



# How to read "diaconia" in the Bible?

by John N Collins, Anni Hentschel & Esko Ryökäs

In the middle ages, the word diaconia designated a building within the administrative responsibilities of a deacon.<sup>1</sup> Whereas today the Catholic relief, development, and social service organisation operates under the Latin name caritas, the Greek term from the New Testament diaconia has become a synonym of caritas to designate Christian care of the neighbour. In the second half of the 20th century, two New Testament scholars, namely Dieter Georgi and John N. Collins, questioned the legitimacy of this contemporary understanding of diaconia.<sup>2</sup> This led to lively exegetical and theological discussions on the issue. These were not confined within Lutheran circles.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the latest editions of exegetical dictionaries have included revised understandings of this word.<sup>4</sup>

This article presents a joint report on the issue by two scholars deeply involved. They present their interpretations of diaconia in the same two passages of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic scholar John N. Collins has been writing in this area since his doctoral dissertation on diaconia in 1976. The Lutheran scholar Dr Anni Hentschel advanced the discussion in her dissertation of 2007.<sup>6</sup> On semantic issues the two are of one mind, but on interpretation of some passages they sometimes hold different views. This relationship is clear from similarities and differences in their treatments below of respectively Mk 10:42–45 and 1 Cor 12:4–6.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to their exegetical comment, each presents a concluding reflection on values attaching to the newly described semantic scope of diaconia. This suggests possibilities

for further reflection on appropriate uses of the term diaconia in the context of church and diaconate.<sup>8</sup> The biblical text cited is NRSV.

## Mark 10:42–45

(42) So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. (43) But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, (44) and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (45) For the Son of Man came not to be served

» mandate to bring deliverance to humankind «

but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' In his analysis of Mk 10, John N.

Collins draws on sociological factors affecting the situation confronting Jesus as well as on aspects of general Greek usage, while Anni Hentschel's analysis focuses more directly on the linguistic and rhetorical material in the passage itself. Although the methodologies thus differ, the outcomes are similar. Remarkably their English and German translations are virtually identical.<sup>9</sup> The diaconia of Jesus here is not just one task

1 Cf. Esko Ryökäs, *Diaconia* according to Martin Luther, in: *Diaconia Christi* 51 (2016) 129 – 134. See also John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, New York 1990, 66 – 69.

2 Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (1964), Edinburgh 1986; Collins 1990.

3 Cf. Ryökäs 2016.

4 A Greek/English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Third Edition (BDAG) by W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. Arndt & F. Gingrich, Chicago 2000, 230; cf. Kari Latvus, *Diaconal Ministry in the light of the Reception and Re-Interpretation of Acts 15. Did John Calvin Create the Social-Caritative Ministry of Diaconia?*, in: *Diaconia I* (2010) 82 – 102.

5 Esko Ryökäs introduces these contributions.

6 Anni Hentschel, *Diakonie im Neuen Testament* (WUNT; II.226), Tübingen 2007.

7 See Collins' discussion in his review of Hentschel 2007, 'Re-interpreting diakonia in Germany', in: *Ecclesiology* 5:1 (2009) 69 – 81.

8 Stefan Sander has provided an early indication of the potential here in 'Der Diakon – Bote Jesu Christi?', *Diaconia Christi* 50 (2015) 266 – 277, which evaluates diaconia differently from his treatment in: *Das Amt des Diakons. Eine Handreichung*, Freiburg i.Br. 2008.

9 See Collins 1990, 248 – 292; John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, Leominster 2002, 28 – 33; Hentschel 2007, 278.

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among other tasks but constitutes a lifelong mandate to bring deliverance to humankind.

## John N. Collins

The focus in this passage is on the kind of ‘service’ envisaged in the Greek verb *diakonēsai* (Mk 10:45). Here, in the course of exposing the nature of discipleship, Jesus the ‘teacher’ (v. 35) declares the nature of his own mission. In the Roman world, outside of the imperial system there was no room for independent power plays. Power was exclusive to the Gentile ruler, who then empowered his ‘great men’ to domineer the rest (v. 42). The teacher declares, however, that power was not the way of discipleship (v. 43).

