EMPOWERED TO SERVE

Gretchen Gaebelien Hull

At first glance, being empowered to serve appears to be an obvious and familiar concept to many people. The thinking is: Of course we Christians are called to serve God first and then to serve our fellow human beings, and obviously if God calls us to do something He will give us the power to do it.

However, even among sincere Christians, familiarity with a Bible truth does not mean either in-depth understanding of that truth, or — just as important — excitement about putting that truth into action, making it an integral part of our daily walk of discipleship. For, as has been aptly said, the only part of the Bible you and I believe is the part we obey.

We can profit from taking a fresh look both at the overall concept of being empowered to serve and at how it affects Christians who stand for biblical equality.

The CBE faith statement affirms that God’s free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is offered to all people, and that the power and presence of the Holy Spirit are present in the life of all believers. The statement further declares that because all persons are created in the image of God and each has essential equality and dignity, we Christians are called to reflect that image by using our God-given gifts for the good of others.

Again, familiar concepts to most of us. But simply because they are familiar, we can be in danger of failing to see how very revolutionary they are, and also how uniquely inclusive they are.

THE POWER OF THE CONTROVERSIAL GOSPEL

Back in 1990 I received a phone call that highlighted how familiarity can breed indifference to Bible truths. I’ve used this illustration many times since, because it makes the point so graphically. My caller represented a conservative women’s religious group, and invited me to speak at their annual meeting. But she put a limitation on what I was to say. She told me I was not to talk about women in ministry because (as she put it) discussing Christian service would probably mean discussing ordination of women. She said, “Our group is very conserva-

tive and we want to avoid anything controversial. So we just want you to talk about the Gospel.”

Quite frankly, I was stunned. This sincere Christian did not want to be controversial, and yet she was asking me to present the Gospel! As she expounded on how I was to give a “simple” Gospel message, I thought:

I wonder what she makes of Jesus’ remarkable words in Luke 4:18,19 where at the beginning of his public ministry Jesus presented himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, come to bring healing and liberation. Jesus’ words were so controversial that people tried to kill him after the service.

But the controversy wasn’t limited to Jesus. I wonder if folks who do not want to be controversial have ever thought what a controversy must have resulted when people responded to Jesus’ call “Follow me” and immediately left their fishing and tax collecting businesses and took off after this unknown itinerant rabbi?

I cannot believe first-century folks found this behavior any easier to take than people would today. The Bible presents these scenes with great economy of words, but we can use our imaginations reverently to flesh out the accounts. Take the passage in Mark chapter 1 where Jesus called Simon Peter and Andrew, and also James and John—four men in the fishing business. In both cases, Mark tells us "straightway" — immediately — these men left their business and followed Jesus. Don’t you think there was a tremendous reaction? What about Peter’s wife, or the father of James and John? These families depended on fishing to live. Do you really think the various members said, “Oh great, you men go off and find yourselves. No problem. Have a wonderful spiritual retreat, and if it lasts a couple of years — so what?” Hardly. I suspect there was quite a bit of consternation when these men laid down their nets and walked away with Jesus.

Or what about the list of women in Luke 8:2-3, who went around the countryside with Jesus? Take Joanna, who was the wife of King Herod’s steward. Do you think her husband said, “Of course you can use a change of pace, and all that tramping around will be more fun than cooking, cleaning and mending my togas?” I have a strong suspicion that these women’s decision to follow Jesus caused a tremendous controversy in their neighborhoods, families, and even in Herod’s palace.

Think also about the controversy Zaccheus must have generated when he had a conversion experience and

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suddenly gave back all the money he had embezzled and
extorted, not to mention the controversy among Jesus' own followers when—in her complete devotion—Mary of Bethany lavished precious ointment on him.

Yet today the conventional wisdom among even good "Bible-believing" Christians is that we should fit Jesus' call into our usual routine because, after all, we don't want to be labeled fanatics, do we? Unlike those earliest fol-

owers of Jesus, we seem reticent to let the Gospel upset

our carefully-planned lives or, even more radical, aban-
don our comfortable way of life altogether. But when

those earliest believers encountered Jesus' transforming

power, their lives were literally turned upside down!

