A Basic Impediment to a Theology of Diaconate

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Recently Esko Ryökäs asked my opinion of the book *The Deacon Reader* edited by James Keating and published in 2006 by Paulist Press of New York. In doing so, he alluded to his own advanced research project into the rationale supporting the ecclesial status and pastoral role of deacons in late antiquity. Among influences driving his project are uncertainties that began emerging within the strong Nordic deacon communities in regard to the validity of their understanding of the office of deacon. These uncertainties arose, quite slowly at first, largely in reaction to a new semantic profile provided for the early Christian Greek terms for deacons and their activities in my research volume of 1990, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. This semantic profile was enhanced in subsequent publications, and endorsed by a similar semantic investigation and important pastoral applications published in 2007 and subsequently by Anni Hentschel of the university of Frankfurt.

The caritative dimension of theology of diaconate

The novelty of the newly developed profile achieved a certain notoriety in 2000 in German-language theology through an article by Hans-Jürgen Benedict and in the Netherlands through regular commentary by Bart

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1 The project is amply reported under his name on the web.

4 H.-J. Benedict, ‘Beruht der Anspruch der evangelischen Diakonie auf einer Missinterpretation der antiken Quellen? John N. Collins Untersuchung ”Diakonia”’,
Koet. Nonetheless, in Germany in particular, with its many schools of ‘diakonic’ studies, no academic review of the 1990 research volume appeared in the decade prior to Benedict’s intervention. In fact, this intervention was itself occasioned by Benedict’s participation in a deacon conference in Finland where he was confronted for the first time with the new linguistic research in a lecture by Kjell Nordstokke of Oslo. Just prior to this, Sven-Erik Brodd of Uppsala, in reporting on deacons in the Church of Sweden, had anticipated that problems arising for the Lutheran tradition of deacons from the new interpretation of the *diakon*-terms would be ‘the focus of future debates’.

The accuracy of this forecast soon appeared questionable. Brodd had in mind the traditional focus of churches upon the essentially charitable or caritative function of the diaconate. At the beginning of the 21st century even Danker’s third English edition of Bauer’s classic *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, which had done much to propagate the new semantic profile, did little to dislodge the emphasis upon a supposed caritative dimension of the *diakon*-terms. The elimination of the caritative dimension remains, nonetheless, a central element in the reconfiguration of the semantic range of *diakon*-terms by Hentschel and myself, that dimension never having been registered in any instance of *diakon*-terms across the long history of their usage from their appearance in the era of Herodotus to that of Byzantine Christian writers.

**The mandatory dimension of ancient diakonia**

By contrast with the traditional caritative semantic value that has been enshrined in modern diaconates since the German evangelical initiatives in the middle of the 19th century, the Collins-Hentschel focus has been
on the ecclesial and mandatory character of any activity expected of a deacon, whatever may be the character of that activity (e.g., liturgical, pastoral, caritative…) The mandate will originate within the community’s own sense of its response to the gospel, although it is likely that in many churches a churchwide mandate would overtake such a simple scenario and see to the creation of a diaconal office that has recognizably churchwide relevance and credentials.

Since my own tradition is Roman Catholic – as experienced (it is probably significant to note) in Australia, where that tradition has little sense of its own inbuilt creative potential but, instead, appears to operate under an overbearing drive to seek conformity with indications of doctrine and praxis originating in the Vatican without reference to the circumstances and resources of its own people – I have had little exposure to the attempts of a minority of dioceses in this country to establish the permanent diaconate as part of the legacy of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). What has been evident in the course of the last 20-30 years, however, is that training programs for our miniscule numbers of candidates in a minority of dioceses are heavily dependent upon the letter of the law (e.g., Lumen gentium 29), even when official statements of roles are actually presented simply by way of illustration. As well, the process has been heavily imbued with the spirit of clericalism and hierarchy that has encumbered Roman Catholic pastoral practice for centuries.

The US input
In addition, within the English-speaking world, the theological output on diaconate has been dominated by publishing houses in the United States, a province within Catholicism that early availed itself of the new pastoral initiative represented by the permanent deacons, and whose 15,000+ deacons constitute more than one third of Roman Catholic deacons worldwide. This statistic represents a notable boutique market for publishers, and their authors tend to develop views on pastoral practice based on the simple threefold scheme outlined in Lumen gentium 29, i.e., ‘the diakonia [named ‘service’ in the standard translation] of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity’.

