
PAUL'S CONCEPT OF SERVANTHOOD IN 2 CORINTHIANS

Jason V. Hallig

Second Corinthians reveals Paul's conception of ministry in the light of his apostolic defense. It is in this book that we find considerable information about the apostle Paul's ministry and his call as a **διάκονος**. Central to Paul's defense of his own ministry is the presentation of his understanding of **διάκονος**, which defines his concept of ministry in terms of servanthood ministry. The opponents of Paul are trying to portray themselves as the rightful **διάκονοι** for the church at Corinth. They claim to be the true **διάκονοι** of Christ because of the credentials they possessed such as the "letter of recommendation" (3:1). Paul, however, refutes his opponents and explains to the Corinthians his understanding of his call as God's **διάκονοι**.

Διάκονος in Paul's time was understood in several ways. The Greeks understood the word to be of no value. A servant was seen as the lowest sociological status in the society. The Jews, though more decent in their understanding of a servant, had a limited understanding of the nature of **διάκονος**. Servants were only valued in terms of their service to the great master, e.g. God and the prophets. During the intertestamental period **διάκονος** was used more for a religious status, i.e. a religious propagandist—a divine agent who stands in the same position with the god he/she represents. Paul's concept of **διάκονος** takes a radical shift from these contemporary concepts. Paul's understanding of **διάκονος** takes its renewed meaning from his new religious experience as a Christian.

Διάκονος – A Divine Slavery

Paul understands **διάκονος** as God's call to servanthood. Servanthood is an act of service rendered by a slave. A slave is under the authority of a master, either of human or divine. In Second Corinthians, Paul refers

"Summary, Conclusion, and Implications" of a Th.M. thesis submitted to Asia-Graduate School of Theology, 2000. APNTS is part of the AGST consortium of seminaries in the Philippines.

to himself as a captive slave of God who is being led in a triumphal procession in service for God (2:14). Paul's concept of **διάκονος** is synonymous to the idea of **δούλος**, which means a slave. **διάκονος** is an image of a divine slave.

Paul is no way a religious propagandist. He is a divine slave who is under the authority of God. God is the one responsible for his life and ministry. Paul's image of a captive slave in 2:14 perfectly supports the understanding of his role as **διάκονος**. Moreover, Paul pictures himself as the aroma of Christ, spreading out to the whole world (2:15). To be Christ's aroma does not mean for Paul power and honor; rather, he becomes an object of both praise and humiliation. Paul says, "To the ones (who are perishing) we are the smell of death; to the others (who are being saved) the fragrance of life." Obviously, Jesus was not generally accepted as Messiah. Some thought of him as a criminal for he died a criminal death. Others thought of him as an impostor, claiming to be the Son of God. To be identified with Christ means to be a smell of death and life. Such is the life of the slave of God, which Paul portrays himself.

Indeed, who is equal to such a task? Paul's enemies understand **διάκονος** as that of a divine representative—one that is given honor and power to represent God. No wonder they claim to be **διάκονοι Χριστού**, i.e. Christ's representatives. However, Paul believes that to be a **διάκονος** of Christ is to be a slave of God.

Διάκονος – Servant of the Gospel

The gospel is central to servanthood. A true **διάκονος** is identified with the gospel of Christ. Paul has given emphasis to the gospel he preaches as a defense against his opponents who do not only claim to be **διάκονοι Χριστού** but who also preach a different gospel. Paul accuses them of distorting the word of God (cf4:2) by preaching another gospel, a different Jesus, and a different spirit (11:3). Paul is a slave of the gospel, a gospel that is defined as in the framework of the new covenant is more glorious and far superior. The new covenant is not under the law/letter, which condemns and leads to death, but under the Spirit that gives life and brings righteousness (3:17-18). With the gospel of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit, Paul is confident of his ministry (3:4ff.). He takes his confidence not in his own identity as an apostle but because he has been made competent as a servant of the new covenant (3:6). He does not water down the truth of the gospel by using deception and self-glorification. His hope is built on the life to come, where he wants to be found faithful as God's servant. The Corinthians bear witness to Paul's ministry (3:2-3). Their existence testifies to the authenticity of Paul's ministry: he is the true **διάκονος** of the new covenant.

