



Foreword by Brian Howard



serve

LOVING YOUR CHURCH
WITH YOUR HEART, TIME AND GIFTS

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1. WHO DO WE SERVE?

My wife and I are two of the tens of millions of people who became hooked on the TV series *Downton Abbey*. We were fascinated by the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their domestic servants on their fictional country estate in early 20th-century Britain. We enjoyed it so much that we even became members of the National Trust.

For a working-class lad born into a two-up-two-down house in a deprived area of Liverpool in the 1970s, my experience (like most people's) is a million miles away from the aristocratic families who used to reside in these grand mansions. But I confess that I have said to my wife, Siân, on several—ok, on many—occasions that I think I could *just about* have handled that life. I especially think this on day trips to country houses as we pass through grand studies, enormous living rooms and vast grounds.

The other area of these households that fascinates me is what was known as the “downstairs”. The life of these

old aristocratic homes was kept going by the service of those who lived and worked downstairs—the butlers, footmen, lady's maids, cooks and kitchen hands. These roles were taken up by local people who lived within the house and served the families that employed them. It wasn't viewed as casual employment but as a dedication of their lives to service and, hopefully, if the family were kind, a dedication to that particular family. To do the best job, these staff had to know exactly who they were serving—by learning the ins and outs of the master's and mistress's habits, likes, dislikes and temperaments. They also needed to serve each other through their different roles downstairs—the cook still needed to prepare staff meals and the maids still needed to lay the fires for the staff. And outside of the household, they were fully aware that they represented that family to the surrounding towns and villages that relied on the success of the House. They were serving their master, each other and the local community.

Like the servants in these grand houses, as Christians we are called to serve. One way of describing what happens when someone becomes a Christian is to say that they have “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). The word “servant” doesn't *fully* describe who we are as Christians, but it is *part* of who we are as Christians. And, just as in those country houses, when it comes to our service, who we are serving matters more than what we are doing in our serving. In

other words, we need to know first and foremost exactly who it is we are serving. Really understanding this will be the foundation that determines why and how we serve, and will give purpose and meaning to our lives.

WE SERVE GOD

Genesis 1 declares that we have been made in the image of God. God's plan and desire in his design was for humanity to display his image here on earth. As people walked, worked, played, interacted, engaged in relationships, had children (multiplying more image-bearers) and created culture, his glory would increase. God gave humans everything we needed to represent and serve him fully. We were to live a life of joyful service with our Master walking beside us. Not with him living upstairs and us living downstairs but with God's presence right in our midst, with him being glorified in our service.

But the desire to be served and the desire for self-glory captured the affections of the first humans. As a result of their disobedience to God's word, sin entered the world, and the human image of God was distorted. Our intentions became selfish, and we lost sight of the God whom the first humans had joyfully served, and we became afraid of him. Humanity was cast out of his life-giving presence, with death becoming our ultimate destiny—this is the tragedy recounted in Genesis 3. In the book of Romans, Paul sums it up like this:

“They [humans] exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever!” (Romans 1:25)

People ended up serving themselves rather than God and others. They sought to sit in the Master’s place. And as generations came and went, one thing remained the same: the determination of humans to put themselves first and expect the world to revolve around them.

But God wasn’t done with humanity. The book of Exodus is the story of God freeing, forming and communing with the people he had promised to restore to relationship with himself but who had been in slavery for 400 years under the oppressive regime of the Egyptians. One of these Hebrews, Moses, was chosen by God to lead his people out of slavery and into the promised land. He famously brought the order from God to Pharaoh to “let my people go”, but the second part of God's demand is often forgotten:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let my people go, that they may serve me.’”’” (Exodus 8:1)

God’s command to let his people go was for the purpose of *serving him*. There was a plan for and a purpose to their freedom. God was redeeming his image-bearers so they could serve him and display his glory. He gave them hope for the future and an opportunity to serve their Creator freely, rather than a life of slavery to “created

things”. The exodus story foreshadows the redemption that Christians have in Jesus. We have been saved, freed and forgiven, thanks to the grace and mercy of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We can now know the one whom we have been created to serve; we can walk with him and enjoy him.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul reminds the believers that they were once dead in sin but now are alive in Christ, all because of God’s grace and mercy and nothing to do with their own efforts. We are saved—but what next?

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)

In other words, we have been saved and restored for good works of service that display his glory to the world. And it’s not a life of drudgery that is in store for us—our Master has personally prepared good works for us to do. We have been saved to serve him, giving us a joyful purpose to our lives.

Who do we serve? We serve a loving Creator, who is not upstairs waiting for our service but rather is in us and with us, enabling us to serve him for his glory. We serve God.

WE SERVE THE CHURCH

I love football (or soccer, if you’re in North America—but in this book, we’ll call it football). I love playing it (well,

I used to), I love coaching it and I love watching it. The past few years have been good to me because I've enjoyed my team, Liverpool Football Club, being one of the best in the world. There are many reasons why Liverpool have reached the pinnacle of world football—we have great players, great fans and great coaches. But I think the key element for the club's success is one Jurgen Norbert Klopp—a former average second-tier German footballer who has become widely regarded as one of the greatest managers on the planet.

