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The Theology of the Diaconate

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I. Introduction: Historical Summary: New Testament and Early Church

The New Testament gives us only a rough and partial outline of the Church's ministry in the first century, and the task of filling in the details of the picture is inevitably precarious. In the early second century the order of deacons was already well developed in the time of St. Ignatius who constantly refers to the bishop, the presbytery and the deacons. This development must have been taking place in the first century, but the New Testament contains only one, or at most two, clear references to an order of deacons.

First, 1 Timothy 3:8-13: 'Deacons must be grave, not double-tongued, . . .' This passage speaks only of their moral qualifications and gives no hint of their functions.

The other possible reference in the New Testament to an order of deacons is Philippians 1:1: 'Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus, which are at Philippi, *σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνοις*.' It is natural to take this as referring to two orders, those of presbyter-bishops and of deacons. But there is doubt in the matter, since nowhere else does St. Paul refer to an order of deacons, whereas he uses the word *διάκονος* in a general sense, even applying it to himself (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:5; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, 25). Thus, it may well be that the phrase in Phil. 1:1 should be translated, 'bishops and other ministers'.

The common identification of 'The Seven' with the deacons is questionable. There is no mention of an order of deacons in Acts 6, and it seems impossible to treat this passage as evidence of the diaconate. For what are the facts? First, the daily poor relief is described as *διακονία*. Then the Apostles declare that it is not right for them to abandon evangelism ('the word of God') in order to 'serve tables' (v. 2); and the Seven are appointed, so that the Apostles may be free for 'the *διακονία* of the word' ('the ministry of the word'). Thus evangelism and the relief work are both alike *διακονίαι*; and the Seven are not called deacons nor is there anything to suggest that 'serving the word' was an official function. Later, when we meet one of these men, Philip, again, he is not called the Deacon, but the Evangelist, one of the Seven (Acts 21:8). Probably the Seven were temporary officials,

scattered by the persecution that was fatal to Stephen, and never re-established.

After New Testament times deacons became an order of great importance and honour. They were the personal assistants of the bishop both in the liturgy and in the administration of church affairs. The business of the diocese was carried out by a staff of deacons, attached to the bishop, and led by the archdeacon or chief deacon. The deacons were also given the duty of administering the chalice to the congregation, carrying the reserved Sacrament to the sick, reading the Gospel, baptizing in the priest's absence, and performing other liturgical functions. In ancient liturgies the deacon has his own part as well as the priest, and the Eucharist could not be celebrated properly unless a deacon was present.

In summary we may say: despite the scanty New Testament evidence, by the early second century the order of deacons was already well developed and occupied a position of great importance and honour.

II. The Threefold Ministry of Christ and His Church

The threefold ministry of the Church is the continuation of the threefold ministry of Christ Himself, who is Apostle, Priest, and Deacon. In this present age, between Christ's Resurrection and His Parousia, His ministry to the world is fulfilled through the instrumentality of His body the Church. All true ministerial acts of the Church are gesta Christi, the acts of Christ, the Head of the Body. Christ is still the one who commissions and sends the pastors of His flock (that is, Apostle); He is the celebrant at every Eucharist (that is, Priest); He is the minister of every act of loving service that His disciples perform in His name (that is, Deacon). To put this truth in another way, because Christ is the Apostle the Church is Apostolic; because He is the High Priest, the Church is sacerdotal; because He is Servant (Deacon), the Church is ministerial. The historic threefold ministry of the Church, represented by the words 'apostolate', 'priesthood', and 'diaconate', is derived from the threefold ministry of Christ. Christ Himself is our Apostle, Priest, and Deacon, and the apostolic, priestly and ministerial functions of the Church are the ways in which He works through His body in the world.

