

What is Biblical 'Ministry'?

Re-evaluating *diakonia* in the New Testament

In changing times, for church and society, there are understandable calls for change in ministry. Yet there is a more fundamental reason for review. Biblical scholarship has been redefining the term itself. The word 'ministry' in English Bibles is typically a translation of the Greek word *diakonia*. This has been thought to imply such ideas as 'loving service'. However, one recent writer claimed that, '[s]uch mass misreadings of the Scriptures have no place in a church'. Instead, it is suggested that the core meaning of 'ministry' is that of 'go-between', 'agent' or 'representative'.

This shift in thinking has resulted in sustained reflection on current practice within a number of denominations. At a time when British Baptists are focussing particular attention on ministry for the future, this lecture will therefore re-examine the use and meaning of the term *diakonia* in three key New Testament texts, to see how 'ministry' is there understood. The lecture will challenge some aspects of the new approach to *diakonia*, but also begin to explore its significance for those who minister today.



Ed Kaneen is Tutor in Biblical Studies at South Wales Baptist College, and teaches New Testament in Cardiff University. His primary research is in the interaction between the first Christians and their social world. Before moving to Wales, Ed was a Baptist minister in Sussex. He now lives in Whitchurch, Cardiff, with his wife and daughter, where they are part of Ararat Baptist Church.

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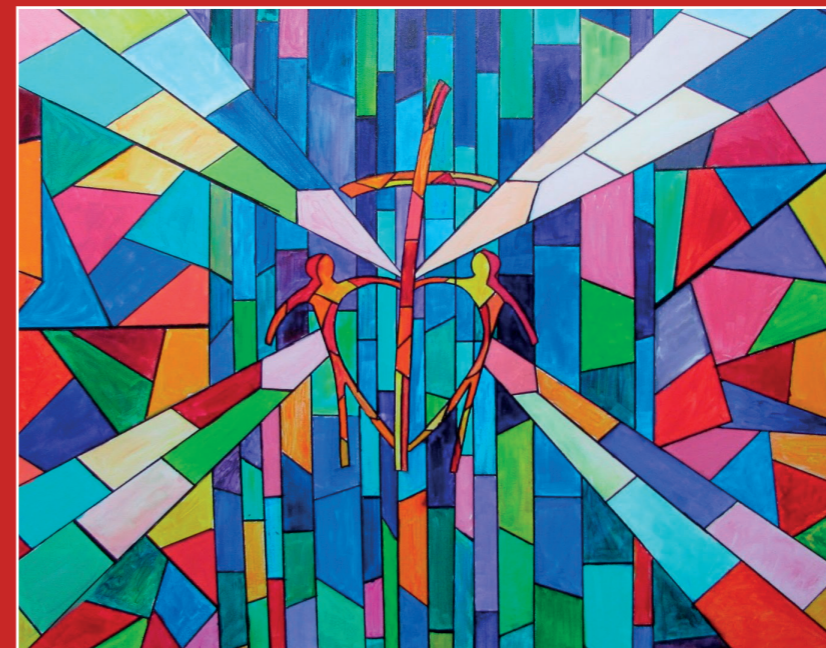


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The Whitley Lecture 2015 What is Biblical 'Ministry'?

Re-evaluating *diakonia* in the New Testament

Ed Kaneen



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WHAT IS BIBLICAL ‘MINISTRY’?

REVISITING *DIAKONIA* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT¹

1. INTRODUCTION

For some, there may be no need to ask the question, ‘What is biblical “ministry”?’ The answer may seem obvious and it is only the practice that is difficult. For the rest of us, however, the answer to the question is far from certain. The term ‘ministry’ is used for a wide range of activities today, and I well recall the confusion of my barber when I told him I was, ‘going into the ministry’, and he assumed I was joining the armed forces, as part of the Ministry of Defence. Within Christian circles, there is widely varying usage. In some cases, it refers to the order or group of the clergy, as the phrase ‘going into the ministry’ suggests. In others, it refers to a specific Christian activity undertaken by some, as in the question, ‘what is your ministry?’ In another instance, it can refer to the particular activity of preaching, which took me a while to work out when people first started to thank me for my ‘ministry this morning’. The term can be used to refer to a particular form of encounter with the Spirit, as when worship leaders give space for a ‘time of ministry’. In still other cases, it refers to an organisation through which a Christian undertakes their chosen activity, such as when a well-known evangelist refers to their ‘ministry’. Although this variety of usage does not generally impede communication – we know what we mean – it does not help us to know what ‘ministry’ is in the Bible.

For those who are called to ordained ‘ministry’, the problem can be particularly acute. For them, not only is ministry something that they do, but also the person who they are. When there is confusion about both activity and identity, the results can be crippling. Even Eugene Peterson, whose memoir is titled, *The Pastor*,² can yet say in the midst of very visible and tangible success, ‘I realised that I was not doing what I was called to do.’³ This is especially challenging when it seems that everyone else in the church has a very clear idea about what a ‘minister’ should both do and be!

¹ I would like to express thanks to the Whitley Committee for their kind invitation to present this lecture, to my colleagues at South Wales Baptist College for their encouragement in its preparation, and to Dr Larry Kreitzer for editing the published volume. I would particularly like to thank those who took the time and trouble to read through the manuscript: Dr Peter Stevenson, Dr Roy Kearsley, Helene Grant, Karen Kaneen and Charlotte Trombin. Although no blame should attach to them for what has been written (!), the lecture has certainly been improved by their careful comments.

² E.H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

³ E.H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 35.

In light of this, it seems appropriate to revisit the New Testament term itself, to see whether the way in which it is used sheds light on what the first Christians understood by ‘ministry’, and how it should be practised. This will engage us with a significant scholarly challenge to the view that ‘service’ is at the root of all ministry.⁴ Such thinking has resulted in serious discussions within Roman Catholic and Anglican churches about the order of Deacons. Lutherans and Methodists have likewise engaged in considerable debate about the implications of this revisionary work. At a time when many of the ‘givens’ of church life are being challenged by social change, and Baptist unions in Britain are reflecting on ‘ministry’,⁵ it seems timely for Baptists also to reflect on this research.⁶

Therefore, the modest aim of this lecture is to examine the biblical word translated ‘ministry’. We will begin by surveying the occurrences of ‘ministry’ words in the New Testament and exploring their possible meanings, before turning to look in detail at three passages. Commonalities and differences between the usages of the terms in these texts will be examined, before drawing the threads together in some reflections on contemporary ministry. What we will not be doing is providing an easy definition of ministry from the Bible with which to trump all other definitions. Rather, I want to tease out some aspects of the contexts in which ‘ministry’ appears, which can broaden and enrich our understanding of what the word refers to in the Bible. The lecture will, therefore, finish with some suggestions for the translation of the word. We begin, though, with how things are currently conceived.

2. THE MEANING OF ‘MINISTRY’

2.1 *DIAKONIA* IN THE BIBLE

The word ‘ministry’ in modern Bibles is almost always a translation of the Greek abstract noun *diakonia*. Along with the related terms *diakonos* (the concrete noun) and *diakoneō* (the verb), the word has passed most obviously into English through our term ‘deacon’. *Diakonia* hardly

⁴ See, for example, R.E. Schweizer, ‘Ministry in the Early Church’, *ABD* 4:836.

⁵ See, for example, the recent Baptist Union of Great Britain draft document: *Report of the Review of Selection, Formation, Funding and CMD* (August 2014).

