

## Positioned to Serve

Exodus 18:9-20; Psalm 25:4-15; Matthew 20:20-28



The purpose of church sometimes escapes us. We know how to “do church,” but sometimes the point behind the doing and the being gets fuzzy. After all, church has something to do with the kingdom of God—a rather nebulous quantity in the minds of most. Jesus taught much on the “Kingdom of God,” but we might be hard-pressed to define it. We are familiar with the traditions of religious and church life: prayer, music and preaching services, Bible study and—for good Baptists—meetings, committees, and more meetings. But what is the point? What is it all about? Did Jesus die in order that we might attend meetings forever? Is that what serving God is all about?

After the being released from Egypt under bondage to Pharaoh, the Hebrews crossed the Sea of Reeds into a brand new way of living. Here in the wilderness they were to learn how to get along with one another and become a nation. They were struggling to understand the identity of this God who had led them out of Pharaoh’s grasp and called them to a new life. Moses had never run a nation before. The people had never had the opportunity to structure their own lives as they saw best. They were experiencing a brand new freedom and did not really know what to do with it. They thought they did, but they still had much to learn about self-governance, just as they had much to learn about this God who had rescued them and given them the chance to live outside the chains of slavery and oppression.

Moses was pleased with the visit of Jethro, his father-in-law. For his part, Jethro was greatly pleased to hear of the wonderful victory that *Yahweh* had given the people in their flight from Egypt. He came to meet Moses and took in the good news of what God had done for them, and how his son-in-law had served as God’s lead instrument in redeeming the people. Jethro offered sacrifices of thanksgiving to *Yahweh* for redeeming the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. Moses and Aaron and the elders of the people came to partake of those sacrifices and share in the service of thanksgiving that Jethro led.

We take comfort in the support Jethro shows to Moses. After all, Jethro was priest in Midian when Moses came to him after fleeing Pharaoh many years before. Having married his daughter and then led the people out of Egyptian bondage, it is only natural that they would rejoice together at the victory that God had enacted for the people. The text does not say, but perhaps Jethro played some hand in preparing Moses for that return into Egypt to bring the nation to freedom.

The story seems so natural, and yet we ought to be scandalized! From the perspective of the Levitical laws that we are to read about, it would appear that Jethro should have no authority to offer these sacrifices and lead the elders of the nation in worship of *Yahweh*! Moses and Aaron here are allowing a priest from another nation to officiate in sacrifice to *Yahweh* before the very people that God has rescued. Moses and Aaron come with the leaders of the people to eat of the sacrifices, receiving Jethro’s priestly service.

We should be scandalized, but God seems not to notice. God does not seem to have any qualms with Jethro’s leadership in sacrifice, even if it places him in the role of a priest above Moses and Aaron. God is just not interested in those games of position and power and authority roles. God does not seem to care so much for human designations of who is or might not be worthy or important enough.

Jethro serves as priest before Moses and Aaron. He then offers counsel to Moses regarding the administration of such a large people. Moses cannot retain control over the whole of the nation. There is no way he can adequately judge and lead the nation if he is to do it all himself. He must give up control and a certain amount of authority to others. These are to be faithful and have charge over others, sharing the load of responsibility. It is to be Moses' role to teach and guide these leaders in following God's will. Together they will share the burden of responsibility as Moses equips them with a better understanding of God and the direction God would have them pursue.

Moses had been trying to control too much and fulfill the model he had seen in Pharaoh. He was keeping things under his thumb, ignoring how dependent the people were on his pronouncements. As God was not limited to working through Moses, but would allow Jethro to officiate sacrifice, so Moses needed to give up some of his own controlling power to leaders among the people. He would rather teach, guide, and direct, trusting them to carry out the ministry and service that God had for them. His leadership required that he relinquish control as he offered direction.

James and John had their ideas of what the Kingdom of God was all about. They thought of it in the very same terms as any other earthly power structure. They wanted to be sure to get their positions of authority established before Jesus inaugurated the expected Kingdom. They were not power-mongers, but they were still interested in the effects of power, position, authority, and prestige. They sought some of the benefits and privileges of serving Jesus in the same terms with which the world considered them. They were not completely selfish, but they wanted control. Their interests were not evil, but they were misguided and selfish at heart. James and John wanted to help other people and did not intend to abuse power, but they desired for themselves the kind of power that held the potential for abuse.

James and John sought power the Pharisees and Romans wielded. They did not understand there was any other way to lead. All the models they knew were models of coercive authority and power. They pressed Jesus' teachings into that model. Why shouldn't they be the ones to wield the power—since someone had to? Who better than they to fulfill the roles most associated with the position they had among the disciples? Wasn't Peter too hot-headed and unpredictable?

Jesus did not simply deny their request. He did not simply point out the self-seeking aspects of their request. He explained that they had not understood what this kingdom. This kingdom would not be built upon, nor wield coercive power. It was not about coercion, intimidation, fear, and dread. This realm was not about privilege for the few at the expense of the many. This was no realm which played on the plight of the masses to enforce a yoke of bondage upon them. The realm of Jesus' rule was one in which God descended to serve. Such a model of selfless service precludes the kind of power and coercion that James and John sought.

That is the model of service in this kingdom structure called church. They needed to refocus from positions of authority to positions of service. Moses had to relinquish control and focus on leading and guiding. The disciples had to grapple with a new model of organization that embodied the principles of Jesus' teaching. Love, mercy, justice, caring for the needs of others, and living as God was living before them—that was what this kingdom was about! It was not about power over others, but God's strength to place self in proper perspective. "Doing" and "being church" is not so much about ourselves as serving the needs of others. Are we up to the challenge of giving our all to serving God?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*