In this identification of deacons’ ecclesial roles, the mention of the codeword diakonia has heavily coloured whatever else the Council’s document was intending to say about the role of deacons. Such is the power of the notion of diakonia that emerged from the 19th century founding initiatives in Germany. When, instead, theologians and bishops

10 Paulist Press in particular; see the listing of ‘The Paulist Press Deacon’s Library’ consisting of 8 books between 2004 and 2006
should be looking to the three sectors of ecclesial life designated as ‘liturgy’, ‘the Gospel’, and ‘works of charity’, the last named has remained as constituting in practice the quintessential role of the deacon. We see this capturing the focus of even so prominent a theologian as Cardinal Walter Kasper – an eminent patron of the German Catholic diaconate – who, in 1997 at a singularly important international meeting on the diaconate in Bressanone, identified the threefold role of deacons as ‘liturgy, preaching, and diakonia’. Once published, this article became one of the most widely read and cited documents on the identity of the diaconate in the modern Roman church.

The International Theological Commission
The same mistaken emphasis underlies the workings of the document on the diaconate – over ten years in the making (1992-2002) – of the Vatican’s International Theological Commission. A member of the 7-member subcommission of ‘experts’ that signed off on this ‘historico-theological research document’ was Gerhard Müller, presently Cardinal Prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In his own previously published study of the diaconate (1997), he had opened his account under the heading ‘Ursprung in der Diakonia Jesu Christi’, expanding on this in a paragraph headed ‘Christus als Diakon’ and beginning:

Der Kyrios aller ist der diakonos aller. Gott, der Herr, begegnet uns im Gottesknecht. Jesus Christus, der Vaters eigener Sohn (Röm 1:3), der in der morphe theou war, hat die ihm wesenseigene Gottheit nicht festgehalten… ‘bis zum Tod am Kreuz’ (Phil 2:7f).

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13 ‘Der Sakramentale Diakonat’ in Priestertum und Diakonat (Freiburg: Johannes, 2000) 150-87 citing 150.
These lines of 1997 by Müller reappear verbatim in the opening of the German translation of the ITC document,\(^\text{14}\) thus illustrating the influence wielded by Müller on the formulation of the final version of the ITC document as well as on the foundational importance which the ITC itself affixed to this basically 19th century German understanding of *diakonia* in the New Testament as an expression of lowly and loving service to others. Indeed, in the foreword to the German translation Müller attributes this character of *diakonia* to the initiative undertaken by the Divinity itself in regard to human kind. We read:

Christliche Existenz ist Anteilhabe an der Diakonia, die Gott selbst in Christus den Menschen geleistet hat, und damit auch Verweis auf das, was Erfüllung und Vollendung des Menschen bedeutet.\(^\text{15}\)

In contrast with the assuredness of such assertions, the actual lexicographical report on the *diakon-* terms in the ITC document is extremely brief and superficial in spite of being presented under the heading ‘Difficulties in terminology’. Reference here is to Beyer in TWNT and to other exclusively German commentary, this including one substantial citation from Ernst Dassmann’s *Ämter und Dienste in den frühchristlichen Gemeinden* which is simply a restatement of Eduard Schweizer’s lexical description of the *diakon-* terms in *Church Order in the New Testament* from forty years previously.\(^\text{16}\)

**diakonia and douleia**

Even such a brief critique of the ITC document points to the enormous importance attributed to the terminology associated with deacons and the diaconate. A significant voice in the United States at this juncture is that of William Ditewig, formerly Director of the US bishops’ Secretariat for the Diaconate, who has published and lectured widely on diaconal theology in the context of contemporary pastoral needs. So strong is the semantic connection he assumes to exist between the Greek *diakon-* terms, especially as they appear in passages like Mk 10:42-45, and lowly loving service that he assumes any mention of the term *diakonos* is but an alternative theological term for the Greek term *doulos/slave* in the hymn cited in Philippians 2:5-11.


\(^{15}\) *Der Diakonat*, 7.

This hymn depicts the Christ figure discounting his divine prerogatives in order to take up a human role of humbling himself like a slave to undergo death on a cross. The hymn presents the process as a *kenosis* or ‘emptying’, and employs the image of the stateless slave (*doulos*) to mark the level of humanity to which the Christ is willing to reduce himself. By making this *douleia* (slavery) equivalent to the *diakonia* (service) to which the Christ commits himself in Mark’s gospel (10:45: ‘the Son of Man came … to serve/diakon-’), Ditewig aligns himself with those who, since the middle of the 20th century, have identified ministry/diakonia within the church as a call to lowly, self-effacing service to humanity.

**Lowly service and footwashing**

The re-interpretation of *diakonia* in the Collins/Hentschel synthesis is to be understood as having totally discredited this semantic attribute of ‘self-effacing service’, but within deacon circles and indeed often at the highest levels of ecclesial pastoral exhortation the conviction remains that the authenticity and effectiveness of pastoral activity is dependent on the authentic quality of a *diakonia/service* supposedly endorsed by the gospel. Thus Ditewig locates the diaconate at an ecclesial level where deacons are ‘the soul of the Church’s own identity of *diakonia*’.