Even more, in fulfillment of Jesus' promise that they

themselves would be "clothed from on high," these new

believers "received power when the Holy Spirit came

upon them" at Pentecost. They were all empowered —

women as well as men, old and young, of all back-
grounds—to witness to God's saving grace in Christ. And

as they continued to witness, they had the assurance of

continuing to receive all the power they needed to serve

their Lord, no matter how hard the way might be. As Peter

later wrote, "(We) are being protected by the power of

God through faith ... God's divine power has given us

everything needed for life and godliness" (1 Pet 1:5, 2 Pet

1:3). And Paul gave the added assurance that "by the

power at work within us (God) is able to accomplish

abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph

3:20).

These first-century Christians knew that following

Christ was not non-controversial, ho-hum business-as-

usual. They had personally experienced the Gospel as the

very power of God bringing salvation to everyone who

believes (Rom 1:16, 17), and they knew that—to all who

believed—God gave the power to become children of

God (John 1:12), to be part of a new family, with a new

calling to be about God's family business of sharing that

transforming power with a lost world (2 Cor 5:16-20). Is

it any wonder that Acts 17:6 records these pioneer Chris-
tians as "those who have turned the world upside down?"

EQUALLY EMPOWERED

Today when we take that fresh look at the Scripture

record, we see that a non-controversial Gospel is a con-

tradiction in terms. The Gospel may be familiar, but it is

never "safe"; plugging into the power of God is indeed

like handling dynamite. All who truly seek to be empo-

vered to serve will find their usual human way of looking

at life turned upside down.

Think of Jesus' flat statement: "The first shall be last

and the last first" (Mark 10:31). Who wants to hear that in

a power-oriented society?

And what about that amazing passage in 1 Corinthians

1:27-28, telling us that God chooses to channel his power

through the weak, foolish, and despised of this world? How

much more controversial can you get?

But while these many Scripture portions are contrary
to everything the secular world holds dear, what healing,

strengthening, and challenging words for women, for mi-

norities, for disadvantaged persons everywhere. Any who

have been traditionally considered of no account are called

God's chosen agents, that the power and the glory may be

all of God and not of us. The good news of the Gospel is

that our salvation and our ability to serve God are free gifts

of God's grace, never the result of any "do-it-yourself"

efforts. So Paul writes that we have the treasure of our new

life in the city "jars" of our humanity, that it may be made

clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and
does not come from us (2 Cor 4:7). And then Paul also

informs us that, because we are now transformed and

energized by Christ's resurrection power, we no longer

look at each other from a human point of view, but see

ourselves as new creations in Christ Jesus—all equally

empowered to be Christ's ambassadors. Therefore, in

contrast to the world's way of rating people by their

political, economic, or social power over others, the Gos-

pel proclaims an upside-down kingdom where all persons

are of equal value, and all are equally empowered to serve

their Savior—men and women alike.

Here I confess to finding it tiresome that some persist

in tacking on the word "woman" in situations that are

gender-blind, because—however subtly—such usage

conveys the implication that a woman serves differently

from a man in a similar position. For example, in the

forty-three years my husband has practiced law, I have

never heard him referred to as anything but a lawyer, but

my daughter-in-law is termed a "woman" lawyer, with that

qualifier conveying the notion that she might practice law

in some sort of peculiarly "female" manner. Similarly with

"woman" doctor. Yes, the medical doctor who is a woman

may, as might her lawyer counterpart, bring female per-

spectives and insights, but she is bound by the same rules

and regulations of her profession as are the men doctors

(and lawyers) and she is held to the same standards of

ethics, competence, and behavior.

So also in the Christian community: For too long we

have been creating unnecessary divisions between the

genders by compartmentalizing women believers, as if
female Christians are some sort of unique species—even hot house plants. We might recall the observation of Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to China, when he said, "I am manning my stations with ladies." Or we can remember that in the nineteen-thirties Betty as well as John Stun was martyred for her faith, or that—back in Paul's day—Priscilla and Aquila both risked their necks for the Gospel.

Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow him is gender-blind, and it has never struck me that cross-bearing is a protected occupation. When will we accept the fact that we are not "women" Christians or "men" Christians, but we are equally empowered servants who are all equally challenged to move out in that God-given power and use our many diverse gifts to serve the good of the one Body?

Of course whether we are a female Christian or a male Christian brings diversity to God's family, just as sons and daughters bring diversity to human family life. But we are one in our origin as equally created in the image of God, we are one in what Jude calls our common salvation, we are to be one in obeying the command to be mutually submissive one to the other out of reverence for Christ, and we are one in our appointment as equal servants of Christ.

