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My Service Conversion

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My Service Conversion

Abstract

"We are called to serve because service is God's gift to us before it is ever his commandment."

Posting about the purpose of Christian service from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/my-service-conversion/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

My Service Conversion

 inallthings.org/my-service-conversion/

Aaron Baart

I still remember very clearly the moment of my “conversion” in terms of how I saw service. In 2008 I was invited along on a work project to Liberia. We were going to help build a compound for a company that installed wells. Well, that *and* visit some new friends at a local church and orphanage. From the moment we arrived, though, I had never been exposed to poverty and hardship like that before. Even when our flight arrived, we had to circle the Robertsfield airstrip numerous times, buying time for the airport crew to refuel the generator that ran the runway lights. I never realized that I had taken properly-working runway lights for granted.

Then came the baggage claim and immigration window. Chaos was an understatement. Everything seemed utterly backward and frustrating. I was so accustomed to efficiency and expediency and predictable, controllable environments. Liberia was anything but. I hadn’t even been on the ground one hour (all of it spent in an airport) and a big part of me already wanted to go home. So many of the little things we were being asked to do seemed pointless and archaic. There had to be a better way to get things done.

The one hour drive from the airport to the ministry guest house where we were to stay took us in darkness past little groupings of people in dotted communities, huddled around fires or small lit areas, powered by diesel generators. The homes that surrounded their huddles were made mostly from mud bricks or woven grass walls. Metal sheet roofing quickly appeared to be a measure of relative affluence. It was hard to comprehend the space-time continuum it felt like I had just passed through. There were still people in the world who lived like this? (As if every National Geographic I had ever watched had been filmed in a synthesized studio!)

The work we did each day wasn’t any less frustrating either. Crappy tools. Shoddy materials. Stifling heat. I caught myself utterly frustrated time and again. In all honesty, I couldn’t figure out what, if anything, I was even contributing to this project at all.

But one day we visited the church and orphanage. Most of the kids there had lost their families during the brutal 15 year civil war that had recently decimated the country. They were war orphans. I was asked to help serve food to the kids. One big bowl of rice with a little meat-flavored sauce on top. The only meal they ate each day. And every day, exactly the same thing. I’m still not sure exactly what it was precisely that started it all but all of a sudden I started crying. I mean *really* cry. Snot bubbles and all. It was embarrassing and I wasn’t sure what to do or where to crawl. I looked at these children and expected such misery because their deplorable situation. Their abject poverty and lack of opportunity. They should have been miserable and feeling sorry for themselves. That’s how I had felt this whole time here (and I was going home next week).

But their joy! They danced and sang and played. It was as if they didn’t even know they were supposed to be miserable. As the day went on and I took it all in with wide-eyed wonder it hit me: I came here out of an act of charity—to do something benevolent and philanthropic. To be nice. That’s what good Christians do, right? They are charitable toward the less fortunate. But it wasn’t *charity* I felt. It was *envy*. And it caught me off guard, sticking in my throat and catching my breath between sobs. And as I handed them food with tears coming down my face, I wanted them to give me some of whatever it was that they had. I wanted an exchange. They obviously knew or felt things I didn’t. They had exposed my own poverty and I wanted

them to give to me.

Since that day, I have never looked at charity the same. In fact, I don't use that word anymore. It's too condescending. Too arrogant. Moreover, I began a journey of realizing that when Jesus summarizes the entire law by telling us to love him and to love our neighbor as ourselves it isn't just for *their* benefit. It's for ours as well. The question I am asking now is, what if God's invitation to join him in his plan to save the world will also save us from ourselves, all at the same time?

We are called to serve because service is God's gift to us before it is ever his commandment. Service pulls us outside of ourselves. We are all inherently selfish, self-interested, self-obsessed. Serving the others begins to free us from the prison of self-interest. It teaches me that I don't just do good for the purpose of changing the world around me; I also do good because it changes me. And I need to be changed. I need a Savior *and* I need to be changed by the other. Service cultivates humility and it is more reciprocal than we could have ever imagined.

*and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.*

Isaiah 58:10-12