The story goes that on his first day at the club, he gathered the team in the canteen along with all the support staff: cleaners, administration assistants, groundsmen and so on. Then he asked the superstar players if they knew the names of those employees. The response was embarrassing... Klopp said that that needed to change; he told the players that without these staff serving them, success on the pitch would never happen. Each of the support staff also wore the team badge on their uniforms and were a vital part of the Liverpool FC family and the success of the club. From that moment, the players would eat with support staff and get to know them, and everyone would serve each other because, he said, "We are Liverpool, and this means more".

God hasn't called a few select superstars to be served by a mass of believers that no one really knows. He has saved a people whose distinctive quality is to be their love for each other. In Eden (Genesis 1 – 3), Adam was

unable to truly reflect the glory and image of God on his own, so Eve was created as his helper. *Together* as God's people, Adam and Eve were able to display his glory as they served each other and served him. But when they turned away from God, they turned towards serving themselves—Adam didn't love, lead and protect Eve, and Eve didn't trust the word of Adam that came from the word of God. The reflection of God's loving image was shattered, and their love for one another was marred.

Later, in Genesis 12, God promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation that would be a blessing to the world. Through Abraham's line, God had chosen and saved a people (the Hebrews) whom he would cherish:

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples.” (Exodus 19:5)

Through their obedience to God's word, they were to be a holy nation (v 6)—a people set apart, who functioned and engaged with each other based on an understanding of the glory and goodness of God. They were to be a kingdom of priests: devoted to the service of God and to each other, and distinct from other nations in how they lived, loved and served him and each other through following his law.

These early promises to Israel reflect the promises of God to his church today. In his letter to struggling Christians

who were trying to live for Jesus in a hostile culture, Peter uses those words from Exodus 19 to remind the Christians who they are as God's people:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

(1 Peter 2:9-10)

Even though the world rejects them (v 2), they are to continue to love one another with a sincere brotherly love which is grounded in their knowledge of God's grace and mercy. Peter is saying that because of what Jesus achieved in dying and rising from the dead, they—and we too—are now his people living in this world, moving towards the promise of a secure inheritance. And what sets us apart as his people is the way we love each other, engage with each other and serve each other before a watching world.

There is no service to God that doesn't include service to each other as his church, whatever the circumstances. Right after Jesus had stooped to wash the dusty, dirty feet of his disciples, he gave them a new commandment:

“Love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know

that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Jesus’ actions and words combined present a picture to us of the kind of humility and love that distinguishes us as his followers. The Liverpool FC staff were encouraged by Jurgen Klopp to serve each other because they all wore the team emblem—each and every one of them played a part in achieving the club's goals (quite literally). In serving God, we need to know that we are to serve each other because each of us is a part of God’s treasured possession. To put it another way, we need to remember that God does not save us as individuals but as a people, bringing each of us into his family. Your church are your brothers and sisters, and you’re given to each other to serve one another, in order to serve God.

Who do we serve? We serve our brothers and sisters, the family God has put us in. We serve the church.

WE SERVE THE WORLD

Let’s recap a couple of the verses we’ve already looked at:

We exist...

“that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

(1 Peter 2:9)

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

Who do we proclaim the excellencies of God to? We proclaim them to him, as our way of recognising his greatness, and we proclaim them to each other, as our way of encouraging our family, but we also proclaim them to the world. If we serve each other in the sacrificial way Jesus loved and served us, people will know that we are his disciples. Our service to God and each other flows out in compassion and mercy to serve a world that needs to hear and know the glory of the God who has saved us. In displaying his glory to us, God calls us to display that glory to the world, as Peter shows:

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:12)

As we, God’s people, serve our neighbours, friends and colleagues through our honourable conduct, our kind deeds and our sharing of the gospel message, the world is blessed—even if the world doesn’t see that, or even rejects and ridicules us because of it.

Who do we serve? We serve a world which desperately needs to see that there is a loving God who wants to save and restore people.

This is a book about serving. And we will be getting practical. I hope this book will leave you more equipped for serving than you were when you opened it. But before you figure out what it means to serve as a

Christian and a member of your local church, you need to know exactly who it is you are serving. You need to know who you are and what your purpose is. But it's also good to know what the one you are serving thinks of you. In Bible times, kings would keep the valued possessions that they held most dear on their person or in close quarters. You may not think you're held dear by many people or even anybody at all, but you are God's treasured possession, you are dear to him, and he chooses to display his glory through you by preparing great things for you to do in his cause—works of service that reflect and reveal his love. That is why we serve. And being excited about serving the God who loves us in this way will leave us wanting to be equipped for serving. We get to serve the greatest of all masters. We are God's people, who have the great honour and privilege of serving him, the church, and the world.

ACTION STEPS

- Why is it helpful to keep in mind a deep knowledge of who you are serving?
- How does 1 Peter 2:9-10 help you to understand both who you are and who you are to serve?
- In the moments when you are tempted to serve self, what is it about the gospel that helps you run from that to embrace the gift of serving God, the church and the world?