

ABOVE REPROACH

by Ronald F. Smedley

How does God expect us to treat our employees?

THE PROBLEM WAS CLEAR, the answer obvious. I had just completed a wage study and audit for a ministry, and several staff positions were conspicuously misclassified as exempt from overtime pay.

The CEO explained. “We can’t afford to pay overtime,” he said. “Besides, our people believe in this ministry. They don’t mind working extra hours and have agreed to work for a set amount. God has called us to carry out our ministry, and I believe this calling supersedes the law. So what’s the problem?”

Such poor reasoning is ethically bankrupt and far too prevalent among today’s Christian leaders who don’t realize the nonnegotiable role and responsibility of human resources management in today’s ministry organizations.

As the relative truth of a postmodern “me first” world continues to infiltrate all aspects of life, churches and parachurch organizations find themselves thrust under the public microscope of doing what is right for their employees. Because most labor regulations apply to ministry as well as business, Christian ministries need to do more than merely manage human resources in accordance with established laws. A Christ-centered organization must go further and ask the real question: Above and beyond meeting our basic legal requirements, how does God expect us to treat the employees he has placed in our care?

For the answer, we need to look at how our Lord Jesus Christ treated people during his public ministry and what patterns of his character may be applied to today’s ministry leaders.

Jesus treated every person with dignity,

respect, compassion, and integrity no matter what their situation in life, their employment, or their social, political, or religious class. Whether it was a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman, or a blind beggar like Bartimaeus, he gave them equal attention and compassion. Why? Because he knew every person was created in the image of God and therefore had both value and worth.

How do we account for how he treated people differently? Why did he blast the Pharisees and not the disciples, for instance? Jesus treated people differently based on their talents and abilities and how they performed their respective responsibilities associated with those abilities. Abilities in this respect means the gifts and talents one brings to a vocation, whether as a CEO, administrator, janitor, or pastor.

Jesus differentiated his treatment of others based upon *what they were doing* with their talents, not *who they were* as human beings created in God’s image. He served and ministered to others similarly on the basis of their intrinsic worth, even as he challenged, corrected, and led those who were equipped and assigned to carry out God-given roles and responsibilities.

Thus, the distinction: For Jesus, similar treatment was about *servanthood* and the inherent value of all people, while different treatment was about *stewardship* and leading people to employ their gifts and talents as intended by God. Servanthood invokes a picture of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. Stewardship brings to mind his admonishment of the Pharisees for not doing their “job.”

Treating our employees as Christ treated others means knowing how and when to

offer them the blessing of servanthood, and how and when to use the call and correction of stewardship. And if we, as leaders, are going to model ourselves after Jesus in how we treat our employees, we will need to be mindful of two central truths:

Our employees’ abilities, talents, and position all create responsibility and, from the Lord’s perspective, demand good stewardship. Jesus required that stewards be found faithful in who they are and in what and for whom they are responsible. As our Lord said in Luke 12:48, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

Jesus treated people differently based on their stewardship of the responsibilities with which they were entrusted.

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Today, we could call these responsibilities a job description, company policies, and procedures. If people (employees) were faithful, they were rewarded and edified; if they were unfaithful, then they were counseled. They were all equally respected and similarly shown integrity and compassion (even the Pharisees), but they were treated differently depending on how they exercised their abilities.



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then come into play.

4. Abilities and talents may vary, but worth in an organization is never solely measured by the amount or type of ability one has. In other words, the administrative assistant or janitor has, in one sense, just as much value to the ministry as the CEO, and should be made to feel that way. Secretaries are often viewed as more expendable and easier to replace than CEOs; however, Christianity does not treat individuals as commodities. From the Lord's perspective, the widow's mite was just as important to the kingdom and the cause of Christ as was the religious leader's large financial investment.

5. All levels of management in all types of ministry must be men and women of character. It is impossible to treat people with dignity, respect, and integrity unless you have those characteristics in your own life. In order to have employees move up through the ranks into leadership positions, they must see these characteristics modeled by their leaders. The words and actions of today's ministry leaders must always mesh.

In Philippians 2:15, Paul commands us to be "blameless and pure" beyond question. As ministry leaders, the ultimate measure of how we treat our employees rests with the courage to ask whether we will take seriously our calling to be above reproach in all we think, say, and do.

Will we go above and beyond the work of compliance, policies, and procedures to transform our ministry culture, relying on the example of Jesus to serve and steward every employee? For the sake of our Lord and the people he has entrusted to us to fulfill his kingdom work, the answer should be obvious and clear. ●

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Being faithful to these principles has five core ramifications for how we, as ministry leaders, treat our employees:

1. Leaders should seek to develop people, not use them. Christ showed compassion; he cared about people. In thinking Christianly on the job, a company objective is never more important than the lives of the people, who give the organization productivity and growth.

2. Employees should be measured by attitude on the job as well as productivity. To measure only by productivity is to "use" the employee as a tool rather than seeing him or her as a person. Obviously, productivity is important, but if a person is trying (especially at the beginning of a new work experience), then job performance

to some degree should be measured by the commitment and passion the person has for the job.

3. Good stewardship of talents and abilities creates responsibilities, with greater potential for rewards and admonishments. In a work environment, some will be good stewards of the responsibilities given them and others will not. We live in a fallen world, and not everyone will work to their potential. Some will not carry out their job description. Those who do should be rewarded. Thus, management has a responsibility to treat employees fairly, to not show unjust favoritism or to exert undue influence in order to achieve a result. When stewardship of responsibilities is lacking, justice and loving discipline must