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## SERVANTHOOD AND THE CHRISTIAN EDITOR

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# SERVANTHOOD AND THE

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ISBN 0-9623741-7-2

Cover design by Randolph Capp © 2002
Typesetting by Anna Pugsley
Printed in the USA for the publisher
Media Associates International, Inc., Bloomingdale, Illinois, USA

# Christian Editor

*by Judith E. Markham*

# Servanthood and the Christian Editor

Servanthood can be an uncomfortable topic in today's world. For some it conjures up a class society, or worse, the subjection of one race to another. For others, for whom the highest good is a life that is self-serving, such a subject is relegated to the list of "obsolete ideas." Regardless of these perceptions, however, everybody in one way or another serves something or somebody at some time in their lives. And for the editor, service is a way of life.

In Webster's dictionary, the verb *to serve* means "to be of use, to stand by, to assist, to wait on another person, to give service and respect, to comply with commands and demands, to gratify, to answer the needs of someone." I believe that a number of functions and attitudes associated with servanthood and service aptly describe what an editor does and what an editor is to be—particularly an editor who is also a Christian.

The Christian editor serves four masters: the publisher, the reader, the writer, and the Lord, although not necessarily in that order.

## The Editor Serves the Publisher

The publisher is the company or organization or individual who underwrites the cost of publishing, printing, and distributing books, magazines, or other publications. The editor is responsible for acquiring, editing, and producing publishable materials for the publisher. Sometimes the publisher is also the editor, but in most

instances the functions involved in publishing and editing are carried out by different individuals; and even when they are carried out by the same person, they still function as different roles. So for our purposes, we will be speaking about the editor's role as it relates to the publisher. In this sense the editor serves that larger body that includes the publisher, the publishing firm or house, the organization or publishing board.

**The editor serves as the eyes of the publishing house**, seeing the potential in ideas, outlines, and drafts. The editor envisions, imagines, or anticipates what the writer is trying to do, even when he or she hasn't done it yet. The editor looks at an outline and a proposal and sees what it could become; the editor reads a sample chapter and captures the vision for a book in the making. The editor not only sees what isn't there yet, but must also effectively communicate this to all the others involved in the publishing process: to the editorial board, to the marketing department, to the sales personnel.

**The editor serves as a facilitator**, making the publishing process flow smoothly and in a timely fashion—and dealing with the problems that occur when the process isn't smooth or timely or when deadlines are missed. Too often editors are perceived as ivory-tower people—strange creatures who get paid to sit in a comfortable chair and read all day. Nothing is further from the truth. In fact, the editor who lives in an ivory tower is probably condemned to stay there.

While the editor's lifeblood may be words and ideas, anyone who works in the editing world for any length of time will wear many hats, all of which serve the publisher or organization and implement the publishing process.

At any one time—and sometimes simultaneously, depending on the size of the publishing operation—an editor is acquiring and developing manuscripts; estimating cost and profit potential of a project; selling a book to the sales and marketing departments; negotiating a contract with an author; juggling a number of manuscripts and authors; managing the work flow of the publication/production process; holding the author's hand (more about that later); being the author's advocate in the house; negotiating

subsidiary rights; participating in weekly, biweekly, and monthly editorial and/or production meetings; attending conventions and trade shows; writing jacket and catalog copy; and, in between all this, editing manuscripts.

The editor sees that the book continues through the publishing process and gets to the sales force, and from there to the bookstores and the readers.

## The Editor Serves the Writer

Perhaps it is in the editor's relationship with the writer that the editor is most clearly a servant. While we are working with a writer, we are exclusively theirs—or at least it should seem so to the writer. This can create a delicate balancing act at times, because the author also needs to respect our time and the fact that we do have a responsibility to other authors. It is important, therefore, that we do our best to build a relationship that is professional but personal, trustworthy but not proprietary.

Editors can't teach talent. We can only teach writers to be more serious about their own talent and encourage them to develop it better. Part of the editor's service is to bring out the best in the writer.

Writers are fragile people. They may be tough as old boots on the outside, but inside they can be a complicated mixture of insecurity and authority, pride and humility. Editors must understand this and learn how to deal with it appropriately. We must learn to read between the lines—to discover exactly what form of encouragement a writer needs.

