

# So you thought you knew “deacon”?

written by Crossings | June 21, 2012

Colleagues,

This week we send you a second treat from Pr. Richard Gahl, a friend and informal colleague of mine in Cleveland, Ohio. You got the first in January (ThTheol #709). See the introduction there for a brush up on who Dick is and why he’s a person to listen to. Here I merely add that Dick is one of those blessed folks who refused to flip off the brain-switch when he got home from his retirement party. He spends lots of time these days poring through books in his study and following threads of thought that intrigue him. Christian ministry is one of his particular interests. Entrenched positions on that topic in his LCMS branch of the Lutheran venture are one of his banes.

A while ago Dick told me that he’d stumbled across some fresh thinking about ministry in the New Testament, with respect to the diaconate in particular. I asked if he’d write it up so we could share it. He agreed. Here it is. If, like me, you’re well beyond 50 and haven’t thought much about deacons since you wrote that paper on Acts 6 back in seminary, you’ll be surprised. Pleasantly, I trust. I think there’s something strangely delicious in having preconceptions dashed. Read on.

As you do, a bit of explanation for those of you who haven’t studied New Testament Greek. Dick uses standard shorthand references for a couple of the essential tools of the trade. One is “Kittel.” That refers to a monumental ten-big-fat-volume work called Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, a translation of the German Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by, yes, Gerhard Kittel. The work consists of long, minutely detailed articles about particular words and their meanings as these evolved over time. The articles were written by a wide assortment of top-notch scholars of the past century.

The other bits of shorthand are “BAGD” and “BDAG.” That’s Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, followed by Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich. They refer respectively to Editions 2 and 3 of A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament Greek, originally compiled in German by Walter Bauer, then translated and augmented in three successive English editions by American scholars F. Wilbur Gingrich, William F. Arndt, and Frederick W. Danker. Fred Danker was the sole editor and reviser of Edition 3. Hence his advancement in the line-up of initials.

By the way, I just checked. Amazon’s current price for a new copy of Edition 3 is a mere \$145.20; for which, among so much else, you’ll get the latest scoop on what the words diakonos (deacon) and diakonia (what deacons do) really mean. Then again you could just read Dick.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

New Testament scholarship has, for the most part, taken diakonia in its noun and verb forms down the wrong path since the nineteenth century. This is the judgment of John Collins, an Australian professor who has studied at The Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and earned his doctoral thesis at King’s College, London in 1976. His 1990 DIAKONIA, Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources [1] led to a complete rewriting of the diakon- entries in the 3rd edition of the standard Greek-English lexicon, published in 2000. A later work, Deacons and the Church, 2002 [2], describes the directions of New Testament studies around the diakon- words after 1990. This article will attempt to

trace the development of Collins's work and identify some of the significant interpretations his work makes possible.

Translations in recent years have been all over the place with the diakon- words. Deacon, deaconess (for a clearly masculine noun), ministry, waiting on tables, serving: all are frequently used with little evident rhyme or reason. Gordon Lathrop's recent *Four Gospels on Sunday* [3] gives the word-family a clear social ministry flavor, with an emphasis on helping the poor and needy. *God's Word to the Nations* has been the only translation to admit difficulty in bringing "deacon" into understandable English with its six identical footnotes that read, "English equivalent difficult" [4].

Collins traces the wrong path back to the influence of the Lutheran Deaconess movement in the mid-nineteenth century. He credits Wilhelm Loehe with making diakonia "service to the poor" [5]. This track was continued in the 1930's PhD thesis of Wilhelm Brandt who was influenced by the Kaiserwerth community of deaconesses. It became standard thinking through H. W. Beyers' article in Kittel [6]. Collins concludes that "the titles 'deacon' and 'deaconess' were adopted in the nineteenth century on the mistaken understanding that the apostolic diaconate was essentially for works of mercy" [7].

To reinterpret the ancient sources Collins studied some 370 instances of the use of the diakon- family of words from some 90 authors over an 800-year time frame, from 500 BCE to 300 CE. He also identified 20 inscriptions and 30 papyri that made use of the word-family [8]. The results are readily seen in a comparison of the major headings for the verb form of diakon- in the second and third editions of *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

#### BAGD – 1979

1. Wait on someone at table
2. Serve – services of any kind
3. Care for, take care of
4. Help, support someone
5. Ecclesiastical office, serve as deacon

#### BDAG – 2000

1. Function as an intermediary, act as a go-between, agent
2. Perform obligations – include meals
3. Meet an immediate need
4. Carry out official duties, minister in a cultic context
5. Acts 6:2 poses a special problem: care for, take care of with dative of thing.

Collins begins his 2002 book with a thorough examination of Mark 10: 45, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (NRSV). He notes that it is customary to treat the text as a simple contrast between "to be served" and "to serve." The diakonia word is in both parts of the verse. This leads somewhat naturally to understanding this with table service as the setting. However, Collins insists that the phrase "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" is expegetical, that is, the second phrase explains the first. The point then is that Jesus is carrying out his assignment from the Father.