That disciples have no access to power is of no import because discipleship functions essentially and entirely outside of the sphere of power or compulsion. This does not mean that leaders are banned. Inevitably leaders emerge, but how are these ‘great’ or ‘first’ among disciples (vv. 43–44) to operate? This they are to discover in what the teacher has to say about his own role: ‘the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’ (v. 45)

We note the grammar: ‘to be served’ is a Greek infinitive in the passive voice (*diakonēthēnai*); ‘to serve’ is the active infinitive (*diakonēsai*); both infinitives are in the aorist tense for the purpose of embracing the whole of the mission of the Son of Man. These two *diakon-* verbs of v. 45 echo the *diakon-* noun of v. 43 summoning the disciple to be a ‘servant / *diakonos*’, alternatively a ‘*doulos* / slave’ (v. 44). Both terms refer back to

scenario of the Gentiles in determining the kind of service the Son of Man expresses in stating that he came ‘to serve / *diakonēsai*’, namely, to carry out the humiliating service of a slave.

Supporting this, many go on to remind us of the praise of the heavenly Christ Jesus who, ‘though in the form of God ... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave / *doulos*’ (Phil 2:7). Some also make connections with other *diakon-* statements, especially the one in the parable of the judgement of the nations. At Mt 25:44, the king condemns those on his left side because they have never given him food, drink, clothing, shelter, comfort; and they respond, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you / *diēkonēsamen soi?*’ (NRSV) The Louw and Nida Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (1989 at 35.37, 462) provides here: ‘to take care of, by rendering humble service to’, adding in note 7 that the usage is ‘emphasizing the personal care and attention involved’. In accord with this emphasis, Louw and Nida urge particular clarity in regard to Mt 20:28 (par. Mk 10:45): ‘the Son of Man did not come in order for people to serve him but in order to serve people.’ (35.19, 460)

Today, within both scholarship and broad swathes of the Christian community, the *diakon-* / service terms are essentially associated with menial duties; in addition, on the basis, e.g., of Mt 25:44, the usage is also understood as being deeply imbued with a specifically Christian sense of loving care.

The major influence in establishing this semantic outcome has been H. W. Beyer’s article on the *diakon-* terms in TWNT (1935), this study drawing on Wilhelm Brandt’s dissertation of 1931.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, however, the *diakon-*

the staff within the houses of ‘the great’ (v. 42). Commentators and preachers often take a lead from this sociological

<sup>10</sup> H. W. Beyer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids 1964; Wilhelm Brandt, *Dienst und Dienen im Neuen Testament*, Gütersloh 1931.

terms occur primarily in connection with the lavish courts of royalty and other highly placed individuals, with Philo and Athenaeus expressly dissociating the terms from an in-built reference to slavery. In tune with this, commenting on the angels ministering to or waiting upon Jesus in the desert (Mk 1:13), Clement of Alexandria explained that the term *diakonoun* was being used there 'as if Jesus were already a veritable king'.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, at both Mt 25:44 and Mk 10:45 the usage is that of the great and royal households. In the former instance, the royal attendants, in effect, are saying to the king, 'Your Majesty, when was it that we ever neglected to attend to any of your commands?' At Mk 10:45, the Son of Man rejects for himself a bevy of attendants but, as a servant himself, must 'carry out the mandate he had received'.<sup>12</sup>

Of additional interest in the Son of Man's statement is the fact that the passive verb translated as 'to be served' (*diakonēthēnai*) is unprecedented in Greek literary sources. Even the English Authorised Version (1611) reflects the singularity in its awkward translation: 'the Son of man came not to be ministered unto'. Nowhere else in ancient Greek is a passive *diakon-* verb predicated of a person who is being 'ministered unto'.<sup>13</sup> In addition, all instances of this Greek infinitive across the first millennium CE (totaling 52) occur in the citation of or in reference to Mk 10:45 / Mt 20:28. The uniqueness of such usage points to close and precise considerations contributing to the formulation of the Son of Man's statement within the Hellenistic tradition.