⁶ There have been British Baptists who have made use of the work of John N. Collins (see below, n. 21, 23-24), but not from a Baptist perspective. R. Alastair Campbell has engaged with Collins’ NT exegesis, agreeing with his general analysis but suggesting that the NT maintains the sense of ‘humility’: *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Studies of the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 133-135. Also, Myra Blyth (with Wendy S. Robbins) has worked with the ideas as part of the WCC Programme Unit on Sharing and Service: *No Boundaries to Compassion? An Exploration of Women, Gender and diakonia* (Geneva: WCC, 1998).

makes an appearance at all in the Greek version of the Old Testament, featuring occasionally in the Greek version of Esther, and some of the works in the Apocrypha. Thus, it is a word that is used increasingly towards the end of the Second Temple period and this is reflected in its use in the New Testament. However, even here it is not very frequent, appearing in its various forms 89 times.⁷ Infrequency should not be equated with insignificance, however. ‘Repent’ or ‘repentance’ (*metano-*) occurs only 48 times; ‘saviour’ or ‘salvation’ (*sōtēr-*) occurs 75 times; and ‘church’ (*ekklēsia*) occurs 113 times. In other words, even on the basis of frequency alone, *diakon-* words are worthy of study.

More important than plain frequency, however, is where the words occur. Fig. 1, below, demonstrates that there is a reasonably even spread of occurrences throughout the New Testament. This indicates that the words were common currency in the geographically and socially disparate Christian groups which produced the New Testament, as well as throughout the period during which the New Testament was written. Thus, in *diakonia*, we are dealing with a well-established linguistic term, even if its usage is likely to be shaped somewhat differently by different writers. Moreover, it should be noted that *diakon-* words occur in all the genres of the New Testament: gospels, acts, letters, sermons (if this is the correct description of Hebrews) and apocalyptic. The words also occur in all the sections of the New Testament: Gospels, Acts, the undisputed Paulines; the disputed Paulines; the Pastoral Epistles; Hebrews; the Catholic Epistles and Revelation. Hence, the terms are not appropriate to only one communication medium, and can therefore be assumed to have had a fundamental role in the communication of early Christian ideas. Moreover, since their use is not limited to one writer or group of writers, nor specific to any one expression of early Christianity, we can be confident that whatever *diakonia* and its related words meant to the first Christians, the term was sufficiently important that all recipients of those first Christian writings could be expected to know something about it.

⁷ Here, and elsewhere, statistics are based on analysis of searches in the databases of BibleWorks 8 and Logos 5, which in turn are based on the NA27 edition of the Greek New Testament.

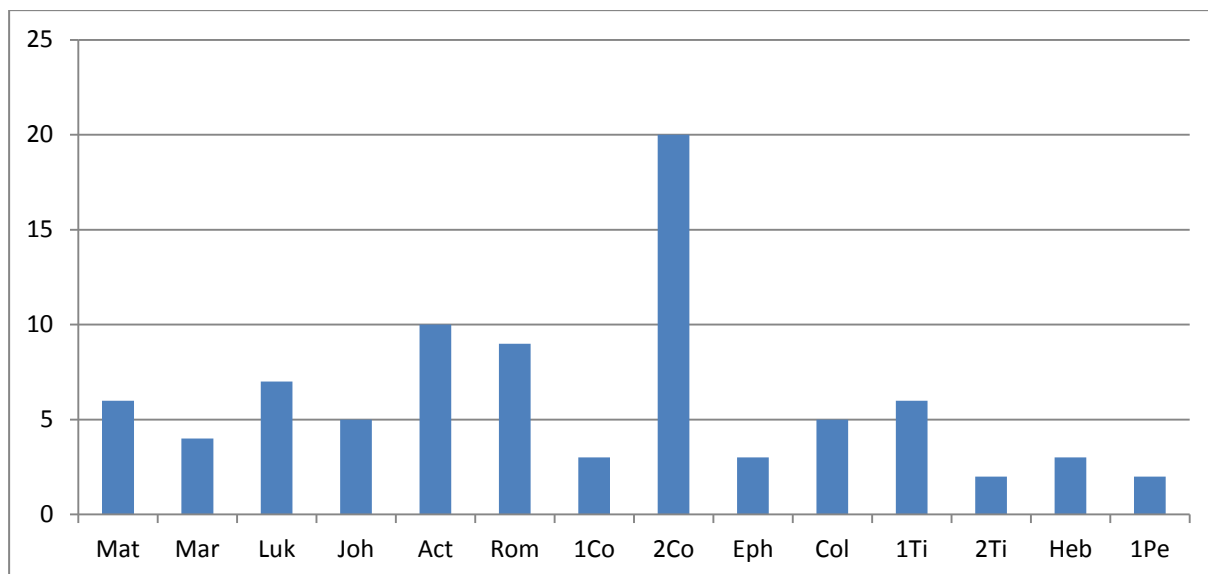


Figure 1 - Frequency of occurrences of *diakon*- words in New Testament books.⁸

When we consider the actual occurrences of these words in different books, however, we can see that they are skewed in certain directions. In terms of frequency, the most occurrences are found in the Gospels, Acts, Romans and, in front of all others, 2 Corinthians. For this reason, we will turn to some of these texts in more detail below. However, if we look at the frequency of occurrence of these words in each book against the total number of words in that book, then a different picture emerges, as shown in Fig. 2. This, after all, is a simple measure of the importance of the word group to the book as a whole, because it is a measure of how much ‘space’ within the book is taken up by these words. On this measure, apart from 2 Corinthians, we see that Ephesians and Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and 1 Peter bear the weight of these occurrences. These books are regarded by most scholars as bearing witness to a later stage in the development of Christianity than the undisputed Pauline writings. It is unsurprising, therefore, that they have more of a focus on these terms, since, in the case of the Pastoral epistles, this is due to the development of *diakonos* as a church office. The preponderance of the words in these later texts in general indicates that *diakonia* and its related terms are becoming a more established and settled element in the description of early Christianity as time goes on.

⁸ Books where the words only occur once have been omitted for clarity.

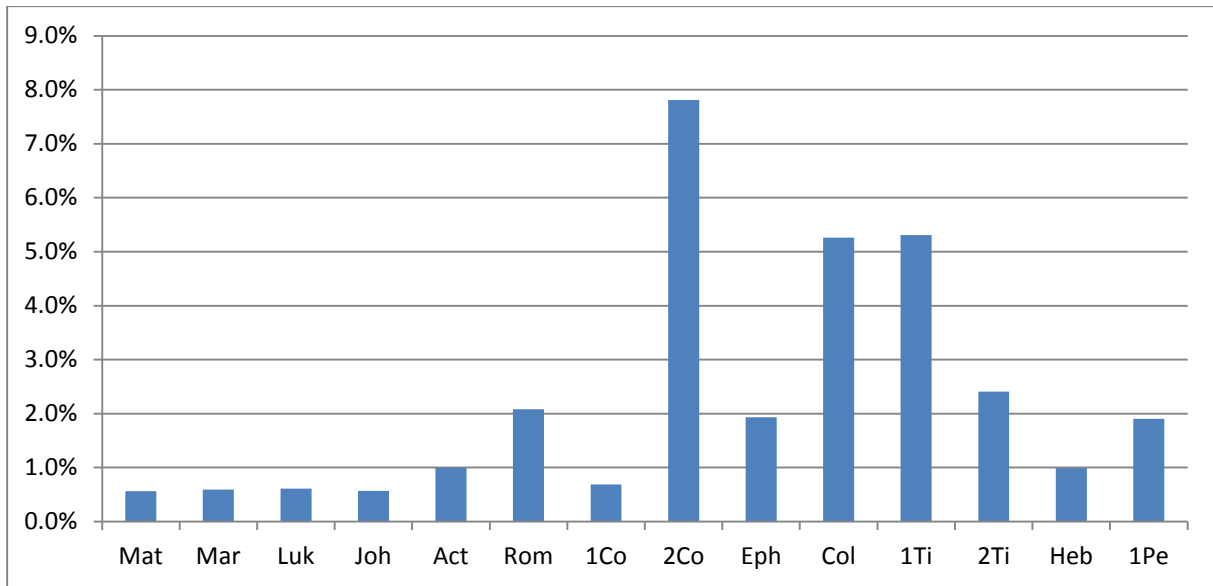


Figure 2 - Frequency of occurrences of *diakon*-words in New Testament books, expressed as a percentage of the total words in those books.

