

COPY OF A LETTER RECEIVED BY BISHOP CLARK FROM MR. JOHN N. COLLINS,
FLAT 471 WILLIAM GOODENOUGH HOUSE, MECKLENBURGH SQUARE, LONDON,
WC1N 2AN, DATED 29.7.74.

Dear Bishop Clark,

I send you the following communication on ministry because of the part you have taken in ecumenical discussion on the subject. I can well imagine how much time you must continue to give to committee work and writing in this and related areas, but hope nonetheless that you will have time to discern something significant in what I have to say. My remarks are not directed at any pastoral aspect of ministry but indicate grounds on which the received modern doctrine of ministry is open to criticism.

You might be interested to know that for three years I have been fully engaged in a study of diakonia (if you use that term) - more precisely of the early Christian use of the Greek cognates *διακονία*, *διακονος*, *διακονω*. My initial interest was not in ministry, nor is it my main concern now. When in 1971 I was asked for a thesis topic by Professor Christopher Evans of King's College, London, it struck me, one bright New Guinea morning, that what had long interested me was the apparent conjunction of ethical values and dogmatic principle in the saying of the Son of Man that he came to serve and give his life. As I did not want to get involved in the mess of critical method and opinion in regard to this famous saying (Mk 10:45), I thought I would at least see what had attracted early Christians to express an ideal of "service" in terms of Greek diaconic vocabulary. As it is clear that they did not inherit the vocabulary from the Greek Old Testament, where it plays no real part, the investigation moved into profane literature.

This ground has been covered before, notably by Beyer in Kittel's Wörterbuch. Of course Beyer was not working in vacuo, and took over ideas expressed in a 1931 monograph by Wilhelm Brandt and in an earlier lexicon by Cremer. A recognised feature of many such theological word studies of the time was the regularity with which the "intellectus quaerens fidem" is tripped up by "fides". For one thing, there seems to be a presupposition that Christians were always writing theology, with the consequence that profane material often assumes an unnaturally low profile and Christian material a disproportionately high relief. Some scholars have attempted to provide a corrective to this sort of thing but, in the meantime, the term and an ideal of diakonia has become a commonplace in several sectors of theological writing. I have myself traced the rise (and indeed signs of the fall) of the ideal in the social theory of the World Council of Churches. More to the point here, it continues to bite deeply into the theology of ministry.

You will be aware of its influence in the documents of Vatican II - Cardinal Bea devoted a study to the idea in We Who Serve - and in ecumenical literature generally. One statement I like to cite occurs in Herzog's contribution to the Karl Barth festschrift Service in Christ (1966, p.149):

The unusual interest in diakonia in Roman Catholicism of late promises to make a conversation in diakonia the cutting edge of the Roman Catholic - Protestant dialogue.

How explicit a role diakonia played in the conversations leading to the Canterbury Statement I cannot be sure. Colin Davey refers to it à propos the Venice paper on Church and Ministry, and it is likely to be the point of your reference (p.5) to "the doctrinal development of the last thirty years ... in relation to the ministry and service which characterises the life and activity of the whole Church". The Statement itself is coloured by this doctrine, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in the instruction to ministers to "lead their communities in the service of humanity" (para. 10). You know in how many other similar statements the doctrine is currently making its impact.

Beyond ministry, it works also as an ecumenical catalyst in the area of apostolic succession and authority. The Groupe des Dombes last adapted it to their purposes in respect of the former, and the leader writer in last Friday's Tablet was rather impressed at its potential in both areas, citing the remark from the as yet unpublished ITC statement on apostolic succession that the role of the ministry of governing is one of "service in and for the community". That, like your own phrase "authoritative service" (Canterbury Statement, p.30), would seem to me to be pure Ktng, which is all very well except that he stands in direct descentance from Beyer on diakonia. Ktng said (The Church, - 389):

The particular place and function of the individual in the community was comprehensively described with a word which carried no overtones of authority, officialdom, rule, dignity or power: the word ~~service~~ service.

He himself added (p.391) that the consequences are "enormous", and you are witness to that, so that there is no call to refer to the considerable theological literature, as distinct from the few statements mentioned, which has grown around the idea.

