

Ministers and Deacons, or Just Servants?

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English translations of the Bible use various words to describe what are usually called "offices" in the church. In this article, I want to examine what the Bible says about ministers and deacons, examine the Greek words behind these English translations, and see whether there might be some better translations. I am also going to take a look at Acts 6:1-6 to explore whether these verses really tell us of the ordination of the first deacons.

In the previous article in this series (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/servants.htm>), we found that the Bible says nothing about offices in the assembly. We found, in fact, that there are no offices in God's assembly. We also saw that the Bible says nothing about clergy, although the etymological root of the word "clergy" is applied to all of God's people. While the Bible says nothing about offices or clergy in the assembly, it does have much to say about several functions of service. In this article, I want to begin examining the various roles named in the New Testament.

Minister

I brought out in the previous article the fact that the Greek word translated "office" in Romans 11:13 is *diakonian*. I said, "This word comes from *diakonos*, which means 'a servant' and itself derives from words that mean either to flee or to kick up dust when one runs. It is the common word for a servant. The word Paul uses in this verse is simply the occupation or function of serving. *Diakonian* does not mean 'office.' It means 'service.'" This will be important to remember as we continue.

The word "minister" as a noun (singular and plural) and including the variations "administration," "ministry," and "ministration"; and as a verb in various tenses and including the variation "administer"; and as an adjective ("ministering") is found in the King James Version of the New Testament 101 times. It is translated those 101 times from fourteen different (though often closely related) Greek words. Nevertheless, by far, it is usually—73 times—translated from words that derive from roots meaning to flee or to kick up dust when one runs as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Here are the lexical forms (that is, the forms in which you would find them in a lexicon) of

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these words followed by the number of times the word is translated into a form of the word "minister": *diakoneō*—25, *diakonos*—20, *diakonia*—28.

Diakoneō is a verb meaning "to serve." An example of its use is in John 12:1-2, where we read, "Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him." This was not an office. It was very mundane. They had a meal and Martha served. In Luke 10:40, we again see Martha serving. She complains that "my sister hath left me to serve alone."

So we see that besides being translated by various forms of the word "minister," *diakoneō* is also correctly translated in the King James Version as "serve," "serveth," and "served." Additionally, as we saw in the last article, forms of *diakoneō* are also the Greek words behind the gross mistranslations "let them use the office of a deacon" and "they that have used the office of a deacon" in 1 Timothy 3:10 and 13. These should simply be translated "let them serve" and "those having served" respectively.

Diakonos is a noun meaning "a servant." For example, in John 2, we read about the servants at the wedding feast who filled the pots with water and drew out wine (see specifically verses 5 and 9). The word "servants" is the plural of *diakonos*. So, besides being translated by various forms of "minister," *diakonos* is also correctly translated in the King James Version as "servant" and "servants." There are also three places where it is not really translated but simply transliterated. The word "deacons" in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12 is taken from plural forms of *diakonos*. The word "deacon," then, is a non-translation of a Greek word that does nothing to convey its meaning to English-speaking readers. I will have more to say about "deacon" shortly.

Diakonia is a noun meaning "service." That is, it means the work or function of serving. Above, I gave an example of the word *diakoneō* from the end of Luke 10:40. But *diakonia* is also in that verse, in the first half. Let's look at the entire verse: "But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me." The word "serving" is translated from *diakonia*; it is what "cumbered" or distracted Martha. Besides being translated as "minister," "ministry," "ministration," "ministering," "administration,"

"service," and "serving," *diakonia* is also mistranslated in the King James Version as "office" in Romans 11:13 (discussed in the previous article). It is also translated as "relief" in Acts 11:29, which is somewhat confusing. That verse would be better translated as, "Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined as a service to send to the brothers dwelling in Judea."

Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary gives these definitions for the English word "minister" as a verb:

- 1 : to function as a minister of religion
- 2 : to give aid or service <*minister* to the sick>

Definition 2 of the verb is a definition that would correctly translate the Greek verb *diakoneō*. But I think that "minister" is not necessarily a good translation of *diakoneō* for three reasons. The first reason is perhaps subjective, but I think of minister as a verb as being old fashioned. If somebody says to me, "The nurse served the sick," I simply picture a nurse. But if somebody says to me, "The nurse ministered to the sick," I think of a nurse dressed like Florence Nightingale. The second reason is, I think, less subjective. It has to do with the word "minister" being set apart as a type of serving. For example, I can serve the sick and I can serve at table. I can minister to the sick, but I cannot minister at table (or at least it would be very odd to put it that way). Rich households have servants who serve them, but they don't have ministers who minister to them. "Serve" is the more general term, it is a perfectly acceptable translation of *diakoneō*, and it allows translators to use it with less interpretation. It may be difficult to determine whether *diakoneō* in a Scripture can be translated "minister," but "serve" will always do. The third objection is that "minister" as a verb is often seen as something that "ministers" do.

Here is *Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary's* definitions for the English word "minister" as a noun:

- 1 : AGENT
- 2 a : one officiating or assisting the officiant in church worship b : a clergyman especially of a Protestant communion
- 3 a : the superior of one of several religious orders – called also *minister-general* b : the assistant to the rector or the bursar of a Jesuit house

4 : a high officer of the state entrusted with the management of a division of governmental activities
5 a : a diplomatic representative (as an ambassador) accredited to the court or seat of government of a foreign state
b : a diplomatic representative ranking below an ambassador

Only definitions 2 and 3 are concerned with the church, and they can all be dismissed based on what we have learned about clergy in the previous article and on what I will say about ordination in a future article.

"Minister" originally meant someone who took the minor or small role as a servant. But today, we think of a minister as someone officiating, something not at all intended by the word *diakonos* in the Bible. "Servant" is the much better translation.

Deacons

Almost all churches make a distinction between "ministers" and "deacons." The Bible makes no such distinction. *Diakonos* appears in the New Testament of the King James Version only as "minister," "ministers," "servant," "servants," and "deacons." It appears as "deacons" in only three places: Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12. There is no reason in those three places that it could not be translated "ministers" or, better yet, "servants." The reason *diakonos* is transliterated "deacons" in these three places is because the translators had a bias backed by centuries of ecclesiastical hierarchy that included the "office" of a "deacon." And, as explained in the article, "*Ekklesia* or Church, Does It Matter?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/ekklesia.htm>) the King James Version translators were told to use their translation to uphold the ecclesiastical government of the established church. So, in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, where it appears along with the word translated "bishop" (I'll discuss this word in a later article), it was decided by the translators to merely transliterate *diakonos* with "deacons," an office in the established church.

The word "deacon" entered the English language from the Latin *diaconus* and this, in turn, came from the Greek *diakonos*. This transliteration of the word, rather than translating it, resulted in obscuring of its meaning. And the confusion was compounded in Bible translations when *diakonos* was sometimes translated as "servant," sometimes translated as "minister," and sometimes transliterated as

"deacon" depending on what the translators assumed or even wanted the verse to say according to the bias of their church tradition.

Philippians 1:1 simply translates as, "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and servants." When we examine other Scriptures that mention the roles of the overseers and servants, this verse becomes clear. But using "bishops" and "deacons" only clouds it.

In 1 Timothy, Paul gives criteria for those who are to be overseers (translated "bishops" in the King James Version—I will address this word in a future article) and those who are to be servants in the assembly. Below, I give a literal translation and some parenthetical comments for 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

:8 "Servants [*diakonous*—this is the accusative plural of *diakonos*; the word simply means servants] likewise be honorable [*semnous*—can also be translated "serious"], not double-talking [*dilogous*—as in the western movie cliché, "White man speaks with forked tongue." That is, he should not be inclined toward saying whatever seems convenient for the moment without regard for the truth], not attentive to much wine [*mē oinōi pollōi prosechontas*—lit. "not holding to much wine"; the use means "not holding the mind on much wine"], not profiting through shameful means [*aischrokerdeis*—lit. "shameful gaining"], "

:9 "holding the mystery [*mustērion*—lit. that which is shut or hidden. The reference is to the Gospel, which had been hidden, not absolutely, but in types and shadows, but now in the New Covenant is revealed plainly] of the belief [*pisteōs*—the faith, the belief in the Gospel that all saints hold in common] in a clean conscience."