In spite of the singular character of the usage, the passive infinitive *diakonēthēnai* attracts no comment in Greek sources of the first millennium. This, too, speaks of the effective-

ness of the statement. Nor indeed did these commentators evidence a need to explain the nature of the 'ministry' or 'service' predicated of the Son of Man by the active infinitive ('to serve / *diakonēsai*'). Evidently to them, the meaning was transparent, which no doubt explains why we find only two or three of the commentators taking an opportunity to enter an explanatory phrase.

Thus, Origen (c. 200 CE), the first one, states that the 'service' to which the Son of Man dedicates himself is not the kind of service he is recorded as having received from angels (Mk 1:13, *diakon-*) or from Martha (Lk 10:40, *diakon-*). What we have here, Origen writes, is that 'he came to live among humans for the purpose of carrying out a mission (*diakonēsēi*), even to the extent of effecting our salvation (*diakonōn hēmōn tēi sōtēriai*) in journeying on to give his life as a ransom for the many who believed in him'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Procopius of Gaza (the rhetorician, c. 500 CE) noted: 'Christ came not to be served, as he said himself, but to effect / deliver (*diakonēsai tēn ... oikonomian*) salvation of the human race'.<sup>15</sup> Later in the sixth century, the hagiographer Cyril of Scythopolis, in extolling obedience to God's will, drew a parallel between the Son of Man's statement that 'he came to serve (*diakonēsai*)' and his statement at John 6:38, 'I came not to do my will but the will of him who sent me'.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, for Cyril, the two statements are equivalent, and their teachings identical. The object of the Son of

## » usage is that of royal households«

<sup>11</sup> See discussion of Mt 25:31–46 in John N. Collins, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry*, New York 2014, 94 – 100, also Collins 2002, 59 – 65; on Clement and courtly usage, see Collins 2014, 180, note 66; for an overview of usage in this connection, see chapter 7 in Collins 1990.

<sup>12</sup> This interpretation is the outcome of the semantic study in Collins 1990. Anni Hentschel arrived at the same interpretation in Tübingen 2007.

<sup>13</sup> On the *diakon-* verbs at Mk 10:45 see Collins 1990, 248 – 252, with reference to passive usage at note 1 in the Section 'Son of Man', 332.

<sup>14</sup> *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei*, bk 16, ch 8, lines 280 – 295, consulted at *Thesaurus linguae graecae* at [tlg.uci.edu](http://tlg.uci.edu), 2042.030.

<sup>15</sup> *Commentarii in Isaiam*, tlg 2508.004, 2529, line 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Vita Euthymii*, tlg 2877.001, 29, line 7.

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Man’s service is not ‘people’ (as in Louw and Nida above) but ‘God’.

## Anni Hentschel

This passage in Mark is embedded in a context about power, authority, and control. The occasion for Jesus’ teaching here is the request from James and John to take up places of honour in heaven on his left and right (10:35–40). These places are connected not only with honour but also with domination, the delivery of justice, and the power that goes with that.<sup>17</sup> Jesus’ response to the disciples’ request is not a flat rejection, but he does ask of them the capacity to endure suffering (10:38–40). The disciples affirm that they will take upon themselves what the cup and the baptism of Jesus brings, and Jesus confirms their destiny (10:39).<sup>18</sup> However, the allocation of places of honour is not within his competence (10:40) and, in what follows, the exercise of power and control is not radically censured but is subjected to stringent requirements.

The ambitions of the two disciples annoy the others who are blatantly

exhibiting their own ambitions for honours. This leads to a further instruction from Jesus. In Mk 10:42 Jesus takes up the issue of power within the kingdoms of this world. His choice of words establishes that the exercise of power at the expense of oppressed peoples is under criticism: rulers are presented as those who forcibly oppress (*katakuriēō*) their own people while their ‘great ones’ (*megaloi*) exercise

