

What is New Testament Service

Should a Christian be involved in every ministry of the Church? Should Christians serve, even if not qualified, led or gifted, just because of a need? Ministries have all kinds of needs, and many Christians are tempted to jump “right in.” However, there is a danger, because “unless service is guided Biblically, it may be frustrating and even destructive.”¹ Jesus tells the Disciples in Mt. 20:25-27, that “whoever will be great among you, let him be your minister.” The word minister is *diakonos*. Normally we think of the word Deacon, or the office of Deacon when discussing *diakonia/os*. The words servant, minister, and deacon are translated from *diakonos* the NT. The key idea of the word in scripture is service, as seen in the following passages- Ro.12:7 spiritual gift, Ro. 13:4 governments, Eph. 3:7 Paul’s ministry in the gospel, Col. 1:7 concerning Epaphras. This servant is a person who serves doing common things, not just the office of deacon.

I. Description of New Testament Service

The New Testament uses several terms to describe the concept of serving and ministry. A brief description follows:

A. *duolos*- a slave. Slaves were despised in the ancient world, and lived without freedom under the authority of another. Each believer is considered a privileged slave of Jesus, living to please Him (Gal. 1:10), and to serve others (Gal. 5:13).

B. *huperetes*-underrower, subordinate, helper, officer, steward, ministering to those who proclaim the gospel, (Acts 13:5, Acts 24:23). This word emphasizes the stewardship or accountable authority of one who is under another’s authority, (Mt. 26:58, Jn. 7:32).

¹J. Gary Irving

C. *latría*-service for hire, service in worship specifically in following the Levitical law during worship, (Jn. 16:2). This word can also refer to Christians serving sincerely, (Ro. 12:1).

D. *diakonia/diakonos*- doing menial or mundane activities, doing these activities involved submission, constraints on time and freedom. The Greeks considered *diakonia* as degrading and dishonorable. Doing this type of service voluntarily was totally alien to the Greek way of thinking. “In Greek eyes service is not very dignified. Ruling and not service is proper to a man... The formula of the sophist: How can a man be happy when he has to serve? ... For the Greek in his wisdom and freedom there can certainly be no question of existing to serve others.”²

Judaism did not have a servant philosophy, so the idea of *diakonia/os* was foreign and offensive to the Jew of Jesus’ day.

“Judaism in the time of Jesus knew and practiced its social responsibilities, e.g. to the poor, this was mainly by alms, not by service (cf. Luke 10:30-35). Lowly service e.g., waiting at a table, was beneath the dignity of a free man (cf. Luke 7:44ff).”³

Diakonia is used 34 times in the New Testament, *diakoneo* 37, and *diakonos* 29. This shows us that New Testament service is unique. “True *diakonia* is modeled on the pattern and command of the Savior and represents the practical outworking of God’s love, especially toward fellow believers.”⁴ This service is personal, one believer to another, it is not solely the function of a church or an institution.

² Gerhard Kittle

Theological Wordbook of the New Testament s.v. “*diakoneo, diakonia*
p. 82-83

³ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 545.

⁴J. Gary Irving

Called to Serve: Toward a Philosophy of Ministry
Bibliotheca sacra, vol.140, p. 337

II. True NT service is Christ-centered ministry, Col. 1:7,23,24-25

Paul is dealing with false teaching in Colossians by exalting Christ. Paul shows that Jesus is the source and sustainer of all we accomplish (Col. 1:15-17). This reminds us that in Christ, every believer enjoys a unique ministry given by the risen Head of the church. Three uses of *diakono* in Colossians 1 provide a picture of the essential components of ministry.

1. Epaphras was a "faithful *diakonos* of Christ" (Col. 1:7) this statement emphasizes that Jesus, as Head of the church, is the source of ministry.
2. Paul spoke of "the hope of the gospel . . . whereof I Paul am made a *diakonos* (Col. 1:23). This points to the fact that the gospel, the Word of God, determines how ministry is done.
3. Paul wrote about "His body (which is the church) . . . where of I am made *diakonos* (Col. 1:24-25). The church provides the place where ministry is to be done.

As Torrance observes:

"The *divkono*" is one who has been given a task by his Master, and who does only what is commanded by Him, not what he thinks out for himself. Because every believer possesses a Christ-given ministry, each can speak with Paul of "the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:24). Ministry is both from Him and for Him, and a believer's motive should be to please Him in all things. The Christian thus serves with a sense of liberty and dignity. He ministers by divine calling as a fellow-worker of God (1 Cor. 3:5), sharing in the ministry of Christ. "⁵

This Christ centered ministry allows us to live above circumstances. Now, believers recognize the goal is that "the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Co. 4:10). The supreme motivation of all New Testament service is "to be accepted (well pleasing) to Him" (2 Co. 5:9). In order to be pleasing to Christ we need to realize that He is the

⁵ Ray S. Anderson

one who makes us able to minister, and it is HIS work that has already satisfied the Father. We are now able to serve in a way that is pleasing to Him.

