

## Diakonos – Servant or Deacon

In an attempt to understand the various meanings and nuances of the word *diakonos*, I have set forth what hopefully will be a helpful, though brief, study in its biblical contexts. My desire is to help clarify the definition and use of this word group in the New Testament. In addition to the Greek New Testament<sup>i</sup> and The Holy Bible - English Standard Version, my sources will be limited to Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament<sup>ii</sup> and A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.<sup>iii</sup> References to the Apostolic Fathers<sup>iv</sup> will also be noted.

Defining the ministries at Providence is an ongoing process of discovery and growth. Our desire is to develop teams of ministers (servants) who will implement in word and deed the essence of our purpose statement: "To declare the Sovereign Majesty of God through proclamation, exaltation and education, according to the revealed Word of God to the ends of the earth, by His grace and for His glory." In order to accomplish this purpose, the whole church must be committed to serving faithfully out of her giftedness in submission to the Lordship of Christ, through the roles God has assigned to each in the power of the Holy Spirit. This exercise in defining *diakonos* is not an attempt to be dogmatic as much as it is an attempt to clarify and learn for the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of the ministry. Our end is to glorify the Lord and enjoy Him forever. The means to that end is to go hard after Him through the pages of the Scripture so that we might be a Bible-saturated, God-besotted people. Our prayer is that of David in Psalm 119:18, "Open my (our) eyes that I (we) may behold wondrous things out of Your Law."

Throughout church history there have been three principle forms of church government: congregational, hierarchical and by means of a presbytery. In this day of mega churches there appears to be a fourth form, that of viewing the pastor as a CEO and his staff as the Board of Directors. This form allows the congregation very little if any say in the actual governance of the church. In all of these models of church government deacons (*diakono*i) have played vital roles. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century on, the role of deacon has been viewed as an office and thus a position of authority.<sup>v</sup> This tradition has stood since the days of the Apostolic Fathers and is widely accepted among the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The question that needs to be raised in light of this tradition is a question that goes to the interpretation of the word *diakonos*. Is the word "deacon" the proper translation and if so, are there grounds for seeing this service (or ministry) as an office?

The second question can be answered quite easily. The phrase "the office of" as found in the KJV is an addition inserted by the 1611 translators. There is no Greek manuscript that has that particular phrase. In the KJV the phrase is italicized to indicate that it is assumed, but is not actual. As a side note, the translators did the same thing with the word "unknown" in I Corinthians 14:2, 4 in translating the word *glossalalia* as "tongues". We know there may be undiscovered languages and

dialects but there is no such thing as an “unknown” tongue that goes to an ecstatic prayer language. For the Apostle Paul, “tongues” referred to a language. Back to the subject of *diakonos*, translators have tended to translate out of their own historical and cultural bias when addressing particular issues that the church faced in their day. With the fire of reformation burning brightly the need for faithful, valiant men and women who would serve the church both in deed and word was great. To heighten the importance and value of such service, the word “office” was included or at least intimated in order to give weight to this particular ministry. The 1689 London Confession of Faith, Chapter 26 Article 9, addresses this very issue. Deacons are seen in this article to be an office as are bishops and elders. This is not surprising given the position of the KJ translators and the extraordinary days of reformation.

However, is this the best definition and use of the word *diakonos*?

The word *diakonos* means servant-minister or servant. Only in Philippians 1:1 and I Timothy 3:8, 12, 13 is the word translated “deacon”. Those who translated the English New Testament from the Greek simply put *diakonos* in its transliterated form “deacon” in those two passages. In all of the other texts where *diakonos* or its verb form is found, it is translated “servant” or “minister”. It is never used as a proper noun or a title for one who holds office. *Diakoneo* in its secular setting meant to “wait table”. It could also carry the meanings “to care or provide for” or “to help, support”.<sup>vi</sup> These meanings are embraced in the word *diakoneo* throughout the New Testament and translated as “serve”. In the eyes of the Greeks, service was reserved for slaves and those who were not rulers. In fact there was no merit in this term for the Greeks. They did not recognize it as a true self-emptying for the sake of others. For a noble Greek, service was not one of the powers which held heaven and earth together, nor did it lead to sacrifice (Kittel, Volume II, p. 82, Beyer).

