
According to Duane Elmer, cross-cultural servanthood is a complex process. Too often cross-cultural workers intending to serve actually display attitudes or actions that signal the opposite of servanthood. 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” (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. In the cross-cultural setting openness is the ability to give oneself to others in culturally appropriate ways. Openness requires a willingness to suspend judgment and tolerate ambiguity. Acceptance flows from this openness to cultural differences. Because God values and accepts all people, cross-cultural servants will communicate acceptance and esteem of others through language learning and fighting personal ethnocentrism. Trust is essential for relationship-building. Growing trust requires time, emotional risk, and actions that are trustworthy from the other person’s perspective. Relation-
ship building almost always involves some conflict. Utilizing culturally appropriate conflict-resolution 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. Cross-cultural workers can only be servants if they affirm others’ worth by learning from and with them, acting and teaching in ways that save face and preserve relationships. Cross-cultural understanding 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, service is “becoming like Christ to others” (144), willing to serve with empowering humility. When cross-cultural workers are open, accepting and trustworthy, able to learn from and understand others, then the ability to serve can become a reality in their lives. Elmer emphasizes that each of these 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. The book attempts to speak to all cross-cultural workers yet seems focused largely on a North American audience. Although understandable from the author’s perspective (one can only responsibly give negative illustrations about one’s own culture), I fear this might encourage other cultural groups to see these teachings as mostly applicable to Americans.

Because the message of the book strikes at the bitter root of ethnocentrism found in every culture, I would hope that in future editions a broader range of applications and illustrations might “internationalize” the important teachings found here. For this is a book all who work in multi-cultural or cross-cultural settings need to read, absorb, and prayerfully apply.

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George Barna is a widely-known and highly-respected researcher and pollster. Much of his work focuses on current trends in Christianity within North America. In this book Barna examines the state of