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How might there be a Biblical Diaconate in the Church of England?

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There is much confusion, indeed frustration, in the Church of England over the role of the diaconate today. For a hundred years or more it has been stated that the diaconate has become merely a stepping-stone to the presbyterate, and is regarded as having little value or identity in itself. This is the continuation of a process which has been occurring for centuries. As the office of deacon has become merely vestigial, at the same time there has been in many quarters of the church an adoption of practices from the post-apostolic age, obscuring the biblical office. How then might the biblical diaconate be recovered within an Anglican setting? We shall consider the biblical material; from that we shall assess the diaconate in church history; and finally we shall discuss a possible way forward.

The Biblical Material

The biblical material is potentially confusing, for the noun *diakonos* 'servant' and the verbal forms of *diakonein* 'to serve' are used in various ways in the New Testament. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the different uses in trying to determine the shape of the biblical diaconate.

Jesus' own ministry was that of a servant, seen in his public ministry of preaching and attendant compassionate works of healing and exorcism, and of course particularly in his death for the salvation of his people. The appointing of the Seven in Acts 6:1-6 to distribute food to the Hellenist widows is regarded by many as the establishment of the role of the deacon, even though only the verb *diakonein* is used there rather than the noun *diakonos*. The Seven are appointed because the apostles consider that it is not appropriate for them to abandon preaching the word in order to be involved in this practical help for the people of God. Nevertheless they consider this as most worthwhile, so others are appointed for this specific task, prayed for, and commissioned by them.

In Philippians 1:1 we encounter the first use of the term *diakonos* to refer to

particular persons, mentioned alongside the ‘overseers’. Nothing, however, is said about their role.

It is the epistle of 1 Timothy to which we have to turn in order to find a description of a deacon. Here again finding a description of the role is elusive, for as I.H. Marshall remarks, ‘The author’s concern is with the kind of people to be appointed rather than with a job description’.¹ The qualities of character for a deacon are set out following the list of qualities required of an overseer, and it is instructive to compare the two lists. Some qualities are duplicated, for example the requirement that deacons manage their families well (v. 12 *cf.* v. 4). Other qualities are extremely similar in essence, but happen to be phrased differently, for example the requirement that they are not avaricious, represented by ‘not a lover of money’, v. 3, and ‘not pursuing dishonest gain’, v. 8 (NIV). One quality mentioned in the overseers’ list is noticeably absent in that of the deacons: the ability to teach, and given the preoccupation of the author of the pastoral epistles with right doctrine over against those deemed to be heretics, this *lacuna* would appear to be significant. The nearest equivalent to a requirement of an ability to teach is v. 9: the deacon should hold the ‘mystery’ of the faith with a clear conscience. The implication is that, although they are not gifted at teaching it to others, deacons still need to be clear about the teaching of the Christian faith themselves. Milen remarks: ‘This ensures that their practical service springs out of their faith in the gospel and not from merely humanitarian motives’.²

Elsewhere in the epistles we find the apostle Paul frequently uses *diakonos* to refer to his own ministry as an apostle (*e.g.*, Colossians 1:23). Since ‘Christianity is based on the servant example of Jesus Christ, deacon is the standard term for every kind of Christian worker’³ and so it is, for example, that the woman Phoebe can be referred to in this way for her works of service in Romans 16:1-2.

How best is one to synthesize the biblical material? ‘As with *presbuteros* and *episcopos*, the New Testament presents us with a terminological difficulty in

1 I.H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p.472.

2 D.J.W. Milen, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Fearn, Rosshire: Christian Focus Publications, 1996), p. 65.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

4 ‘Deacons in the Ministry of the Church: a report to the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England’ (Church House Publishing, 1988).

the case of deacons, *diakonoi*, [... for the words are not] used with demonstrable consistency or as technically exact terms.⁵⁴ We cannot discern whether there is a direct relationship between Acts 6 and the people described in 1 Timothy and addressed in Philippians, but given the view of the early church that they do correlate (Irenaeus was the first to refer to the Seven as deacons, c.185), and that this is a generally accepted view within all sections of the universal church today, we are inclined to agree with the conclusion of Bardwell: ‘While there is ambiguity about whether or not the seven were deacons in the technical sense, they undoubtedly came to be seen as prototypes of the developed diaconate.’⁵⁵ It is a reasonable hypothesis, therefore, that deacons were concerned with practical help for the poor and needy of the church rather than explicitly teaching the faith, and can be seen as complementing and supporting the word ministry of the presbyters.