The New Testament writers took this word and developed its meaning to represent one who serves or ministers to both the Lord and others. Jesus’ view of service was predicated on the Old Testament command to love one’s neighbor which issued from the command to love God. This was the expected ethical conduct of Jesus’ followers. Christ saw in this service the very thing which made men and women His disciples (Luke 17:7-10, 12:37, 22:26f; John 12:1). In fact, in the ministry of Jesus, this service is emphatically displayed in the washing of the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper (John 13:1-20). It is also demonstrated in Martha (Luke 10:40), Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:31), in the angels’ ministry to Jesus (Matthew 1:13, Mark 4:11), and Timothy and Erastus’ assistance to Paul in the preaching of the gospel - *diakovountes* (Acts 19:22). See also II Timothy 1:18, Romans 15:25, II Corinthians 8:19 and Hebrews 6:10. This kind of service is depicted vividly in Matthew 25:42-44 where Jesus spoke of those who served the “least of these” as having in fact served Him. The aim of Jesus and His followers was not and is not to set up human orders in the world, but to proclaim the kingdom of God to the glory of God through faithful, Christ-exalting service. And the way to that goal leads through suffering and even death. For the follower of

slave of all (Mark 9:35, 10:44). As Beyer remarked, "*diakoveiv* is not just about table service, but is a full and perfect sacrifice as the offering of life which is the essence of service or being for others, whether in life or death". (Kittel Volume II, p. 86).

Given the political and religious environment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century and beyond, interpreting *diakonos* as deacon seemed natural and practical. The word *diakonos* as deacon appears to have been read by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century church back into the 1<sup>st</sup> century reading rather than allowing the word to stand as written by the Apostle Paul. Paul was not advocating a church office or even attempting to set forth a particular structure for the church as much as he was establishing an order for service and ministry. Tradition seems to have trumped the meaning of the word *diakonos* in its context and historical setting.

Now back to the first question, how does Scripture use the words *diakoneo*, *diakonia* and *diakonos*?

*DIAKONEO* is used thirty-seven times: to attend to, serve, provide a service. Nothing more! The kind of service performed, for or upon whom, whether voluntary, or whether physical or spiritual, is not included in the meaning of *diakoneo*, but can often be found in the context. *Diakoneo* is sometimes translated "minister," "administer" or "use the office." But these words may give a false impression that the people performing such functions are part of an ecclesiastical staff or clergy; which concept is foreign to the meaning in the text. Thus *diakoneo* should always be translated as a form of "to serve," to preclude such misconceptions. In Rom.15.25-27, *diakoneo* (to serve) saints by giving material things is contrasted to "sharing in spiritual things" (v.27), and is also contrasted to "serving (*leitourgeo*) in fleshly things". Comp. "service" (*diakonia*) and "servant" (*diakonos*). Comp. "to slave" (*douleo*), the meaning of which includes serving a lord or slavemaster.

SERVE Mt.4.11; 8.15; 20.28,28; 25.44; 27.55. Mk.1.13,31; 10.45, 45; 15.41. Lk.4.39; 8.3; 10.40; 12.37; 17.8; 22.26,27,27. Jn.12.2, 26,26. Act.6.2; 19.22. Rom.15.25. 2Co.3.3; 8.19,20. 1Ti.3.10,13. 2Ti.1.18. Phm.13. Heb.6.10,10. 1Pe.1.12; 4.10,11.