How then, does *diakonia* come to be associated with ‘ministry’? The Latin Vulgate, which provided the ecclesiastical vocabulary for much of the church in the West, almost always translates *diakon*- words with *minister*- words (*ministerium*, *minister*, *ministro*). Indeed, there are only four occasions where the Vulgate uses any other word. Three of these instances simply use a transliteration of the Greek word, since they refer to the office of ‘deacon’.⁹ The other occurrence, in Rom 15:31, uses the Latin word *oblatio*, which means ‘offering’ or ‘a giving’, but the translator is likely following a variant manuscript tradition at this point which contains a different Greek word.¹⁰ Therefore, the Vulgate saw no need to distinguish between different usages of *diakon*- words, considering them to be encompassed within the *minister*- word group. When this passes into English in, for example, the Authorised Version, approximately 85% of *diakon*-words are translated with an equivalent English ‘ministry’ word. Thus, there continues to be a consistent pattern that *diakon*- words can be recognised by the reader and will be understood to relate to ‘ministry’. However, while this was certainly true of the Vulgate, and generally true of the AV, contemporary versions are much less clear about how the *diakonia* word group should be translated. Typical translations include, ‘ministry’, ‘service’, ‘task’, ‘relief’, ‘mission’, and ‘distribution’.¹¹ Indeed, taking the NRSV and ESV as examples, they both translate *diakonia* as ‘ministry’ only a little over 50% of the time. Therefore, many links between passages are lost on the modern reader and, more importantly, their relevance to an understanding of

⁹ There are only two passages where this happens: in the salutation to the Philippian leaders (Phil 1:1), and in the description of the requirements for deacons (1 Tim 3:8, 12).

¹⁰ *Dōroforia*. See the note in NA²⁸. However, evidently some manuscripts of the Vulgate follow the *diakonia* text. This is a textual issue beyond the scope of this lecture to resolve.

¹¹ These examples are taken from the NRSV, but other modern translations are similar.

‘ministry’ is obscured. This raises the question of what *diakonia* actually means, answering which has resulted in a significant debate in recent years.

2.2 *DIAKONIA* AS TRADITIONALLY DEFINED

The term ‘servant-leadership’ has become almost a given for the attitude and approach that should be demonstrated by those in ministry. For example, the popular *Radical Leaders* by Paul Beasley-Murray contains a section entitled, ‘Leadership is always servant-leadership’¹² and the earlier *Christian Training Programme* volume on *Being a Christian Leader* had a similar section entitled, ‘The Leader is to be a Servant’.¹³ In the previous series of *Baptist Basics* booklets, Malcolm Goodspeed wrote on leadership,

[Jesus’] authority lay ... in servanthood shown in the way of life he led, the truth he spoke and in his dedication to serving God and people. So he set the pattern and determined how his church must think about leadership today. Baptists are committed to trying to work this out.¹⁴

This sounds remarkably like the ideas expressed in Wilhelm Brandt’s influential work from the early part of the 20th century, in which he considered the gospel passages featuring *diakon*-terms.¹⁵ His conclusion was that Jesus’ act of sacrifice was the supreme act of service, and Jesus’, ‘service is the expression of messiahship: *the Christ* serves.’¹⁶ This understanding was taken up by H.W. Beyer in what became the standard article on the meaning of *diakon*- words in the important *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. He writes,

Fundamental to an understanding of *διακονέω* [*diakoneō*] in all its uses is the fact that it has an original concrete sense which is still echoed in its figurative meanings. In secular Gk. *διακονέω*, which is first found in Herodot[us] and is never too common, means a. “to wait at table” ... b. Rather more generally it means “to provide or care for,” ... On the basis of these original senses, it has c. the comprehensive meaning “to serve”¹⁷

¹² P. Beasley-Murray, *Radical Leaders: A Guide For Elders & Deacons In Baptist Churches* (Didcot: BUGB, 1997), 14-15.

¹³ F. Bacon, *Being a Christian Leader* (Christian Training Programme; Didcot: BUGB, 1990), 18-19.

¹⁴ M. Goodspeed, *Leadership in the Local Church* (Baptist Basics; Didcot: BUGB, 1994). Interestingly, the notion of servanthood is not present in the current series of leaflets.

¹⁵ W. Brandt, *Dienst und Dienen im Neuen Testament* (NTF 2/5; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1931).

¹⁶ Brandt, *Dienst und Dienen im Neuen Testament*, 80.

¹⁷ H.W. Beyer, ‘*διακονέω, διακονία, διάκονος*’, in *TDNT* (eds. Gerhard Kittel, et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 81-92 (82).

Beyer goes on to describe the low regard in which such menial acts were held in the Greek world. In other words, the one who serves is a *diakonos*, and their service (*diakonia*) is usually low-status in nature, often being carried out by a slave. These ideas are taken up by subsequent writers who consider *diakonia* in the New Testament, saying, for example:

The Synoptics breathe the atmosphere of *diakonia* both in the Person and Work of Christ and in his teachings, and this *diakonia* is couched in the language of servanthood.¹⁸

Paul views Christian leaders not as those of the highest status within their Christian community, but as those who serve.¹⁹

As a consequence of such work, Christian discipleship thus becomes typified by service, and ‘ministry’ will therefore be expressed through helpful and humble acts of loving service to a neighbour. This, in turn, becomes characteristic of the understanding of the office of deacon.²⁰ No doubt most people in the church will be familiar with these kinds of ideas. However, they have been challenged in recent years, primarily due to the energetic and single-minded work of one man: John N. Collins.

2.3 *DIAKONIA* REINTERPRETED

Collins’ primary monograph, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*²¹ was published in 1990 as a revised version of his doctoral thesis.²² It forms the foundation for his subsequent publications, which are more popular and more directly applied to the church situation: *Are all Christians Ministers?*, *Deacons and the Church*, and, very recently, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry*,²³ in addition to numerous articles.²⁴ In his original work, Collins criticises the traditional view of *diakonia* as ‘service’, suggesting that the ‘idea of “serving” is vague and

¹⁸ A.W. Swamidoss, ‘Diakonia as Servanthood in the Synoptics’, *Indian Journal of Theology* 32:1-2 (1983): 37-51.

¹⁹ A.D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (First-century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 243.

²⁰ R.E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (SBT 32; London: SCM, 1961), 177-179.

²¹ J.N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²² The subtitle of this lecture is intended to give homage to this important work of Collins.

