

SERVICE IN CHRIST

Essays Presented to
KARL BARTH
on his 80th Birthday

Edited by
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and
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Contents

Service in Jesus Christ: Professor T. F. Torrance, D.D., Edinburgh	1
The Classical World: Professor J. B. Skemp, M.A., Ph.D., Durham	17
Old Testament: Principal N. W. Porteous, D.D., Edinburgh	27
New Testament: Reverend C. E. B. Cranfield, M.A., Durham	37
Early Church: Professor G. W. H. Lampe, D.D., Cambridge	49
Middle Ages: Professor G. Barrois, Princeton	65
Reformation:	
Luther: Reverend J. Atkinson, D.Theol., Hull	80
Butzer: Reverend B. Hall, M.A., Cambridge	89
Calvin: Professor J. K. S. Reid, D.D., Aberdeen	101
England: Professor G. W. Bromiley, D.Litt., Pasadena	110
Puritans: Reverend G. Yule, M.A., Melbourne	122
Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Professor F. Herzog, D.Theol., Durham, N. Carolina	135
Christological Understanding: Reverend W. A. Whitehouse, D.D., University of Kent, Canterbury	151
<i>Diakonia</i> in some of the Churches Today:	
Anglican Communion: The Most Reverend A. M. Ramsey, D.D., Archbishop of Canterbury	162
Roman Catholic: Monsignor H. F. Davis, Birmingham	166
Reformed: Professor J. L. M. Haire, D.D., Belfast	174
Methodist: Reverend G. S. Wakefield, M.A., B.Litt., London	182
Diakonia in Modern Conditions: Professor D. M. Mackinnon, D.D., Cambridge	190
The Church's Diakonia in the Modern World: Reverend Alan A. Brash	199
Ecumenical Diakonia: Reverend John Coventry Smith	212

Diakonia at the time of the Reformation

JAMES ATKINSON

LUTHER

1. *Diakonia as Luther inherited it*

The noble art of beggary was a legacy the sixteenth century inherited from the fifteenth. In Luther's day it had developed into a recognized trade, even an art, judging by contemporary accounts of their practices. Beggars were recognized in many cities to the extent of being taxed like any other citizen, and in 1477 in Erfurt they took tickets in the town lottery along with other citizens. Beggars stood at every church door, beggars walked the streets, beggars roamed the lanes: beggars were everywhere. They had even crept into contemporary literature as 'characters' of everyday life. Beggary was the plague of Europe.

This state of affairs had arisen partly owing to social and political causes, partly religious. Luther attributed much poverty to the rising class of rich merchants, supported by the landed gentry and monied class, who wasted the country's wealth on frivolous dress, luxury goods and exotic food and drink, as well as to the papal curia which treated Germany as a milch-cow. Both of these criticisms stand examination. Other contemporary observers blamed the German people for not working hard enough, and used to instance towns and communities where, when all the priests, nuns, mendicants, beggars and loafers were added up only about one in fifteen was working seriously and producing food and goods. They argued that the economy could not stand so many idle hands. Further, now that the trade routes to the East had been opened up, the glorious prosperity both of the rich cities of southern Germany with their transit trade, as well as of the great northern Hanseatic ports, was beginning to decline. That was not all. Gold had become a means of exchange, there developed a shortage of silver, and people experienced a mysterious and uncontrollable rise in prices. A shortage of land caused everywhere acute hardship and a paucity of food before a rising population. It was the peasant who found it hardest. Luther knew all this at first hand. His father had been compelled to move owing to land shortage, found farming impossible, and turned to metal mining. Not all had the ability, resources, or determination of old Hans Luther. Armies of people succumbed to the poverty and hardship, and simply gave in.

The gap between the rich and the poor grew wider. Butzer in Strassburg complained that nobody wanted to work at the traditional tasks, but everybody was rushing to trade and business in order to make money. Contemporary observers were unable to diagnose these problems; even present-day historians and sociologists are in little better position to understand and interpret these events. All that the sixteenth-century man knew was the tightening grip of worsening poverty.

