

# **SERVANTHOOD AS WORSHIP**

*The Privilege of Life in a Local Church*

Nate Palmer

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To my wife, Steph, who through her example has taught me more about service than anyone else. To my friend Toby Kurth, your encouragement and help was invaluable. To Emily James, your writing expertise made a huge impact. To the Pastors and members of Grace Church Frisco who model Christian service every day.

-Nate Palmer

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“In an age where the church can be likened to Cinderella—beautiful, but largely ignored and forgotten—Nate Palmer’s book forces us to rethink both the church and our relationship to her. In an age where egocentrism ensures that we sing, ‘O say, can you see—what’s in it for me?’ on a weekly basis, Palmer forces us to say instead, ‘How can I best serve the church?’

Looking at the needs of others rather than one’s own is possibly the most serious deficiency in the church today. Reading this book will help redress the deficiency. I heartily recommend it.”

**Derek W. H. Thomas**, John E. Richards Professor of Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson); Minister of Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS

“Think of these pages as a handbook. Put this handbook into the hands of your people and you will give them a sustainable, practical vision for serving in the local church that is powered by grace. Along the way, they will also pick up a mini theological education”

**Justin Buzzard**, pastor, San Francisco Bay Area; author, BuzzardBlog.com

“In our media-crazed, me-first culture, the art of the basin and the towel has been shoved off onto those who get paid to serve—certainly a call to serve in humility can’t be God’s will for all of us, or could it?

In this helpful book, Nate Palmer gets at the heart of our resistance and portrays our dear Savior’s humiliation in his acts of service for us—not only as our example but also as our righteousness. I strongly recommend this book.”

**Elyse Fitzpatrick**, author of *Because He Loves Me*

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# One **SERVICE**

## The Ministry of All Believers

“Can you serve in the nursery this morning?” As you try to pick one of the more plausible excuses that have popped into your head, you secretly hope the pastor’s question was theoretical. You know you should say, “Sure, I will serve anywhere!” but you just can’t. The last place you want to be is with a bunch of screaming babies, having to change diapers and dodge spit-ups while your friends enjoy the sermon. Why you? Can’t someone else do it?

You’re awakened by an obnoxious alarm clock. It’s 5:30 Sunday morning, and outside the rain is coming down in sheets. You must get up, but you don’t want to. *This is what, the third week in a row?* The thought of once again going to help set up the auditorium in the school where your church meets is paralyzing. Picking up the van, hauling the equipment into the building in the rain—you’ll need to bring extra clothes. You wonder if it is possible

to catch the flu before it's time to leave. Why you?  
Can't someone else do it?

If these situations are at all familiar, I know how you feel. When I became a Christian at age twenty-five, I was so happy and energized by the wonder of my salvation that I didn't mind serving on Sunday mornings. I enjoyed it. It seemed only natural that, as a new member, I would help with the chores. Doing odd jobs before church seemed like a way to pay for all the joy and benefit I was receiving. Plus, as part of a new church plant that met in a school, there were far more tasks than there were people to do them. Someone had to serve or we couldn't "have" church. And so, week after week, I did my duty.

During those early months of my Christian walk, however, serving gradually became a mixed bag of emotions and competing motivations. What started out as a way to express my joy soon became, in my mind, a way to manage God. My service was like the volume knob on a car stereo—I could amplify God's opinion of me by serving more. If I'd had a bad week, frequently giving in to temptation or not reading the Bible, I would just go to church early and serve. In my mind, the exchange rate was something like one act of service for one sin. *God will have to like me again once he sees how hard I'm trying to make up for my failures.* This form of atoning for sin was easier than actually facing my problems and trying to work on them.

After a few short months I had completely flipped salvation upside down. I was managing God and serving myself instead of managing my responsibilities and serving God. I had rewritten the rule book to put myself in charge. I had exchanged Christ's service on the cross for the merit of my serving in the church.

As serving became a tedious process of self-justification, it took a toll on my affections for God and the church. It became harder and harder to show up. Hooking up audio cables became pure monotony. Every Sunday I would do the same thing and nobody ever thanked me or acknowledged my effort. No one seemed to care that I got up insanely early to haul heavy stuff around, only to have to change out of my completely sweaty shirt. Everyone else enjoyed their weekends while I toiled. It didn't seem fair. I actually began to dread Sundays. The whole concept of serving became thankless and meaningless, a colossal waste of time and — let's not forget — talent. I constantly asked myself, *Why me? Can't someone else do it?*

It was at this point in my life that I became addicted to a drug: leadership. I saw that maybe there really was an upside to serving. *Eventually the church leaders will notice, right? Isn't it those who are faithful in the small things who are given greater responsibilities?* Servanthood took on a useful new

role—a springboard to leadership in the church—and mysteriously my vigor for serving returned. Sure, I was subtle about it, but now all those audio cables were a means to a new end. Once you're already using your serving (you imagine) to manage God, how much easier is it to manipulate men? As I served to gain attention, the church leadership would see my works and place me in some important position. Serving as a vehicle to advance my personal ambitions? Let it rain!

In a few short months, my attitude toward serving had gone from thrilled to ambivalent to resentful to selfishly ambitious. Why the roller coaster ride? Largely because I had no clear idea what the Bible teaches about serving. I didn't know, from God's perspective, why I was doing it. So I did it for my own reasons.