:10 "And these also let them be approved first [*dokimazesthōsan prōton*—approved after examination or testing first; they are to be vetted], then let them serve [*diakoneitōsan*—the verb of the noun in verse 8. No hint of the word "office" as found in the KJV and no excuse for the translation in some other versions of "serve as deacons." The word simply means "serve"] being unblamable [*anegklētoi*—irreproachable; not able to be blamed or charged]."

:11 "Wives [*gunaikas*—this word can also mean "women," but since it is between verses referring to the servants, who are males, this verse likely refers to their wives, not female servants], likewise, are to be honorable [as verse 8], not slanderers [*diabolous*—a word also used to refer to the devil because he is a slanderer, but here surely referring to people], sober [*nēphaleous*—sober as literally not drunk; temperate], trustworthy [*pistas*] in all things."

:12 "Servants must be one woman [or wife] men [or husbands—they must neither be practicing polygamy nor have unlawfully divorced and remarried], leading children well, and their own families [or houses]."

:13 "For the ones having served well gain [*peripoiontai*—lit. "make around"] a good step [*bathmon*—"a step up," a stage or threshold] for themselves, and much outspokenness [*parrēsia*—or boldness in speech] in belief, which is in Christ Jesus."

Paul is simply saying that if someone is going to be a servant in the assembly, he must meet these criteria to show that he has his life and family in order and so that he does not bring shame upon the assembly. But, as I will explain later, this should not be thought of as extremely formal. That is, many other people served. But these were the people whose backgrounds were examined and found to meet these criteria so that they could safely represent the assembly and so that they could be counted on as trustworthy.

The First Deacons?

In Acts 6:1-6, we read the following:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

This is often assumed to be an account of the ordination of the first deacons. But let's notice a few things. 1) The noun *diakonos* is not in these verses: there is no mention of "deacons," "ministers," or

"servants." 2) The noun *diakonia* (service) is found twice. It is translated "ministration" in Acts 6:1, and "ministry" in Acts 6:4. 3) The verb *diakoneō* is found once in Acts 6:2, where it is translated "serve." 4) The English misses the play on words. The apostles are essentially saying, it is not fit for us to be serving tables because we are to be constantly attending to the service of the Word. 5) Although the multitude of the disciples looked for the seven, it is the twelve who appointed them. 6) The seven were a unique group of special servants, much like the twelve. Years later, Phillip, no longer living in Jerusalem or attending the Jerusalem assembly, but living in Caesarea, is still called one of the seven. He is also called an evangelist, but he is never called a "deacon." 7) The seven were appointed over the business of distributing the food. Nothing says they personally did the waiting on tables.

Now notice this from *Vincent's Word Studies* comments on 1 Timothy 3:8:

...the evidence at our command does not bear out the view that the institution of the diaconate is described in Act_6:1-6. The terms [*diakonos*] and [*diakonia*] are, in the Pauline writings, common expressions of servants and service either to Christ or to others. Paul applies these terms to his own ministry and to that of his associates. Diakonia is used of the service of the apostles, Act_1:25; Act_6:4. [*Diakonos*] is used of Paul and Apollos (1Co_3:5); of Christ (Gal_2:17; Rom_15:8); of the civil ruler (Rom_13:4); of ministers of Satan (2Co_11:15). The appointment of the seven grew out of a special emergency, and was made for a particular service; and the resemblance is not close between the duties and qualifications of deacons in the Pastorals and those of the seven. The word [*diakonos*] does not appear in Acts; and when Paul and Barnabas brought to Jerusalem the collection for the poor saints, they handed it over to the elders.

Clearly, Acts 6:1-6 does not describe the appointment of the first deacons. Instead, it tells us about the appointment of a special group of seven men who had administrative authority.

This quote from *Vincent's Word Studies* makes another important point: The Greek words relating to servant and serving are used in the New Testament to apply to Christ, Paul, the other apostles, and

other Christians, and even to civil rulers and the ministers of Satan. I will add that they are also used for actual servants in households. We have also seen that there were men who met certain standards in their lives that enabled them to be recognized by the assembly as servants. These men could represent the assembly and could be counted on as trustworthy. Yet other people who did not meet these qualifications also served. So we see that these words have several levels of use.

In the next installment, we'll look at some specialized words that are also translated "minister," and closely examine Matthew 23:1-12 to reveal how this passage is so often violated today.