For example, when Ellen calls, is she looking for help in solving a problem with the ending of her book or does she just need the reassurance that she can take two more weeks to finish the manuscript? Skilled writers may not need the direct editorial intervention often required by the novice, but they require as much, or sometimes more, hand-holding and reassurance. When David

makes contact, he may simply be seeking a sounding board for his ideas and an editor who is willing to agonize with him through every stage of the process. In a sea of uncertainty the editor remains a constant for the writer, conveying confidence in the writer and the project, offering sensitive and sensible encouragement, and being available (whether by phone, fax, or email). As one editor has noted:

> The satisfactions of giving advice are considerable, as everyone knows, and advice is part of an editor's business. He gets paid to give it. This might make for a happy occupation if it were not for hidden dangers. The big one, I think, consists of inattention. Listening must precede advising, and intelligent listening I believe to be a trained skill, requiring conscious, hard effort. I have come close to editorial disaster because of not listening carefully. [1]

Every writer is an individual needing different kinds of encouragement and editorial input from the editor, which is why encouragement takes many forms—direct and indirect. For that reason, *how* editors say something to a writer is as important as *what* we say.

Editors are not professors admonishing foolish students, nor are we superior intellects instructing inferiors. And no matter how earnest writers are in assuring us that they want their work critiqued honestly, even "ruthlessly," when the edited version arrives on their desk, every change or suggestion can be painful for the writer—like the tiny, almost invisible paper cuts that are an occupational hazard for editors.

Read your editorial comments back to yourself. How would you feel if these comments were made about *your* work? Are the criticisms too harsh, too arrogant? What's the tone?

While qualifying words, at least in the English language, may weaken some types of writing, they can be a valuable working part of an editor's vocabulary. A "probably" here, a "possibly" there—like a spoonful of sugar they make the medicine go down. "I think this might read more clearly this way. What do you think?"

brings the writer into the conversation and can often assist the author in moving beyond pride, subjectivity, stubbornness, and just plain weariness to hear and accept an editorial suggestion or critique.

A servant is entrusted to care for property that belongs to someone else. Much of what an editor cares for belongs to someone else: someone else's idea, someone else's words, someone else's article, someone else's book. In the course of that care, with a nudge here and there (or sometimes a gentle push), the editor urges the writer to strive for perfection. The best writers want this, knowing that a good editor has the writer's best interests at heart. In my many years as an editor, one of the highest compliments I've ever been given came from an experienced and skillful writer who said, "I appreciate your demand for clarity, precision, and conciseness. I have full confidence that you know what I am trying to express and that you appreciate my desire to find just the right word or phrase."

In his history of *The New Yorker* magazine, *Here at the New Yorker*, written upon the fifty-year anniversary of the magazine, Brendan Gill wrote this about Harold Wallace Ross, the founder and first editor of the magazine:

> [Ross] saw his job as encouraging people more talented than he to do their work better than they had hitherto known how to do it, largely by being harder on themselves than they had been accustomed to be. Simple enough, but how rare! The principle that one must be harder on oneself than one knows how to be is, I believe, the only secret means that *The New Yorker* possesses for the achievement of excellence.[2]

A concern of editors and writers alike is that material will be edited too heavily, which some gauge by the number of marks on the paper or the number of strikeouts on the computer document. Actually, too much editing has little to do with the marks on the manuscript. You'll know you have gone too far, not by the amount of ink or the number of key strokes, but by the realization that you are trying to make someone else's work your own.

Saxe Commins was Senior Editor at Random House in New York City from 1933 until his death in 1958. During those years he worked with many of the major writers of an extraordinary literary era in the United States: Theodore Dreiser, W. H. Auden, Sinclair Lewis, James Michener, William Carlos Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and William Faulkner. Commins's total dedication to the editorial craft and to the writers he served would provide any editor with a model of excellence. But of all the examples from his life and work, perhaps the most succinct and the most telling is the telegram that William Faulkner sent on hearing of his editor's death: "The finest epitaph everyone who ever knew Saxe will have to subscribe to, whether he will or not, is 'he loved me.'"