In what I have read of it I have come across the occasional theologian who demurs. In regard to the vocabulary at the bottom of it all, a couple like R.E. Brown and D.E. Nineham comment briefly about the danger of reading into it modern values; more significantly, Rahner remains quite unimpressed in regard to diakonia as a value: in his final analysis, "Office is office." (Servants of the Lord, p.30). None of these, however, has had occasion to

take up a fresh study of the ideas represented by the word in early literature, not even A.M. Farrer, who many years ago in a discussion of ministry, spoke of the "abuse of this unhappy word" (Kirk's Apostolic Ministry, p.149).

Having undertaken such a study myself, I can only endorse Farrer's remark. When full account is taken of the various contexts in which the New Testament uses the vocabulary - mutual relationship of disciples, of disciples to Master, of the Master to his mission, of the apostle to the church, etc - and which may truly appear, as Jean Colson noted, to give to the vocabulary "une mystique originale" (La fonction diaconale, 1960, p.10) or what André Lemaire more recently has described as "la résonance effective de l'attitude du 'maître'" (Les ministères, 1971, p.42), it is still possible to differentiate quite clearly between these usages and, in fact, to relate each one of them to profane usages, none of which expresses the connotation of the English term "service" (or the German Dienst), whether it is understood as service to one's fellow man or service to God. If this is so, the recurrent talk of "theological depth" (Beyer) in the vocabulary must ring hollow, and theories of Christian ministry, social ethics or authority that are dependent on the existence of an original and specific Christian usage must be rather precariously situated.

If these general remarks make any sense to you, you would no doubt want to see them substantiated. Clearly that is not possible in a communication of this kind. I am confident, however, that they have been well substantiated in what is already written of the thesis mentioned earlier. My arguments there are semantic - simple but diffuse - and will comprise some 90,000 words when complete in a month or so. A sample of the type of enquiry conducted is included in the reprint from the Journal of Biblical Literature, although the topic treated there is only marginal to the one raised now.

The history of the reprint also illustrates the problem with which I am now probably faced and which leads me to write to you. The article was written in December 1972 and, although acknowledged by the editor as an important contribution to its area, could not be published until March of this year. It is probably correct to suppose that publication of the rest of the material will face similar delays. The delay would be of concern to you only if the semantic issue appeared significant; like me, you would not want to see new data left for some years under wraps (in manila folders) while the Faith and Order Commission, the International Commission and the committees of numerous interdenominational bodies pursue a common doctrine of ministry and authority along diaconic lines. If the ecumenical worth of diakonia is truly as ephemeral as that of the old philosophers' stone, the fact should be publicised in a way to ensure its ready acceptance.

Several times in the last twelve months discussion and reports on ministry and authority in such places as The Tablet, Clergy Review, etc., has made me think of preparing an outline similar to the present to represent my view on these matters. When the Anglican report on Deacons in the Church recently recommended the abolition of the diaconate on the principle that "Service is too general a function to be usefully focussed in a specialist" (p.25), as well as laughing and crying a little, I put together a couple of thousand words that I thought might interest the Catholic Herald, who had editorialised on the subject. I am glad now that they were not accepted, for, as they say, you don't send the baby for the beer.

I would be prepared and most interested, however, to enter discussion and present papers in academic and ecumenical circles where my interests would be respected. The latter aspect is of concern to me for reasons that it will be useful to mention only if you see the point and feasibility of such a proposal. The proposal is suggested as a practical way of communicating information that has come as something of a surprise to me in circles where it belongs and to which I have no immediate access. I am also influenced by the fact that within six months I shall probably have to leave this country and shall not have the opportunity of engaging in give and take at such levels.

Whether the proposal interests you or not, I would be grateful to know of your reaction to the diakonia matter. Since I have not got down to the semantic details involved, you need not think that I am looking for a lengthy correspondence from you. You could as well have a chat over the phone or drop in to our flat. The question is merely, if I am right about the semantics, am I right in seeing implications for ecumenical theology?

