To Lead Is
to Serve

by Dr. David L. McKenna

Inaugural Address

Eternal truth always comes packaged as a paradox to baffle our finite minds. Jesus poses such a dilemma for us when He says, "Whosoever will be great among you shall be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matthew 20: 26, 27). On one side of the paradox is our image of a leader — a person with power, charisma and success. Trouble begins when we try to reconcile that image with our thoughts about a servant — submissive, self-effacing and unsung. The paradox of the servant-leader can only be resolved in the example that is given to us by Jesus Christ Himself.

A case study in Scripture resolves the paradox as we see servant-leaders, clergy and laity, in action. In the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we read about the miraculous growth of the church after Pentecost. Then it happens! Numbers of converts outrun the available food supply, internal conflict develops, and the infant church is threatened with early extinction.

The outline for analyzing our case for servant-leadership comes from the text in Acts 6: 1-8:

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer

Dr. David L. McKenna, fourth president of Asbury Theological Seminary, was inaugurated to his new post on April 16, 1983.
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and to the ministry of the word.” And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. (NKJV)

To lead is to serve... in human conflict... by personal example... with redemptive results.

Serving in Conflict

Conflict is the climate in which leaders rise and serve. Whether ancient or contemporary, local or international, secular or sacred, the ingredients of conflict are the same. First, when the demand for limited resources outruns the supply, we have the fuel for conflict. In our case study, either the needs or the wants of the Grecian widows outran the food supply. In microcosm, this is the source of conflict through human history. World wars have been fought to dominate the limited resources of land and sea. Future wars will be fought over the distribution of the exhaustible resources of oil and the restricted resources of grain. Perhaps even now the only thing that keeps us from holocaust is the virtually unlimited resources under the sea and out in space, or as the scientists put it, “the ocean’s bottom” and the “moon’s behind.” Still, no prophetic revelation is needed to forecast the continuation of human conflict over the allocation of resources — not just the physical resources of time, space, money, food and energy — but the human resources of people, the political resources of power, the intellectual resources of ideas and the theological resources of doctrine. Whether in a secular or spiritual setting, whenever resources are limited and demand outruns the supply, human conflict is a possibility.

A second ingredient which ignites the fuel of conflict is when people divide into factions and begin to act out of self-interest. In our case study we see that two or three days before the crisis in the early church, “The whole body of believers was united in heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). How quickly the unity disappears, because factions of self-interest take over. Greeks lined up against Jews to complain about discrimination in the distribution of food. Latent ethnic hostilities between the Greeks and the Hebrews fired the conflict.

All organizations carry the potential for conflict in the legitimate
roles that can become factions of self-interest — employer and employees, administration and staff, bishops and superintendents, clergy and laity. Whenever these legitimate roles become bastions of self-interest, unity is lost.

Conflict now flares when the flammable fluid of violent language is poured upon the smoldering coals to make ashes of human relationships and burn to the ground any hope for reconciliation. Sad to say, the case of the early church is not unfamiliar to us. Malicious murmurs had spread like wildfire among the believers; Hellenists attacked Hebrews and Hebrews countered against Hellenists. Violent language served as the torch for their hate and the Apostle James writes later, their “tongue is a fire” (James 3:6). How often the violence of language becomes the flaming agent that destroys the relationships between bosses and employees, husbands and wives, parents and children, presidents and professors, pastors and people.

Christian organizations are not exempt from conflict. Even in holy company, where resources are limited, roles are defined, and relationships are verbal, the potential for conflict is ever-present. In fact, Christian organizations may be more susceptible to conflict because we know each other so intimately and care for each other so deeply. Issues that might remain objective in a secular setting take on personal overtones and subjective meaning.

Serving by Personal Example

When the early church got into this kind of trouble, the apostles put out the call for servant-leaders to enter the conflict, resolve the differences, and get the church moving again. Calling the whole company of believers together, the apostles exercised sound management by suggesting a division of labor with delegated authority to layleaders called “deacons” to administer the food program.

According to our Scripture, the seven nominees for servant-leadership were to be men of “personal integrity,” “practical wisdom,” and “filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Personal integrity is the first qualification for servant-leadership. In the volatile climate of conflict and under the scrutiny of murmuring factions, administrative matters often turn into personal tests of credibility and character. In these circumstances, servant-leaders are visible and vulnerable. When Billy Graham was in Seattle, Washington for his crusade in 1976, he withstood pointed
cross-examination from a skeptical press. His wife, Ruth, told me that one reporter in particular proved to be the most bitter and biting man that Graham had ever met in 30 years before the media. Dr. Graham felt as if he had failed with the man, but I knew the other side of the story. When the reporter returned from the press conference, he told his colleagues as he sat at his typewriter, “It won’t be easy to attack Graham. The man is genuine.” Visible leadership is the leading edge of the servant-leader’s public witness and sometimes the court of last resort.

*Practical wisdom* is the second qualification for a Christian who leads by serving. Conflicts which are created by self-interest factions are never resolved until someone sees the “big picture” and envisions what psychologists call a “subordinate goal” to lift the sights of the battling factions. Practical wisdom is the combination of intuition, experience and homework which sees beyond the factions of self-interest to a larger purpose.