Διάκονος – A Slave of the Church

The church is central to Paul's ministry. The church is composed of the people of God. Its people are not only recipients of God's grace but are also God's witnesses to the world. The church plays an important role in the divine plan of salvation. It is continuing the divine ministry through its faithful devotion to Jesus as Lord and its obedience to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul as **διάκονος** sees himself as a servant of the church. Paul says, "We preach Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants" (4:5). Paul is not the Lord of the church. He does not rule over them (cf 1:24). Instead, he teaches them the truth of the gospel and leads them to faithful service to the Lord (4:2f.).

Paul is indebted to the church to preach the gospel that is pure and holy. His task is to deliver the gospel message that leads to the change of their lives. For this reason, Paul is committed to the truth of the Gospel, and seeks not to distort it by his own human wisdom. Paul's opponents were the ones distorting the Word of God for self-gain. They preached for profit and not for the good of the church. Paul labels them as masquerading to be servants of righteousness. On the contrary, "they are false apostles, deceitful workers, and masquerading as apostles of Christ" (11:13,15).

Paul's attitude towards the church is an expression of his service in genuine love for their sake. His dealing with them reveals his depth of love for them (cf. 2:4). Furthermore, Paul does not burden them by preaching the gospel of God free of charge (11:9). All these Paul did because he is the church's slave.

Διάκονος - A Life of Weakness

Weakness plays an important role in Paul's understanding of his role as God's **διάκονος** relative to his apostolic ministry. Paul's opponents belittles him for his weakness, which they view as uncharacteristic of a **διάκονος** of Christ. They seem to hold a triumphalistic theology that emphasizes authority, skills, and credentials as the primary qualification of **διάκονος**. Hence, Paul is compelled to answer the criticism that he is weak and cowardly (10:1, 10; 11:7; 13:3-4), that he somehow lacks apostolic power (12:12), and that because he refuses to accept support from the Corinthians and continues to work at a trade, he in some way denigrates his apostleship and brings shame to the church (11:7-9; 12:13-18; cf. 1 Cor. 9:3-18). Paul defends himself with his own renewed understanding of weakness, but as Paul himself insists, he is not simply engaged in personal

defense (12:19). Paul views the opponents as attacking not only his apostolic authority but also the gospel he preaches. Paul defends his reputation but it is as much for the good of the church for whom he lives as a slave.

Weakness – Identification With Christ

Paul views weaknesses as an identification with Christ. Paul says, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (4:10). In these verses, Paul talks of his sufferings as participating in the suffering of Christ. As such, he carries in his body the death of Jesus.

Similarly, in 6:4-10, Paul speaks of his sufferings as servant of God. Paul says, “As servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance, in troubles, hardships and distress, in beating, imprisonment . . .” (6:4-5). While for some, Paul’s commendation seems to be estranged; Paul strongly believes that as a true servant of God, suffering are inevitable for they are part of the call.

As Christ suffered, so must his servants. The disciples are no greater than their master (cf. Matt. 10:24). A servant is expected to suffer the same fate as his/her master. However, the suffering of the servants is not vicarious but rather participation in the life of the master.

Weakness – Revealing the Power of God

Paul claims that God works through his life and ministry. As **διάκονος**, Paul is under the direction and authority of God. Paul’s willingness to suffer reveals his status as slave of God, but his sufferings serve to honor God and to reveal the power of God (cf. 2:14-16).