Yours sincerely,

(signed) J.N. Collins

FROM THE REPLY OF BISHOP CLARK TO MR. COLLINS' LETTER
OF JULY 29th, 1974.

... I have tried to identify the exact meaning I give to "ministry" as I think it is presented in the Canterbury Statement. I do not identify it with "service" in the W.C.C. sense. I see the whole Church in ministry, i.e. exercising its common priesthood of prayer and praise and the building up of the koinonia; and I see within that general ministry or priesthood the ordained ministry as that which enables it to live and act.

Now, on reading your own conclusions that there has been an example here of "intellectus quaerens fidem" and being tripped up on "fides", I think it is of the greatest importance that you communicate your own conclusions from your close study of Christian and pagan usage of the Greek cognates. I am wondering, therefore, if you would think of writing an article, for example, in ONE IN CHRIST. Obviously this is not a specialist magazine, but it does cover the ecumenical field and endeavours to base itself on specialist data. On the other hand, you might like just to submit a limited paper to ARCIC itself, suggesting that we are running the danger of giving a meaning to diakonia which it does not admit. Mind you, I do not think we have fallen into the trap of equating diakonia with douleia.

I see "ministry" as being the fulfilment in the individual person of their particular response - ordered or not - to the will of God in Christ, and in that sense, the fulfilment of a particular taxis in the Church. I can see what Rahner is getting at when he says: "office is office". The notion of service, therefore, is not a devalued one.

Forgive me for rambling on, but I wanted you to know that I think you have a great contribution to offer us. We are already having doubts concerning the exact meaning to give to koinonia: whether we are loading it with a meaning which did not appear in New Testament times. Of course, the sola scriptura approach shows its weakness here, and tradition does invest the scriptural term with a depth of meaning the New Testament dictionary does not necessarily offer. Or am I wrong?

By the way, the theology of the diaconate - which is in a total mess - can be righted if we see the deacon as immediately related to the bishop (even as the presbyter is immediately related to him), in whom is subsumed both the presbyter and deacon. The deacon, in this sense, is the bishop's man, and the diaconate is not a sub-structure of the presbyterate.

I have wandered hither and yon in this letter, but I would be grateful to know how you feel you can best help us. Your own thesis, of course, will be of immense importance, and it could well be that you will be offering the sort of service that was given by Elliott in his exegesis on I Peter 2: 9-10. ...

FROM THE REPLY OF MR. COLLINS TO BISHOP CLARK'S LETTER
OF 6th AUGUST, 1974.

... Something of the same difficulty (about an article in ONE IN CHRIST) attaches to a limited paper for ARCIC. As something presumably to be circularised to members, it would need to be literary and substantial. The idea suits me well, but is not possible on my present timetable. More appealing, but I do not know how practicable, would be the idea of a lecture to some members at least of the Commission. It could be informal; notes could be made available, points put rather baldly, and their deficiency might be made up in discussion. It could probably be done at any time, and would allow ARCIC to take account of its conclusions while a fuller statement was in preparation.

Leaving that there, may I now feel my way a little? I had been thinking of developing this letter for the purpose of coming closer to what I mean by saying that DIAKONEIN is not really a "service" vocabulary. A few attempts along those lines, however, show that the letter would become unmanageable; the issue can only really be handled through analysis of texts.

You might like to know, nonetheless, that the analysis entirely supports your proposition that the deacon is "the bishop's man". Your own grounds for the assertion are likely to be historical, liturgical ...; it would seem to me to be the only assertion possible from a linguistic point of view.

English is apparently unable to represent what DIAKONEIN said to the Greek mind, but in the case of the deacon, "agent" probably comes close. Just about the worst word in every context is "service". The field of meaning in which I prefer to work is "go-between". There is a considerable difference, as you see, between the two.

The vocabulary occurs often, for example, in the history of Paul's collection for the community in Jerusalem. The usage there has been grist to the mills of diaconic theology: the servant church in action. In fact, Paul is talking merely about something like a "mission" to Jerusalem. In the same way, when he "deacon" a letter (2 Cor. 3:3), he "delivers" it. There is a link here with his "deacon of the gospel" (Eph. 3:7; I Cor. 3:5 ...): the one who passes it on - not to be associated with DOULOS. The DIAKONIA TOU LOGOU (Acts 6:4) might be a memorable phrase, but the Christian dimension comes from LOGOS, not from DIAKONIA.

