



Christian Mentoring

JOHN MALLISON MINISTRIES

AN INSATIABLE DESIRE

Ken Cornwell: *Dealing with the desire to please others*

I had a great mother! A big regret for me is that I didn't say that very clearly when she was alive. She gave me an example to follow and was a good pattern of integrity. She was one who lived to please people. She also suggested that my life should be lived the same way- to please people. I don't believe that she ever said that I needed to please her in order to receive her love. But she did put a high priority on my pleasing her and others.

That was fine and it certainly encouraged me to listen to people carefully and sensitively. That is an important skill and quality in the life of Christian leaders. But this became a real difficulty for me, to the point where to please people was a fetish. I guess it became that because I wanted the approval and the affirmation of people around. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that to give and receive approval and affirmation is wrong, but to continually to seek it becomes an obsession which can and does have devastating consequences.

I had managed to cope with this until the time when I was the Principal of MLC School, (formerly Methodist Ladies College, Burwood) I had accepted this post with the full conviction that this was the ministry to which God had called me. In my desire to please, I consulted widely on about every issue that confronted me. It soon became apparent that to please everyone was a physical impossibility and I would have to deal with the consequence. It also led to confusion, as well as being subjected to extraordinary political pressure. Some people call it lobbying, but at times it was extreme pressure.

Then there came a simple but profound insight. I felt compelled to go to a place where I could see the people I had been called to serve. In fact I found myself in the centre of the school where pupils and staff were clearly visible and audible! Two very simple questions came:

1. For whom do I exist? And
2. What would Jesus do in my situation?

Once I had wrestled with these two questions, I then went to the Chapel and in that sacred place where solitude was to be in the presence of God, I prayed over and over: "Lord, show me your way."

This may sound very pedestrian and unimportant, but for me it was a liberating experience that I have repeated regularly. Gone are the days when all I wanted to do was please those around. I now seek in solitude and prayer to discern God's way and with a quiet confidence that was once lacking, I seek to minister as God's servant and not as the popular crowd pleaser. In all this God has given me a calmness that eluded me for so long. In fact I believe God has given me a new self.

As I now reflect on my early ministry I was so often motivated by giving to people what I thought they wanted. That view was reinforced by the constant call for the church to be relevant in its message and mission and I used this to rationalise my position.

The temptation to be relevant, popular and to please always lurks underneath the surface and another of those moments of insight came to me when I read Henri Nouwen's great little book, "In the Name of Jesus", which is a reflection for every Christian leader. This is something that reinforced what God has been saying to me:

"Too often I looked at being relevant, popular, and powerful as ingredients of an effective ministry. The truth, however, is that these are not vocations but temptations. Jesus asks, 'Do you love me?' Jesus sends us out to be shepherds, and Jesus promises a life in which we increasingly have to stretch out our hands and be led where we would rather not go. He asks us to move from a concern for relevance to a life of prayer, from worries about popularity to



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communal and mutual ministry, and from a leadership built on power to a leadership in which we critically discern where God is leading us and our people." (p71f)

REFLECTION:

Go to your favourite place of prayer and relax in the knowledge that you are with God.

Read Psalm 25: 4-7. Read these verses several times, and maybe in different translations. Then slowly pray them.

Eugene Peterson says that the temptation for all ministers is to become Program Directors when we ought to be Spiritual Directors. Reflect on this statement: "The spiritual director pastor is shaped by the biblical mindset of Jesus: worship-orientation, a servant life, sacrifice. This shifts pastoral work from ego-addictions to grace freedoms. It is work at which we give up control, fail and forgive, watch God work." (From "Contemplative Pastor")

Charles Ringma in "Dare to Journey" reminds us that the place of solitude when we pray is "not the place where we recharge our spiritual batteries and then continue to live as we have lived before. It is not the place where we catch our breath in order to madly re-enter the race. It is not the place where we simply find some quietness before we plunge into the world with its babbling voices.

The place of solitude is where we are changed. It is the place where we abandon some of our agendas, where we acknowledge our compulsions, where we discover new directions and where, more importantly, we find a new self." (Reflection 14)

Pray around these questions:

- a. What changes do you believe that God is trying to make in your life?*
- b. What agendas and compulsions do you need to abandon?*
- c. Pray for new directions and a new self.*

(Ken Cornwell now spends most of his time mentoring and leading retreats. Previously he was NSW state moderator of the Uniting Church in Australia and a parish minister. Prior to that he was Principal of a prestigious private college for girls in Sydney.)