III. The Ministering Church: the Church as Servant or Deacon

The Church is ministerial because Christ is Servant or Deacon. Jesus Himself conceived of His mission in terms of service. 'The Son of Man came not to be deaconed unto, but "to deacon"' (Mark 10:45). 'I am in the midst of you as δ δ ιακονῶν' (Luke 22:27). We have good reason to think that Jesus used His self-designation of 'Son of Man' in the sense of the Isaianic conception of the Servant of Yahweh, and there can

be no doubt that His characterization of Himself as *ὁ διακονῶν* is derived, humanly speaking, from the Servant Songs (Isa. 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9 and esp. 52: 13-52, 12). In these passages the Servant of the Lord fulfils a divine mission to the world, not merely to Israel: 'I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth' (Isa. 49: 6). The mission is accomplished through suffering vicariously borne for the sins of others; and the Suffering Servant is then raised up and vindicated by God, so that those who rejected him are constrained to recognize that he has suffered for their sins and for their salvation. Jesus taught His disciples quite specifically that they also were to be servants. In the story of the Foot Washing (John 13: 1-11), which vividly illustrates the truth that Jesus is *ὁ διακονῶν*, He says to His disciples: 'If I then, the *Κύριος* and the rabbi, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye also should do as I have done to you' (John 13: 14f.). He contrasts the overbearing pride of the great ones of the secular order with the humility of the leaders of his own community: 'Whosoever would become great among you, shall be your *διάκονος*: and whosoever would be first among you, shall be *δοῦλος* of all' (Mark 10: 43).

It is not surprising therefore that the conception of Christian disciples as ministers or servants should have received great emphasis in the early Church, or that baptism into the Church should have been regarded as an ordination to the ministry of the Church (1 Cor. 12: 13 in its context). There are no 'lay' members of the Church who are without a ministry in it; the Church is a ministerial priesthood of the laity or people of God. We must not allow the development of a special order of *διάκονοι* to obscure the truth that the whole community and every individual member of it were a ministry which participated in the one ministry of Christ. There are 'diversities of ministrations' (*διαίρέσεις διακονιῶν*) in the Church, but all are performed to and through 'the same Lord' (1 Cor. 12: 5). The whole passage 1 Cor. 12: 4-30 makes it very clear that *διακονία* is not a function merely of certain 'orders' in the Church, but that every layman has his part in the total ministry of the body of Christ, which corporately through the empowering of the Spirit constitutes an organic ministry that renders service (whether *λειτουργία* or *δουλεία*) to God. All Christian ministry is the service of God and of Christ. Even the daily toil of a household slave is service rendered to the *Κύριος* in heaven and not merely to an earthly *κύριος* (Eph. 6: 5-7). The Church's ministry to the starving, the refugees, the needy, the sick or the imprisoned is service rendered unto Christ (Matt. 25: 35-45).

The primary meaning of *διακονεῖν*, like the Latin *ministrare*, is to 'wait upon', especially to 'wait at table' (cf. Luke 17: 8; Acts 6: 2). It indicates a menial office, and we should always remember that *διάκονία* (Latin, *ministerium*) is the office of a slave, Christ

is pre-eminently the Servant of God, and Christians are servants of the Servant of God. In the Old Testament, however, Servant of God was an honourable title (e.g. Gen. 26:24: Abraham; Exod. 14:31: Moses; 2 Sam. 3:18: David, etc.) and similarly in the New Testament St. Paul delights to call himself *δοῦλος Χριστοῦ* (Phil. 1) and Christians are called *δοῦλοι τοῦ Θεοῦ* (Rev. 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:22; 1 Pet. 2:16). Christ is *Κύριος* in the sense of the 'master' or 'owner' of His slaves (Eph. 6:6, 9; John 13:13) as well as in the sense of cultic 'Lord'. The use of *δοῦλος* in this connection is significant because it rules out any suggestion of merit or reward in the 'work' of Christians; the *δοῦλος* is one who by definition receives no wages; Christians are not justified by their *διακονία*, however strenuous or successful it may be. Jesus Himself actually uses the *κύριος-δοῦλος* metaphor to make this truth quite clear: 'Who is there of you, having a *δοῦλος* ploughing . . . , when he is come in from the field, . . . that will not say unto him, Make ready . . . and serve (*διακονεῖν*) me . . . ? Doth he thank the *δοῦλος* because he did all the things that were commanded? Even so ye also, when you have done all the things that were commanded you, say, We are unprofitable *δοῦλοι*; we have done that which it was our duty to do' (Luke 17:7-10). All our *διακονία* must be inspired by gratitude for the free mercy and gift of God. It is not the earning of a reward but the utterly inadequate acknowledgement of a debt that can never be paid. It is our privilege that we are made *συνεργοὶ Θεοῦ* (1 Cor. 3:9; cf. 3 John 8).

