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Diakonia and the Diaconate

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In our earlier article* we sought to show what the NT says about the office of deacon. It may be summarized thus:

(i) this office is found at Philippi and Ephesus, but not to our certain knowledge anywhere else; the Jerusalem phenomenon cannot be placed in this category.

(ii) where this office is mentioned, it is always in the plural, indicating a plurality of deacons: there may possibly have been seven as Luke records of the Jerusalem church and as we see in later times.

(iii) the deacons are always mentioned in connection with the 'bishops', and these two offices seem to have formed a distinct church order in themselves in some Hellenistic churches.

(iv) their functions are uncertain, but it may be conjectured that they included service to the needy and financial or administrative responsibility; the precise connection between the deacon and worship seems not to be demonstrable from the NT.

The Future of the Diaconate in the CSI

LET us now identify some of the questions which arise from this study. I shall stick my neck out and add my own comments here and there.

1. Does the NT pattern of church order constitute a norm for the church for all time? Generally speaking, theologians today would give the answer 'no' to this question, partly because the NT presents us with no one system. We see a number of differing forms in process of development, still in a fluid and flexible state, subject to the fresh wind of the Spirit. But even if there was 'a NT church order', it could not form a changeless norm, because the NT doctrine of the

* The second part of a C.S.I. Theological Commission paper, part 1 of which appeared in *The Churchman*, Spring 1970.

church is part of the gospel and cannot therefore be legalized. Rather, the NT offers us principles and guidelines which must be followed in the shaping of church order in each time and place. If the NT then does not constitute a norm, church tradition certainly cannot do so.

2. If these are not norms, is the diaconate necessary for the church? Is the diaconate of the *esse* of the church? I find it difficult to give a positive answer to this question. The church is *διακονια*, we may say, but that does not mean that we need a formal office to embody it. Evangelism is equally essential to the being of the church, but we do not regard the office of evangelist as a necessary constituent of our church order. Every Christian is an evangelist. Let every Christian be a deacon.

3. We must next examine the forms which the diaconate has taken in the history of the church, and the forms in which it is exercised among us. What sort of deacons have we actually got, and what do they do? (I count that we are very fortunate in the CSI, particularly in South Tamilnadu, that both Anglican and Congregationalist forms of the diaconate should have been preserved among us. This should at least prevent our understanding of the diaconate from stagnating or petrifying, and encourage experimentation.) This will lead us on to seek for a criterion by which to evaluate those forms. Here for example is one basic question which needs to be asked: how far does our diaconate represent in India today that *διακονια* to men and women in their need to which Christ calls his people? We may also ask whether it stimulates the whole people of God to partake in Christ's *διακονια*, or whether by tending to monopolize the ministry to the needy it weakens the sense of responsibility and participation of the church as a whole.

4. What is the significance of indigenous Indian or Hindu patterns of service for the structure of the Christian church in India? We cannot attempt to answer this extremely interesting and important question until we have examined what those patterns actually are. But, without in any way wishing to prejudice discussion of that issue, I would mention one relevant point which springs directly from the subject matter of this paper. We asked how much the Christian diaconate owed to Jewish and Greek antecedents, and the answer was very little. In the light of that fact, how far may we expect the institutions of non-Christian society to shape the development of the Christian diaconate in India? In my opinion, it is the contemporary needs and demands of Indian society rather than the traditional patterns of its social or religious institutions which should be the guiding influence in the growth of our church order.

5. Finally, where do we go from here? We have inherited a set-apart diaconate in various forms: are we content with it as it is? We may want to scrap it entirely, or at least modify it drastically. Or we may be led to experiment with completely new forms. In any such re-thinking, there are one or two further issues which need clarification:

(i) is the deacon's ministry essentially one exercised within the church to fellow church members, as it seems to be in the NT, and as the other two historic ministries are; or should it be a ministry of service towards the world, taking up in concentrated form the general overall diakonia of the whole church? (Dr. Burn has taken the second line. But this raises the question how such a diaconate differs from the ministry of all other Christians, when they truly see their daily work as an avenue of service to the world in Christ.)

