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Diakonia and the Diaconate

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IN THIS paper* we shall consider first the usage and meaning of *διακονια* and its related words in the New Testament. This will lead us on to a study of the particular office of the diaconate as it appears there. Finally we shall try to identify some of the basic theological questions which are raised by this discussion for the church today.

Diakonia in the NT

1. THE basic meaning of the *διακονια* group of words is 'humble service', particularly that of waiting at table. This was the common usage in secular Greek, though there were also technical and religious usages, which we shall note later. But it is significant that to the Greek, the idea of *διακονια* was menial and degrading. Plato speaks of it as *δουλοπρεπης* 'fit only for a slave', and *ἀνελευθερος*, 'not becoming for a free man'. (This usage, devoid of any special theological content or derogatory overtone, also occurs in the NT, particularly in the gospels; e.g. the wider sense, of any service—Lk. 8: 3, Matt. 22: 13; the narrower sense, of service at table—Mk. 1: 31, Lk. 12: 37, 17: 8, etc.). Of this group of words, *διακονεω* does not occur at all in the LXX; *διακονια* twice only, both times in this secular sense; and *διακονος* also very infrequently and only in the same sense of any humble service. Nevertheless, although there is no *linguistic* precedent in the Greek OT for the theological usage of *διακονια*, the theological idea itself is not lacking there. It is, however, expressed by the Greek word *δουλος*, as a translation for the Hebrew *ebed* in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah and other passages. There of course it has none of the contemptuous overtones of the classical Greek usage.

2. Secondly, the use of these words in the sayings of our Lord. The fact that they took on a completely new meaning and a rich, deep theological content in the NT is due precisely to the creative and original usage of Christ himself, in the interpretation of his own person and mission. In Lk. 22: 24-27, when the dispute about greatness broke

* Originally read to a theological consultation of the CSI held at Tirumaraiyur. It will be published here in two parts.

out among the disciples at the Last Supper, Christ challenges and reverses their ideas about greatness by pointing to the fact that *he himself* is present in their midst 'as the one who serves', *ὡς ὁ διακονῶν* (Lk. 22: 27). Thus in direct contradiction to Greek ideas, he holds up before the disciples the figure of the servant, engaged in concrete humble unassuming service, as the ideal for the children of the Kingdom. The other fundamental text under this heading carries us even further. In Mk. 10: 35-45, another instance of the disciples wrangling about precedence in the Kingdom, Christ again holds up the figure of the *διακονος* as the ideal of discipleship. The basis for this reversal of human values is given in 10: 45: 'for the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many', *οὐ διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι*. In the Lukan text, when Christ describes himself as *ὁ διακονῶν*, he may have been referring to his service rendered at the meal, perhaps even to his washing of the disciples' feet, though Luke does not himself record that. Or he may have been referring more widely to the whole of his life of humble, loving service among them. In Mark it is quite clear. There is no meal context here. 'I came to serve,' he says. The whole purpose of his coming, of his earthly life and ministry can be summed up under this one word, *διακονῆσαι*—to wait upon men as they sit at table, but in an infinitely enriched and deepened sense. And this service finds its culmination and fulfilment in his laying down his life as a ransom for many. Sacrificial service to the point of death is the concrete example of the Master. At this point, in spite of the absence of precise lexical affinity, we may detect the influence of the OT idea of the Servant, expressed here in the Greek terminology not of *δουλεία* but of *διακονία*.

3. The third step in our study is to observe how the idea of *διακονία* is carried over from Christ to the disciples and the church. We have already seen how in the terminology of *διακονία*, Christ pointed his followers to the way of sacrificial service, abandoning all forms of worldly ambition and self-assertion. They are to be *διακονοι*, or *ὡς διακονοῦντες* (Lk. 22: 26f, Mk. 9: 35, 10: 43, Matt. 23: 11). The Christian is primarily the *διακονος* of Christ, and renders service to him, as is made plain in Jn. 12: 26. The context there shows that such *διακονία* as this means following the Master—that is to say, it means hating one's own life, and falling into the ground to die. Paul thus speaks of himself and others as *διακονοι* of Christ (Col. 1: 7, 2 Cor. 11: 23, 1 Tim. 4: 6) or of God (2 Cor. 6: 4). But this *διακονία* is rendered to Christ by being rendered to others. This is made very plain in Matt. 25: 44f: "'Lord, when did we not minister to thee?' (*διηκονησαμεν*). "As you did it not to one of the least of these, you