²³ J.N. Collins, *Are All Christians Ministers?* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992); J.N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002); J.N. Collins, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁴ For a reasonably full list of publications, see *Diakonia Studies*, 265-268.

inadequate'.²⁵ More recently, he has gone so far as to call traditional interpretations 'mass misreadings of the Scriptures', which, 'have no place in a church'.²⁶

Collins reaches these conclusions on the basis of a thorough consideration of the usage of *diakonia* in both biblical and non-biblical sources.²⁷ For example, the earliest occurrence appears in the *History* of the Greek writer Herodotus, who describes Etearchus, a Cretan ruler who entertained a merchant and 'made him swear that he would [undertake] for Etearchus whatever he required' (4.154.3).²⁸ 'Undertake' is here a translation of a *diakon*-word. In fact, the particular undertaking was to 'dispose of a girl by throwing her into the sea'. Thus, the first example of the word which will come to be translated 'ministry', refers to a contract-killing – which thankfully does not take place! However, as Collins works through the occurrences, he identifies a number of semantic fields in which *diakon*-words seem to occur. These include running errands, carrying messages, acting as an agent on behalf of another, mediation and diplomacy, as well as the more familiar 'waiting' or 'service at tables' – although the instances of the latter are surprisingly few given their influence on the traditional interpretation of *diakonia*.²⁹ Thus, Collins shows that *diakonia* does not necessarily imply either table-service or lowly status. Rather, it is a term which refers to, 'activity of an in-between kind'.³⁰ He suggests alternative terms for those who carry out such activity, for example, emissary, spokesperson, envoy or ambassador, all of which convey a very different sense of status than the traditional interpretation. Perhaps the most helpful term suggested by Collins is the 'go-between', whose particular task is dependent on the role which has been assigned by another – thus emphasising that *diakonia* refers primarily to an activity, without regard to its status, and, in particular, to the fulfilment of an activity on behalf of someone else.³¹

Collins' reading of the material has been supported by Anni Hentschel, who confirms that New Testament usage is consistent with that found in wider literature.³² The measure of the shift in understanding that Collins has brought about can be seen in the additions to the entry on

²⁵ Collins, *Diakonia*, 194.

²⁶ J.N. Collins, 'The Problem with Values Carried by Diakonia/Diakonie in Recent Church Documents', in *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37-53 (53).

²⁷ The most accessible summary of this work can be found in Collins, 'Ancient Greeks'.

²⁸ Collins, *Diakonia*, 73.

²⁹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 154.

³⁰ Collins, *Diakonia*, 335.

³¹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 194.

³² A. Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament: Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (WUNT II 226; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). For an English summary of her argument, see Collins, 'Diakonia in Germany'.

diakonia in the most recent edition of the standard dictionary of biblical Greek.³³ The assumption of the rest of this lecture will be that Collins' reading of the non-biblical material is accurate. However, a cornerstone of his argument is that, 'Christian usage is indistinguishable from non-Christian'.³⁴ The question to be asked in the rest of this lecture is to what extent this is true.³⁵ To put this another way, to what extent does Paula Gooder's summary of Collins' ideas reflect a New Testament understanding of the word 'ministry': 'Service ... is more about carrying out orders than it is about looking after others?'³⁶

2.4 *DIAKONIA* AND DEFINITION

Before answering this, we must ask on what grounds it could be the case that Christian usage shows distinctive elements. For, ever since Deissmann and others discovered Greek papyri,³⁷ those ordinary documents which described everyday activities in the ancient world – such as shopping lists, letters and bills of sale – it has been recognised that the New Testament shares a 'common' (*koine*) Greek with these texts.³⁸ In other words, the first Christian writings used the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire, and any attempt to deny this is futile. This is why Collins' work has been so successful, because it surveys the usage of *diakon*- words in a range of different texts. This is a standard approach in biblical studies, for if we want to understand how a word is to be understood in the Bible, then other ancient writings in the same language may give helpful

³³ J.N. Collins, *Diakonia and the New Greek Lexicon (BDAG)* (2001 [cited 10/10/10 2010]). Unfortunately, this web resource no longer seems to exist at the following address, but a search may find it elsewhere: <http://www.deaconpages.org/library/LEXICON%20BDAG%20article%20by%20John%20N.%20Collins.pdf>

³⁴ Collins, *Diakonia*, 336.

³⁵ I am not the first person to ask this question. In particular, Andrew Clarke has argued for maintaining 'service' as an appropriate translation in some instances. See Clarke, *Serve the Community*, 239-245; A.D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* (LNTS 362; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 63-67. In the latter piece, although his views are somewhat tempered, Clarke nevertheless says, 'I remain unpersuaded by his [i.e. Collins'] arguments' (66).

³⁶ P. Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins', *Ecclesiology* 3 (2006): 33-56 (42).

³⁷ For the significance of this for our understanding of the language of the New Testament see, A. Deissmann, 'Hellenistic Greek with Special Consideration of the Greek Bible', in *The Language of the New Testament: Classic Essays* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; vol. 60 of *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 39-59.

³⁸ Literary Greek sources do not generally use 'koine' or Hellenistic Greek, but rather, 'Classical' Greek. Therefore, there should be caution about the applicability of evidence from such sources, which form the bulk of Collins' analysis. Collins is aware of this reservation, however, and accounts for it in his work, as well as surveying the papyri for examples drawn from a similar register and dialect to the NT writings.

examples.³⁹ One of Collins' criticisms of the traditional interpretation is, therefore, that it envisions a shift from the normal usage, to a specifically biblical or Christian use of the words.⁴⁰

However, to deny the possibility of this would be to swing the pendulum too far to the other extreme. In Britain especially, we are familiar with different dialects, as different linguistic patterns and preferences are expressed by groups from different geographical regions. Sociolinguists have also acknowledged different 'sociolects' (social dialects).⁴¹ These represent the ways in which people communicate within a social group, irrespective of geography. For example, 'I was pleased with the fellowship' would mean quite different things in the sociolect of my university context as compared to my church context.⁴² We are all familiar with such examples. Therefore, it is possible that the groups of Christian believers from whom the New Testament writings come, also developed a sociolect. Indeed, many of those writings deliberately seek to shape an identity which transcends regional, ethnic, gender and status boundaries, whilst also developing a clear separation from those outside the group. This distinctive inclusivity provides fertile ground for similarly distinctive linguistic development to occur. Collins acknowledges this by noting that the title 'deacon' does not correspond to the normal usage of *diakonos*, either inside or outside the Bible.⁴³ Therefore, if it is possible to observe such a language shift in this case, it seems at least reasonable to assume that it might occur in other uses of *diakon*- words also, given that they are a particular feature of New Testament texts, as we have seen.

On the other hand, if this assumption were to prove correct, we need not and should not assume that every occurrence of a *diakon*- word carries the same meaning, or that the different meanings can all be seen in any particular occurrence. To do so would be to fall victim to 'illegitimate totality transfer',⁴⁴ a felony which Collins accuses Clarke of committing because he attempts to read the meaning of *diakon*- words from their usage in the Gospels to the rest of New

³⁹ For a helpful recent introduction to lexical semantics in New Testament studies, see M. Turner, 'Modern Linguistics and Word Study in the New Testament', in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 189-217 (esp. 203-209).

⁴⁰ 'Christian usage cannot be differentiated at any point from usage in Greek literature generally', Collins, *Deacons*, 14.

⁴¹ P. Trudgill, *A Glossary of Sociolinguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122; R. Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Blackwell Textbooks in Linguistics 4; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 154; C.H. Vickers and S.K. Deckert, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics: Society and Identity* (London: Continuum, 2011), 70-79.

⁴² In the latter case, I would be unsure without other information whether 'fellowship' referred simply to the congregation, or to the quality of relationships amongst the congregants.

⁴³ Collins, *Diakonia*, 336; Collins, *Deacons*, 14.

⁴⁴ J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218-219.