EQUAL AMBASSADORS

These biblical truths have very practical applications on a day-to-day basis, because all the individual members of God's family are equally important for the effective functioning of the whole. No part is worth "less" than another, and each has a place in God's plan for the community of faith.

Here I recall how an unknown woman ministered to me. In 1988 I was in London, and on a free Sunday visited a small storefront Anglican church. I'll never forget her part in that service: the Scripture reading. Unlike some readers who mumble, talk too fast, or speak in a monotone, this woman read with tremendous meaning. I had probably read or heard 1 Corinthians 12 hundreds of times before, but when she read it the words came alive. One verse in particular leapt out at me as especially apt in promoting biblical equality. 1 Corinthians 12:18 states: "God arranged every part of the body, each one of them, just as God chose and planned them to be."

What a great verse! We need never apologize for being "only" women, or "only" a minority person, or "only" a low-income person. God has created us as God wants us to be, with our physical, mental, and spiritual make-up. And God has placed each individual woman, as well as each individual man, exactly where God wants that person to be in the Body of Christ.

The scriptural sequence is that I am created in the image of God, God made me physically the individual I am, God's grace has reached out to me spiritually so that I am now a new creature in Christ Jesus, and finally I now have a new servant calling as God's agent of reconciliation—an ambassador for Christ.

This word ambassador is a strong word in the original New Testament Greek, just as it is in English. It means the highest official envoy, someone accredited to go to a foreign government as representative of his or her own government. In Greek, it comes from the same family of words as the word for elder or overseer. Ambassador denotes an important, authoritative role, and it is a role all believers are called to fill. Paul clearly and inclusively states: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors" (2 Cor 5:20).

RESISTING CULTURAL DEFINITIONS OF SERVICE

Yet, all too often, even in the Church we have been guilty of thinking: "The most visible person, the most educated, the one with the title—that person is 'first among equals'," failing to see that "first among equals" may sound fine but in reality means inequality. Thus as an antidote to even the most subtle temptation to create power structures within the body of believers, Jesus stated in Luke 22:24-27: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them ... But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves ... I am among you as one who serves."

Here is a good place to take a fresh look at the word "serve." The dictionary tells us that it means to wait on others, to help and benefit others, but—more specifically—servant comes from the root word meaning slave and is defined as someone who is at the disposal of others. Yet from the beginning of human history, it has gone against the grain of human nature to be someone else's servant, much less their slave. It simply is not our natural reaction to want to put ourselves at other people's disposal, which can mean quite literally being used up for others. However, when that transforming power of God enters the picture, everything changes. We are no longer our own, we are bought with a price—the price of Christ's sacrificial death in our stead. And we must come to see that we are to act as "bought" people who are now at Christ's disposal.
But because this does not come naturally, Scripture makes it clear that such a transformation can only be by God’s power. So Paul is able to write to the Corinthians: "We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake .... and we do have the treasure of our new life in our human form, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." And Paul also says, "Of this Gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of God's power" (Eph 3:7).

Yet how hard it is for some Christians today to see themselves as only one servant among many. This has been particularly true in the areas of racism and sexism, where persons who traditionally have been culturally empowered to be over others can find it difficult to think that in God’s family circle they are now on equal footing with those they have always considered subordinates.

But while very few persons of good will today would still promote racism, all too many in the conservative church still teach that men are to have power over women. They may not say it bluntly, but by teaching that men are to retain the final decision-making role in home, church, and society, then men do in fact have power over women — not only setting the parameters of women’s lives, but also preventing women from growing up—from joining the family circle as equally-adult persons who are fully responsible to God, not to man.

As subordinationists ponder who sits where in the human family circle, have they forgotten that, for much of so-called "civilized" history, the approved packaging for persons allowed to sit around society’s decision-making table meant being packaged not only as a male, but in an approved skin color — white? We must ask: Why abandon racism, but not sexism? Remember that it is God’s Word itself that declares that we new creatures in Christ Jesus are not clothed with a particular racial or gender "uniform." Galatians 3:27 proclaims: All believers are now clothed with Christ. And Ephesians 2 teaches that Christ has made us into one new humanity, no longer separated by fleshly distinctives or even placed into some artificial "separate but equal" grouping, but Christ has made us into one new humanity, so that we are being built together into the one household of God.

LOVING LEADERS OR SERVANT LEADERS?