did it not to me.” To visit the sick and clothe the naked is to render *διακονια* to Christ, who is ever present in the person of the poor and needy. In addition to these practical ways of *διακονια*, to proclaim the gospel is supremely an act of *διακονια*. Paul writes that he is a *διακονος του ευαγγελιου* (Col. 1: 23), or *διακονος δι’ ου επιστευσατε* (1 Cor. 3: 5). Not only can his own life and calling as a Christian be termed a *διακονια*, but the life and mission of the church as a whole can be described in the same way. The total ministry which the church renders to the world in the name of Christ is called *η διακονια του πνευματος* (i.e. quickened and liberated and empowered by the Spirit, 2 Cor. 3: 8), *η διακονια της δικαιοσυνης* (i.e. which announces and bestows righteousness or justification, ib. 9), *η διακονια της καταλλαγης* (i.e. which announces God’s reconciling act in Christ and calls men to appropriate it, ib. 18). If it were to be objected that these passages in 2 Cor. refer solely to the special ministry of the apostles, there is still ample ground for affirming that such a *διακονια* is committed to the church as a whole. We may cite particularly Eph. 4: 12 (equipping the saints *εις εργον διακονιας*) and Rev. 2: 19 (‘I know your works . . . and your *διακονια*’); also Heb. 6: 10, where the Hebrew Christians are said to have showed love to God’s name by ministering to the saints (*διακονησαντες τοις αγιοις*). We may sum up this section by saying that as Christ came to fulfil a *διακονια*, or to be a *διακονος*, so the church as a whole and each Christian individually is sent to fulfil a *διακονια*. This involves humble service to the point of death, in seeking to meet the needs of the world in all their various forms.

4. Fourthly, within this one general apostolic *διακονια* of the whole church, there are specific, particular functions which can be termed *διακονιαι*, committed to individuals. Here the basic text is 1 Cor. 12: 4ff: ‘Now there are varieties of gifts (*χαρισματα*), but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service (*διακονιαι*), but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one’. In this passage Paul emphasises that in the one body of the church, there are many limbs, each with a different function. All the functions are dependent upon the gracious gift of the One Spirit, and all are equally essential to the healthy and harmonious operation of the whole. That is to say, within the one total *διακονια*, each member has his own differing individual *διακονια*. Later in the same chapter, Paul gives a list showing what are some of those personal ministries, endowed by the Spirit: ‘God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues’ (1 Cor. 12: 28). In the light of the previous passage, all these can be called *διακονιαι*. Among them, apostleship

holds the primary place, since it is through their testimony that the church comes into being. Paul thus speaks of his apostolic ministry as a *διακονία* (Acts 20: 24, Rom. 11: 13), and Peter uses the same expression in Acts 1: 17, 25. The ministries of Timothy (2 Tim. 4: 5) and of Archippus at Colossi (Col. 4: 17) are also termed *διακονίαι*.

5. Within the multiplicity of varied *διακονίαι*, some are *διακονίαι* in a special sense in contradistinction to all other particular ministries. Thus in Rom. 12: 6ff, again in the context of teaching about the body of Christ, Paul writes as follows: 'Having gifts (*χαρίσματα*, cf. 1 Cor. 12: 4) that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service (*διακονία*), in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness'. Here among the various *χαρίσματα*, which in 1 Cor. 12 were also called *διακονίαι*, one particular *χάρισμα* receives the name *διακονία*. If we ask what form of ministry this word here denotes, as distinct from other ministries, we may assume from the basic meaning of the word that some practical service is referred to, in contrast to the ministry of the word denoted by prophecy, teaching and exhortation. This assumption is confirmed when we look at a second passage under this head, 1 Peter 4: 10f: 'As each has received a gift (*χάρισμα*), employ (*διακονούντες*) it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: (11) whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God: whoever renders service (*διακονία*), as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies'. Here first we notice in verse 10 the conjunction of *χάρισμα* and *διακονία*: all ministry depends on the gift of God's grace. In that verse, *διακονέω* is a general word for the exercise of any of the several ministries exercised within the church. Then in verse 11, two examples are given of the *χαρίσματα* or *διακονίαι*: one is speaking the word of God, and the other is plain *διακονία*. Here this can only mean practical service, in contrast to the ministry of the word (cf. Acts 6: 1-4; also perhaps 1 Cor. 16: 15f). So in these two passages, *διακονία* indicates the humble ministry of service, as one among the many *διακονίαι* which go to make up the one total *διακονία* of the church.

