

BOOK REVIEW

## **CROSS-CULTURAL SERVANTHOOD: SERVING THE WORLD IN CHRISTLIKE HUMILITY**

By DUANE ELMER

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Paperback, 212 pages



The moment you spot the term “cross-cultural” in a title of a book or article, you know you may be in for surprises. In the case of “cross-cultural servanthood” many are discovering that the intention to serve people in other cultures is not as easy as it sounds. In fact, their service is often perceived as indicating attitudes of superiority, paternalism or neocolonialism by those who are the recipients of their well-meaning service. The reason for this problem says Duane Elmer, a Professor of International Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, is that cross-cultural servanthood is a complex process that can

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, the ability to welcome people into your presence and make them feel safe. Notice that Elmer sees openness not as a personality trait or temperament, but as an ability that can be learned by a Christian willing to be a servant. In the cross-cultural setting, openness is the ability to give oneself to others in culturally appropriate ways. Many who would characterize themselves as open or open-minded will discover that openness goes against the human tendency to make quick judgments to categorize people based on surveying visible features in an initial encounter. In cross-cultural situations, this automatic response mechanism boycotts our ability to accept others as they are. In contrast to our tendency to judge, Jesus called on his disciples to "stop judging by mere appearances" (John 7:24). Openness thus requires a willingness to suspend judgment and tolerate ambiguity until we can see the pieces of the cultural puzzle fit together.

Acceptance flows from this openness to cultural differences. Cultural differences are often difficult to accept. They affect relationships at a very deep level that is at first difficult to spot. When we encounter patterns of behavior that we are not used to, it is easy to characterize such behaviors as "wrong" or "stupid" (it does not make sense) until we get to know the new culture. In the meantime, we may have to be patient as we commit cultural mistakes in the process of functioning in a new culture. Because God values and accepts all people, cross-cultural servants will communicate acceptance and esteem of others through language learning and fighting personal ethnocentrism. It is this effort to communicate acceptance that is the basis for trust.

Trust is essential for relationship-building. In cross-cultural relationships there are plenty of minefields to undermine trust. Elmer has plenty of good examples that make it very clear how fragile trust actually is. Nevertheless, the Scriptures exhort us to "make every effort to keep the bond of unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Growing trust requires time, emotional risk, and



misperception that leadership training and education equips people to be leaders in cross-cultural contexts. Too often such training prepares them only inadequately to fit into the cultural patterns of wise leadership and ignores the patient process of trust building and true cross-cultural learning.

Thus, *Leading in a Cross-Cultural World* is truly a challenging book to ponder for Christian leaders. It calls us to practice openness toward people, accept them as they are and to build trust with them as a foundation for revealing Christ to others. As we learn from and with people, they will feel valued and we will discover patterns of meaning we have never seen before, maybe even in our own understanding of God. This is a book not only for cross-cultural workers but for all leaders who seek to become more effective in the increasingly multicultural environments in which we live and work.