## The Editor Serves the Reader

The editor is the author's first reader. (Sorry. Friends and family don't count here.) And the editor answers the questions the writer desperately wants answered: What is it like to read my book? Does the writing work? Is reading my manuscript an exciting or a rewarding or an inspiring experience? Are there any loose ends? Does my writing make sense? Is it really any good?

Since we are sitting in for the reader, we need to know what readers are thinking, what they are concerned about, what they want to read—and what they need to read. The latter may sound presumptuous, but I believe that the editor has to be willing to encourage readers to venture in new directions, or in directions they perhaps are not even aware exist. We must balance timeliness with timelessness.

If we are to serve the reader, we also must respect the reader. This means we look for material that is clear and accessible, and we look for writing and ideas that will speak to a wide spectrum of people and interests. Which book and when, which author and how, what idea, what style. This is where we must serve all the readers. There is no such thing as one great "reading public." There

are as many different kinds of readers and needs and interests as there are cultures and individuals. Certainly there are universals. Most Christians, for example, at some point will probably be interested in some kind of book on prayer or discipleship or the discipline of the Christian life. But how these subjects take shape, how they are communicated, can differ widely. As editors, we cannot afford to be elitist about readers or types of literature.

I feel strongly about this, because through the years, behind the scenes I have heard—and been guilty myself—of "looking down" on certain authors or books or styles. Certainly we should be discriminating; we must look for the best in a given genre or category. But we must also recognize that different subjects and different styles appeal to different people—and are valid.

Yes, we publish what appeals to us, what communicates to us, what moves us to action, what we enjoy. But our editorial instincts must also tell us that others will want to read it too; that it serves the truth and will meet needs.

The foundation of these "instincts"—this editorial savvy—is our accumulated memories of words and our breadth of experience. How will you know what is good, bad, or indifferent? How will you ever know what people love to read, have read, and want to read? How will you ever know what endures and speaks, or what is fleeting, unless you have read or experienced it yourself? And you can never go wrong if you follow the advice of my friend and colleague, editor and author Julie Ackerman Link, who is always reminding me (and others) to keep Philippians 4:8 over the desk: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (NIV).

Unless you can get as excited about your fiftieth book on prayer as you are about signing the hottest Christian communicator of the day, unless you can get as excited about the simple, well-communicated Gospel message as you do about the brilliant theological work, unless you can spot and eagerly develop the unpublished, unknown, promising writer as eagerly as you market the biggest,

yearly best-selling author, you are not serving readers.

Initially, however, as we serve the reader, whatever the material is, it must somehow speak to us. It must grip us, inspire us, enthrall us, intrigue us, compel us. As the great British publisher Edward England puts it: "I learned to publish only what fired my own mind and heart. If a book on prayer did not make me pray, if a book on hungry people did not make me give, if a volume on the Holy Spirit did not make me seek his blessing, I turned aside. I was a heart more than a head publisher."[3]

A wonderful thing happens when an editor and a writer connect in this way, because it then means that they will connect with the reader. And that's the whole point, of course. Katherine Paterson, daughter of missionaries, born and educated in China, whose books for young people have won the Newbery and National Book Awards, says, "No matter how good the writing may be, a book is never complete until it is read."

## The Editor Serves the Lord

Editors serve the publisher, the writer, the reader. But above all, editors who are Christians also serve the One who has called us to His work. We are accountable to Him for our work, for the vocation to which He has called us, and for the talents and abilities He has given us.

A number of Scripture passages seem to speak directly to editors. One of my favorites is Ecclesiastes 12:10 in the NIV translation: "The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true."

God has entrusted us with His truth, and 1 Corinthians 4:2 tells us that "it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

One of the ways Christian editors serve the Lord is through a servant attitude and heart. But this servanthood is not simply a matter of anonymity, working behind the scenes as we do, serving

author and publisher. It is not just a matter of our position in the publishing house or organization. It is an inner spiritual reality in our lives. And this is where, I believe, the Christian editor moves apart from his or her professional colleagues and counterparts in the secular publishing world. For the servanthood we have been discussing thus far applies to qualities and abilities and forms required of any good editor, whether he or she is a member of a major New York or London publishing firm or a small Christian publishing house or organization. These are qualities and characteristics that make any editor skillful and able in the profession. But the Christian serves a greater Master. And it is our service to Him that should set us apart in every way—which is why a servant's heart and attitude are as crucial as the position itself.