Testament.⁴⁵ We must be wary of this, recognising that words take their meaning from the context in which they occur.⁴⁶ However, we must also beware of multiplying the different senses of the words unnecessarily. Therefore, in the analysis that follows, we should expect to find considerable overlap between the ways in which *diakonia* is used in non-biblical sources and what we see in the New Testament, not least because of the work of Collins. However, we should also be open to the possibility of observing elements of particularly Christian usage, given that the terms develop into the title ‘deacon’, which is identifiably separate from the normal use. Hence, the remainder of this study will focus on how three early Christian writers chose to use the term to refer to certain activities of Christian disciples, and in what particular contexts they chose to use these words.

3. ‘MINISTRY’ IN BIBLICAL TEXTS

Having laid out the debate concerning the terms translated ‘ministry’ in the New Testament, and the approach to be taken here, we now turn to consider how the terms are used in three New Testament texts. I have not chosen texts where the term refers to an office in the church, as this would be to artificially limit the scope of the meaning of *diakonia*. Instead, I am using earlier texts, when the usage might be assumed to have been more fluid, and less obviously ‘Christian’. I have chosen these particular texts for four reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, they each contain a concentration of *diakon-* terms, since it is easier to determine the usage of a word where there are a number of occurrences. Moreover, the concentration of terms suggests they are in particular focus at this point. Secondly, the passages come from three different authors, and therefore represent a diversity of usage amongst early Christians. Thirdly, they appear in different genres, and therefore any similarity in their usage cannot be put down to genre-specific constraints. Finally, they each represent quite different situations, some of which we do not typically consider to be ‘ministry’ today, and therefore any overlap in their usage will be all the more significant. Thus, although there can be no claim that these texts are representative of all New Testament occurrences, I am attempting to cover as broad a range of usage as possible within the limits of this lecture.

3.1 2 CORINTHIANS 8-9

The first text is probably the least expected, and I choose to start here to see how such a text can extend our existing understanding. It is least expected because, if you read the NIV or ESV, for

⁴⁵ Collins, ‘From *διακονία* to *Diakonia*’, 17.

⁴⁶ Thus, Donfried can say, ‘*Diakonia* ... is a neutral term waiting to be placed in a context.’ This is why it is essential that we examine how the NT writers use *diakonia* in particular contexts. K.P. Donfried, ‘Ministry: Rethinking the Term *Diakonia*’, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56:1 (1992): 1-15 (4).

example, then you would not know there is any link between this passage and *diakonia*. This demonstrates the enduring value of learning Greek, or at least of engaging with the more detailed commentaries. For in 2 Corinthians 8:4 in the NIV we read of the ‘service to the Lord’s people’ and in the ESV of the ‘relief of the saints’. Among modern versions, only the NRSV speaks of the ‘ministry to the saints’. The translation in the New Living Translation gives an indication of the reason, as it speaks of ‘sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem’. There is no mention of ministry because, on the face of it, these two chapters are not about ministry at all, but about the financial collection that Paul and his companions are making from the churches in Asia Minor for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. Yet, in the space of 33 verses, all on the same topic, *diakon-* words appear six times.

The first and main occurrence is 2 Cor 8:4, ‘pleading with us earnestly for the gift of sharing in the *diakonia* to the saints’. Although this is set in an economic context, and clearly refers to the activity of the financial collection, we nevertheless have a preponderance of theologically loaded terms to describe this activity (in this verse and elsewhere in the passage): *charis* (gift or grace), *koinōnia* (fellowship or sharing), and *diakonia* (ministry or service). It is common to suggest that this is insignificant, and that the terms are simply being used in their ordinary sense. However, given that Paul uses these same words so prominently elsewhere in his letters, suggests to me that there is a deliberate attempt to merge what might be considered the mundane (i.e. the collection) with the spiritually and theologically significant. I therefore quite agree with Keith Nickle who says:

When Paul used various forms of *diakonia* in reference to his collection project he was employing a designation which was quite familiar to his readers. At the same time it was a term which was rich with meaning for them in relation to their understanding of the Christian faith, in that it had not yet been crystallized into a technical designation ... Paul was well aware of the depth of meaning which it bore, and intentionally employed it for his project to emphasize the importance with which he regarded it.⁴⁷

This does not answer, however, what the term means in this context. Betz’s suggestion that the phrase is simply the official name for the collection, thus resulting in him translating it as, ‘the contribution meant for the saints’, is both lacking in evidence and fails to account for the particular language used.⁴⁸ Collins regards the usage of *diakonia* here as falling within his general category of running an ‘errand’, in this case, ‘deliver[ing] something for a delegating authority’.⁴⁹ His point is that Paul will be delivering the collection on behalf of the churches. Yet if the

⁴⁷ K.F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul’s Strategy* (SBT 48; London: SCM, 1966), 108.

⁴⁸ H.D. Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 46.

⁴⁹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 218.

emphasis is on the delivery and, hence, the movement of the collection, it is not at all clear how the Corinthians, not to mention the Macedonian churches, are to *share* in this activity – they cannot all deliver the goods with Paul. Rather, the activity seems to be that of contributing to the collection itself, and the emphasis is not so much on the ‘delegating authority’, but on the recipients in need, in this case, the ‘saints’ in Jerusalem.⁵⁰ Thus, we have an activity which, even in English, can also refer to the object itself, ‘the collection’, which many can share in because of the intended recipients, the ‘saints’. For this reason, Collins uses the more generic word ‘mission’ as a translation of *diakonia* here, which has the benefit of emphasising the relational nature of the activity.⁵¹ However, we should note that the word not only implies mission-from, as Collins suggests, but also mission-to, a point to which we shall return.

We should note that this activity is one in which the believers should excel (8:7), as it can be tested (8:8). Moreover, the *diakonia* in which the churches share is mirrored on the generous example of Christ, whose own self-giving serves as a metaphor of economic advantage for them (8:9). Hence, again we see the connection between ‘simple economics’ and the more overtly Christological vision of Paul’s gospel.

The next occurrences of *diakon*-related words appear in 8:19-20, where the verb is twice used. In both cases, the AV’s translation of ‘administering’ is often followed by modern translators. Thus, the ‘gift’ (*charis*) is ‘being administered’ (a participle of *diakoneō*) by Paul and his companions (8:19), but he is anxious that there should be no blame attached to them because of ‘this abundance being administered’ by them (8:20). Hence, we have a task which is their responsibility, but which again can be undertaken well, or badly, and others will be in a position to judge which is the case. For this reason, Paul is eager to note the credentials of his companions and co-workers as it is clearly important that appropriate people undertake this important task (8:16-18, 23). Moreover, appointment to this ministry has not simply been Paul’s choice, but rather, the choice of the churches, so there is a committed sharing in both the undertaking and success of the mission, and consequently a sharing of power. It is not clear who might be likely to judge the work, whether the senders, the recipients, or simply those whom Paul encounters along the way. However, there is a clear sense that this ‘ministry’ is not undertaken privately, but there is responsibility both to the churches and to God (8:21), and the proper undertaking will result in benefit to all concerned (8:19).

⁵⁰ This emphasis on recipient can be seen in V.P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1984); M.E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994-2000), 525.

⁵¹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 218; Collins, ‘Paul, Delegate’, 145.