So, according to the New Testament, *διακονία* is the privilege and duty of all Christians: it is the 'ministry' of all Christians. The Church as a whole is Minister or Servant or Deacon: it is a ministering Church. The Church as a whole has a ministerial character, just as it has an apostolic and priestly character. The whole Church constitutes an apostolic and priestly ministry, in which every individual member has a share. The whole community and every individual member of it is a ministry which participates in the one ministry of Christ, who is Minister or Servant or Deacon.

IV. *The Theology of the Diaconate*

Is there, then, a theology of the diaconate, that is, a specific theology of the specialized order of deacons?

As we have seen, by far the greater number of occurrences of *διάκονος* and its derivatives in the New Testament are clearly non-technical. The words are used for any kind of 'ministry' or service, they are freely applied both to what Christ has done and to what He continues to do in His people, they are freely used of all sorts of service by all sorts of persons. *Διάκονια* is essentially the 'ministry'—the job of all Christians. When therefore it is used in a specialized sense, it is reasonable to assume that it is a delegated specialization. If, that is, certain persons within the

community are distinguished as *διάκονοι*, it is only because they are rendering, in some representative form, the service or 'ministry' which it is the vocation of every member of the whole Church to render to all who need it. But to say that is not to prejudge any issues about the origin of the specialized office of deacon, still less to suggest that the diaconate was created by mere evolution from 'below'. It is *only* to underline that *διάκονια* is essentially the 'ministry' of all Christians, and of that ministry the diaconate is a specialized instance.

Can we go further than that? Is there a theology of the diaconate as such? We submit that there is not. Historically the functions of the diaconate have varied from place to place and age to age, giving the order a greater or lesser importance; but neither in the New Testament nor in the subsequent history of the Church does there emerge a specific theology of the specialized order of deacons, apart from the simple recognition that it is part of the historic threefold ministry of the Church.

Now why is it that there is not a specific theology of the diaconate, while there are specific theologies of the episcopate and the priesthood? One answer may be that while we have sufficiently appreciated the apostolic and priestly character of the Church, we have only partially appreciated its ministerial character, or, to put it in another way, we have not fully appreciated that Christ is Servant just as much as He is Apostle and Priest. It would seem, therefore, that the best hope of developing a theology of the diaconate lies in studying afresh the New Testament conceptions of Christ as Servant and of *διάκονια* as the service or 'ministry' of all Christians, a ministry which is a participation in the one ministry of Christ; a re-discovery, in theory and practice, of the 'ministering Church', of the Church as Minister or Servant or Deacon, rendering lowly service to all who need it. With that re-discovery, in theory and practice, of the ministering Church, it would be natural to see the Church's ministerial character focused in and typified by the order of deacons, just as her apostolic and priestly character is focused in and typified by the episcopate and the priesthood respectively. It would then be realized that the diaconate is an order whose dignity and importance is comparable with that of the other two orders, for the Church is no less ministerial than she is apostolic and priestly, even as Christ is just as much Servant as He is Apostle and Priest.

We submit that it is along such lines that there could be developed a truly Scriptural theology of the diaconate, a theology which would convincingly demonstrate, in the words of the Ordinal, 'how necessary that Order is in the Church of Christ, and also how the people ought to esteem them in their office'.