Servanthood has nothing to do with the altitude of our position in life, but it has everything to do with the attitude of our heart. And a servant's heart is the work of a lifetime.

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[1] Burroughs Mitchell, *The Education of an Editor* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), 103.

[2] Brendan Gill, *Here at the New Yorker* (New York: Random House, 1975), 288.

[3] Edward England, *An Unfading Vision* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 158.

## What Is an Editor?

**An editor**

- believes a good book can be made better.
- raises the questions that provide objective guidance for the writer.
- is not afraid to say what he/she thinks about a manuscript, honestly but with sensitivity.
- has vigilant concern for every word, every sentence, every punctuation mark in the writer's work.

- is a sounding board for the writer (according to the dictionary, a sound board reinforces tones by sympathetic vibration).

**An editor**

- adjusts to a writer, not vice versa.
- takes time. Good writing takes time; so does good editing.
- has an ear for the author's style.
- is the most objective reader the book will have before it is published.
- knows that clear writing is essential for clear thinking.
- tries to second-guess the writer, but always in the writer's terms.
- confirms the writer's uniqueness.
- gently cuts through the writer's hurt pride, subjective judgment, stubbornness, and just plain weariness.
- says, "I put this in to show you what I think is wrong, not to insist that what I want is right."
- never says "I told you so."

## What Is Editing?

- Editing is the rigorous pursuit of perfection. It is an attempt to make writers draw on resources they never knew they could command.
- Editing is improving the improvable.
- Editing is finding the weak places and questioning them.
- Editing is fine tuning—scrutinizing words, sentences, and paragraphs to see whether the language works.
- Editing answers the questions the writer desperately wants answered:
  - What is it like to read my book?

  - Does the writing work?
  - Where are the loose ends?
  - Can I write?
- Editing is responding to what is present in a manuscript as well as what is absent.
- Editing is the subtle change that does not violate the author's style but results in discernible improvement.
- Editing is discovering what the writer is trying to do and then helping him/her to do it a little better.
- Editing means saying such things as:
  - I'm not convinced here.
  - I don't see how you got from there to here.
  - The order here is confusing.
  - This is where you lost me.
  - I got bored here.
  - You've already said this.
  - This character is one dimensional.
  - This illustration/anecdote does not work here/does not make the point.
  - This beginning/ending is weak.
  - What are you trying to say in this paragraph?
  - Shouldn't you introduce this before that?
  - Is this the right word in this context?
  - What's the point here?
  - Can you defend this statement?
- Editing always takes two: an editor who believes that a good book can be made better, and a writer who is serious about his/her craft.

## About the Author

JUDITH E. MARKHAM has been an editor for almost forty years. For most of that time, she has worked in religious book publishing. At present, she serves as Editorial Advisor for Discovery House Publishers and as a partner in her own company, Blue Water Ink. She is a founding member of the Academy of Christian Editors and serves on the faculty of the Writers' Publishing Workshop each summer at the Ockenga Institute at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Judith and her husband, Robert, live in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

MEDIA ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL

Media Associates International, Inc. (MAI), serves the worldwide Christian church by training and encouraging Christian media personnel to become skilled communicators through the written word.

MAI provides on-site strategic guidance and technical assistance to men and women involved in publishing ministries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as Central and East Europe.

MAI's biennial LITT-WORLD conference provides an opportunity for media personnel from around the world to receive training and encouragement and to learn trends and advancements in the world of print media.

MAI publishes two newsletters, *Profile* and *Trainer Network* (copies available upon request), and the "Expand Your LITT-WORLD" print-media training booklet series, among other titles.

MAI is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) publicly supported Christian agency. MAI is also a registered British Charity (No. 328568) with an office in England.

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