There was another cause of the pernicious beggary of the early sixteenth century. The Church had long taught beggary as an ideal of the full contemplative life, and poverty as Christian perfection. For example, Prince Alexius chose to lie at his father's gate as a beggar rather than live in the castle rightly his own, and for this earned a universal reputation for piety. Or again, Luther tells the remarkable story that as a boy he saw the saintly Prince of Anhalt, a wretched skinful of bones, begging in the streets. The almsgiving and works of mercy of the Church of Luther's day needed this vast sink of human misery in order to exercise its charity and earn merit, and the very charity of the Church maintained this beggary. Every monastery, every hospital, gave freely and liberally without question to every person who knocked at its door: none was denied. Every Christian man felt obliged to give; not necessarily for the sake of the suffering poor, but for the sake of the giver. The impulse and the necessity lay with the giver, generally without concern for the result of his giving. The giver had given, he had earned merit: that was his life, and his religion.

2. *Diakonia as Luther conceived it*

Luther severed the very tap-root of this unwholesome growth, and it perished overnight like Jonah's gourd, at least in those territories where Luther was heeded.

It is important to bear in mind that Luther's teaching on *diakonia* was the sequel of a precise theological reformation and not a mere reformation of Church order or discipline or social practice. It was neither a return to the ways of the primitive Church of Acts, nor was it an attempt to cope with the immense social problem of beggary maintained by catholic merit-earning practice. In effect it did restore primitive convictions and practice, and it also, by its teaching on justification by faith, caused works as a means of grace to wither away and work as a means of grace to rehabilitate itself. Nevertheless these were only fruits of a profound theological revolution.

Luther's interpretation of Christianity was wholly different from that of the Church of his day, and may be seen most clearly perhaps in his controversy with Erasmus on the bondage of the will. Luther recognized that Erasmus, alone of all his contemporary opponents, had perceived Luther's real evangelical concern and did not confound the issue with discussion of indulgences and immorality and scandals. Erasmus opposed Luther in the belief that man was essentially good, would respond to the good, and by appropriate effort could attain

some fellowship with God. Luther argued, on the contrary, that man's salvation lay not with man and his works but with God and His Work: it lay wholly, utterly and only in the sovereign grace of God, free and unmerited, and that the natural man lay fast bound in sin, and was raised out of this death-dealing paralysis by the effectual calling of God in Christ. He described the error of Erasmus as *hominem praedicare*, and saw this error as both the ruin of the Church as well as the breeding-ground of all abuses and scandals. Faith to Erasmus meant, in the main, belief in man and assent to the Church's doctrines. To Luther it was a living and known assurance of a God who had shown His hand in Christ: a total recognition of man's frailty, his creatureliness, his finitude, his sin; in answer to which God of His free mercy had given Christ 'for us men and for our salvation', and had elected us to certain salvation and unwavering faith in Him.

It was Luther's Christology that made the Reformation. He argued that a man cannot talk of God until God has talked to him and declared His promise of salvation in Christ. 'When it pleased God . . . to reveal His Son in me . . . (Galatians 1^{18f.}) was Paul's beginning and Luther's. The heart of Europe was strangely warmed when it turned from seeking salvation in merit to heed salvation offered in Christ only.

This first principle of salvation in Christ alone stunned Luther when it first dawned into his searching mind. The entire New Testament lit up for him, and with that the Old. He knew that it was not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy (Romans 9¹⁶). He trembled in the realization that it had been revealed to him that the Church had lost by and large her doctrine of salvation, and with that her *raison d'être*. He grew painfully aware of the futility of monasticism, fastings, vigils, pilgrimages, expiations, ascetic practices, 'good works' . . .

It was this conviction that spelt death to a mediatorial priesthood. Mediaeval Christians were taught that the life of the soul was created, nourished, perfected through sacramental grace of which the priest was the sole purveyor. Pardon was forgiveness pronounced by the priest, grace a medicine he dispensed: the keys of heaven and hell were on the girdle of the priest. But with the doctrine of salvation in Christ alone the priest lost his role as mediator between God and man. That place could be filled only by a minister of the Word of God preaching and offering salvation in Christ only.

