

Ask Not...

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This Wednesday marks the sixtieth anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He offered what would become one of the most memorable Inaugural Addresses in presidential history. In his closing remarks, he challenged the world to become servants:

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.”

Service was at the heart of Kennedy’s call. The concept of service had been impressed on him as a teenager. The “ask not” dynamic of his speech had been taught to him in school by a Jesuit priest. All those years later, service continued to resonate with him. Regardless of one’s opinion of former President Kennedy, the self-giving perspective of his speech is commendable.

The Strangeness of Service

Service is not a natural way of life. We are inclined toward selfishness. In response to the self-centered thinking of James and John, Jesus said, “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

The self-centered perspective of James and John persists among disciples today. This problem can be seen in the relationship Christians have with the local church. For example, some Christians want to know what a church can do for them. They want to know what benefits they will get if they join a local church. They will join the church if the church meets their self-serving expectations. If the church does not give them what they want, they will leave.

Certainly, churches are to provide for the spiritual needs of their members. The flock must be fed. However, a church will only be as effective as the Christians who comprise it. Churches need Christians who serve.

Christians Who Serve

1). Members, not customers. The apostle Paul described Christians as members of the body of Christ. He wrote, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Rom. 12:3-5).

This passage makes two important points. First, as members of the body of Christ, Christians have a personal relationship with Christ. Second, Christians are members of one another. This indicates a relationship with other members of the body. Both relationships involve responsibility for them to function properly.

Unfortunately, some Christians do not view themselves as being members of the body of Christ. Some Christians view their relationship with the church like customers going to a grocery store. If the church has what they want, great! If not, they will go elsewhere. The relationship with the church is transactional. This is not what Paul described. Christians who ask what they can do for the church will be focused not on themselves, but on serving other members.

2). Using our gifts to serve. In the same text in Romans chapter twelve, Paul wrote about using our God-given gifts to serve. He instructed, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:6-8).

God has blessed each of us with a gift. We are to use our gift to serve Him and one another. A lack of humility will lead us to judge how others use their gifts. We will complain and criticize one another. Christians who ask what they can do for the church will be focused on how they can make the best use of their gift by serving the church.

Several years ago, some of our family members relocated across the country. When they were looking for a church, my uncle said they wanted to find a church where they could be the most useful. They did not want to get lost in a crowd. They did not look for what the church had to offer them. Instead, they wanted to serve. This perspective is what helps churches grow.

3). The results of service. What happens when we begin to ask not what the church can do for us, but what we can do for the church? What happens when we view ourselves as members of the body of Christ instead of customers? What happens when we selflessly use our gifts to serve one another?

When each member of the church works properly, the church grows together in love (Eph. 4:16). As Christians individually become more and more like Christ, the collective church will grow. Looking outwardly towards one another and using our gifts to serve will produce a

noticeable self-giving culture in the church. This is how churches become inviting places where people can seek their salvation and engage in spiritual life.

Conclusion

How do we develop such a self-giving attitude in such a self-centered culture? We must have our thinking renewed. The Gospel must reshape our minds. This will produce a change of life: transformation (Rom. 12:1-2). To aid in our spiritual transformation, we would be wise to ask not what the church can do for us, but what we can do for the church.