their power like tyrants (*katexousiazō*).<sup>19</sup> Conduct within the circle of disciples has to be different (Mk 10:43f): ‘whoever wishes to become great (*meγas*) among you must be your diakonos, and whoever wishes to be first (*prōtos*) among you must be slave of all.’ Even here, Jesus is not directing criticism at striving for greatness but is providing criteria for how relationships among themselves are to be and how the leadership is to be exercised. Jesus lays down two demands. In the first, the focus is on the noun diakonos. Normally, and in accord with the range of meaning of this noun, diakonos designates a person who carries out a particular task in the name of a second person. Thus, the male or female diakonos does not function on his or her own behalf in the manner, for example, of a king, but as someone commissioned to function in the name of another.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, from the perspective of a hierarchical system, a diakonos always holds a subordinate position since he is always accountable to a commissioning agent. In any event, the designation diakonos does not of itself imply a lowly status; the term points to function: the male or female diakonos executes a duty in the name of the commissioning agent and, thereby, becomes accountable. This word usage sits comfortably within its context. The diakonos appears as the opposite of those who rule the world and who are able to farm out duties and enforce their execution while themselves being responsible to no one for the manner in which they exercise leadership (Mk 10:42). Central to Jesus’ second demand is the noun *doulos*: The slave is presented as the counterfigure to the person striving for honour, to be first. A slave stands at the lowest rank of the social hierarchy and has no honour at all. Pursuing honour, accordingly, is simply not a

17 Cf. Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (HTK NT; II.2), Freiburg i.Br. 1977, 161; Ludger Schenke, *Das Markusevangelium*, Stuttgart 2005, 250f; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC), Michigan 2002, 415f.

18 Cf. Pesch 1977, 156f; Schenke 2005, 251; Peter Dschulnigg, *Das Markusevangelium* (ThKNT; 2), Stuttgart 2007, 284f.

19 Cf. France 2002, 418f; Schenke 2005, 252; Frederick W. Danker & Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3 rev. edition, Chicago 2001, 421b (BDAG).

20 Grammatically the noun diakonos is in the masculine form but serves to designate both male and female subjects. Prior to the 3rd century CE no feminine form existed; see Hentschel 2007, 85 – 89, 433 – 444.

possibility.

The synthetic parallelism allows two different aspects to emerge: the first saying is referring to function and the second to status. In this way, particular semantic aspects of each of the terms diakonos and doulos are invoked for the purpose of differentiating within the subordinate role of disciples seeking leadership in their community.

That such differentiation within the synthetic parallelism is appropriate would seem to be supported by a comparison with Lk 22:26. The

Lukan Jesus says to his disciples: ‘the greatest (meizōn) among you must become the youngest (neōteros) and the leader (hēgoumenos) like one who serves [NRSV;

hó diakonōn: ‘a person carrying out tasks mandated by a leader’]. The use of the participle in the second part of the saying indicates that the verb diakoneō is designating a specific action while the first part of the instruction concerns status. The participle hēgoumenos also normally refers to positions or duties of leaders.<sup>21</sup>

Anyone who strives for a position of leadership – and again here this is not subject to criticism (cf. also Lk 22:30) – should fill it responsibly, conscious that it brings its own liabilities.

In this manner, those disciples seeking power, honour and leadership are instructed that in regard to their activities within the community they always remain fully accountable and that they cannot just lead and rule

to suit themselves. In regard to their status they should not pursue the No. 1 appointment but much more the last, that is, the status of a slave.

This instruction is further developed in reference to the role of Jesus (Mk 10:45): even Jesus himself has not come to have others carrying out tasks for him (diakonēthēnai), but to dutifully carry out his own task as mandated (diakonēsai). Jesus’ divine mandate consists in giving his life as a ransom for many. Thus, this saying points to Jesus’ death on the cross.

While this death certainly represents

## » designating a distinct commission within the community «

a dutiful fulfilment of his mission, in it there is no trace whatsoever, in human terms, of the honour due to Jesus as Son of God. In the background stands a proclamation of a mes-

sage by force of which Jesus is sent or mandated to bring deliverance to humankind.<sup>22</sup>

### 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

(4) Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; (5) and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; (6) and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.<sup>23</sup>

An analysis of the first letter to the Corinthians 12 builds for Collins an arena for discussion about leadership

within the community. The noun diakonia is here recognised by the audience as designating a distinct commission within

<sup>21</sup> Cf. in the New Testament, e. g., Mt 2:6; Acts 7:10; 15:22; Heb 13:7; 17:24; and see BDAG, 434.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Hentschel 2007, 277 – 280; Collins 1990, 248 – 252; also Rom 15:8 and Gal 2:17.