However, in the attempt to try to get around the fact that teaching subordination of women infantilizes women and limits their redemptive freedom, persons who teach that only men are to be in leadership roles have justified this practice by saying that men exercise “loving” leadership. Thoughtful persons are not fooled. As long as one group holds to the notion that there is another group that is always under them, the dominant group cannot understand the biblical meaning of servanthood. However unconsciously, the dominant group is really saying, "There is one group that is always there to serve us."

Loving leadership of men over women may sound workable, but it never exemplifies the biblical call to mutual submission of all believers one to the other. As long as a group or an individual is unwilling to submit to another, unwilling to serve another by letting that "other" join the adult decision-making circle and even letting that "other" lead them when appropriate, then the first group does not in practice consider themselves to be equal fellow-servants of our one Lord. That first group is really saying: "There is a hierarchy, and we are the chief servants."

You see, that notion of loving leadership is not at all the same as servant leadership. A person can be very loving, but does not truly serve others unless he or she allows others, encourages others, and empowers others to use their God-given gifts to the fullest by giving them every opportunity to obey the biblical injunction to grow up into the fullness and stature of Christ.

This is why the notion of males only as leaders is so unbiblical. No one of us is empowered to be over others by making the final decisions for them. No one of us is empowered to make another group our assistants. Rather, God’s power comes to us when we are to serve others by putting their interests above our own and putting ourselves at their disposal.

Yet how sad when some men think that God’s good gift of "power to serve" is somehow their masculine property, to be controlled by them even to the point of excluding women from certain ministry roles altogether.

Have such persons forgotten that we do not ever need to grasp after power? God gives us power! First, power to become children of God, and then power to act as God’s children. The power of the Holy Spirit comes on women as well as men, young and old, and furthermore, it is power given in order to be shared and even given away. Significantly, at Pentecost the power of the Holy Spirit came publicly, not in some secret room, but publicly so that those still outside God’s family could see God’s power at work in women and men alike. Then we are told that those outside could inquire about this miraculous power, and have the opportunity to experience God’s power themselves.
BACK TO THE BIBLE

Increasingly today we hear it said, "Let's return to the practice of the New Testament church." As we study the range of meaning in being "empowered to serve," what would be involved for Christians in 1995 to serve God as the first-century church served?

That is a far different matter from simply trying to recapture the ancient cultural setting of the early church, a cultural setting in which women were traditionally subordinate and had limited opportunities compared to men. Remember, the Gospel does not reinforce fallen human culture, it transforms culture. The Gospel turns human notions on their head, and the Gospel certainly turns traditional teaching about "who gets to do what" upside down.

I quite agree that we need to return to the actual practice of the New Testament church—not culture, but practice—beginning with a fresh appreciation of Paul's admonition not to look at each other any longer from merely a human (fleshly) point of view. And we need a fresh appreciation of Jesus' radical teaching in Luke 11:27-28 where Jesus himself taught there was nothing to be gained by concentrating on gender; rather, our concentration is to be on serving God. The text tells us that as Jesus was teaching, "a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that gave you nourishment.'" What a natural opening that ancient formula of blessing presented for Jesus, had he wanted to teach gender roles. But did Jesus say, "Oh, thank you for reminding me. Yes, you women, your primary function is a biological role in life." No, Jesus made a response as radical today as it was then. Jesus said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

And what is the word of God as it now comes to us through Christ? "Be my witnesses." Redeemed women and men together both have equal responsibility to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. Consider: Jesus did not restrain the Samaritan woman in John 4 from running to evangelize her village; Jesus did commission Mary Magdalene to be the first to tell the male disciples about the resurrection.

Yes, it is the Bible itself that contradicts any notion that women are restricted, on account of their gender, to some narrow "female" area of service. Scripture itself gives so many inspiring role models of women empowered by God to serve in every possible ministry role: from Old Testament leaders like Miriam, Judge Deborah, Esther, or the prophet Huldah, to the combination entrepre-
neur and homemaker of Proverbs 31, and also New Testament women like merchant Lydia (founding mother of the church at Philippi). Or what about pastor and congregational leader Phoebe, the apostle Junia, social worker Dorcas, family nurturers Lois and Eunice, teacher Priscilla, and Phillip's four preacher daughters?