2 Corinthians 9:1 also uses the phrase ‘the *diakonia* to the saints’, and the same comments apply here as in 8:4.⁵² However, 9:12 features a phrase that is difficult to translate, as captured by the ESV: ‘the ministry of this service’. For here we have two terms that are often regarded as synonyms: *diakonia* and *leitourgia*. Both can be translated ‘service’ or ‘ministry’, but their appositional use here suggests they are not completely synonymous, but that the nature of *diakonia* is extended or explained by *leitourgia*. The latter term typically has cultic significance in the LXX,⁵³ referring to religious service, and this would make sense given the immediate context of thanksgiving to, and glorification of, God (9:12-13). But it can also refer to ‘public service’, such as putting on a play for others,⁵⁴ and the repeated emphasis on the testing of the *diakonia* (9:13) may emphasise the public nature of this activity. Therefore, *diakonia* again represents an activity, which is visible and can be tested, and which involves both senders and recipients (9:11, where the Corinthians are mentioned as ‘you’, and where the Jerusalem recipients are implicitly mentioned as those who will give thanksgiving), all of whom will benefit and bring glory and thanksgiving to God (9:11-13), in response to Christ’s gospel (9:13), which included this element of giving, as previously mentioned.

This first passage has raised a number of issues in the interpretation of *diakonia*. The most obvious is that the term clearly cannot be restricted to particularly ‘spiritual’ or liturgical activity, and any attempt to do so is to deny a significant biblical example. Paul has no qualms about describing economics, or a financial transaction, in ‘ministry’ terms, indeed, he is perhaps deliberately doing so to emphasise its importance. Moreover, this ministry is a responsibility conferred by others, but very much carried out with the recipients in mind. Thus, it is a two-way transaction involving multiple parties, and the activity itself will bring the parties relationally closer together. These parties are in a position to judge whether the ministry is conducted well, since it is publically visible, and a well-discharged ministry results in benefit to all, as well as glory and thanksgiving to God. Thus, we have a reasonably balanced power system, where those who carry out the ministry retain responsibility for its success, but are appointed by the senders, and answer to all interested parties. Since it is right that such ministry is done well, those of good character are selected to be particularly involved, but sharing in such ministry is the responsibility of all Christians, as all who confess the gospel are bound by the self-giving example of Christ. In this, we have not seen any evidence that *diakonia* refers to a particular status, such as a servile status, but rather that the activity being described by the word, in this case the collection, has a status of high importance in this passage, which is thus conferred on those who carry out the task.

⁵² There is debate around whether 2 Cor 8 and 9 were originally separate from the rest of 2 Corinthians, and whether the chapters might each have been separate letters. However, these possibilities do not materially affect the discussion here.

⁵³ The Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

⁵⁴ Betz, *2 Corinthians*, 117.

It has been suggested that Paul's use of *diakonia* here in 2 Corinthians is an extension of its use in Acts 6, and it is to this passage that we now turn.⁵⁵

3.2 ACTS 6

The description of the appointing of the Seven is a much more obvious passage than the previous one, but for this reason there is a far greater risk of reading back into the text later divisions between clergy and laity, and finding in it those particularly valued activities that different orders of clergy have undertaken. It is true that the ministry to which the Seven are here appointed has often been regarded as a defining moment in the development of the diaconate.⁵⁶ Moreover, the majority of patristic interpreters considered this to be the origin of the role of deacon, and for this reason, for example, limited the number of deacons in a city to seven.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is almost universally held today that this passage is not about deacons. The most obvious argument is that the word deacon (*diakonos*) does not appear in the passage, and it is implausible⁵⁸ that a description would be given of the origins of an office without actually mentioning that office. Nevertheless, while the passage does not depict the later development of the diaconate, it still has much to tell us about ministry. *Diakon-* words appear in three places. First, they are used to describe the problem, which in the NRSV is called 'the daily distribution [*diakonia*] of food' (6:1); secondly, to describe what the Twelve no longer wish to be doing, what the NRSV describes as 'to wait [*diakoneō*] on tables' (6:2); and finally as an indication of what they would be doing instead, which was devoting themselves to 'serving [*diakonia*] the word' (6:4, NRSV). The preponderance of these otherwise sparsely distributed words in Acts suggests a connection between them, and that this is a significant passage for providing an example of *diakonia*.

Although the passage is brief, it has given rise to a number of debates. There has been considerable argument about the exact identity of the two groups – who are the 'Hellenists' and the 'Hebrews' in this case?⁵⁹ Moreover, there is just as much debate about what the cause of the problems might be, from simple administrative difficulties caused by the rapid growth of the

⁵⁵ Nickle regards this inter-church provision for those in need as an extension of the inner-church provision in Acts 6. While this is plausible, it is equally possible that we simply have two quite different models, both of which can be considered to be 'ministry'. Nickle, *The Collection*, 107.

⁵⁶ J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Anchor Bible 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 345.

⁵⁷ So, the Council of Neocaesarea (315 CE), canon xv: 'The deacons ought to be seven in number, according to the canon, even if the city is great. Of this the Book of Acts will persuade you.'

⁵⁸ Barrett goes so far as to say, 'impossible'. C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC 34; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 1998), 1:304.

⁵⁹ For a full description of the issues, see C.S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (3vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012-2014), 2:1253-1260.

church,⁶⁰ to long-seated ethnic divisions.⁶¹ However, we do not need to resolve these issues,⁶² for we are interested in the problem itself and the solution that Luke describes.

So what is the problem? 6:1 tells us that a group of widows are being ‘neglected’ (NRSV, ESV), which is an unfortunate translation possibly implying intent, so better is ‘overlooked’ (NIV) in the ‘daily distribution of food’ (NRSV, NIV). However, the word ‘food’ is not present in the Greek, which simply has ‘daily *diakonia*’. Food is therefore an assumption, not unreasonable as we will see, but an assumption nevertheless.⁶³ Thus, the AV’s more literal translation, ‘daily ministrations’, is closer to what we might plausibly understand at this point in our text. There is some activity which is being done by others in the church for a group of widows. It is an activity that can be judged to be done well or badly, and the widows are clearly of the view that it is being done badly. We discover from the second verse that it is, in fact, the Twelve apostles who are doing this task badly. What have the apostles been engaged in in previous chapters, that might give us clues to this task? Primarily, they have been proclaiming the word, both inside and outside the church, but also managing the distribution of funds within the community (4:35). That these tasks were their responsibility, their ‘ministry’ (1:17, 25), is evidenced by the Twelve taking the initiative to resolve the problem.⁶⁴

The apostles phrase their response like this: ‘It is not right for us to leave the word of God to *diakoneō* at tables’ (6:2). Whatever this ministry is, it involves doing it ‘at tables’.⁶⁵ This is why the most popular suggestion for the activity is the distribution of food – the tables are meal tables. Certainly, it can have that meaning, as is shown later in Acts (‘he set before them a *table* [i.e. a meal]’, 16:34) and in Luke’s Gospel (e.g. Lazarus ‘desired to be filled by the fallings from the rich man’s *table*’, 16:21). The Gospel also sets Jesus’ key statement about *diakonia* in the

⁶⁰ L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 105.

⁶¹ D. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 231.

⁶² Which may, ultimately, be unattainable: ‘Even those who would prefer to take the text at face value have to confront the difficulty that Luke is vague about both the issue and its resolution.’ R.I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 156.

⁶³ If correct, then it provides an answer to an anecdotal question asked by Lucy Moore, founder of *Messy Church*, at a training event: ‘In the future, will caterers be more important than ordained ministers?’ If Acts 6 is anything to go by, the answer is: ‘It has always been so!’

⁶⁴ Keener, *Acts*, 2:1261.