With the collapse of the mediatorial priesthood there collapsed the entire diaconate, deacons and subdeacons alike. Luther had no room for these minor orders, responsible for reading the Epistle and the Gospel and for being in attendance at mass. In fact, he described them as a plague in the Church. To Luther all clergy, archbishop and parish priest alike, were ministers and servants. They were called to minister the Word of God and to serve the people of God given to their charge; to nourish them with prayer and sacrament, to give general pastoral and personal oversight; to minister Christ and the things of Christ:

Therefore, the man upon whom the preaching office has been bestowed has had committed to him the highest office in Christendom. This man may, in addition, baptise, say mass, and bear all responsibility for the cure of souls. Or, if he does not want to do all these, he may keep to the preaching alone and leave baptism and all the other lesser offices to others. This is what Christ did, and Paul too, and all the apostles (Acts 4). In the light of this we see that the bishops we now have and our spiritual leaders are just painted images and no bishops at all. For they leave the highest office of the ministry of the Word, which is their only proper function, to the very lowest orders, namely, chaplains and monks, mere alms-collectors! They even leave them to do the minor offices as well, such as baptism and pastoral work. On the other hand they administer confirmation; they dedicate bells, altars and churches, none of which are Christian or episcopal tasks. They are invented out of their own heads. These men are just blind play actors. They are playing at bishops like children.

(Dass eine christliche Versammlung 1523, WA.II.415.30-416.10. See also: *De captivitate Babylonica* 1520, WA.6.564.15ff.; *Von weltliche Obrigkeit* 1523, WA.II.271.11ff.; *Vermahnung an die Geistlichen* 1530, WA.30.2.335ff.; and in many places throughout Luther's writings. Luther held to this view to the end, e.g. *Hauspostille* 1544, WA.52.587-98.)

The deacons, referred to in the quotation given, were to Luther the pastor's assistants, who in ministering to the sick, the poor, the lonely, the suffering, the workless, were doing the second great task of the Church, and further were actually freeing the true ministers for their real task:

The diaconate . . . is a ministry, not for reading the Gospel and the Epistle, as the practice is nowadays, but for distributing the Church's bounty to the poor, in order that the priests might be relieved of the burden of temporal concerns and give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. This was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 6. Therefore, whoever does not know or does not preach the Gospel is not only not a priest or a bishop but is a plague of the Church. Under the false title of priest or bishop he is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Such men oppress the Gospel. They are wolves in the fold.

(*De captivitate Babylonica* 1520, WA.6.566.34-567.5.)

It was this vital first principle of justification in Christ alone that at once caused both the collapse of the mediatorial priesthood and with it the mediaeval practices in relation to the sick and poor; and also founded the evangelical ministry with its first task the ministry of the Word and its second the care of all in need. It is essential to make one further point in this context. Justification by faith is often set against justification by works. This contradistinction is, of course, true in the relation of Christianity to Judaism, and rightly occupied the prime place in the New Testament. In Luther's day, although the Church taught meritorious works (as Judaism had done before it), the real divergence lay not in a justification by faith on the one hand and a justification by works on the other, for the word justification carries a different meaning in each case. The justification experienced by the believing sinner elected in Christ is wholly

different from that kind of 'justification' which a man feels who has performed works. Justification meant two different things to a Paul and a Gamaliel. Our conflict lies elsewhere. The counterpart of justification by faith is priestly absolution. This was why the mediatorial priesthood collapsed and in its stead stepped in a ministry of the Word. Good works were henceforth seen as a fruit of faith, as the New Testament teaches; not only the doling out of alms but in the whole giving of one's life to the well-being and welfare of one's neighbour. As Luther carefully taught in his *Freedom of a Christian Man* (1520), a man lives in Christ through faith and in his neighbour through love.

Luther therefore set the whole matter on the high plane of Christian love as the expression work of a man justified by faith. He sought to intensify and to regularize it. Already at the Leipzig Disputation, 1519, he disapproved of mendicant orders. In his *Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament and the Guilds* (1519) he advocated the establishment of a common parish chest for the aid of craftsmen when in need. In his *Address to the German Nobility* (1520) he strongly disapproved of any and every kind of mendicancy and beggary and advised every town to assume responsibility for its own poor and needy by appointing an official to advise the pastor.

