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The Service of God

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"To serve the living... God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

1. The Service - What It Is

If the service of God is to be as immediately and fully fruitful and effectual as it can be it is essential that we should have its nature clearly defined. If asked what the service of God is, many different answers would be given. Christianity has - on its practical side - been resolved into certain particular lines and forms of work, with their peculiar objects governing. Because the conception of Christian service has become so large and general it has become necessary to reconsider the matter and ask - What is really the Divine object in the service of God?

(a) The Object

If we look carefully at the Bible as a whole with this question before us, we shall see that there is but one all-inclusive and all-governing answer. The work of God may move along many and various lines and have different aspects but the object is one. This one object determines whether the work is really the work of God, and also determines the measure of permanence and eternal value of what is done in the Name of the Lord. Even with the best intention of doing God service, there is very much that misses the mark and fails of the Divine object.

The one object is Christ. God has, all-inclusively, committed Himself to fill His Son with all things, and to fill all things with His Son. To bring Christ in, and to increase the measure of Christ, both extensively and intensively, is God's sole object, and co-operation with Him in this is the only true service of God. That "*He may fill all things*"; that "*in all things He might have the preeminence*"; that "*Christ (may be) all, and in all,*" is the only service which answers to God's heart. This is a statement of fact, and it is also a test of work. In the Old Testament, everything points to Christ, and He is implicit in all things there. The significance of Christ governs all. In the New Testament this is explicit. Conversions are not ends and objects in themselves. Every new believer is a vessel of Christ. The fact in every "new birth" is that Christ has come in. But the Scriptures do not leave it there. The greater part of the New Testament is occupied with the increase of Christ in believers. That is the personal aspect. Beyond this the Church as a whole is brought into view as that which is to be "*the fulness of Him.*" Then local churches are represented as vessels and vehicles of Christ beyond individual possibility and capacity. The whole idea of the Holy Spirit is to make the fulness of Christ a reality. All the conflict is related to this, for the Adversary knows that his kingdom is weakened and narrowed in proportion to the increase of Christ. The test of all Christian work will be its effectiveness in really enlarging the measure of Christ in this universe.

(b) Its Nature

In this dispensation Christ is not on this earth physically, but is only here in and by His Spirit. Christ cannot, therefore, be known in any other way than spiritually. Further: Christ is not, in this dispensation, seeking to set up something on this earth as attached to it. He is detaching a people from the world and the nations, and attaching them to Himself in an entirely spiritual way. Their birth is spiritual - John 3:6. Their sustenance is spiritual - John 6:33. Their knowledge of God and of His things is spiritual - 1 Cor. 2:9-16. Their consummation is spiritual - 1 Cor. 15:35-38. Everything is now a matter of spiritual measure and value.

So the service of God in this age is essentially spiritual. Not what can be seen, counted, or in any way appraised by the natural senses; but what is the pure and alone work of the Spirit of God is the criterion.

The trend of things since Apostolic times has almost entirely been to set up a world-system of Christianity; a Church that is something of temporal account and position. The immediate result of touching this cursed earth is discord and division. Only a Church on heavenly ground is the "*one body.*" (see Ephesians 1 and 4). As the Church of "*the eternal purpose,*" so is its ministry, spiritual and heavenly; not 'ecclesiastical,' formal, and ritualistic.

2. The Servant

If the work of God is essentially spiritual, then it demands spiritual people for its doing; and the measure of their spirituality will determine the measure of their value to the Lord. Because this is so, in God's mind the servant is more than the work. If we are going to come truly into the hands of God for His purpose, then we shall be dealt with by Him in such a way as to continually increase our spiritual measure. Not our interest in Christian work; our enthusiasms, ambitions, energies, or abilities; not our academic qualifications, or anything that we are in ourselves, but simply our spiritual life is the basis of the beginning and growth of our service to God. Even the work, when we are in it, is used by Him to increase our spiritual measure. Any Christian work which does not have the effect of adding to the measure of Christ in the worker is either not the true Divine service, or is

itself working to his or her condemnation and injury. The Apostle Paul is a great example of how much increase of true spiritual knowledge and Christly measure is resultant from the very service of God itself, when the servant is a truly spiritual man. There are numerous other instances of this, both in and out of the Bible.