Church tradition

What about later developments in the early church? One can trace fairly precisely developments in the role of the deacon, given the wealth of material in writers such as Hippolytus, Ignatius and Jerome. Two factors appear to have been key in the development of the office.

The first factor was an increasing rivalry between orders. Rivalry between presbyters and deacons came to a head at the Council of Nicaea in 325 where canon 18 stipulated that deacons were not to preside at the eucharist: presidency was to be restricted to presbyters (amongst whom are bishops). Fuelling this rivalry was the view of the *cursus honorum*, the progress of clergy up through the ranks, as though the church were an army. We know that it was only very late that clergy began to adopt special dress to mark themselves out from the rest of the *laos*, and this was to underline their positions. For example, we know that in 428 clergy at Rome dressed in the manner of the laymen of the time. Not long after this, clergy chose to remain in anachronistic dress in order to appear distinctive. The *dalmatic*, for example, was an everyday garment of fourth century Rome; when, however, it was superseded, it was retained by the clergy so that by the sixth century it had become the recognized distinctive dress for bishops and deacons. The

5 Bardwell, E., “Pastoral Role of the Deacon,” in C. Hall, ed., *The Deacon’s Ministry* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1991), p. 50.

preoccupation with status of orders is again demonstrated by the ruling of the Council of Braga in 563 which ordered deacons to wear the stole over the shoulder and outside the tunic so that they would not be confused with subdeacons. It is in this context of rivalry that specialization of ministry begins to occur. Given that deacons were restricted from certain functions, other functions were then laid down as being their unique preserve: for instance, Hippolytus writes that it is the task of the deacons to bring the offerings of the people to the Bishop at the Easter eucharist; in the late third century, the deacon was to be responsible for the blessing of the paschal candle at the Easter vigil. There are many other functions and for further reference, a chronology of them is laid out in Hall (pp. 121-2). O' Toole comments: 'History suggests that the diaconate evolved to serve the needs of the community and when that service was taken over by others ... the diaconate declined into a purely ceremonial activity.'⁶

The second factor was a view of orders and ministry which came from a certain interpretation of the Old Testament. Rather than the model of ministry radically being transformed by the sacrificial death of Christ, the Old Testament was seen as the pattern for the model of ministry of the New Covenant. Thus the Old Testament priesthood with all its different ranks continued in a New Covenant priesthood and the diaconate was seen as a lower order of that. This has been expressed in recent years by Gregory Dix who saw a parallel

between the deacon who placed the bread and mingled cup before the president (at the eucharist), ministered the *lavabo* ... and ministered the elements to the communicants, and the Jewish "attendant" who ministered the ceremonial handwashing, set the bread for breaking and the mingled cup for blessing before the president of the *chaburah* and served the food and drink of the religious meal.⁷

Because of this view, liturgical actions were seen as extremely important.

What is one to make of these developments in the early church from a biblical standpoint? First, it is clear that the clergy of the church had become worldly,

6 O'Toole, R., "The Diaconate within the Roman Catholic Church," in C. Hall, ed., *The Deacon's Ministry*, p. 177.

7 Dix in Kirk, p. 246.

squabbling over their respective status and tasks, rather than being an organic society with different people exercising different functions dependent on their God-given gifts. They were hardly following the example of Christ as humble servant and appeared to be behaving like the ‘rulers of the Gentiles’ which Jesus specifically commanded his people not to imitate. Secondly, the New Testament gives no directions for a specific liturgical function of the deacon. The role of the deacon in the post-apostolic age changed due to tensions within the orders of the church, of claims of other ministerial order to particular functions, and is not biblically determined at all. Indeed the New Testament knows nothing of liturgical preoccupations: the *leiturgia* which it prescribes for all of the saved people of God is good works of charity – precisely that thing which the diaconate appears to have abandoned, or at least was not making its main preoccupation. Thirdly, orders were being viewed from an Old Covenant standpoint, through a failure to understand how Jesus’ atonement had fulfilled the sacrificial system (expounded primarily in the Epistle to the Hebrews). Interestingly this error seems to have had as much a profound effect on the diaconate as it did on the presbyterate, meaning that the diaconate also was being viewed through a eucharistic-liturgical lens.

