



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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“Can I Speak to the Minister?”

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It’s one of my oldest memories and illustrates how easily we can slip away from biblical terminology. As a boy, going with Dad from place to place in his Sunday appointment preaching, I remember him asking more than one group of adults, “How many of you are saints?” The response was always overwhelmingly negative. After all, saints are the people canonized by the Catholic Church (a use we disapprove) or people who have it all together morally (a use we approve, but rightly feel unworthy to claim for ourselves).

Biblically speaking, we’re wrong on both counts. And it takes just one passage to prove it. In 1 Corinthians 1.2, Paul writes “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be *saints* . . .” Say what? Those who were involved in division—saints? Those who tolerated the man involved in a sexual relationship with his father’s wife—saints? The ones who sued their Christian brothers and forgot their bodies were temples of God’s Spirit—saints? The ones who abused their gifts, turned the Lord’s supper into a contest of one-upmanship, even denied the resurrection—*they* were *saints*?!?!?!?!?

Yes. You see, all the word translated “saints” (*hagios*) means is “holy ones,” and what “holy” means at its root level is “set apart.” Biblically speaking, sainthood is not primarily about personal moral accomplishment, but surrender to God (through which, in an irony never appreciated by moral perfectionists, purity is eventually realized).

What has all this to do with ministry? It’s mainly illustrative. For just as we have allowed the world’s definition of “saint” to become our own, so too we have adopted the world’s use of “minister.” People who steadfastly (and correctly) refuse to call their preachers “reverend” or “pastor” consistently refer to them as “*the* ministers.” In doing so, they both set preachers apart in an unbiblical way and fail to properly appreciate their own identity as disciples.

Proof of this contention is found by looking at the New Testament’s use of *diakonia* and its kindred words. Turning first to 2 Corinthians, an epistle which says more about ministry than any other one book, we see that the word most often used to present Paul’s

teaching on the subject is *diakonia* (used, with its cognates, 20 times in the epistle). For instance, in 2 Corinthians 3.8 he referred to “the ministry of the Spirit.” In 4.1, he said that, “having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.” In 9.1, in his discussion of the collection, he said that “it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints.”

In the New Testament, *diakonia*, which if you remember, has “menial service” as its fundamental meaning, becomes *the* word to describe the work of service performed by the first disciples. In its various forms (*diakoneō*, *diakonia*, *diakonos*), it appears 100 times. Only nine books never use it (1-2 Thessalonians, Titus, James, 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude).

Of additional interest is the variety of people to which the words refer: men, women, preachers, apostles, Christians generally, Christ, and deacons. (For uses of the noun *diakonos*, the one serving, see Matt 20.26; 22.13; 23.11; Mark 9.35; 10.43; John 2.5, 9; 12.26; Rom 13.4; 15.8; 16.1; 1 Cor 3.5; 2 Cor 3.6; 6.4; 11.15, 23; Gal 2.17; Eph 3.7; 6.21; Phil 1.1; Col 1.7, 23, 25; 4.7; 1 Tim 3.8, 12; 4.6.) In short, “minister,” like “saint,” does not refer exclusively to a special class of Christians, nor even to Christians with a particular task. It refers at various times to all those who have committed to follow Jesus as Lord.

In view of this, might we need to change some habits? Some stationery?¹ Our expressions in some prayers? And especially some attitudes about who does the Lord’s work?

Fellow-believer, try this: The next time someone asks, “can I speak to the minister?” don’t put them on hold. See what they want and what *you* can do to serve them. For whether they realize it or not, they are talking about you.

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¹ Sometime around the time I originally wrote this article, I was made aware of a congregation who in their published directory, designated the men who were “elders,” “preachers,” and “deacons,” and then listed all their remaining members under the heading, “ministers.”