*The diakonia of Jesus, as dramatically contextualized by Mark in chapter 10, at the end of the Galilean mission and on the road to Jerusalem, was to serve the One whose voice called to him at his baptism, and the Son of Man would perform this service by carrying out the mission to which the voice had consecrated him. [9]*

In the letters of Paul ten individuals are identified with the term diakonos: Apollos, Ephaphras, Phoebe, Stephanus, Timothy, Tychicus, Mark, Fortunatus, Erastus and Paul himself. In addition, in 2 Corinthians 11 reference is made to servants of Satan. 1 Corinthians 3:5 identifies both Apollos and Paul in the role of diakonos. Divisions within the house churches of that community had led some to place Apollos in a leading role while others did the same with Paul. The diakonos word by its use in Greek culture would suggest “that Paul and Apollos belonged to a god, that they had been entrusted with the god’s message, that they have the duty to pass it on and the right to be heard and believed, and that their rights and duties are equal.” Diakonos thus signals delegation or assignment. Each of the remaining eight deacons should be seen in the same light. It is of interest that Phoebe then is not to be called deaconess, as she is so termed by Beyer. [11] Instead she is the delegate from Cenchraea, their representative to the house churches in Rome. In an introductory note to Deacons, Collins states that while his study does not specifically address gender issues in the book, “the ancient language of ministry, namely diakonia is inclusive. Accordingly, every implication for ministry today that arises from the considerations presented in the following pages is equally applicable to men and women” [12].

Collins characterizes the diakonoi of Satan in 2 Corinthians 11:15 as a parallel that “arises from the notion of delivering a message from an unworldly realm and requires us to read the latter term as a designation of spokesmen” [13].

The cultic use of the diakon- words in Greek literature from the period of study is far from a characterization of menial service. Collins notes the religious character of the usage in accounts of banquets and festivals [14]. Slaves were never servers at banquets with religious character, rather “young sons of free men would pour the wine” [15]. This customary Greek language use can readily be seen to provide a role for deacons in Eucharistic services in the second and third centuries CE.

Acts and the appointing of seven deacons has traditionally been seen as growing out of the human care needs of the Hellenistic widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. What has long been puzzling is why both Stephen and Philip left behind their assigned food ministry for preaching the gospel. Collins’s solution is to trace the use of diakonia in Acts beginning with 1:17. Here Peter raises the need to fill Judas’ share in this ministry (diakonia). In 1:25 “this diakonia” is a parallel for apostoles, i.e. “apostleship.” In 20:24 Paul describes himself as carrying out the diakonia he received from the Lord and reports to James in 21:19 on how he carried out this diakonia to the nations. Collins concludes that the word diakonia is a code word for the special apostolic mission to take the Word of God abroad [16]. Because Acts 6:4 also references diakonia in connection with the word of God, Collins goes on to state:

*What does this make of the Seven? It makes of the Seven a new group of preachers, directed at first to the needs of the Hellenists—note how happily the story ends at 6:7: the word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem. [17]*

The Greek-speaking widows were overlooked in the daily preaching of the word. Daily the word was proclaimed in the temple in the language of the Jews. But being Greek-speaking they were not able to understand the proclamation. They needed preachers who could teach them in their own language. So the Seven are selected to preach the word. This was their diakonia, their mission.

Finally, in doing some preparation for preaching on a Sunday when 2 Corinthians 6 was one of the texts for the day, the subject of coworkers drew this writer’s attention. See verse 1: “Since we are God’s coworkers...” Digging back into chapter 5 one finds Paul writing that “Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation.... A new way of living has come into existence. God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and has given us

this ministry of restoring relationships. (vv. 17-18, GWT; emphasis added). By now a reader will likely surmise that the word “ministry” is diakonia . This makes restoring relationships the assignment, or mission, of the people of God.

#### Endnotes

1. John N. Collins, *Diakonia Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990.
2. John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church, Making Connections between Old and New*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, 2002.
3. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Four Gospels on Sunday, The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2012. See pages 46 and 73.
4. *God’s Word*, World Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1995. This footnote occurs Romans 16, Ephesians 6, Philippians 1, Colossians 1 & 4, 1 Timothy 3.
5. Collins, 1990. p. 10
6. Collins, 1990. p. 7
7. Collins, 1990. p. 255
8. Collins, 1990. p. 74
9. Collins, 2002. p. 33
10. Collins, 1990. p. 196
11. Herman Beyer, *TDNT* vol. 2, 1964. p. 93
12. Collins, 2002. Note following p. viii
13. Collins, 1990. p. 202
14. Collins, 1990. p. 156
15. Collins, 1990. p. 158
16. Collins, 2002. p. 52
17. Collins, 2002. p. 58