

# The Prophetic Voice of the Deacon

## *Insights from the Bible about the role of the Deacon today*

### Introduction

A number of challenges for talking about Diaconal ministry

- The tendency of people within the church to define something by what makes it unique
- The interweaving of the words for minister/servant/deacons and the complexity of untangling them
- The difficulty in any case of defining Modern church practice from 1<sup>st</sup> century references.

### The Problems of Definitions

*The ancient Greek word for 'to serve' is diakoneo and it has provided diaconal work with its name. The basic meaning of diakoneo is 'to serve at table'. From there, the notion 'to provide for' developed into the more general meaning 'to serve'. The nuanced meaning of diakoneo is personally to do service for another person...The washing of the disciples' feet in John 13 is ...proof of Jesus's seeing himself as a servant of love. The central meaning of diakoneo probably originates in the practice of the last supper: it is here that serving at the table intersects with the 'serving' sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of his followers.<sup>1</sup>*

The problems with this definition are multiple but it is important to be clear about the issues

(I am reliant on the work of John N Collins here but not solely reliant – not indeed uncritically reliant)

- In critiquing this definition it sounds as though one is saying that Deacons should not see themselves as servants of love, doing service for other people –of course they should
- Flaw in method – Deacons = servants = Jesus served therefore John 13 is symbolic of diaconal ministry
- Begin with John 13 and the iconic act of foot washing
  - the problem here is that Jesus does not restrict this to any one group of Christians but says 'You should wash one another's feet' it is a constitutive act of the Christian community

---

<sup>1</sup> Fetzer, Antje, "The Concept of 'Service' from a Diaconal and Theological Viewpoint.," in *Ecumenics from the Rim*, ed. John F. O'Grady et al. (Berlin-Hamburg-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 62.

- nor in fact is the word diakoneo (or any cognate used)
- Next issue with this definition is that the basic meaning of the word diakoneo
  - One of the interesting features of the word group is that it is often defined **Acts 6:1-4** *Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the **daily ministry**.* <sup>2</sup> *And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to **minister at tables**.* <sup>3</sup> *Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task,* <sup>4</sup> *while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to the **ministry of the word**."*
  - What this tells us is the ministry at tables is NOT the basic meaning of the word but ministry/service more generally which then needs further definition
  - It is interesting to note that in Paul the words are also further defined though more qualitatively so we find 'ministry of the spirit' 'ministry of letter' ministry that gives life' 'ministry that kills' 'ministry of reconciliation'

### **John N Collins and Commissioned Agency**

John N Collins has helpfully challenged some of these presuppositions by demonstrating that

- It is really quite challenging to come up with a basic definition of the word and even if that is possible it cannot be seen to be wait at table or even solely as 'menial service'
- Argues that a better, catch all definition is 'commissioned agency'
- Value of this – a servant is someone who serves a master or mistress what shapes their service is the task to which they are sent.
  - A valuable reflection for all ministry – shifts the focus from what we do onto why we do it
  - And a particularly helpful definition of a deacon as one who sees themselves as sent by God

### **Deacon as Servant and Prophet of God**

What might the markers of the Deacon be?

- Someone who defines their ministry primarily in terms of the one sending them and who can give a clear articulation of why they do what they do
- Someone who speaks the word of God into the world as it is now
- Someone who lives out God's vision for the world in everything that they say and do (this will almost certainly have elements of menial service in it but for different reasons)