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# THE SCOPE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE DIACONATE

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## OUTLINE

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The double meaning of "diakonos" and "diakonia"

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3. Charismatically the diaconate looms large
4. Spiritually this office is intense

### Suggested reading:

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March '72 On the change of name of Committee on General Benevolences  
Aug/Sep '72 same subject  
Aug/Sep '72 Albert Edwards, "To whom Do We Show Mercy?"  
June/July '73 "Diaconal Ministries"  
Oct '73 "Was Phoebe a Deacon?"  
Jan '74 Rollin Keller, p. 16  
June/July '74 Lawrence Eyres on the Elder (concerning deacons, too)

**VISITO, POTO, CIBO, REDIMO, TEGO, COLLIGO, CONDO,  
CONSULE, CASTIGA SOLARE, REMITTE, FER, ORA**

"Visit the sick, refresh the thirsty, feed the hungry, redeem the prisoner, clothe the naked take the stranger in, bury the dead.

"Counsel the perplexed, correct the sinner, comfort him who is sad, forgive the offender, bear with him who is burdensome, and pray for all men."

(memotechnic verses quoted by Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventura, and Aquinas, which latter divided the "consule" of line two into 'teach the ignorant' and counsel the perplexed. making seven parts in each line.)

Cf. G. Barrois, "On Medieval Charities," in *Service in Christ*

**The Scope and Importance of the Diaconate**

Introduction

The etymology of "diakonos" (deacon) is uncertain. A. T. Robertson sees it as composed of "dia" and "konis" so "through dust", as one who raises dust in his haste to serve. Not a bad start in showing what the meaning of a deacon is! For all the vigor and quality of the Korean churches, for example, the writer is deeply disappointed that their very numerous deacons (some churches have dozens of them) are, in the main, doing little service. To them it is too often but an honorary office and a stepping stone to the office of elder. In the West the very

idea of service is much more richly seen than in the East in our everyday language. We have table service, service stations, self-service, servicemen, and religious services. These words are, however, often weak in the images of true service to the average Christian, to the church and to the office of deacon.

The scope of service is as broad as the work of the Christian community. In fact, the Christian religion itself is presented as a service throughout the Bible in a rich variety of ways:

1. The word groups "abad", "douleuein" and "diakonein" are constantly used to show that the believer's relationship to God is one of service. The Hebrew "abad" word group broadly means to work, and, religiously, to serve Jehovah or some other god. Though subjection to the god is always involved, the word group as such does not primarily indicate subjection but rather the rendering of service, (Cf. I Kings 12:4-7). "Douleuein" both in the Septuagint and in the N. T. often represents the ideal of the whole of man's life task as rendered to God from the heart. ("Lat-reuein" and "leitourgein" generally refer to single deeds or particular functions within douleuein.") Christian freedom is not denied by the duty of service since liberty in Christ means that we willingly, in love, serve Christ and are servants of one another. Cf. I Pet. 2:13-16.

2. "Diakonein" differs from "douleuein" in that the latter depicts work from the viewpoint of obedient service to a master (usually), while the former characteristically points to the person receiving service. Thus Luke 12:37 speaks of a master performing "diakonia" service to his slaves in giving them a feast, although such service is not one owed to them, since he is their master. Nevertheless, Jesus taught that believers should be both diakonos and doulos (servers and subjects) to one another (Mt. 20:25-28. Cf. Eph. 5:21 and I Pet. 5:5). Christ himself was the diakonos par excellence, and originally so, especially when he laid down his life as a ransom. He is the suffering servant of Isaiah who accomplishes the task of redemption for us all. (The Hebrew there for servant is "ebed" from the "abad" root. The Septuagint has "pais".)

3. Some idea of the variety of appearance of the term deacon in its broad usage is seen in the following. Christ is the deacon of the circumcision (Rom, 15:8); apostles are said to have a deaconship (Acts 1:17, 25); Paul is a deacon by which others believed (I Cor. 3:5; Eph. 3:7); other preachers are called deacons (Eph. 6:6-21; Col. 1:1, 4:7). Angels are such (Heb. 1:14).

It is already evident in view of the above that there is a double use of the word deacon in Scripture. In general it refers to one who ministers, serves, functions called by that name which we discuss below. It seems almost certain that the seven men chosen and appointed

to the daily ministration for the Greek widows (Acts 6:1-7) were the first to fill that new office whose members are later called deacons. In the New Testament, as in earlier secular usage, "diakonia" in its most restricted usage means (according to Kittel) waiting at table or provision for bodily sustenance, as Luke 10:40. The basic same meaning is evidently in view when the ministrations of the angels to Jesus after the temptation are called by "the same word (verb, in this case). The word is also used for any discharge of service in genuine love. It is interesting that the apostles in Acts 6 use the same word in reference both to the seven serving tables and their own ministry of the word. The seven are to serve food physical, the apostles, spiritual.