Once Luther had established evangelical theology, society realized that beggary must go. A strong conscience on work had developed once Luther had demolished the idea of a 'higher' morality of 'spiritual' folk (monks, nuns, priests) and a 'lower' morality of 'secular' folk (princes, merchants, soldiers, artisans, parents). If a person was justified by faith in Christ, then in that status or relationship to God any work was God's work, whether it was ploughing the field, milling the corn, sweeping the house, or bringing up children. If that relationship were absent, then any work, even the so-called meritorious good works such as pilgrimages, endowments, etc., were futile, purposeless, unwanted by God. With this theology there was reborn a sound doctrine of work, and professional beggary, no matter how 'holy' the beggar, was disapproved, on the grounds of bad theology and harmful social practice. It was later to be severely punished.¹ Nevertheless, this treatment was meted out only to a vagrant. The evangelicals took a personal care in the sick and poor and needy who lived in their parish confines.

It was during Luther's absence at the Wartburg that Karlstadt put these principles into practice at Wittenberg in his *Beutelordnung* (1521) (Common Purse), as part of the new Church order. Unfortunately, Karlstadt was the wrong man, for all his religious work was wrecked by his 'socialism' and 'enthusiasm'. Within a year the *Kastenordnung* (common chest) followed. Influenced by this, the congregation at Leisnig, which had deposed its priest and gone

¹ There was an interesting development of this in Elizabethan poor law. The Beggars' Litany which ran 'From Hell, Hull and Halifax, Good Lord deliver us', arose from the fact that it was at both Hull and Halifax that vagrants were rigorously punished. In Halifax they were summarily put into a machine which decapitated them and at Hull publicly flogged. Vagrants did what they could to avoid Hull and Halifax and hoped God might deliver them from the third place. Chroniclers say vagrants were afraid of Hull and Halifax, but not of Hell.

evangelical, drew up an *Ordinance for a Common Chest* and submitted this for Luther's criticism. It delighted Luther and he wrote a Preface to the document in 1523.

The essence of the Ordinance was as follows. All the parish solemnly agree to choose their own pastor in accordance with Scripture. Every householder was to hear the exposition of the Word of God, and to see that all servants and children in his care were to do likewise. The whole parish was resolved to put down all sin, vice, drunkenness and immorality. Then the care of the common chest was regulated. All churchly incomes had to go into this chest. Over it ten wardens were to be appointed, representative of the nobility down to the peasantry. Three times a year the parish meeting was to be held, to hear the report of the wardens, transact business and elect officers. Out of the chest were to be paid the salaries of the clergy, sexton and school teachers, and their expenses of office; all care of the church property; support of the poor and needy of all classes. There was also to be a girls' school maintained (very advanced thinking). Only non-residents were expected to pay fees. The common chest should always be administered to leave some reserve for an emergency such as plague, famine or storm. If the regular income proved inadequate, powers were given to levy or tax to supplement resources.

Luther's preface approved of all this, and further advised on what to do with declining monasteries. (The whole affair compares most favourably with what happened in England under Henry VIII and Cromwell, and under Edward VI and his advisers.) Luther counselled the taking over of these properties by the temporal authorities. Remaining inmates, no matter for what reason they chose to stay, were to be generously supported for life. Those who chose to leave were to be given the means of making a fresh start in life. Needy heirs of the original benefactors were to have their needs met first. Only the remainder was to go into the common chest for the benefit of nobility and commonalty alike. Where profit had accrued from usury, that wrongful interest had to be restored. Mendicant houses were to be converted into schools for boys and girls, and sometimes into ordinary dwelling-houses. The whole programme was to be carried out in a spirit of evangelical love.

Luther was realist enough to know that his advice was a counsel of perfection. Neither the temporal authorities nor the churchmen rose to the needs of the hour: where they did, they were quickly to fall back into old ways. Luther realized here (as elsewhere) he would have to wait 'until our Lord God makes some Christians'. It was to administer this common chest in evangelical love that the Diaconate was called. So Luther determined, but we must now turn to consider how it all worked out in practice in the Reformation Church of the sixteenth century.

