

A False Dichotomy

Neil Girrard

Peter wrote, “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies...” (1 Pet. 4:10-11) Well, that’s sort of what he wrote. After all, he wrote in Greek and not English. What we’ve just read is English and this particular passage suffers under this translation.

Peter used the word *diakoneo* [1247] which is rendered “minister” in the above translation. The word refers to one who attends another, waiting upon them, serving them. From this word, “church” tradition has derived the idea of an *office* of a deacon, an elevated position somewhere above the people and just below the “pastor” (originally called “bishop.”) Peter knew only the former definition – the latter derived definition is part of the modern “church” paradigm that distorts our understanding of God’s word.

It is precisely in this derivation that we begin to see a false dichotomy. It is not that there is absolutely no validity in the use of the word “minister” to translate Peter’s word choice. It is that there are layers of *added* meaning to the word “minister” that adversely colors the meaning behind Peter’s words here. There are even some who, as a result of this word usage, equate Peter’s “anyone who speaks” as the “pastor” or elder-bishop and his “anyone who ministers” as the deacon. (see 1 Tim. 3:1, 8, etc.) Yet this too is an addition to Peter’s intent. Peter’s use of “each one” and “anyone” refers to *anyone* who has received any gifting of the Holy Spirit. To restrict his meaning to an elevated class of clergy (a thing that did not come into being until the 3rd and 4th centuries) is historical and textual revision.

But this duality persists to this day. This dichotomy comes into view for a travelling worker in the gospel when he is asked, regarding a particular trip, “Were you just visiting someone or ministering to the saints in the area?” This question betrays the inquirer’s partially buried belief that “ministry” is still an outward, exterior activity one engages in when one is in the proper setting. Absent is the idea that *all* service spontaneously flows from the life of Christ within to meet specific and particular needs at *God’s* appointed time.

The idea of *diakoneo* is that of serving or helping someone. In fact, several translations use “serve” or even “help” in this passage. The idea here is the servant who takes on the lowly role to aid and assist the other. (Mt. 20:28) The idea of an exalted *position* or *office* from which one officially *ministers* or *administers* according to the rules of the organization or institution in which one is an *officer* is foreign to the simple, personal, divinely-enabled *service* or *assistance* Peter says here to render.

Jesus said, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of *living* water.” (Jn. 7:38 - emphasis added) He also said, “I have come that [My sheep] may have *life*, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (Jn. 10:10 - emphasis added)

The service that Peter speaks of is to be done according to the strength or ability that God gives. It is necessarily connected and integrated with the *life* one has in Christ. One does not draw on the strength of the flesh (though many self-righteous “church”-ites do!) to do this work of service. If ever one’s service becomes disconnected in any way from one’s life in Christ, it is no longer spiritually helpful to anyone – neither to the one serving nor to the one being served. Jesus still says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” (Jn. 15:5)

No one is called to “minister” in the sense of holding an elevated office over other brothers and sisters. “It shall not be so among you!” (Mt. 20:26, etc.) But we are all called to

share our lives in Christ with whomever we come into contact with. If the sharing of our life in Christ does not help another sincere seeker to delve deeper into Christ, then something is very wrong with our life in Christ. If we must put on some “ministerial mask” so as to pass on “words of wisdom” to those who can’t (or won’t!) hear Christ for themselves, then something is very wrong with our notion of serving – and our notions of how to help others follow Christ!

This false dichotomy between “ministry” and *life* is only another piece of leftover baggage we acquired at “church.” Those who persist in lugging it around with them will find this a severe burden to carry into the wilderness where Christ is leading them. Those who find it impossible to let go of this self-exalting, idolatrous practice of “ministry” would do just as well to return to the Babylonian “church” and rot quietly in one of the pews or take a position on the staff there. Such a one’s “service,” tainted as it is with the arm of the flesh, is completely unacceptable, unwanted and unwelcome in the genuine assembly of the Firstborn.

The flesh wars against the Spirit and the Spirit wars against the flesh. (Gal. 5:17) No “ministry” of the flesh, no matter how religiously satisfying it is either for those who practice it or those who receive it, will ever achieve a work of the Spirit. Rather it will only produce yet another counterfeit of the true way of following Christ and God.

Let he who has ears hear.

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