<sup>23</sup> The authors use the NRSV.

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the community such as that held by Paul and teachers collaborating with him. In Anni Hentschel’s presentation, the passage illustrates the wide range of roles of individuals within the community. In this context, by the noun *diakonia* the gifts of the Spirit are not being designated as lowly services of a loving character, but as official undertakings in the name of Christ that are of equal worth and importance: *diakonia* is here the designation for a commission from within the community.

## John N. Collins

The debate as to whether in Paul’s thinking ‘gifts’, ‘services’, and ‘activities’ are different names for the same realities within the operation of a Christian community or, alternatively, designate facilities within the community that are to be distinguished from each other is one of the most deeply seated debates in ecclesiology. The dominant view is that the terms are equivalent. One scenario deriving from this consensus is that ministry (‘services’) is church-wide, Christians being called into that capacity at their baptism. In the decades since I completed my semantic examination of the Greek term for ministry or ‘services’, I have found the contemporary consensus incompatible with Paul’s Greek text (where his term is the plural noun *diakonai*). In the published research of 1990, representing my research of the 1970s, I struggled to come to an understanding of Paul’s succinct Greek statement, although today I feel that my reflections on the passage in the Afterword of that book are consistent with what research had disclosed about the semantics of the Greek *diakon*-words. Within a year of having published that research, however, and in the course of writing *Are All Christians Ministers?* (1992) I found both a clarification to the obscurity I

had been encountering in the passage and, along with that, a resolution of the theological difficulty I experienced in relation to the concept of an ‘all-minister’ church.

What I brought to the passage was a new evaluation of the term *diakonia*. Today the plural Greek noun is most often translated as ‘services’ or ‘ministries’, terms whose semantic parameters are difficult to determine in English and have long been considered elastic and porous. The Greek term was commonly considered to be suggestive of meniality. Research had shown, however, that *diakon*-terms belonged to formal language, and that, although uncommon, they held a recognised place in philosophical and religious discourse, could carry strong religious connotations, and were especially effective in designating processes involved in communication, including communications between earth and the upper and nether worlds.

With such a semantic character, the terms proved attractive and highly effective in Paul’s discussion of his apostolic role among the Corinthians. In his first letter to them he registered the significance of being among them as a ‘minister / *diakonos*’ (1 Cor 3:5). The magnitude of his claim could not have escaped the Corinthians. The Greek public was fully aware of the significance of the term. Hermes was publicly acclaimed as the *diakonos* (messenger-god) of Zeus. In Second Corinthians 3–6, where Paul debates the legitimacy of his apostolic status, he argues the case not on the authenticity of the credentials of an ‘apostle’, signed off on paper by some external authority, but on the experience of revelation which the Corinthians had received from him in his role as *diakonos*. He did this because he knew that, like any other Greeks, the Corinthians would recognise the broad

ambit of his claim and could test it against their own experience of the reception of the word of the gospel.

Accordingly, when Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:4–6 of ‘gifts’, ‘ministries / diakoniai’, and ‘activities’, he is signalling by the middle term that he is speaking of responsibilities within the community that belong to those who have been commissioned to deliver and expound the message of the gospel. It seems to me that the Corinthians could have seen no other reference in his use of this term in this context. Elsewhere<sup>24</sup> I have argued further that the three terms are not equivalent but present a pattern of generic and specific functions: the term ‘gifts’ is generic, and two specific groups fall within that generic giftedness: the formal commissions to deliver and sustain the Word (diakoniai) and the widely varied functions inspired by the Spirit that are here called *energēmata* (activities).

