TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Diakonia Equals ????

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Moving more deeply into our study of New Testament ministry, we turn to a focus on *diakonia* and its cognates, the verb *diakoneō* (to serve) and noun *diakonos* (servant).

Notice first the multiple English words used to translate the term. For example, in the King James Version, *diakonia* is translated "ministry" (Acts 1.17), "serving" (Luke 10.40), "ministration" (Acts 6.1), "relief" (Acts 11.29), "office" (Rom 11.13), "service" (Rev 2.19), "ministering" (2 Cor 8.4), and "administration" (2 Cor 9.12). The same variety is evident in the English Standard Version where *diakonia* is translated "ministry" (Acts 1.17; Rom 11.13; 2 Cor 9.12), "distribution" (Acts 6.1), "serving" (Luke 10.40), "relief" (Acts 11.29; 2 Cor 8.4), and "service" (Acts 12.25; Rev 2.19). A survey of uses of the cognates *diakoneō* and *diakonos* reveals the same diversity.

We might wonder whether so much variety is warranted, but we should not question the motive or practice of the translators for using multiple English words to translate the same Greek word. The translation process often requires that shades of meaning found in the original language be rendered by different words in the receptor language. Always, the context of a passage is the final determinant for establishing a word's meaning in that particular place.

When it comes to *diakonia*, the process has become more complicated by virtue of the fact that "ministry," one of the terms used to translate the Greek word, has taken on a meaning(s) in current English use that is not really parallel to its meaning in any New Testament text. Resulting from this is the use of terminology, practices, and, in some cases, prohibitions, that do not derive from New Testament teaching.

The solution to this problem begins with a more thorough study and understanding of what *diakonia* meant to the New Testament writers and their original readers. Having reached that understanding, the next step is to use English terminology that aligns with that teaching, even if doing so means we are out step with the modern world's (or modern church's) expectations. Yes, that may require more elaborate discussions and explanations of biblical ideas than our impatient world likes. But if we are serious about being a *biblical* people, a community who "speaks where the Bible speaks," we should at least make the

effort to try to teach and practice a biblical idea, regardless of how inconvenient it may be or how well received it is.

What, then, did *diakonia* mean in the time of the New Testament? At its most basic level, it referred to a servant, table servant, or waiter (*The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas, ed., 1:369). But even at this fundamental level, it is important that we not impose modern views on the ancient term. Being a table waiter, or server, may not be the career choice we hope our children ultimately make, but there is no inherent dishonor associated with that job in today's world. But that was not the case in the ancient world, the world of the New Testament. In that time and place, *diakonia* referred to "menial and mundane activities . . . activities without apparent dignity" (J. Gary Inrig, "Called to Serve: Toward a Philosophy of Ministry, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December 1983, 336).

In other words, *diakonia* was not a word with which first century people wanted to identify. The Jews saw the word in terms of a social obligation or that which an inferior had to render to his superior. The Greeks regarded it as "degrading and dishonorable" (see Inrig, 336-337). Yet, it is the word used most often by Jesus and his delegated messengers to describe the role Christians are to assume. In fact, it is the word Jesus chose to describe himself. A study of that choice will take us far toward a biblical understanding and practice of true Christian ministry.

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