Yet, leaders who try to serve by relying only upon their own personal integrity and practical wisdom operate in a small and shaky circle. For this reason, when the early church began its executive search, only those who were filled with the Holy Spirit were eligible for election. Personal integrity, then, is no longer a matter of rigid self-discipline or clever public cover-up. . . . Under the power of the Holy Spirit, practical wisdom takes on transformed meaning.

The qualifications for servant-leadership are now complete. Through the infilling of the Spirit, we are called to lead and serve with a personal integrity and a practical wisdom that is not our own. As E. Stanley Jones says in his final book *The Divine Yes*, Christ is not a signpost which points, “Go this way”; He is the Shepherd who says, “Follow me.” To lead is to serve by personal example.

*Serving with Redemptive Results*

Silence follows the deacons after their election. The Scriptures give us no hint about their “affirmative action” plan for equalizing the distribution of food. We are not told how they brought the Greeks and Jews back together for the first Wesleyan-type love feast; and we have no idea how they changed the grating sound of the grumble into the hum of a note of joy. All we know is that reconciliation takes place, and, once again, the church turns its attention toward world redemption.

For those of us who are enamored with the internal processes and
administrative procedures, the biblical silence is maddening. We have a lesson to learn. Managerial methods are important only as they lead to redemptive results and internal reconciliation is essential, but only as a base for advancing the Gospel and serving human need. So, if you want to renew your vision for the potential of the evangelistic church, read again the report on redemptive results in Acts 6:7. Here is what happens when the Body of Christ is reconciled and its energies are focused upon its redemptive mission. One, "... the word of God increased." The image ripples on a pond, with the word of God spreading into the world by ever-widening circles. Two, "... the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem ..." After Pentecost it is reported that thousands were "added" to the church daily. Then, just before the conflict over the distribution of food, the mathematics of effective evangelism take over as the church makes the exponential leap to "multiplying" numbers of people who believe on Jesus Christ. Significantly, after the internal conflict is resolved and the church returns to evangelistic outreach, the number of disciples begin multiplying once again. Three, "... a great company of priests were obedient to the faith." The church, for the first time, penetrates into a strategic center of power, even into the hard-core priesthood of the established institutional church.

Neither the potential nor the expectations for the church have changed. Whether pastor or parishoner, our servant-leader task is the same — reconciliation within and redemption without — as evidenced by the ever-widening numbers and the ever-penetrating witness.

Our case study concludes with the rewards for the servant-leader. Stephen, a Greek and a layman, is described at the time of his nomination for deacon as a person full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. Now, in Acts 6:8, we are informed that he is empowered to do great wonders and miracles among the people. One of the rewards of leadership is the discovery of new gifts for serving God. In the division of labor proposed by the apostles, Stephen’s role is better defined as a “giver of alms” or a “distributor of food.” Yet, from that servant-base, the cultivated gift of his Grecian mind is discovered and he becomes the most eloquent defender of the Christian faith. In fact, some scholars suggest that his speech before the Sanhedrin cut the Gordian knot that tied the early church to the Jewish faith and set the Gospel free for world evangelization. What a promising picture for
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leadership development in the church today! Our greatest untapped resource may be in the hidden gifts of the lay people whom we have limited to waiting on tables.

Another reward for the servant who takes the risk of leadership is the opportunity to exalt Christ. Accused of blasphemy on a trumped-up charge before the Sanhedrin, Stephen’s face shines like an angel (Acts 6:15). Then, against the fury of the mob that will stone him, Stephen turns his face upward and cries, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God...” (Acts 7:56). And, at that moment of death, he calls upon God saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59). In the image of the exalted Christ, the servant-leader finds his glory.

Not by surprise, then, the servant of Christ who takes the risk of leadership is rewarded by the continuity of Christian witness. Sometimes only faith can see that reward, as in the case of Stephen’s slayers whose clothes were laid at the feet of a young man named Saul. Wherever servant-leaders are in action, God’s word will not be lost and God’s work will not be stopped. In the mantle passing from Stephen to Saul, servant-leaders win assurance that the Gospel will be perpetuated through others whom God calls.

The late E. Stanley Jones, after whom Asbury Theological Seminary has named its school of evangelism and world mission, is renowned as a spirit-filled, world statesman for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Dr. Jones suffered a massive stroke that left him paralyzed and speechless at the age of 89. In one of the last entries in his journal, he anticipates going to heaven and asking the Lord for just 24 hours to visit his friends who are there. Then he writes, “...I shall go up to Him and say, ‘Haven’t you a world somewhere which has fallen people who need an evangelist like me? Please send me there.’ For I know no heaven beyond preaching the Gospel to people.” In one choice sentence E. Stanley Jones resolves the servant-leader paradox in the spirit of the exalted Christ. To lead is to serve... in the conflict of the fallen world, at the risk of personal example, but with the promise of redemption of needy people. For the servant-leader, there is no other heaven.