I know that some churches have essentially zero expectations that members will pitch in to help. Other churches have enough resources that there is little or no need for the average member to serve in practical ways. But a great many churches follow the biblical model, which values servanthood in itself. Are you in a church like that? Then at some point you will definitely struggle with serving. You probably have already. Service, of course, can come in many forms—building maintenance, children's ministry, worship music, local outreach, tech



support, missions trips, and a hundred others. But if you don't really know why you are called to serve in the church of Jesus Christ, your attitude will be as unstable and unhealthy as mine was.

In this book, I want to provide the theological framework that Christians need to understand what serving in the local church is really all about. When we are informed by a biblical understanding of service, it changes everything.

The first thing we need to see is that service is inescapable. Literally.

## **Full-Time Servants**

Do you realize that serving is a constant activity? It's like breathing. There is never a moment when we are not serving someone. None of us are ever on the sidelines, waiting to get into the game of servanthood. Since birth, every one of us has been actively serving.

Most of the time we are simply serving ourselves—pouring our energy and hope for happiness into the nurture of our own desires. But at each moment, we are serving either the desires of our flesh or the desires of God. As Paul Tripp states, “Each of our lives is shaped by the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of self.”<sup>1</sup>

The conflict is that we don't want to be subservient to anyone else's wants and needs. Not even God's. This poses a problem, as Jesus points out,

for we cannot obey both God and our own interests at the same time: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). Either we labor for God or for an entirely different master. This isn’t always the kind of servanthood I want to embrace. Often I prefer my own kingdom—the one where I am the object of worship and I get to define servanthood (usually as me serving me and others serving me). We always serve who we see as the king of our kingdom. That’s why servanthood and worship are essentially the same thing.

But biblical service requires that we prefer others over ourselves, that we sacrifice willingly, giving time and energy that could have been used for personal benefit to benefit others. Biblical service calls us to direct our focus outward. In this we imitate Christ, who served others to the point of death. As I will emphasize throughout this book, serving God as a grateful response to the gospel is the calling of every Christian.

## **The Vision and the Need**

All healthy churches, regardless of size or resources, seek to integrate their members into the life of the church through service. These churches see servanthood as both biblical and essential to

church life. There are a *lot* of established evangelical churches that take this view, and new ones are started every day. Approximately 4,000 churches are planted each year in the United States alone.<sup>2</sup> Many of these new churches are started through networks like Acts 29, which saw overall attendance double in 2009 while planting fifty-five churches.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of a church's age or size, a biblical vision for serving is vital to building a healthy church. Who are the servants in a particular church actually serving? What are their motivations? Are they more interested in serving God's purposes or their own? Many churches succeed or fail on the answers to such questions.

Given the number of existing churches, plus the explosive growth in the creation of new churches, there is a huge need for people to serve, and serve for the right reasons. Pastor and author John Stott wonders when Christians will recover "the ministry of all believers"<sup>4</sup> in which each Christian exercises his or her gifts in ministry to others.

Serving in the church is not just the privilege of the few. It is the call of every Christian's life. (The Appendix addresses this subject more thoroughly, although I suggest you read it later.) Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and

Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:4-7). While roles may be formal or informal, creative or mundane, physical or intellectual, the goal is the same: to glorify God and magnify the gospel to the benefit of others.

Each of us has been given gifts, and each of us are called to use our gifts as a light before men. When biblical, gospel-centered service in Christ's name is present at the center of a local church, it forms a brilliant nucleus radiating out into a dark world. This brilliance is something the church must recover. That recovery starts with a theological foundation of servanthood. The purpose of this book is to present a biblical vision of service so that believers from all sorts of churches can say, along with Joshua, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

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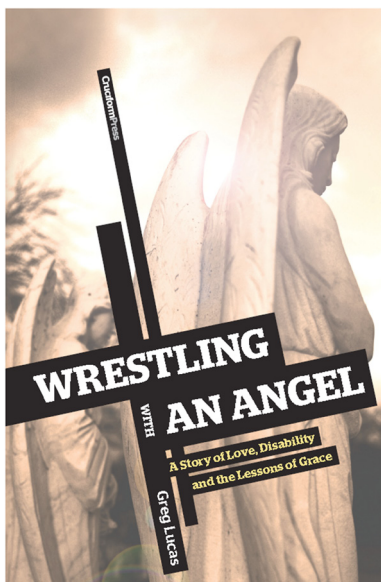
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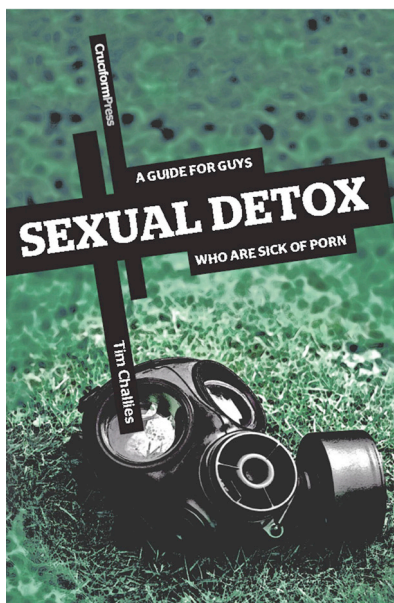
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