3. *Diakonia in the sixteenth-century Lutheran Church*

Luther's criticisms of the Church and her ways occasioned a great deal of ferment, even confusion in places. The evangelical ethic which Luther taught

needed the proper theological convictions for it to develop and grow. All too often the picture is one where the old ways and virtues had collapsed owing to reformed criticism, but the evangelical convictions had not taken their place and the last state was worse than the first. Complaints and attacks against the Church for its wealth, its buildings and its consuming interest in money had been on lips other than Luther's; for instance, Karsthans, Eckard, and Westerbürg had all spoken. Particular feeling was expressed against the pressure to coup endowments for the Church from the dying. There was also the scandal of indulgences. For instance, reformers were quick to point out that in Nürnberg in 1484 indulgences costing 20,000 gulden had been drained from the city without a pfennig left for the Nürnbergers. In 1490, 6,500 gulden had been filched, leaving this time a paltry 600 gulden for the city's needs. By 1516 the corporation had plucked up enough courage to send the indulgence-seller packing with ten gulden for travelling expenses. Complaint was now rife, and very bitter; in England, Strassburg, Germany, everywhere, the documents tell the same sad story. In 1521 students at Wittenberg rough-handled a mendicant. Their days were now over.

It should be remembered that the Church had always cared for its poor before Luther, even though it were an exercise in merit earning. The Nominalists had been more realistic, but in their case it was a political-social movement within the context of the independence of Church and State. For Luther it was a religious and ethical concern. Nevertheless, it was precisely those places which had taken the Nominalist teaching seriously which took most readily to Luther's new emphases.

For instance, Augsburg in 1522 under Oecolampadius made a firm beginning to the evangelical care of the poor. Similarly in Nürnberg in 1522 we find weekly allowances of quite surprising worth allowed to the various grades of the poor, people known as individuals to the Church, not just poor people. In Strassburg we find as early as 1523 a thorough evangelical organization under the care of a director, four assistant directors, nine church workers with twenty-one helpers. Here it was stipulated that the poor were not only to be helped materially but to be visited as persons at least four times in a year. Money, too, was collected at church services (in those familiar bags on long poles!). Similar arrangements were carried on in Breslau (1523), Regensburg (1523), Magdeburg (1524), all directly owing to the new evangelical theology. In all this Luther emphasized the necessity of the prior work of preaching the Word of God, and leaving all details and plans to the operation of the Spirit in the hearts of converted men. Nevertheless, he knew the necessity of organization, and as indicated earlier wrote his Preface for the Leisniger Kastenordnung while in the Wartburg.

As the old pattern was breaking up, a new pattern independent of the churches began to emerge, again owing to Luther's theology, when society itself in the form of princes and magistrates assumed some social responsibility. Luther preached the responsibility of a Christian *Obrigkeits*, and consequently much of the work began to be assumed by princes and town councillors. Nevertheless,

as far as the Church was concerned, the care of the poor had now taken on the form of early Church practice based on Acts 6. One needs to remind oneself that in those days the community was essentially a churchly unity. Modifications were made. Bugenhagen found one common chest unpractical and in 1528 ordered one for the Church and her needs and another for the poor and their needs, with deacons to manage both. *Kastenordnungen* are now general; we find them the practice in Hesse (1532) and Württemberg (1536).

The common chest was the inheritor of all the resources of the Middle Ages—everything went into it, proceeds of masses, vigils, guilds, endowments. The congregation subscribed in the *Klingelbeutel* after the sermon (as today), and this the deacons publicly put into the chest uncounted. Collections at church doors were infrequent (as today), though sometimes the deacons collected from house to house, generally in kind (fruit, vegetables, food, wine) rather than cash, and took these to the needy. Sometimes collections were taken at weddings, baptisms and funerals. Pressure to bring in a compulsory poor tax was resisted strongly by the reformers: all gifts had to be freely given from a glad heart.