#### I The scope of the role and service of the deacon

The following considerations argue for a broad range and scope:

1. The very name deacon itself implies that the one so called is to be in some sense a model or epitome of service, inasmuch as all Christians and all church officers are deacons in a broader sense, as indicated above.

2. The office is (Cf. DeJong, p. 155) a. Divinely appointed, b. a permanent office, c. well-defined (Rom. 12:4-8), d. ministerial and, e. fruitful unto spiritual growth and edification of the congregation, (Acts 6:7), all of which gives it potential for a wide scope of usefulness, if permitted by scriptural analogy.

3. The same spiritual qualifications are required of both deacons and elders except that the latter must also be "apt to teach" (I Tim. 3:2). Hendriksen's commentary is excellent and emphatic on this point. It would seem to follow, therefore, that deacons are fit for more than waiting on tables (Acts 6:2), and this is demonstrated in Acts 6:8, 9, immediately following, where Stephen is described as doing signs and wonders and being unbeaten in debates with opponents from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, Asia, etc. Similarly, Philip, one of the seven, preaches in Samaria (8:5), and performs miracles as well. Indeed, he may be the very one who baptizes his own converts in Samaria where he goes to preach. Who else of the believers was with him?

We should, of course, insert a caution here because it may be that there were not as yet elders appointed, making deacons the first office-bearers after the apostles themselves. Elders are not mentioned until later in the book of acts (11:30). The apostles alone are mentioned as appointing (6:3) and laying hands on the seven (6:6). It may be that the Apostles themselves

performed the function of elders at this time. Or, it may be argued that the broad and exalted functions of the seven indicates they, in effect, carried both the functions of elder and deacon at this time. As we saw above, Philip preaches (ekerusen) and apparently baptized as well. If this latter view of the seven incorporating both the function of elder and deacon is true, and it may be, this is more reason, not less, for honoring the dignity of the diaconate as having been first and most embracing of authority and function, except for apostles, in the early church. It should make us hesitate to think of deacons as primarily or basically assistants to elders. A partitioning of function does not in itself imply subordination of one of the divided functions to the other. The seven did much more than waiting on tables, the preaching, baptizing, and insuring of equity in distribution to the recipients of relief feeding are all on a spiritual level and authority level with what we today ask of elders, it would seem.

4. The conversion of a large group of priests at this time (6:7) may also indicate the impression these seven made in their performance of duty in acts of mercy as well as in other areas. Priests and Levites, according to some, did official deeds of mercy. The parable of the good Samaritan has a priest and a Levite passing by the wounded man on the roadside before the Samaritan stops and helps his traditional enemy. Was Jesus not reflecting on the particular duty of the priest and Levite in respect to the needy? It is interesting that the Jewish Encyclopedia asserts that alms, prayer and fasting constituted the three cardinal disciplines transmitted to the church from the synagogues. What the seven did must have well impressed the priests.

5. It is difficult to reduce diaconal activity to waiting on tables. Paul and his companions on his missionary journeys collected and carried offerings from the Macedonian churches for the many poor believers in Jerusalem. Certainly this is diaconal activity, but not waiting on tables. That deacons were involved in this ministry seems evident from the fact that Paul's letter to the church at Philippi (one of the Macedonian churches) is addressed to all the saints including the overseers and deacons (1:1). He addresses the deacons in no other letter, and it is the Philippian epistle in which he particularly commends their participation in the gospel, as to no other church (1:3-7 4:10-18). Therefore it seems correct to conclude that the deacons in the Philippian church are mentioned and addressed most likely because of their particular involvement in what Paul praises that church for—the ministry to the poor in Jerusalem (Cf. II Cor. 8:1-4) and help to Paul himself in his ministries (Phil. 1:3-7; 4:10-18).

One other commendation of a deacon may be the reference to Phebe in Romans 16:1 where she, if a deaconess, is so commended as a *prostatis* which Arndt and Gingrich in their lexicon render as "protectress, patroness, helper"—again, more than waiting on tables. The references to deacon in I Timothy are not of the nature of a greeting or commendation, but rather set the prerequisites for the office. Duties as such are not spelled out, but the qualifications are, and as mentioned elsewhere in this paper, almost identically those required of elders.