We notice that, when Paul has surveyed the multiple ‘gifts’ at work within the community, comprising as they do the varied workings of ‘the body of Christ’, he closes this part of the discussion at v. 28 by prioritizing the roles of ‘first apostles, second prophets, third teachers’, these, I believe, being the commissioned roles that he identified at v. 5 as *diakoniai* at the opening of the discussion.

### Anni Hentschel

Similarly to Rom 12:1–8, 1 Cor 12:1–11 deals with different functions and activities within the community that are all designated by Paul as charisms,<sup>25</sup> as gifts of the Spirit sent by God (1 Cor 12:4; Rom 12:6). Paul likens the community to a living organism whose different parts perform different tasks for the vitality of the body.<sup>26</sup> In this, he focuses on the equivalence of the different contributions to the life of the community (1 Cor 12:24–27; Rom 12:3–5) and criticises the pursuit of an eminent position

and the arrogance that goes with that (1 Cor 12:15–17, 21–24; Rom 12:16). At 1 Cor 12:5 all the charisms are characterised more precisely by the noun *diakonia* as commissions under Christ. At Rom 12:7, however, the noun *diakonia* designates a particular gift of grace: the commission to preach the gospel, and it is listed between prophecy and teaching (12:6f; cf. Rom 11:13).

At 1 Cor 12:1 Paul begins a new theme with the phrase *peri de tōn pneumatikōn* introducing the aspect of the workings of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup> For Paul it is fundamental that any individual confessing Jesus as Lord has the Spirit (12:3). In the three following verses (12:4–6), God’s actions within the community are identified. At 12:7 discussion moves on to the function of the workings or gifts of the Spirit (12:1,4) that are for the use of all, for the upbuilding of the community. In 1 Cor 12:8–10 are listed – not in any recognisable order – the Spirit’s gifts within the community; these include activities that involve speaking or proclaiming as well as quite practical activities. 12:11 concludes with the assurance that one and the same Spirit effects all this among the various individuals.<sup>28</sup>

In 12:4–6, in three parallel statements, Paul describes God’s single activity within the community: ‘There are distributions of gifts but one and the same Spirit, and distributions of tasks (*diaireis diakoniōn*), and one and the same Lord; and there are distributions of activities, but it is one and the same God who activates everything in everyone.’ The three terms ‘gifts, tasks, activities’ are to

<sup>24</sup> Collins 2002, 82 – 84; Collins, ‘Ministry Among Gifts’, in: *Diakonia Studies* 123 – 138.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (EKK; VII.3), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999, 137 – 141; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC), Michigan 2000, 97f, 930.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Schrage 1999, 219 – 220.

<sup>27</sup> For rewarding insights into this reference to the gifted see comment on 1 Cor 12:4; 14:1 in Schrage 1999, 117 – 119; Helmut Merklein & Marlies Gielen, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (ÖTB; VII.3), Gütersloh 2005, 118.

<sup>28</sup> After the description of the community as a body (1 Cor 12:12–27), Paul again lists various tasks and functions, and here for the first time appear the titles ‘apostles’, ‘prophets’, and ‘teachers’ (12:28–30). This can be read as criticism of the exaggerated self-esteem harboured by individuals in positions of leadership; see Anni Hentschel, *Gemeinde, Ämter, Dienste* (BThSt; 136), Neukirchen-Vluyn 2013, 117 – 124.

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be understood as three aspects of the one reality, the spiritual activity of God in the community (12:1–3).<sup>29</sup> Corresponding with that is the fact that when Paul lists the gifts at 12:8–10 (cf. also 12:27–31) he does not sort them into different task groups. Paul maintains that the gifts of the Spirit are divided among all in a comparable way (12:4). They do not serve the advancement of any individual’s status among those so gifted, but they do impose an obligation of collaboration within the community (12:5): giftedness by the Spirit is not for the purpose of one’s own spiritual development, but all gifts are commissions under Christ (12:5). Success in the activity is not to be seen primarily as an individual’s accomplishment but, before all else, as the working of God (12:6). By the noun *diaconia*, the gifts of the Spirit are not being designated as lowly services of a loving character, but as official undertakings in the name of Christ that are of equal worth and importance.