The managers of the common chest were at first called deacons (on the pattern of Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3), but later *Kastenherren*. They were not in holy orders. Their duties varied, but Luther insisted that their election was the responsibility of the congregation. Most careful safeguards were made in the collection and administration of these funds. Audits were annual. No capital sum could be lent without the approval of the council. Deacons were to meet regularly and apportion the money collected. Most chests had three keys, so that the chest could only be opened collectively. (Magdeburg's chest had ten keys!)

In administering the resources of the chest the first claim was the 'deserving' poor. These people comprised unemployed or sick bread-winners, widows, orphans, spinsters, aged faithful servants, and generally meant known worthy folk fallen on hard times, age, or sickness. Vagrant scroungers, the workshy, and ne'er-do-wells were treated with firmness: help was given, but only at minimum levels with the maximum of good counsel! The deacons were always predisposed to help or even to re-establish a genuine worker. There was always a remedial touch to their activities, and where a man was the victim of his own sin, careful consideration was given as to the reformation of his character and habits. Deacons were expected to know all their needy personally, and the unknown poor needed very respectable credentials to be helped. Poor folk genuinely travelling were helped (as residents), and were not classed as vagrants. It was generally accepted as normal practice that relatives should help their own, and each had a Christian responsibility to his own neighbour, apart from the official responsibility of the deacons.

What is particularly impressive about this work is the real concern for the genuinely sick, particularly to women in childbirth. Careful allowances are given to midwives and to home help for the mother. Genuine solicitude is shown for the young, especially the neglected or orphaned. These children were schooled and trained for a trade. There is evidence of deacons asking the wealthy to pay

school fees or further education fees for bright boys, and of this being considered an honourable and Christian request. The deacons helped the girls to an honourable marriage. Prisoners and delinquents, too, were given special care, and were visited and helped by the clergy: condemned prisoners were to be given spiritual comfort and the sacrament offered them.

Deacons had to keep records in books, and the poor on the books were helped weekly (in money or kind), mostly by personal visit, sometimes in the church. Certain towns developed the practice of issuing a badge to these regular poor, but Bugenhagen thought this stigma a mark of officialdom and insisted that all help should be given from love and in utter confidence.

Efforts were made to bring the hospitals under the control of the parish deacons, but this did not work everywhere. In any case, deacons were to visit and help every parishioner in hospital and administer spiritual comfort. Bugenhagen had fine ideas on infirmaries: he organized private wards and devoted spiritual nursing, not only in the interests of the patient but to limit infection. One result of this was the founding of establishments in many cities for orphans, poor, aged seamen, unmarried women and similar groups.

Nevertheless when all this is recounted, the last word is sad. The great ideas of the Reformation were never fully appropriated by the ordinary people. Social change worked against religious change and religious enthusiasm waned. The south German towns were declining, as were the great Hanseatic cities. The Peasants' War had impoverished the land: one hundred thousand peasants had been massacred, and whole villages laid waste. The survivors were heavily fined, and those unable to pay the cruel fines were thrown out on to the streets. A succession of bad harvests from 1529 to 1536 made life desperate, and contemporary chroniclers record pathetic necessity everywhere. On this ground evangelical charity could not blossom. Further, the necessary payment of the prior claims of providing for the parson and his church, the schoolmaster and his school, and the infirm and needy poor were now beginning to strain all the resources available. There began a steady falling off, even a failing of personnel, and in times of plague or stress, the shortage was desperate and paid help had to be called in. The early zeal was cooling. And then, too, many established hospitals, brotherhoods and stifts were reluctant to sacrifice their independence to the deacons and clung to former ways. There grew a generation of reluctant rather than zealous deacons, and as early as 1536 in Württemberg we find deacons fined for refusing to fulfil their duties or attend deacons' meetings.

By the end of the sixteenth century Reformation *diakonia* had lost its soul, though when the century turned we find many 'stifts' being founded for orphans, sick, poor, widows, spinsters and others in need. Nevertheless, by the seventeenth century the Reformation Church had sunk back into the plainest pre-Reformation casuistry. The Reformation did not achieve what it set out to achieve. Yet it left stamped upon Christendom its idea of a properly co-ordinated and managed care of the poor and needy as the concern of the Church and as the responsibility of the Christian community.