(ii) do we envisage the diaconate of the future as an 'ordained' ministry, or as a 'lay' ministry? By 'ordained', presumably we mean addressed by some distinctive title such as 'the Rev.', wearing some particular form of dress, such as the cassock or dog-collar, and more likely than not engaged full-time in the paid service of the church. The distinction is of course merely a sociological one, which finds no counterpart in the NT. But the way of thinking which it expresses is deeply engrained. If it is true, as I believe it to be, that we are faced with an urgent need to 'de-sacralise' the presbyterate, it would be more than folly gratuitously to create another sacral class within the church at this time. But that does not prejudice the question whether any new form of the diaconate would still qualify as the third rung in the traditional hierarchy. Surely you can have pukka historic deacons without dog-collars! The question of the deacon's liturgical functions should also be considered in this perspective.

(iii) what are the new patterns of ministry and the new avenues of service to which the church is being called by Christ through the exigencies of his mission in the world today? This must be the fundamental question. Concern with the structure of the church is a necessary pre-condition of mission, but it can become for the theological purist and ecclesiastical lawyer a way of escape from the costly demands of encounter with the world and its need. There is no benefit in tinkering with the church's mechanism just for the sake of tinkering. Only if there are pressing needs and new ventures of service undertaken in response to them, will any experimental form of diaconate in which they are embodied take root and prosper. But in fact it does not seem necessary for all such new experiments to be given formal recognition as official ministries of the church. Let not the church's leaders rush in to lay the cold hand of officialdom on all the unsung initiatives of its laymen. Tender plants often thrive the better without over-assiduous attention from the gardener!

Note

THE dioceses of Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari are the southern-most of the six CSI dioceses in Tamilnadu (formerly known as Madras State). Of these two, Tirunelveli is entirely ex-Anglican, being the fruit of the work of the CMS and the former SPG. It has retained the diaconate in its Anglican form and men are usually ordained deacons immediately upon leaving theological college, and are ordained to the presbyterate a year later. In nearly all the CSI dioceses the same pattern is followed, though in some, the ordinands are required to serve a further year or more as probationers between completion of their training and ordination as deacons (in the CSI, deacons are 'ordained', not 'made').

However in 1965, the Bishop in Tirunelveli ordained two men to the diaconate with the intention that they should be honorary and permanent. One was Dr. Robert Burn, a CMS missionary and maths lecturer at St. John's College, Palayamkottai. He had offered for ordination to the diaconate on the understanding that the diakonia to which he was called and which he was asking the church to recognise was the service rendered to the minds of his students by teaching them mathematics. This was accepted by the CSI Theological Commission and by the Bishop. After ordination, he was given a special garb to wear in church and he performs the traditional liturgical functions of a deacon. Since he feels himself to be called specifically to the diaconate, he has resolutely remained a deacon. The other man, an elderly Indian lay man, has since been ordained presbyter.

Kanyakumari diocese was entirely an LMS field, and there the Congregationalist form of diaconate is still maintained. Each congregation has a committee of seven deacons, who carry financial and other responsibilities, and wield considerable power in the life of the church. They are elected periodically by the members of the congregation, and are not ordained by the bishop. In that diocese, candidates for the ministry are ordained directly to the presbyterate without ever being deacons. Graduate ordinands are ordained immediately after leaving theological college, non-graduates after serving a three year probation. It is reported that last year the Bishop in Kanyakumari ordained to the diaconate some senior men of the evangelist grade, i.e. full-time paid lay workers. They will be the first holders of the traditional 'catholic' diaconate in the diocese, and it will not be intended simply as a stepping-stone to the presbyterate.

It is interesting to note that in Tirunelveli diocese, where a presbyter is usually called 'guru' in Tamil, deacons are officially called 'assistant gurus', but in popular speech often become, appropriately, 'half-gurus'! In Kanyakumari diocese, the congregationalist-type deacons are simply called 'deekkan', without any attempt to find a Tamil equivalent. It remains to be seen what they will call their new style 'proper' deacons.