6. There is some reason to believe that the deacon is not merely a minister of mercy alone. Certainly that, and perhaps that above all else, but more as well. Was not the whole church at the time of the appointment of the seven sharing all their possessions for mutual help and sustenance? The seven were to wait on tables, but not because that was not being done at all, but because it was being done unfairly. The widows of the Greeks were being neglected. So it is appropriate that the newly appointed officers have the honesty and wisdom and fullness of the Holy Spirit to solve the inequity involved. Certainly serving tables as such does not require such qualifications. "The function of these officials may well have been administrative and financial" says Leon Morris in his article "Deacon" (*Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Press, 1960). In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church others are also of this mind (Rev. Albert G. Edwards, for example). The proposed *Amended Version of the Form of Government of the O. P. C.*, p. 11, says, The board (of deacons) shall oversee the ministry of mercy in the church and shall collect and disburse funds for the relief of the needy. *Other forms of service for the church may also be committed to the deacons*, (italics by T. H.)

7. There are other arguments for broadening the scope of the activity of the deacons today:

a. Phebe is called a deacon (diakonos) in Romans 16:1. Calvin considered her one in the official sense. Edmund Clowney is of the same mind, as are others. Others disagree (John Mitchell, of the Presbyterian Guardian, for example, is cautious). Henry Krabbendam of Covenant College says, "It is unlikely that Paul is referring to a fixed office: rather to her services in general. It is clear that the godly women receive recognition for their conduct and loving service. I Tim. 5:3-10. The early church did introduce the office of deaconess. While Scripture does not seem to support the practice of the early church, the church should make use of the loving service of the godly women where men by the nature of the case will be less if not ineffective." (mimeographed outline "The Office of Deacon", p. 1) Leonard Coppes, in discussing a book on the diaconate he hopes soon to publish, (there is a great need for such in our church),

has implied that women should not be deacons because deacons, like elders, have an authority role and that the same argument against women elders would apply here. Edmund Clowney, however, makes the strong point that I Tim. 3:11, if referring to the wife of a deacon, as so often interpreted, ought to follow v. 12 where the wife of a deacon is mentioned in the context of the deacon's rule of her and family. There it would be appropriate to point out of the specific qualities required of the wife of a deacon. The very logic and context argue for v. 11 being in reference not to wives of deacons but to female deacons, therefore. Where, for example, is a reference here to the requirements for the wives of elders? Verses 8 and 11 are almost parallel—v. 8 in reference to the man deacons, and v. 11, presumably, in reference to the female deacon.

b. An office in the synagogue is suggestive for the scope of diaconal activity. Mark, companion to Paul and Barnabus on the first missionary journey, is called "huperetes" to them. (Acts 13:5). Now, the functionary who received back the scroll from which Jesus read at the synagogue in Nazareth is also called by this title in Luke 4:20. The translation of the synagogue in Nazareth is also called by this title in Luke 4:20. The translation of this word as "attendant" (NAS and NEB versions) here, or as "assistant" (NEB) and "helper" (NAS) in Acts 13:5 may be misleading. In Luke 1:2 Luke uses the same term "ministers of the word" as a term of respect for those who informed him about the matters he wrote of in the third Gospel. Was Mark such a one, minister of the word to Paul and Barnabus as they went to tell of Christ to the Gentiles? He was himself an eyewitness of the passion of Christ, it seems (Mark 14:51f.). Kittel's *Dictionary* says that in Xenophon the term often means adjutant, certainly no humble body servant. It also says that the meaning of "diakonos" is closest to "huperetes". Luke the physician, accompanying Paul, is not described as ministering either as a doctor or deacon, for that matter. But he probably does perform both these functions, whether or not carrying the office, in helping in the collection for the Jerusalem poor and as researcher and writer of *Luke* and *Acts*. He even accompanied Paul in prison (II Tim. 4:11, "Only Luke is with me.")

Our own Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Committee of Diaconal Ministries, sends funds abroad, but no diaconal workers as such. The ordained ministers and wives, together with doctors, nurses, and technicians, administer these funds and materials under the Foreign Missions Committee. Would it be out of place, in Korea or in Eritrea where the work of mercy and other tasks engaged in are of a wide variety, to send deacons there with the official role of deacons?

I, for one, yearn for such helpers in Korea. The Christian Reformed Church has a denominational committee of deacons working at similar tasks, as in Korea recently, for example, and agricultural projects and various kinds of social and economic aid as well.