III. NT ministry is ministry of the Spirit. 2 Co. 3:1-6

New Testament ministry does not depend on human resources or enablement. The flesh cannot carry out a spiritual ministry.

"In all Christian work, there are three elements absolutely indispensable: The Spirit of God as the power, the Word of God as the message, and the man of God as the instrument. The Spirit of God uses the message by means of the man."⁶

A. Contrasts

v3- Not ink or stone but the spirit in our hearts. We do not serve by “going through the motions” or just “checking the boxes.”

Legalism and performance says do, grace says done!

B. Empowerment

v5-6 We have access to the power of God when we allow the Spirit to fill, empower, and use us. This is true life, “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

C. All Service Is Based on Spiritual Gifts

The fact that Christ, the Head of the church, has given believers spiritual gifts through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a critical point for the biblical concept of ministry. The New Testament does not show us ministry as a specialized position, occupied by a select few. Gifts are God's provision for serving each other (1 Pet. 4:10). In fact, Peter divided gifts into major categories of speaking and serving gifts (1 Pet. 4:11), and Paul spoke of a particular gift of service (Rom. 12.7). Service takes place by means of spiritual gifts, which shape and define one's

⁶ W.H. Griffith Thomas

Ministerial Life and Work

Baker Book House, 1974, p. 82

ministry.

“Spiritual gifts are a stewardship for which believers are accountable to God. Peter indicated that believers are to use gifts "as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). Not to exercise gifts properly is to fail one's stewardship. This fact inspired Paul's exhortation to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it" (Col. 4:17).”⁷

IV. New Testament Ministry is Grace Empowered 2Co. 3:7-18

Paul contrasted the two covenants in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18, to show that New Testament ministry is motivated by grace, not by law or legalism v7-18. The power for ministry is God's gracious provision, and the message believers bring to others is one of grace, not law. Ministry must be controlled by God's grace or it is not true Christian ministry at all.

“The New Covenant transcends the Old (Mosaic) Covenant, as the sun outshines the moon.”⁸

V. Ministry Is to Equip the Saints for Mutual Ministry

While every believer is gifted for the work of service, God has also given certain individuals (Eph. 4:11) to the church "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry (diakonia)" (Eph. 4:12). The goal is not that some "do the ministry," but instead that they equip and encourage all believers in ministry.

“This has great strategic importance for the functioning of an assembly of believers. A ministry does not exist for its own sake and no elite class should carry on a ministry while others passively observe. Every believer is divinely gifted, and certain people are called by the Lord to function as enablers and equippers. All ministry is mutual ministry and the body of Christ grows only by "the proper working of each individual part" (4:16). The goal of gifted men must therefore be the involvement

⁷ Irving

BibSac vol. 140 p. 344

⁸ Ibid. p.345

of others by instruction in the Word and the development of spiritual gifts.”⁹

VI. All Ministry Is to Be Loving Service

Jesus gives us the model of ministry, and therefore love is essential. When we speak of service, we imply work done, usually for the benefit of another. The New Testament is filled with examples of individuals who served in practical ways, lovingly caring for the needs of others: Timothy and Erastus (Acts 19:22), the house of Stephanas (1 Cor. 16:15), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7), Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16-18), Mark (2 Tim. 4:11), and Onesimus (Phile. 13). In each case Paul was the recipient. His ministry could never have had the impact it did if they had not served him. They were co-laborers with Paul and the Lord in the gospel. All service in love is valued by the Lord.

VII. The Rewards of Serving

We see the fact that God is gracious because He rewards service. For the believer this will take place at the Judgement Seat of Christ. Scripture tells us that we deserve no reward at all, because at best we are all unprofitable servants, Lk. 17:7-10. When we come to this realization we can understand a number of things about true service to the Lord.

A. Serving is a voluntary act of humbling.

Diakonia is chosen, not forced. It is the opposite of self-centered living (Jn. 12:24-26).

B. The motive for true service is love for Christ.

This type of service is done as to the Lord Himself (Mt. 24:34-40)

C. Serving faithfully allows for greater areas of service and responsibility, (1 Tim. 3:10).

Understanding what a servant (*diakonia/diakoneo*) truly is will change the way we serve the Lord. Our goal should be to become more useful

⁹ Ibid. p. 346

to our Savior, so that He is glorified, and opportunities for service increase. A believer who will submit to the Spirit and allow Him to lead can be assured that God will honor it,

“For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have shewed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to the saints and do minister.” Heb. 6:10