## To sum up

To summarize their view of the meaning of the *diakon-* words, John N. Collins and Anni Hentschel put the focus on leadership in the community. The question in the background is how we should interpret the different functions of leadership during the time of Paul. Was there already some kind of different ministries? Were there only different duties? How long could the authority of a leader last?

Both writers agree that the term *diaconia* has a range of meanings determined by the

<sup>29</sup> This is in line with the broad scholarly consensus; see Hentschel 2007, 140 – 142; Schrage 1999, 135 – 137; also Thiselton 2000, 928 – 935; Merklein & Gielen 2005, 121.

context, with only one of these being waiting upon table. The apostle Paul used *diaconia* to designate several

duties of a churchly kind within the early church, including preaching and teaching.

## John N. Collins: *diaconia* as a key to ecclesiology today

The misinterpretation of New Testament passages where the Greek *diakon-* terms occur has been a major influence in the shift within ecclesiology towards an all-member ministry at the expense of the self-understanding of ordained or commissioned ministers. Widespread commentary on this phenomenon – often termed ‘crisis of identity’ – needs no illustration here. The consequences of adopting a corrected and newly nuanced re-interpretation of the *diakon-* terms within the New Testament and, indeed, within early Christian literature generally include the possibility of clarifying the pastoral role of ordained or commissioned ministers across the ecumenical field.

Essentially the impact is to be felt within a re-enlivenment of ‘ministry of the word’. This had long been upheld in theory within the major Protestant tradition as the basis of ecclesial

» re-enlivenment of ‘ministry of the word’ «

ministry; within continuing pre-Reformation churches, on the other hand, it lost most of its potency under constraints of the priorities given to ritual within a hierarchic reserve. Within both ecclesial systems, however, ‘ministry of the word’ was largely deprived of its capacity to empower through the strong tendency to see it as simply the church’s preferred mode of teaching. Far from it being merely a process of teaching, evidence from the earliest pastoral practice, namely, Paul’s endeavours in Corinth, illustrates that ‘ministry of the word’ is essentially the transference of ‘the word of God’ to the ‘conscience /

awareness / syneidēsis' of those awaiting it (2 Cor 3–6).

Further, the evidence shows that as awareness develops, communities are expected to explore and evaluate what it is that they have experienced (1 Cor 14). While this may appear to have the potential not only to destabilise commissioned ministry but to render it superfluous, realities are different when people are responding sympathetically to 'the word of God'. Much painful destabilizing of inherited contemporary ecclesial structures may well eventuate, but nothing fatally injurious to the experience of 'the word of God' will occur when gifted believers seek the further enlightenment of the People of God.

### **Anni Hentschel: Summing up**

In the New Testament the noun *diakonia* and its cognates are used in common with Greek language of the time. The word group often designates activities that are to be conducted in strict accord with the mandate of a third person. Accordingly it is appropriate that the word group should designate different functions within the first Christian communities. In the letters of Paul, there is not a single instance of the term designating waiting upon table. Even in the context of the Lord's Supper, Paul does not resort to such a usage. On the other hand, the word group is frequently used to refer to the task of the proclamation of the gospel. Paul pictures himself as a preacher of the gospel not only as *apostolos* but equally as *diakonos* of Christ or of God (2 Cor 11:13–15; see also 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:23). In Paul's time, there was neither a clearly demarcated office of apostleship nor a definitively established office of diaconate, but there were different functions within the community that could be designated by suitable Greek terms used as titles.<sup>30</sup> Howe-

ver in Paul's writings, there is no evidence to support a view that the word group was used exclusively for activities relating to teaching and preaching. *Diakonia* and its cognates can designate the commission to preach or to teach in Paul's letters, but it is not a technical term for ministers who are proclaiming the word. ☩



(by Emmy Silvius)

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hentschel 2013, 227 – 230; Christine Gerber, *Paulus, Apostolat und Autorität oder Vom Lesen fremder Briefe* (ThST NF; 6), Zürich 2012.

## How to read “diaconia” in the Bible?



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