COLLEGIAL LEADERSHIP

Think also of the fact that in the first-century culture, where the accepted model of government was having an emperor, Jesus set up a model of collegial servant leadership. He chose twelve disciples who functioned together, and he also sent out his disciples in teams. Team ministry was prominent in the early church: Peter and John, Paul and Silas, Priscilla and Aquila, groups of elders and deacons, teams of women and men serving together in their local congregations. Spiritual gifts were not parcelled out according to gender. In that early church, leaders were persons who—like Phoebe and Timothy—were simply fellow-believers called to use their spiritual gifts to minister together with the other members of the local Body of Christ. What a challenging example for us in 1995!

What would it be like to have a similar emphasis on team ministry today? We would certainly be freed from hang-ups about what sex gets to be senior pastor, because team ministry prevents the sort of self-exaltation that can be a sad by-product when leadership posts are appropriated by only one person or group. But team ministry also fosters mutual accountability, and guards against exhaustion. The sort of mutual submission exemplified by mutual servanthood promotes cooperation and a feeling of joint ownership in God’s work, encourages complementary use of spiritual gifts, and thus leads to full participation by the priesthood if all believers. With team ministry in place, each believer knows that her or his gifts are necessary to the proper functioning of the whole Body.

PERSONAL LESSONS

Each one of us is on a life-long journey into learning more about discipleship, and I am no exception. With regard to Christian service, when I was younger I often felt very protective about any ministry project in which I was involved. I was particularly protective if I was the one "in charge." With my zeal to create the perfect results, I exemplified the saying "If I don’t it, it doesn’t get done right." Was this praiseworthy? No. Yes, some projects I was involved with were well-executed, but in retrospect I believe the cost was too great: not only the cost I paid in worry, energy depletion, frazzled nerves, and maybe
even some smugness that the good results were due primarily to my efforts, but also a cost that others paid, too.

For example, after exhausting myself in fulfilling a committee chairmanship, I was looking for someone to be the next chairperson. What did I find? No one was willing to succeed me, because my intensity and perfectionism had produced in others only a sense of inferiority and a fear of future failure. The way I had handled power not only did not empower others, it disempowered them by making them feel weak and inadequate.

I had fallen into the trap of equating my responsibility for the program with the program itself, so that the program became my program. There was no shared ownership. With my preoccupation with producing the most perfect ministry result possible, I'd sent the message that no one else could do as good a job, and so no one else was even willing to give it a try. My actions had stifled any thought that others' contributions and insights could have any value. Sadly, I had taken away their power to realize that they not only could but should share their gifts their own way, which might well have been a great deal better than my way.

Then about ten years after that very important learning experience for me, I found myself leading a Bible class made up primarily of new Christians. This was an exciting class because the Bible was new to most of the members, and it was wonderful to see their enthusiasm as they opened Scripture for themselves. It was challenging and rewarding to teach persons who had never read the Gospels, or never heard of Paul's missionary journeys.

But as the years went by, I became aware that the class had become too dependent on me as the teacher. Many of the members refused to read ahead in the Bible book we were studying, saying: "Oh, we wouldn't be able to understand the passage properly until you teach it to us." I realized that their dependency had created an unhealthy situation: They were unwilling to get beyond the infant stage in their own need to study Scripture personally.

Being older now, and more experienced, I knew that if I stayed on as teacher they might never mature as they should. They'd somehow conceived the notion that since they hadn't been Christians as long as I, or been to all the Bible classes I'd attended, they could never learn "on their own."

And here the difference between loving leadership and servant leadership came into play. Of course I had grown to love the members of that class, but if I had continued on merely as their loving leader, they never would have grown up. I needed to serve them best by empowering them to assume ownership of the class, and responsibility for their own spiritual growth. We planned an organized transition, and I let go by removing myself completely so no one would be inhibited as they took their first steps into leadership themselves.

What happened? A leadership team emerged based on teaching gifts that became evident. More exciting, as some of these newly empowered leaders were transferred to new locations, they had the joy of beginning new classes themselves. Leadership power was multiplied when it was shared.

So it has been not only through my own intellectual study of these many issues as I have searched Scripture to find God's plan for human interaction in Christian service, but it has been through some painful and eye-opening personal experiences that I have come to see more clearly what "empowered to serve" is all about.

**Servant Leadership Embodies Mutual Submission**

The many biblical examples of women serving in all sorts of roles, including what are commonly called leadership roles, put the lie to any notion that leadership is only to be exercised by men. But, on a deeper and more practical level, the fact that in Scripture both women and men serve in a wide variety of roles has taught me a new and inclusive concept of leadership. Servant leadership means that, by God's power, we each in our spheres of service use our gifts to exercise both servanthood and leadership. Servanthood and leadership go together for all of us.