The Reformation

‘The deacon is no altar boy, as the paritists of the Middle Ages and the sacerdotalists of high scholasticism would have had him.’⁸ That was the view of the Reformers who wanted orders to be biblically controlled. The main target in their sights, however, was the Roman priesthood: they wanted to ensure that this was transformed into a presbyterate of pastoring and teaching, and this was the priority in the Ordinal and Articles (for example Article XXVIII). The 1552/1662 Church of England Ordinal was weak on the reformation of the diaconate because the Reformers wanted to stress that ministry was ministry of the Word, and were keen that the whole people of God were involved in good works of charity. The office of the diaconate was something of a victim in that it did not receive the attention it deserved.

It appertaineth to the office of a deacon [...] to assist the Priest in Divine Service [...] and to read the holy Scriptures and Homilies in the Church,

⁸ E.P. Echlin, “Theological Frontiers of the Deacon’s Ministry,” in C. Hall, ed., *The Deacon’s Ministry*, p.162.

and to instruct the Youth in the Catechism; [...] and to preach if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop.⁹

The Elizabethan Settlement, then, did not see the deacon as having a particularly distinctive office, but more as being an assistant minister, with a minor teaching role, as evidenced by the mention of instructing young people in the Catechism.

How then can we assess the Church of England diaconate (given that the Ordinal of 1662 still remains determinative)? What is beneficial and biblical is that the Ordinal does give some reference to works of charity, for it says –

And furthermore, it is his office, where provision is so made, to search for the sick, poor and impotent people of his Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate [*viz.* the priest], that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.

It must be acknowledged however, that this does not come as the first concern in his duties, and there seems to be some recognition, ‘where provision is so made’, that this will not universally be the case, implying perhaps that this charitable aspect is almost an optional extra.

The Ordinal seeks to place the deacon in a parochial context as a ministerial assistant to a parish priest; it gives him a special ministry to the poor, but it makes it clear that he is thought of as a clerk, a preacher.¹⁰

What is good is that the Ordinal does reflect some of the concerns of the pastoral epistles for it states that those who are to be deacons are to ‘be of virtuous conversation and without crime’ and ‘such as to be a wholesome example to the pattern and flock of Christ’.

What is disappointing is that the 1662 Ordinal concludes with a prayer for the newly ordained deacons that they ‘may so well behave themselves in this inferior office, that they may be found worthy to be called unto the higher ministries in thy Church’. Built into the very Ordinal is the temporary nature of the diaconate, that it is merely a temporary order *en route* to the

⁹ Ordinal, *Book of Common Prayer*.

¹⁰ *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church*, p. 15.

presbyterate (and in some cases, the episcopate). This is unfortunate for it perpetuates a view of the *cursus honorum*.

How might a biblical diaconate be regained?

‘The time has come to reform our approach and allow a true three-fold ordained ministry to enliven the Church’s mission. This means three orders which are equal in value, clearly visible and distinct each with its full role and proper place.’¹¹

There have been attempts in the last hundred years to reform the diaconate, beginning as far back as the 1878 Lambeth Conference with a suggestion by the Bishops of the West Indies leading ultimately to the 1958 Lambeth Conference which resulted in a resolution (no. 88) that each Province should examine how the diaconate might be made permanent. No change has yet been made in the Provinces of Canterbury and York. The nearest that the Church of England has come to a permanent diaconate was in 1983 when the Bishop of Portsmouth, Ronald Gordon, established a diocesan scheme to train men for a permanent diaconal ministry. The deacons were to remain in secular employment (like NSM’s) but were ordained to serve in their local churches. Success of the scheme has been limited. In the words of Christina Baxter, the churchmanship of the candidates and churches involved resulted in it ‘drawing all service ministries to itself and depriving others of such tasks’.¹² It seems that the deacons concentrated too much on ‘being deacons’ rather than serving. Baxter comments: ‘The work of the deacon ... must be that of the servant whose work inspires service.’¹³

The Portsmouth experiment is a salutary lesson for us if we want to know what is necessary for a biblical diaconate to be formed in the Church of England.