6. Notice two special instances of practical service exercised within the church which are denoted by the words of the *διακονία* group. (i) The first is the collection for the poor saints of Jerusalem. This first appears in Acts 11: 29 where we read: 'And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief (*εἰς διακονίαν πεμφθαι*) to the brethren who lived in Judaea', cf. Acts 12: 25. The use of the word in this context characterises this as a piece of humble service

rendered by one group of Christians to another in the name and spirit of Christ, to help meet their physical needs. We may note the part played by the Holy Spirit here in the role of the prophet Agabus. The same terminology and the same ideas recur in the context of the collection organised by Paul among the Gentile churches as a means of cementing the bond between Jewish mother church and Gentile daughter churches within the Christian family. 'I am going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints (διακονων τοις ἁγιοις),' writes Paul in Rom. 15: 25; and in 15: 31 he appeals for prayer 'that my service (διακονια) for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints'. The same vocabulary occurs most frequently in 2 Cor. 8-9, where Paul treats the subject more fully. (ii) The second particular form of practical service denoted by this word group is concerned with the practical, personal service rendered to the apostle Paul by his followers. We find the verbal form in Acts 19: 22: 'And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, Paul himself stayed in Asia for a while'. 'His helpers' are οἱ διακονουντες αὐτω, and it is implied that there was a body of men who served Paul thus. We may compare the same usage in connection with the women who served our Lord (Lk. 8: 3 etc.). Elsewhere Paul uses similar language of Onesimus (Phm. 13), Tychicus (Col. 4: 7), and Mark (2 Tim. 4: 11). In these passages we have come back almost full circle to our first point, where διακονια simply meant humble service rendered by servant to master. But there is one important difference from the secular usage: this is διακονια ἐν Κυριω, service motivated and empowered by the Servant Lord himself within his body, the servant church. Moreover, we may perhaps conjecture that the relation of διακονος to apostle here distantly foreshadows the relation of deacon to bishop in the developed hierarchy of the early catholic church. And that brings us at length to the diaconate as a distinct office in the NT. We must not think that all the preceding material has been irrelevant or merely introductory. It is from this rich background that the office of deacon draws its essential meaning and content, and it can only be understood within this theological context.

The Diaconate in the NT

THE material concerning the diaconate as a distinct office in the NT is not abundant. It consists in three passages, which we must now briefly examine.

1. Acts 6: 1-6: In Christian tradition the seven men appointed here to supervise the daily poor-feeding are taken as prototype deacons, in the technical sense. Certainly all the marks of appointment to office

seem to be present. But there are several factors which give rise to doubt whether we can simply speak of these men as 'deacons' and identify their office with the later diaconate. (a) Firstly, the term *διακονος* is never applied to them. Certainly their main task is supervision of the daily *διακονια*, and their appointment is to 'serve tables' (*διακονειν τραπεζαις*). But in this very passage, the ministry of the apostles is also called *διακονια* (6: 4, *διακονια του λογου*). (b) Further, the task in which they engage is not limited to serving tables. In the following chapters Stephen and Philip engage in the work of preaching, disputing and baptising along with the Twelve, though not with the same plenipotentiary authority, cf. 8: 14ff. (c) Again, when we note that all the Seven were themselves Hellenists, as their names show, there is room for supposing that their function included in some way the representation of the Hellenists in the leadership of the church. From the accounts of the work of Stephen and Philip it is clearly apparent that these men brought to their ministry special insights into the universality of the gospel message. Even if these men are not proto-deacons, then, Luke records their appointment in such a way as to make clear some relationship to the deacons of later times. We may say that very early in the church's history formal provision was made for the exercise of *διακονια*, in the sense of ministry to the poor and needy, as distinct from ministry of the word. This was done in response to a particular need within one local community. But there is no further mention of them or any successors in the later history of the Jerusalem church in the NT, even where such mention might be expected (e.g. Acts 11: 30). Further, those who were appointed to bear this responsibility are also seen exercising other *χαρισματα* to good effect: there is nothing static or mutually exclusive about these functions (cf. Rom. 12: 6ff).