As regards Christians "serving" one another, I Pet. 4:10 is often mentioned. RSV says: "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another." JB: "... put yourselves at the service of others." RSV is better, but still tries to suggest "service". The text means: "pass the gift around among yourselves."

Another popular diaconic text occurs in the parable of good works (Mt. 25:44): "When did we not serve you?" I quote Cranfield and then myself.

The theological necessity of diakonia as a function of the Church as a whole and of the individual Christian could not be more forcibly brought home to us ...

As against this, it is possible to suggest:

The verse comes near the end of a long passage where the linguistic emphasis has fallen entirely on the phrases used to describe the good works of the righteous: "you gave me food, gave me drink, welcomed me, clothed me, visited me, came to me". In all, these phrases are repeated three times, but never on the lips of the wicked. On the other hand, there is no mention in the phrases of diaconic language. They are all plain talk. When the king wants to use a shorthand for the good works, he does not use diaconic vocabulary either, but again plain talk: "you did it to me" or "you did it not to me".

If the name of the game in that kingdom was diakonia, would not the king cite the law in diaconic terms?

It is only the wicked who use diaconic terms. In their case, however, it is more than shorthand. The word makes a distinct contribution to the drama in that the wicked are seen at the last as fawning creatures of the king. Having failed to comprehend, despite the lengthy judicial procedure, that the kingdom exists in others, they cast their appeal in terms of courtly attendance on a potentate. In the light of the ethical standards inculcated by the parable, this abject appeal to worldly standards justifies the king's refusal to show them mercy.

Far from being ethical vocabulary, DIAKONESAMEN would thus seem to ^{be} a minor but effective literary device to finally discredit the wicked.

In this connection, I might also mention the menial usage. The vocabulary does not of itself indicate meniality. In the table usage, for example, which many claim to be basic to the vocabulary and to have inspired the whole Christian run on the vocabulary (cf. the eucharist), the vocabulary does not express relationship to the person at table (in the line of "service" but the activity of people who shuttle between kitchen and table: the go-betweens.

These remarks are a haphazard sampling of some New Testament usage. Critical problems affecting Mk 10:45/Lk 22:27 make it pointless to pursue here any theory in regard to those texts, but to me they hold exciting possibilities.

For the rest, let me say in general that the non-service connotation of the vocabulary is discernible from the New Testament itself. It was because the vocabulary appeared there in such a varied idiom and seemed to be so short in theological or ethical values that I decided to look at non-Christian usage. The identity of the two usages is at once apparent, and makes nonsense of the claim that Christians selected the vocabulary to represent values peculiar to themselves.

The recitation of parallels is a narrow and tedious exercise, but parallel usages abound. More important is the judgment about meaning: that "service" is inappropriate and usually misleading. Various test cases could be examined, as when "difficult" texts are emended so that they will render a "service" sense. Such texts invariably make excellent sense when English equivalents are taken from within the range "effect, put into practice, intermediary, agent".

Discussion of this kind often raises more questions than it answers. That is really why I made no attempt to summarise my arguments in the earlier letter to you. I mention some of them now with considerable doubt as to their value in your eyes but with the intention of satisfying any curiosity you may have as to their general nature.

Finally, in regard to New Testament "bishops, teachers, presbyters, deacons ...", it is true that there is no New Testament word for "office"; but it is equally true that there is no generic "ministerial" term by which these various functionaries are projected as "servants" of the communities. There were bishops, and there were deacons, and there were ... If the church today is to learn from those people, one lesson would seem to be that the church has an inherent capacity to appoint whom it sees fit to tasks which it considers necessary. They did appoint; things did not just happen. Conversely, they also suppressed. Within their tradition, a phrase like "the service of authority" would have been meaningless. We can use it, but we must not pretend that we have inherited it. ...