If diaconate is not to be identified as the church’s arm of social care, neither is its logo appropriately the widespread image of the jug and

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20 A seemingly solitary voice in the United States supporting this hypothesis on the basis being argued here is that of Richard R. Gaillardetz in the short paper ‘On the Theological Integrity of the Diaconate’ in Cummings, Ditewig, Gaillardetz, *Theology of the Diaconate* (note 17 above), 67-97. I am not aware of any attempt among US theologians and directors of diaconate programs to support Gaillardetz’s advocacy of the re-interpretation of *diakonia* in relation to the diaconate.
towel used in the liturgical washing of feet on Maundy Thursday. The scene depicted in John’s gospel (13:1-17) does not invoke any diakon-term (but note the occurrence of doulos/slave at v. 16) nor could it have done because the washing of feet is not an activity that falls within the semantic range of diakon-terms. The term diakonia could appear only in the sense of ‘commandment/mandate’ but, when John writes later of the ‘new commandment’ of love (v. 34), he uses the term entolē (the Greek term from the Mosaic code, Deut. 6:1), a notion reflected in the old English word ‘maundy’ from the Latin mandatum/command.

Theological distortions
In the context of such misunderstandings and misuses of diakon-terminology in relation to the diaconate, we appear to be able only to lament the theological distortions which have been visited upon the tens of thousands of idealistic and committed Christians who have sought to be instituted as deacons within their communities. Few only will have been those candidates who escaped a diakonic context of ministry as described in the following paragraph by Kenan Osborne, the widely read historian of Christian forms of ministry:

Service is the foundation of Christian ministry. The icon of the foot-washing and the New Testament word of the Lord on service remain the foundational source for the spiritual and theological growth of all Christian ministries. Even the very term ministry is the English translation of a widely used New Testament term: diakonia. The very name deacon reminds the permanent deacon today to be a servant-minister.21

It is not at all fair if I appear to have singled out William Ditewig and Kenan Osborne for criticism on these issues. Both scholars have done much to draw aspirants to ministry closer to the ecclesial context – both past and present – of their declared avocations. The underlying problem I have sought once again to expose within a brief survey is, however, so profound in my view and so gross in its theological entanglement that nothing will change for the enrichment of the churches’ ministries, I believe, until issues raised here are acknowledged as harmful to the life and ministerial equipment of Christian communities in an era, especially, when the integrity and authenticity of ecclesiastical institutions is under such widespread suspicion.

A disturbing by-product of the promotion of diakonia as an exclusively Christian designation of the kind of service which characterises a follower of Jesus the Servant/diakonos and constitutes the mission and ministry of the churches’ servant leaders is that whenever Christians encounter the diakon-/servant terms in the New Testament they will be reading into the terms values of loving service that the terms are not meant to convey. A striking illustration of such eisegesis is the way some more recent bible translations interpret the instance of the solitary diakon- term in the parable of the judgement of the nations (Mt 25:31-46). Here the king passes judgement upon those in the kingdom who had not assisted others in need. The condemned immediately protest to the king, ‘When was it that we … did not take care of/diakon- you?’ (NRSV; alternately, CEV: ‘when did we fail to help you…?’) The passage has been called the locus classicus of diakonia as an expression of helping the sick, the destitute, the abandoned. But the reason the diakon- term appears in the narrative is simply that the condemned members of the kingdom are addressing a king and thus employ the terminology of courtly service. The usage here has nothing at all to tell us of any semantic connection between the diakon- terms and caritative activities. Such misreading of the terms can have a profound impact upon our understanding of passages of christological import – pre-eminently the mission of the Son of Man (Mk 10:45) – and equally in regard to the foundational ecclesiological issue of the role of the ‘ministry’, as often in Paul’s rhetoric on his ministerial engagements (e.g., 2 Cor 5:18).

**Conclusion**
In conclusion, I repeat the views with which I closed my recent book, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry*:

So long as the inflated and unfounded values that are associated with the German term Diakonie remain tied to the Greek word diakonia of the New Testament, it seems to me we are going to be in bondage to a distorted view of the nature of the diaconate and to be constrained to limit the scope of deacons’ pastoral potential. My broad views on that potential form the concluding pages of my 2002 book *Deacons and the Church: Making connections between old and new.*

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22 Consult the biblical index to *Diakonia* or *Diakonia Studies* for exegetical comment on such passages.
23 *Diakonia Studies* 263. *Deacons and the Church* (see note 2 above) 118-44.