsibilities. It is putting first things first. It is the recovery of that positively medieval concept of chivalry.

This resurgent emphasis on servanthood is not just confined to the corporate world these days. It has also reappeared as a stock-in-trade public virtue in the discourse of politics. Candidates now offer themselves for public service rather than to merely run for office. They invoke patriotic images of community service, military service, and civic service as evidence of their suitability to govern the affairs of state. Once in office they initiate various programs for national service. They charge the government bureaucracy with the task of domestic service. And they offer special recognition for citizens who have performed exemplary volunteer service.

Servanthood is the leading edge of a new approach to sports--with the recovery of the concept of team over individual achievement. Likewise, it is the latest trend in academic counseling--where campus spirit is emphasized over and against the old dog-eat-dog world of scholastic competition.

Indeed, the notion of selfless service is making its way into a myriad of cultural applications--and none too soon in light of the culture of selfishness our consumerism and materialism have helped to create over the past three or four decades.

This sort of servanthood is defined rather broadly in a series of happy public and private virtues--as an expansive sense of civic-spiritedness, good neighborliness, community-mindedness, big-hearted cooperativeness, open-minded receptiveness, and unbridled patriotism.

Of course the genuine spirit of service inherent in servanthood isn't simply a tactic designed to boost profit margins, to protect market shares, to keep customers happy, or to improve employee relations. It isn't just a strategy designed to inculcate patriotism, strengthen community relations, or attract more investments. It is not merely a technique to pad resumes, garner votes, or patronize constituents. It isn't a style of leadership, a personality bent, or a habit of highly effective people.

Instead, servanthood is a function of mercy. It is a genuine desire to seek the best for others, to put their interests before our own, and to exercise authentic love. Thus, the difference between the ministry of service and the business of service is like the difference between faith in God and faith in faith.

The Christian life is inevitably a life of suffering. When we drink the cup at the Lord's table, we are volunteering for martyrdom, we are offering ourselves sacrificially to our neighbor. The life of the Christian is a cruciform life – which means it is a living death. The essence of Christian living is dying to self for others.

Christian faith is not a “system” or an “ideology” but a life. Sure, this life includes a system of theology and set of ideas/doctrines/concepts, but ideology is not a big enough container to hold what we’re all about.

“Heaven as acquired taste.” Indeed – which is to say that even if an unsanctified person could get into heaven, he would not like it very much. Think of obedience as a way of preparing yourself to enjoy the life to come – the more you obey, the more joy you’ll have when you get there. Our capacity for enjoying God is directly proportional to our obedience.