The Apostle's word "*not a novice*" (1 Tim. 3:6) as to "*overseers*" would - if applied to all taking responsibility in the things of God - correct much that is weak and painful in organized Christian work. The lack of an essential measure of maturity has resulted in tragedy in many lives under strain, and many defeats in the work. Too often the devil has either weakened or destroyed the work and the worker by making the activities too heavy and exacting for the spiritual life to measure up. It is not truths stated, ideas set forth, doctrines preached, etc.; but the spiritual life, power, and measure behind it all that settles its real value and fruitfulness.

Again, because this is true, there is no end to spiritual growth in this life. We are really only getting to a position to be of some value, because of experience and understanding, when we are taken away. This would make life an enigma and something of a mockery were it not that the greater measure and nature of our service was to be afterward when and where "*His servants shall serve Him. And they shall see His face.*"

There is a dangerous tendency to commit the interests of God to the hands of those who do not really know Him in a deep way, and to regard those who have measure through much experience as incapable of meeting the needs of the younger generation. The New Testament would soundly trounce this superficial tendency as a peril to the Church of God. Years may not be the criterion, either way, but spiritual degree most certainly is!

3. The Training

Because what we have said about the servant and the service is so true, the training must be above all things that which will produce spiritual men and women. Of course we recognize that this applies to all children of God who would serve Him in any way; but we are now having in mind such as may serve Him in more than a general way.

a. It is essential that there is a strong and sound grounding in the knowledge of the Scriptures. For every obvious reason this is so. But when we have given this matter all the place that it must have, it is necessary to point out that the letter of the Word is not enough. Lectures on the Bible, and analyses of its books will never make a true servant of Christ. The need is for *a spiritual* knowledge of the Word of God; it must be spiritually taught and apprehended. That which lies behind the letter as to the Divine mind must be seen. The teaching and study of the Scriptures must have immediate spiritual effect in the life of those concerned. The Word of God will only profit in so far as it comes to us in spiritual power.

b. There must be a practical life running side by side with the study work. This practical side should have two aspects at least.

1. There must be life as in a spiritual family, so that all the lessons of forbearance, patience, and co-operation are learned. The Cross must be known in the numerous and frequent occasions when the flesh in ourselves and in others rises because of human failures and faults. The great value of fellowship has to be learned in the testing conditions of life at close quarters over a sufficient period.

The reality of the laws of "the Body of Christ" has to be established. Dependence, inter-dependence, inter-relatedness, as over against independence, individualism, and detachment, are some of these laws which will mean in their observance or violation life or death, fulness or limitation in the Lord's service. Our object must not be to get adherents to Christianity, but to build a spiritual "body," therefore we must know 'body' life, order, and function.

2. There must be practical spiritual expression in our training, and the best and most directly fruitful way for this is assembly life. The training of 'workers' should be in close relationship with 'church' life as constituted and formed on the true organic basis of the Body of Christ. Not just a preaching place, or one where meetings are held and attended; but where there is true corporate life and mutuality in building up. In such, and out from such corporate life, ministry and service should be developed; not just technicians from an institute. No one should really be allowed to go out into whole time Christian service who has not had a true 'church' training and learnt the meaning and value of corporate life. God is not wanting so many units, either for salvation or service. He is set upon His Church as the corporate expression of Christ, Everything, therefore, if fulness is to be attained, must be on that basis.

To sum up. God is working in relation to His eternal purpose concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. The Church which is His (Christ's) Body is the predestined "fulness of Him." This personal and corporate expression of Christ is not earthly, temporal, 'ecclesiastical'; not national, or sectarian, but heavenly, spiritual, eternal. The ministry of this corporate representation of Christ is essentially and solely a spiritual thing, determined by its spiritual measure. (Spirituality is what is of God and not of man - even religious man.) While there are those things which are of value in furnishing the Lord's servants for the human aspects of their work, the real training is spiritual, i.e. the knowledge of God vitally, and of His Son, in the Word of God and in experience. Training for the service of God should therefore be solely governed by the object of producing men and women of a sound and strong spiritual life, with a background of a deep knowledge of Him, "the word of God" dwelling in them "richly in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."