⁶⁵ It is for this reason that it has been suggested that the problem might have concerned the involvement of the widows themselves in the particular ministry, as it would typically be a woman’s or slave’s responsibility to ‘wait on tables’. Unfortunately, space precludes the opportunity to explore this, or any other gendered aspects of this passage. However, for some discussion, see, B.E. Reid, ‘The Power of Widows and How to Suppress It’, in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff; vol. 9 of *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*; London: T & T Clark, 2004), 71-88 (esp. 83-86); E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1995), 164-166.

context of dining (Luke 22:27). Thus, the language allows the possibility of this ‘ministry’ being about distributing food, and the summary statement of the church in Acts 2:46 might confirm this, if it were to be translated, ‘they shared their food with glad and sincere hearts’, although it should be noted that the apostles are not mentioned as having any responsibility for this. There is later evidence that synagogue communities responded to those in need, particularly widows, through the distribution of food as well as other provisions,⁶⁶ and this would be consistent with Old Testament demands for the care of widows,⁶⁷ which were no doubt heeded also by the first Jewish Christians.⁶⁸ If this is a correct understanding of the referent for *diakonia* in Acts 6:1, then the likely possibility is that such shared meals were the ‘breaking of bread’ which would later become the Eucharist,⁶⁹ suggesting that the Seven appointees presided at such liturgically significant meals.

However, there is another possibility. As we have seen, there is clear evidence for the apostles’ role in distributing wealth to those in need in the community. ‘Tables’, in this instance, would refer to the banking ‘table’, such as those turned over by Jesus in the Temple (Mark 11:15), or the table upon which the disobedient slave should have left his master’s money on deposit, in the Lukan Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:23). This would be in keeping with the typical description of widows in ancient texts which, ‘viewed widows not, first of all, in terms of their bereaved marital status ... but in terms of their destitution that typically resulted from it.’⁷⁰ Thus, Luke’s summary statement of the first church, that ‘there was no-one needy among them’ (4:34), which undeniably refers to the meeting of financial needs, is echoed in our passage when the apostles hand over to the Seven the responsibility for ‘this need’ (6:3; i.e. the financial need of the widows).⁷¹

Therefore, particularly when read in the light of Paul’s use of *diakonia* in 2 Cor 8-9, it seems to me that it would be at least as reasonable to translate Acts 6:1 as ‘the daily ministry [of funds]’ as

⁶⁶ See J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969), 129-132. Also, B. Capper, ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods’, in *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Richard Bauckham; vol. 4 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 323-356 (350-355).

⁶⁷ E.g. Deut 14:29; 24:19-21; 26:12-13; Job 22:9; 31:16. See also D.L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 189-193.

⁶⁸ This becomes a developed system later, as seen in 1 Tim 5:9-10.

⁶⁹ See Pervo, *Acts*, 156, 159, 162.

⁷⁰ Keener, *Acts*, 2:1265. See also the general description of widows in B.B. Thurston, *The Widows: A Women’s Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 10-17.

⁷¹ Most versions translate *chreia* here as ‘task’ (NRSV) or ‘duty’ (ESV) or ‘responsibility’ (NIV), but there is no good reason why it should not be translated ‘need’, and such a translation would be in keeping with every other instance of the word in Acts.

it is to translate ‘the daily ministry [of food]’.⁷² Thus, the *diakonia* in which the apostles have been unsuccessful, is the distribution of money among the widows to meet their needs.⁷³ For this reason, Barrett’s conciliatory translation of ‘the daily ministrations of charity’ may be helpfully indistinct.⁷⁴ There is one further possibility, however, which I do not wish to dwell on, but which is advocated by Collins. This is that the problem is actually that ‘the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily preaching of the Word’.⁷⁵ He suggests that these non-Hebrew speaking widows were unable to access the daily proclamation in the Temple, and therefore Greek-speakers were appointed to share the word with them in their homes (thus, ‘table’ is a euphemism for the home).⁷⁶ While it is certainly the case that Acts places a priority on the spread of the word, it is clearly not the only topic of concern, as the early chapters on the community of goods indicate. To consider that *diakon-* words serve as ‘code words’ in Acts for the proclamation and spread of the word of God⁷⁷ seems like an artificial limitation on what the terms can refer to. This is particularly the case when the Twelve explain their decision to ‘devote [themselves] to the ministry of the word’ (6:4) – they clearly need to explain which kind of *diakonia* they are devoting themselves to, *diakonia* alone does not carry that meaning.⁷⁸

However, this does raise an important question: is there an intention in this passage to delineate two separate forms of ministry, one, the proclamation of the word which is superior, and the other, a more mundane ministry at ‘the kitchen end of the spectrum’ as Collins puts it,⁷⁹ which is

⁷² It is too much for Fitzmyer to say that food ‘is undoubtedly what is meant here’. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 348.

⁷³ Although a much later text, the *Acts of Thomas* 59 indicates ‘much money’ collected in the ‘service of the widows’ and ‘deacons’ going and distributing ‘clothes and nourishment’ to those in need.

⁷⁴ Barrett, *Acts*, 1:302. There are further grounds for this more general translation in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, where the ‘goats’ say, ‘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 [*diakoneō*] of you?’ (Matt 25:44, NRSV). Thus, these various kinds of provision can all be mentioned in the context of ‘ministry’.

⁷⁵ Collins, *Deacons*, 57. Reprinted in ‘Diakonia of the Seven’, 160.

⁷⁶ Cf. Acts 2:42, 46.

⁷⁷ Collins, *Deacons*, 52. Reprinted in ‘Diakonia of the Seven’, 156.

⁷⁸ A further element in Collins’ argument is that *diakonia*, when it first occurs in Acts 1:17, 25, refers to preaching, and therefore sets the focus for ‘ministry’ in the rest of the book. However, while it is true that the programmatic statement in Acts 1:8 is that the apostles will be ‘witnesses’ (cf. Acts 1:21), the *diakonia* section refers to the appointment of one who could replace Judas. We know from John’s Gospel of a tradition wherein he was in charge of the money and therefore of the distribution to the poor (John 12:6; 13:29). Thus, this ‘ministry’ which Matthias fulfils could also refer to the same activity as we see the rest of the apostles being engaged in later: the meeting of financial needs. However, whether or not this is the case in Acts 1, the fact that the apostles have responsibility for the distribution of wealth, with no sense of criticism from Luke, is reason enough to avoid such an artificial restriction on the meaning of ‘ministry’ to proclamation without clear contextual warrant.

⁷⁹ Collins, *Deacons*, 50. Reprinted in ‘Diakonia of the Seven’, 155.

inferior? Certainly, this becomes the norm in later Christianity,⁸⁰ and it is not uncommon today. For example, one commentator suggests that the ‘humble service to widows’ prepared the seven for ‘more prominent roles as ministers of the word’.⁸¹ Yet, I would argue that there is no sense of promotion or even differentiation in this passage.

Firstly, we take note that the apostles have been fulfilling this role of the distribution of charity, albeit badly, as their own role until this point, seeing it as part of their ‘ministry’ with no suggestion that they should not have been doing so. Secondly, their determination not to neglect ‘the word’ is not a veiled criticism of this other ministry, but rather of their own inability to fulfil it.⁸² Thirdly, of the members of the Seven who are appointed to this need, the only two whom we hear anything further about, Philip and Stephen, both fulfil a preaching ministry without any apparent commissioning to this further task. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume their commissioning to ‘minister’ incorporated both the distribution of charity *and* preaching. Fourthly, the very fact that the same word, *diakonia*, is used for both activities, preaching and serving, is a deliberate attempt to show the unity of these two tasks.⁸³ Finally, if a prioritisation of preaching ministry over helping the poor were the intention of this passage, then it seems doubtful that this would have ‘pleased everyone’ (6:5), but rather further fuelled the complaints of the needy widows.⁸⁴ Thus, I would agree with Nickle who notes that there is no ‘fundamental distinction made between liturgical and more mundane service’ in this passage.⁸⁵ Indeed, as Fitzmyer rightly says, ‘[to subordinate] the “menial” forms of *diakonia*, such as feeding widows, to the more “spiritual” pursuits of teaching, preaching, and prayer ... is to turn the Lucan story on its head.’⁸⁶

So, in this passage, we see *diakonia*, whether of word or works, being a task which, as in 2 Cor 8-9, could be described as a transaction, in so far as either food or money is passed to others, just as the word is also passed to others. In the former case, we have explicit emphasis on those who

⁸⁰ E.g. Ign. *Trall.*, 1-2.