Servant leadership does not mean filling a slot on an organization chart, or being in a position of benign power over others. Nor does it mean empowering others to serve merely as your assistants, or even as your second-in-command — which is what so-called "loving leadership of men over women" promotes. Rather, empowering others to serve however and wherever God calls them to serve involves empowering them to use their God-given gifts freely — even if that means that they eventually assume a leadership post over you.

There is a compelling but often-overlooked example of servant leadership in Romans 16:1-2. Here Paul commends "our sister, Phoebe, a deacon (minister) of the church at Cenchrea" and Paul asks the Romans to welcome her, and help her in whatever she requires. Why? Because, Paul states, "Phoebe has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well." Although most English
translations do not do these verses justice, this is a remarkable passage in the original Greek. Paul is not only commending a woman who was in an ordained post, a *diakonos*, but a woman who was a *prostatis*. The English word benefactor does not give the full range of meaning, but Phoebe was someone in a position of trust, leadership, and even authority. Furthermore, Phoebe had been a *prostatis* in relation to Paul! Paul was being served by the leadership gifts of Phoebe, and Paul as himself a true servant leader was free enough, relaxed enough, and secure enough to share ministry at every level. Paul as a true servant leader rejoiced when another, like Phoebe, was empowered to lead in her own sphere of ministry. I don’t think it is stretching the text to think that Paul received significant aid in ministry from Phoebe. Would Paul have felt diminished to be under a woman’s ministry? Not according to this text. Why? Because the servant leader is not someone whose title denotes “I’m in charge and you are under me.” Gifted people are not empowered to be over others, but empowered to serve others by offering up their gifts for the good of the entire faith community.

The person in servant leadership not only shares expertise, but also models putting that expertise at the disposal of others, never wielding that expertise over others. And so the servant leader has been transformed by God’s power into someone free to serve and also free to let others serve in their turn.

But further, because God has graciously gifted each one of us in some way, leadership is not confined to what we have been acculturated to think of as specific leadership “roles.” I suggest that in God’s family circle we can all be leaders. That is, we can all use our diverse gifts to empower others to serve using their gifts, just as initially God empowered us by giving us those gifts.

For example, we do not usually think of someone who has the gift of helps to be in a leadership position—at least not on that organizational chart. But when the person with a gift of helps exercises that gift, that person is indeed taking leadership in his or her own sphere of compassionate care. And one of that person’s responsibilities in exercising the gift of helps will be to bring along—to nurture and to empower—similarly gifted persons so that they can now use their gift also.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned over the years is to let others use their gifts to teach me. When I am free enough to let them use their gifts to lead me into greater knowledge and awareness of the breadth of discipleship, I am indeed submitting to them and they are indeed both leading and serving me. In the best sense of the term, we are mutually submissive one to the other.

Only practicing Christ’s teaching about servant leadership will free us all from the bondage of self-serving, that human desire to grasp power, to create “our” ministries. Self-serving only ends up disempowering others, and so diminishes the cause of Christ. In contrast, when we recognize that leadership roles are service opportunities and not power bases we are free to accept our own humanity, grateful for the power of God at work within our frailty, and unafraid of the gifts of others, unthreatened by their gifts, and free to receive the gifts they offer us as they take the lead in serving us. The sort of servant leadership in which serving and leading merge not only exemplifies the mutual submission Scripture commands us to practice, but — very practically — servant leadership is the most efficient use of the various members of the Body of Christ.

**RISING TO THE CHALLENGE**

Persons who have accepted a secular culture’s definition of leadership will attempt to control power over others, or even think that power is their property. But spiritually healthy persons are those who know that it is God who gives us power, and that God’s power to serve multiplies, expands, and transforms when it is shared. We can rejoice in the tremendous gift of power that God gives to all who believe: power to become children of God, and power to serve our fellow family members.

May God’s empowered children today catch the challenge, the excitement, the practicality, the efficiency, and the freedom of joining Paul in saying: “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.”

Let us celebrate the fact that we have the treasure of our new life in Christ in these frail human bodies, so that it may be clear to everyone that this extraordinary power to serve comes from and belongs to God and does not come from us. And as we each hear our individual call to follow Christ, let us immediately rise up and follow Him into new avenues of service. May our strength to be servant leaders spring from the empowering scriptural promise that, because it is God’s power that is at work within us, we will together be able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.