A note of caution should be introduced at this point. To give deacons all the work of mercy in the church or all the non-teaching and non-ruling functions, would be to take away from the other members part of their own responsibilities in fulfilling the general offices in the church which are held by every member. Each and every member is prophet, priest and king in some general sense, and we should be jealous for this fact. Some people urge strongly that a separate board of trustees should not exist apart from the deacons (or elders) on the basis of the principle that the deacons are best designed and fitted to do the job. However, following Dr. Clowney here, since the trustees are not a church office group as such, but a group required by state law to handle certain matters of property holding, there is no reason why the deacons should be exclusively saddled with his job, or the elders, either. Nor should the trustees be saddled with property maintenance since all members in some way should share in that matter.

What we have argued for, then, is a broad range for the work of the deacon, but not that he shoulder all tasks in that broad range, when help is available. The deacons give example and leadership in their specific role but do not necessarily do all the work involved. The same principle is seen when elders typify and lead in areas of teaching, but allow and encourage others to participate in the teaching work of the church as well as themselves.

## II. The importance of the diaconal ministry

1. Historically the diaconate was instituted in the New Testament church as the answer to a crucial problem of inequity which temporarily developed in caring for widows. Since the office was instituted by the apostles, and became, it appears, a permanent office, it will not do to assume that deacons are elder's assistants, especially when there may have been no appointed elders as such at that time.

2. Theologically the office focuses the church's physical responsibility in the area of *caritas*, or care. It is the community of saints acting through their representative (though not *merely* through their representative). But it is the community acting not in pride, not achieving some superior mastery over men or situations, but in humility, in love, all conscious that the need

of its needy members is the need of the whole body and the suffering of the whole body.

"But the material point has also to be considered that in diaconate the community explicitly accepts solidarity with the least of the little ones, with the "elachistoi" (Mt. 25:40, 45), with those who are in obscurity and are not of the life of human society, with fellow creatures who temporarily at least, and perhaps permanently, are useless and insignificant and perhaps even burdensome and destructive. In the diaconate these men are recognized to be brothers of Jesus Christ according to the significant tenor of the parable of the Last Judgement."

And Karl Barth goes on to say in respect to the necessary true neighborliness to be performed in and by the community:

"Woe to it if... its witness is not service in this elementary sense! For if not, even though its proclamation of Christ is otherwise ever so powerful, it stands hopelessly on the left among the goats. If not, even though its zeal in other respects is over so ardent, it is on the steep slope which leads to eternal punishment." *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, p. 891.

3. Charismatically the diaconate also looms large. In I Corinthians 12:28ff. where Paul seems to list the gifts in order of value ("covet earnestly the best gifts"), "helps" appears ahead of governments and tongues. The Greek here is "antilempseis" and would appear to refer to the diaconate. In Romans 12:6ff. service (diakonia) is in second place immediately after prophecy, there being no mention of the apostolic gift there. In Ephesians 4 the role of the gifts is for perfecting the saints and, note 4:12, for the work of the ministry (ergon diakonias), as well as the perfecting and edifying aspects. The specific office is not mentioned as such but the diaconal purpose of the gifts are clearly indicated.

4. Spiritually this office is critical and intense. Too often it is not so considered. John Murray in his superb commentary on Romans 12:6ff. says:

"Since this office is concerned with material and physical benefits it is liable to be underestimated and regarded as unspiritual. Hence the office is neglected. The other evil is that for this reason the deacon is liable to arrogate to himself other functions that appear to offer more profitable service. Both neglect and presumption are to be shunned; let the deacon devote himself to the ministration which his office involves. In the proper sense the work of this office is intensely spiritual and the evils arising from underestimation have wrought havoc in the witness of the church." pp. 124f.

In our own Orthodox Presbyterian Church, there has sometimes been a serious neglect of the

diaconate, both at home and abroad. Although I do not know what the local churches give for diaconal work in their own parishes, the amount sent abroad in proportion to the amount sent abroad for maintenance of preaching and teaching missionaries is very, very small. And I have never heard anyone taking account of the ratio in a serious way, not read anything on it. I am completely convinced that John Murray is correct when he speaks of havoc wrought in the *witness* of the church because of the underestimation of this ministry. And yet it was precisely that we might have a strong *witness* ministry that money is urgently sought in large amounts to send preachers and teachers, of whom I am one myself. Surely there is a better way, a better proportion to be sought. To the Jews Jesus appealed to them to believe in his works, if they believed not in his words. Let our works always join our words in our manifestation of truth and love.

### 高麗神學大學 論文集 (제 5 집)

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印刷	1977年 4月 20日
發行	1977年 4月 30日
發行人	吳 秉 世
編輯	高麗神學大學 出版部
印刷所	亞 成 出 版 社

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本 論文集은 研究科 學生會 協助로 이루어 졌음