Paul’s foolish speech is an expression of his confidence in weakness. He says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weaknesses” (11:30). Suffering is a display of one’s weakness, but is also an opportunity to let the power of God be manifested. Surely, this is a Pauline paradox. However, Paul’s weakness is not to be replaced by the power of God. Weakness and power go together. What the Lord says to Paul of his weakness is an assurance of his grace: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:19:a). Hence, Paul declares, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (12:9b). He adds, “That is why for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

Conclusion

Paul's concept of ministry is properly understood through his understanding of **διάκονος** in terms of servanthood ministry. For Paul, his role as God's **διάκονος** defines his office as an apostle. It is what makes Paul an apostle of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is more important for Paul to be called **διάκονος** of God than an apostle.

The relationship between **διάκονια** and **διάκονος** is seen in terms of their nature and function. **Διάκονια** is a ministry of service. It is for the service of the church and outside the church. The role of **διάκονος** as servant makes sense. A **διάκονος** is called to serve the church and to be God's slave in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

Practical Implications

What are the implications of this study on Paul's concept of ministry to the Filipino understanding of the Christian ministry? The following are the practical implications that I perceive as necessary for our understanding of the Christian ministry.

(1) The church now faces a grave threat in its conception of the Christian ministry. The church is bombarded with so many contemporary principles in leadership (in the guise of Christian leadership) that are not Christian or biblical but are often embraced in the church today. Self-propagation is only one of the many issues that are being promoted today in the church. Phrases such as "ministers are leaders" and "congregations are followers" if not properly understood may lead to self-centered leadership. Paul's understanding of **διάκονος** as a slave of God may provide the balance. Indeed, Christian ministers are leaders, but they are servant leaders. Ministers are all captive slaves of God by virtue of God conquering their lives. Ministers are servants of God and their lives are under the direction and authority of God. It is God who defines the mission and work of the ministers. Ministers discharge their ministry "in the sight of God" (4:2) as men "knowing the fear of the Lord" (5:11).

(2) The Christian ministry is still committed to the gospel truth. The gospel remains to be the only message that we have as Christian ministers. It is central to the Christian ministry. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ which includes the incarnation, death, and resurrection that we preach today, and not ourselves. Christian ministers must remain faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any gospel that sets aside Christ or mixes Christ with others is not at all the Christian gospel. The gospel of Christ serves as the framework of the Christian ministry. Ministers are servants of the gospel.

The Filipino church faces a great challenge in the ministry. The rise of independent churches that claim to be preaching the truth but are not willing to embrace the gospel of Christ poses a threat to the truth of the gospel. Like Paul, Filipino ministers must be loyal to the gospel of Christ and seek to preach it with truthfulness.

(3) The ministry is given for the service of the church. Ministers are called to serve the church (4:5). Ministers' task is to protect the church and not to destroy it. They must be willing to endure all hardship for the sake of the church. As the master came to serve and not to be served so must his servants. Today, we have ministers who are working not to serve the church but to exploit the church for their own benefit. For some, the church is a stepping-stone in fulfilling their personal dreams and in gaining power and authority. Paul's understanding of the ministry as serving the church will help the minister understand his role in the church.

The socio-economic issues in the Philippines are major problems that every minister must deal with. The search for a better life seems to be an issue that most ministers are faced with. But ministers are called to serve the church. Service must remain the highest priority in the ministry. Every minister must seek the good of the church and not his/her own good.

(4) The Christian ministry proclaims the suffering of Christ and embraces its importance in the life and existence of the church. Today, ministers are in danger of falling into the philosophies of the world that embrace a triumphalistic theology where power and authority are considered necessary for the Christian ministry. There is some sort of equation of victory with ministry. Ministers are gauged in terms of their successes and not their faithfulness. Paul's view of weakness as an integral part of God's call to servanthood will help ministers understand their calling, i.e. ministers are called to be faithful.

Sufferings must not be viewed negatively. Filipino ministers can claim the promise of God: "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in weakness." As Paul set Christ as the example, so must Filipinos. It is imperative that Christ's example be lived out in every minister's life. Ministers are called to servanthood ministry.