*DIAKONIA* is used thirty-four times: a serving, service, ministry, the work of a servant (cf. Eph.4.12). The service can be in either physical matters (Act.6.1), spiritual matters (Act.6.4), or can consist of material things (Act.11.29). The kind of service, for whom, or to whom is not included in the meaning, but can often be found in the context. In current English, "ministering" or "ministry" can mean something different than "service", and hence should not be used to translate *diakonia*. *Diakonia* is used in context with "an attending" (*leitourgia*) in 2Co.9.12, and with "attending" (*leitourgikos*) in Heb.1.14, where *diakonia* refers to angels providing a beneficial service to Christians.

SERVICE Lk.10.40. Act.1.17,25; 6.1,4; 11.29; 12.25; 20.24; 21.19. Rom.11.13; 12.7,7; 15.31. 1Co.12.5; 16.15. 2Co.3.7,8,9,9; 4.1; 5.18; 6.3; 8.4; 9.1,12,13; 11.8. Col.4.17. 1Ti.1.12. 2Ti.4.5,11. Heb.1.14. Rev.2.19.

SERVING Eph.4.12.

*DIAKONOS* is used twenty-nine times: one who serves or provides a service. The kind of service, who is served, whether voluntary, or whether physical or spiritual, is not included in the meaning of *diakonos* but can often be found in the context. Sometimes transliterated "deacon" or translated "minister," implying an office within a religious organization or for "group of called-ones," but only "servant" is meant. If a male servant is called a "deacon," then a female servant such as Phoebe in Rom.16.1 should be called a deaconess. Depending upon the context, a servant can serve a household (Mt.22.13; Jn.2.5,9); civil government (Rom.13.4,4); God, Christ, the good news (Rom.15.8; 1Co.3.5; 2Co.3.6; 6.4; Eph.3.7; 6.21; Col.1.7,23,25; 4.7; 1Ti.4.6); other Christians (Rom.16.1;

Php.1.1; 1Ti.3.8,12); or the context may give instructions to those who would be God's servants (Mt.20.26-27; 23.11-12; Mk.9.35; 10.43-44; Jn.12.26); or the context may describe false servants (2Co.11.15,15,23; Gal.2.17). In 1Co.4.7 being a servant in the Lord is compared to being a fellow-slave in the Lord. Comp. "slave" (doulos).

SERVANT Mt.20.26; 22.13; 23.11. Mk.9.35; 10.43. Jn.2.5,9; 12.26. Rom.13.4,4; 15.8; 16.1. 1Co.3.5. 2Co.3.6; 6.4; 11.15,15,23. Gal.2.17. Eph.3.7; 6.21. Php.1.1. Col.1.7,23,25; 4.7. 1Ti.3.8,12; 4.6. <sup>vii</sup>

All of these texts overwhelmingly set forth *diakonos* as the ministry of service. There is no hint of an official position that carried authority or rule. If "deacon" is the choice for describing this service, then both men and women must be included, for there is no distinction as to gender when describing the service of believers. Paul's qualifications go to character not gender. George Grant captures this thought well in the following statement from an article in the May 2008 Tabletalk: "In addition to the elders though, those early fellowships were also served by deacons – or more literally, servants. They were to translate the truth of the Word into very practical deeds. They were to make evident the beauty of human relationships transformed, reconciled, and restored by the Gospel. They were to provide abundant evidence of true *koinonia* (community). At the same time, they were to ensure that covenantal relationships would show forth selfless service crafted in tenderness, empathy, excellence, intelligence, and glory." This was the sentiment of Paul who commended the service of Phoebe to the church at Rome in Romans 16:1 where the word used is *diakovov*.

What conclusions can be drawn from our brief study? First, the word "deacon" as found in the English Bible, especially the KJV with its insertion of "the office of" is not the definition of the word chosen by Paul. He used the word that simply referred to and meant "servants". To transliterate a word from one language to another is not necessarily to translate the word. Obviously the expediency of defining this word as office was found to be necessary from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century on. But does that tradition preclude us from taking a closer look at the word group and its meaning? It is interesting that the word is only translated "deacon" in two places in the New Testament (Philippians 1:1 and I Timothy 3:8, 12, 13) out of all texts where it is employed.