First, any reform must be along biblical lines. As we have already seen, the diaconate of the Scriptures has no liturgical or sacramental emphasis; rather its role is works of charity for the people of God. Second, reform must be realistic, given the nature of the Church of England. In 1974 a report, ‘Deacons in the Church’ from Church House was published. Its conclusion

11 Hall, *The Deacon’s Ministry*, p. 58.

12 Quoted by A. Burnham, “The Liturgical Ministry of a Deacon”, in Hall, p. 67.

13 *Ibid.*

was this –

Wishing neither to enlarge the scope of the diaconate nor merely to perpetuate the present situation, we found ourselves driven to recommend the third course of action, namely the abolition or discontinuation of the diaconate in the Church of England.¹⁴

That such action has not happened is not surprising. Although the authors are to be commended in not wanting a meaningless diaconate to continue, they proved to be too radical in their suggestions for reform. The Church of England in its ordering at the Reformation, envisaged three orders of ministry in wanting to preach the message of continuity and catholicity, and it is unlikely that this will change.

It is the view of the present writer that there should be a retention of the diaconate in the Church of England given that it is a biblical office. What is suggested is that the nature of the office, the route to that office, and its relationship to the presbyterate be reordered. This paper suggests that the diaconate remain a third order of the Church of England, but that it made a permanent order separate from that of the presbyterate. Burnham¹⁵ makes the incisive comment that if the diaconate is the probationary year for the presbyterate, the diaconate is defined by what cannot be done, rather than what can, which is hardly healthy for a positive and distinctive view of the ministerial role. To be biblical, the diaconate needs to be distinct from the teaching and pastoral ministry of the presbyterate, for it calls upon a different combination of gifts: those required in the accomplishing and organizing of works of charity.

What are these works of charity? It is difficult to state what they are, since they will vary according to the local situation, and to the needs of the universal church (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). What is more important is to be clear where the works of charity are focussed. Professor G.W.H. Lampe makes a highly significant point about the early church which seems to be little appreciated today: ‘The highly organized activity of the Church as a corporate body where it was caring for the sick and needy through the

14 Deacons in the Church, p. 24.

15 Burnham, “The Liturgical Ministry of a Deacon,” in Hall, p. 67.

16 Quoted in ‘Deacons in the Ministry of the Church’, p. 114.

deacons, afforded an immense advantage to Christianity over its rivals. Paganism could not match its concern for the relief of the sick and needy.¹⁶ It would seem that much of the witness of the church has been weakened by its practical help being concentrated on those outside the faith community. We need a recovery of the sense of Galatians 6:10, 'as we have opportunity let us do good to all people, especially to those who belongs to the family of believers' (NIV). Although this may result in a few 'rice Christians' because of the reputation of God's people's generosity, no doubt it would also result in many real comings to faith or, to use the terminology of the Reformers, if *diakonia* is restricted to those within the visible church, one might find that the visible church became rather larger, and in time, in the context of a biblical presbyteral ministry, the invisible church would also become larger. It might then be that we saw a fulfillment of Christ's 'new commandment'¹⁷ as a direct result of having a more biblical diaconate: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Appendix regarding theological training

If preaching is not inherent in the office of deacon, as in the office of the presbyter, what kind of theological training would be appropriate? In Acts 6:3 the apostles insisted that the seven 'be filled with the Spirit and with wisdom'.¹⁸ This emphasis should be retained, otherwise there is danger of deacons being social workers of a social gospel, rather than visual illustrations of a gospel of God's love in Christ. In the light of the injunction of 1 Timothy 3:9 deacons should receive theological instruction so that they are clear about the 'deep truths of the faith'. As Calvin observed no doubt in the course of their duties 'they will often have to give advice and comfort'.¹⁹ In particular they would need to be clear that salvation is by grace alone, and that the primary human need is salvation in Christ, not the material help which they are giving. They need to be reminded that the help that they are giving is in Christ's name: 'The work becomes a true ministry when it is motivated by the desire to serve in the name of Christ and is done with caring love.'²⁰

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17 John 13:34-35.

18 Deacons Now – ACCM Report, 1990, p. 10.

19 D.J.W. Milen, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* commenting on 1 Tim. 3:9.

20 Hall, p. 186.

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