2. Phil. 1: 1: Here Paul and Timothy send greetings 'to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons' (*συν επισκοποις και διακονοις*). Here it is probable that the two words *επισκοπος* and *διακονος* denote specific offices within the Philippian church. By the word *επισκοπος*, we must not understand the monarchical episcopacy of later times: the word as used here is itself plural, showing that there was more than one *επισκοπος* in the Philippian community—a collegiate *επισκοπη*, we may say. The evidence of other parts of the NT suggests that *επισκοπος* and *πρεσβυτερος* were in fact alternative titles for one office (Acts 20: 28, Titus 1: 5-9). So the Philippian *επισκοποι* may be taken as the equivalent of the presbyteral colleges of which we read elsewhere. At least, there is no mention of *πρεσβυτεροι* at Philippi as an office distinct from that of *επισκοπος*. We may say that at this stage, there was a pastoral

office in the church, subordinate to the apostles, but that no one title for it was universally in vogue (cf. the lists of 1 Cor. 12: 28, Eph. 4: 10f). With these ἐπισκοποὶ are associated διακονοὶ. This association of bishop and deacon also occurs in 1 Tim. 3 and in the sub-apostolic church (see also above, A.6.(ii)). Their number is uncertain, but at least there is a plurality. Their functions are equally uncertain, though it has been suggested that since the purpose of Paul's letter is to say 'thank you' for the Philippians' financial help, the officers here mentioned are likely to be those responsible for church finance and administration. Perhaps; we cannot be sure. That is certainly what we should expect from later Christian usage, but we must be cautious about reading back into the NT ideas and practices which were current at a later date. At least, we may conclude that at Philippi a church order had emerged which included a group of men who were responsible for διακονία, alongside another group which was responsible for ἐπισκοπή. The use of the term διακονος to denote them strongly suggests that they were the holders of some more or less formal office.

3. 1 Tim. 3: 8-13: Here the author gives a list of the qualifications necessary for a deacon. This unquestionably presupposes that there was in the Ephesian church by this time a distinct office of that name. Since they are mentioned in the plural (3: 8), we may conclude that there were a number of them. Here too we find the deacons associated with the ἐπισκοποὶ, whose qualifications are set out in the preceding verses (3: 1-7). It cannot be certainly decided whether there were just these two offices in the church, or whether there was a separate order of πρεσβυτεροὶ as well. In 5: 17ff, we read about the remuneration and discipline of officials called 'πρεσβυτεροὶ', but it is at least possible that they are to be identified with the ἐπισκοποὶ of chapter 3. In that case, we have here another example of a church with a two-tier ministry, consisting of presbyter-bishops and deacons. What are the functions of the deacons? We are not told. We can only guess, on the basis of the list of qualifications given. Apart from spiritual qualities and a regular family life, we notice particularly that they must not be double-tongued or greedy for gain (3: 8). On the assumption that their function may have given them special opportunities or temptations for indulging in these vices, we may guess that they were engaged in some form of pastoral work or house-visiting, perhaps caring for the sick and needy, and in the administration of finance.

In an attempt to ascertain the origin of the diaconal office, let us now probe a little behind the NT documents to see whether similar forms occur in Jewish or Greek society. If such parallels can be found, it may be conjectured that they played a part in influencing the development of the diaconate within the Christian church. First in the Jewish synagogue, there were two associated offices of the ruler of

the synagogue and the attendant. It has been suggested that these form a parallel to the Christian conjunction of ἐπισκοπος and διακονος. But there are important differences which forbid the drawing of a parallel here. First, in Hellenistic Jewry, the attendant is called ὑπηρετης, never διακονος. Further, the attendant of the Jewish synagogue only played a role in worship, not in pastoral service nor in administration, which was in the hands of the elders (πρεσβυτεροι). Neither here nor in the Levites can there be any exact model. As far as the Greek background is concerned, as we have already seen, διακονος was the general term applicable to any menial servant. It only occurs rarely as a title of an office, then as a subordinate official in charge of practical administrative affairs, either for some secular body or occasionally for some temple or religious association. In no case does it occur in that close association with the ἐπισκοπος which we have seen to be characteristic of the NT. No close parallel to the NT diaconate can be found here. In view of this, we must say that the Christian diaconate owes its nature and content not to any non-Christian precedents, but to the distinctive character of the gospel itself. New bottles had to be created for the new wine. The name indeed may come from Hellenism, but it was a name empty of theological or religious associations, which the church was able to fill with a rich new meaning. The idea of διακονια is inherent in the person and work of Christ himself, and in the gospel. If it was to find formal expression in the structure of the church, there were no existing forms that could properly embody it. The gospel itself creates its own structures and expressions, appropriate to particular situations at particular times, in conformity with its own distinctive and revolutionary essence.

(To be continued)