Second, Paul's list of characteristics and qualifications for servants only emphasizes the great need for godliness and holiness among those who serve the Lord and His church. His more detailed list does not reflect a change from the exhortations of Jesus concerning those who serve Him. There is no double-standard in the New Testament. Those who lead, pastors and elders, are NOT called to a higher standard of holiness than those who would serve in other capacities. Certainly there is greater responsibility, but not greater accountability. To list the qualifications for servants was absolutely necessary given the political, spiritual and cultural climate in which Paul lived. The standard of a one wife husband does not speak against a woman serving. Paul did not need to say a one husband wife because the married status was established with the husband. There were many widows in that day who were wonderful servants of King Jesus. Paul's admonition concerning the marital status was to ensure the proper order for marriage in the church. Since the husband is

church at Ephesus was at war with pagan philosophies and doctrinal heresies and needed men and women who understood the nature of service and whose lives evidenced godliness lived out under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The same holds true for our day! Too often in the modern day history of the church, the service of deacon has been interpreted as office and thus accompanied by a privileged status of ruling and authority. This misinterpretation has led to great abuse and trouble. But in all fairness, the pastorate and eldership have also been abused. The issue then for all servants, regardless of their title, is the cross - a daily giving of themselves over to the Lordship of Christ. *Diakonoi* (servants) are to exhibit the character of God in every area of their lives to the glory of God as they go after Him with all their hearts.

Third, as a church we have attempted to answer the question of *diakonos* by establishing ministry teams. In reviewing this text and taking this word in its lexical and biblical meaning we are satisfied, at this point, that this is the place we need to be. We are in no way disparaging the term deacon. We are simply attempting to understand it in the contexts in which the word was written and apply it to those who serve. We believe this does fairness to the faithfulness of women who serve the Lord such as Phoebe who was called a "deaconess" (*diakovov*). If the word in I Timothy 3:11, *gynaikas*, can be translated "women" as well as "wives", this helps clarify the role of women in the church as to their service. This goes well with the admonition that women are not to lead or exercise authority over men but are called to serve the Lord as fellow-heirs of the grace of life.

Fourth, we welcome continued dialogue and discussion on this question. We encourage everyone at Providence to serve out of their giftedness and to go hard after God daily. Service is the responsibility of every believer, even if one does not know their particular gift. Service is the privilege and honor of every believer. The moral, ethical and social characteristics and responsibilities defined in I Timothy 3 by the Apostle Paul relate to every believer in every generation.

Our desire is always and in all things to glorify Christ and edify the church. May all of us serve our great and awesome God with great fervency and zeal, pursuing Him as the treasure of our lives in a world that has minimized service and thus diminished the real Treasure.

Serving as a slave of King Jesus,

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<sup>i</sup> Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 1979.

<sup>ii</sup> Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1964.

<sup>iii</sup> The Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, William Bauer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Edited and Augmented by Fredrick Danker and F.W. Ginrich. University of Chicago Press, 1958. (BAGD)

<sup>iv</sup> J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, The Apostolic Fathers, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1994.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108 Ignatius wrote to the church at Philadelphia, "Pay attention to the bishop and to the presbytery and deacons." See also his letter to the Trallians, p. 98 and to the Smyrneans, p. 114. Though Ignatius referred to the deacons as "my fellow-servants", he included them in the same list with the bishop and presbytery. His letter to Polycarp finds this statement, "I am a ransom on behalf of those who are obedient to the bishops, presbyters and deacons...", p. 116. See also the Didache, p. 147, 157 and the Shepherd of Hermas, p. 204. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Century writings of the Apostolic Fathers indicate an early acceptance of the deaconate as an office.

<sup>vi</sup> BAGD

<sup>vii</sup> Eric W. Traut, ntwords.com