⁸¹ Peterson, *Acts*, 235.

⁸² Certainly, there seems no good justification for Collins to speak of Acts 6:4 as Luke ‘nam[ing] the basic church activity [as] “ministry/*diakonia* of the word”’. ‘Ancient Greeks’, 57.

⁸³ In a similar way, Paul can speak about proclamation in the same breath as the proper undertaking of the ‘ministry’ of the collection (2 Cor 8:18-19).

⁸⁴ A sixth, and less certain, argument is that this is the only place in Acts where the apostolic band is referred to as the Twelve (6:2). The significance of this, therefore, may be that the contrast drawn with the Seven is solely a numerical one – a means of identifying the two groups. In this case, there would be a deliberate attempt to avoid the suggestion that one ‘ministry’ is apostolic (and therefore more important), while the other is not, since the apostles are only referred to as such when they exercise responsibility in commissioning the Seven.

⁸⁵ Nickle, *The Collection*, 107, esp. n. 71.

⁸⁶ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 349.

will be receiving it, because it will be meeting a need. This ministry role is for those who have a good reputation, who are highly regarded, just as was the case with the collection in 2 Cor 8. Moreover, just as we saw there, ministry is exercised in this passage within a fairly balanced power system. In the first place, the apostles have responsibility for, in my view, the money. However, they do not do a very good job of its distribution, so a complaint arises on behalf of those who have the least power and greatest need in this situation, the widows – and that complaint is heard by the Twelve, who have the greatest power. They respond by asking the whole community of disciples (6:2) to select those who could take over the ministry (6:3), a community which included the overlooked widows. Their choice, of seven men with Greek names, may indicate the community’s willingness to select those with particular sympathy for the Greek-speaking widows. The apostles then appoint these men to this ministry through the laying on of hands.⁸⁷ This seems to be a simple public acknowledgement of the new role of the Seven, rather than an enduing with spiritual power or gifting, given that the key prior qualification for these men is that they be ‘full of the Spirit’ already (6:3; cf. the description of Stephen in 6:5).⁸⁸ As has been noted, there does not seem to be any intention to establish a hierarchy within these roles, as the status of the individuals is recognised through their character and gifting *prior* to their appointment, and the tasks themselves are not evidently distinguished by their statuses. Therefore, we have an interplay between the recipients of the ministry, those undertaking the ministry, and the whole community who provide for this ministry – therefore a balanced sharing of the power that goes with the ministry. Thus, as in 2 Cor 8-9, while the responsibility for carrying out a particular ministry lies with commissioned individuals who are suitable for the task, there is a shared interest in its success. The ministry is to be carried out visibly so that all the interested parties may ensure it is done well, and particularly so that those in need may be full recipients of this ministry transaction. By this means, a potentially damaging division in the early church is overcome, and all parties are drawn closer together in common agreement and purpose.

Although quite different situations, at different times and written by different authors, we have seen that there is remarkable similarity in the usage of *diakonia* in 2 Cor 8-9 which describes Paul’s collection for the church in Jerusalem, and in Acts 6, where charitable sharing of money or food, as well as the proclamation of the word, are held up as examples of ministry. In each case, there is a sense of transfer to those in need, as well as a balanced system of power to ensure that the ministry is undertaken well, for the benefit of all. We turn finally to the gospels, to see how a further use of *diakonia* shaped by the example of Jesus can broaden and deepen this picture.

⁸⁷ It is grammatically possible that it is the whole community who lay on hands, although Barrett’s claim that there is ‘no question’ that this is what it means seems extravagant, *Acts*, 1:315. However, in Barrett’s defence, this does seem to be the practice in Acts 13:3.

⁸⁸ It is worth noting that the other occasion in Acts when such a laying on of hands happens involves a commission to proclaim the word (Acts 13:3), again illustrating that this commissioning was not to a ‘separate’ ministry.

3.3 MARK 10

The ‘discipleship discourse’ or ‘central section’ of Mark’s gospel (8:27-10:45) is extremely significant in the message of the book, coming just prior to Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, and containing Peter’s confession of faith, the Transfiguration, and three, increasingly detailed, Passion predictions. It is as a conclusion to the third prediction and to the whole section that Jesus⁸⁹ offers a typically enigmatic saying, ‘whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant’ (10:43, NRSV), and finishes with some of the most famous words in the gospels, ‘For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (10:45, NRSV). In these verses, we get a seemingly different use of *diakon*- words again. In this case, the verb *diakoneō* (here translated ‘to serve’), and the concrete noun *diakonos* (here translated ‘servant’). Does the usage of these words bear any relation to what we have so far encountered in 2 Corinthians and Acts? In order to consider this, we need to examine the immediately preceding context to which these verses respond.

The first point to note is that the section begins with Jesus leading the way to Jerusalem, leading the way to his suffering and death, with the disciples following (10:32). This, in the broader context of the discipleship discourse, offers a reminder of the self-denial and cross-carrying discipleship expected of all Jesus’ followers (8:34). Jesus then reminds his disciples of what he will suffer in Jerusalem, but adds to the previous predictions that he will be handed over ‘to the Gentiles’ (10:33, NRSV). This gives additional significance to the teaching about Gentile rulers which will follow (10:42). The monologue is interrupted, however, by the request of James and John.

Their description as the ‘sons of Zebedee’ (10:35) reminds us that James and John are used to leadership, having left their father in the boat with the ‘hired hands’ when they were originally called (1:20). Thus, they serve as prototypical leaders in this passage, seeking a position of privilege with Jesus, being seated at his left and right (10:37), such as they had with their own father.⁹⁰ That they have failed to understand what they are really asking is evident from Jesus’

⁸⁹ As with much Gospel scholarship, there is a question about whether or not Jesus actually said these words. For our purposes, this does not matter because the saying provides evidence that some early Christians, whether Mark or the creators of the traditions he used, believed that this language was the sort of thing that Jesus ‘could’ say – in other words, for them and their readers, Jesus’ teaching about, and self-description as, a *diakonos* made sense. However, given that these are short, pithy, somewhat enigmatic sayings, which demonstrate elements of parallelism and can be easily translated back into Aramaic, suggests that it is plausible, from a linguistic point of view, that Jesus said them.

⁹⁰ It is possible that they make their request on the basis of family relationship, as there is some suggestion that they might be cousins of Jesus. C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (WBC 34B; Dallas: Word Books, 2001), 118.

response (10:38). The irony should not be lost on the reader, that those who eventually take the places on Jesus' left and right are the two crucified thieves (15:27). In other words, only by suffering 'on the way' with Jesus can such privilege be gained.⁹¹ This much is confirmed by the images of the 'cup' and 'baptism', both of which are used self-referentially of Jesus' suffering and death elsewhere in the gospels.⁹² Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, wishes that his 'cup' of suffering might pass from him (Mark 14:36). Luke, who does not include this discussion between James, John and Jesus, nevertheless uses baptism as a metaphor for Jesus' Passion (Luke 12:50), as well as highlighting John's own suffering martyrdom in Acts, in his death by the sword (Acts 12:2). Thus, in the context of James and John's request for privileged positions, Jesus continues with the theme of suffering discipleship mentioned originally in the Passion prediction.

The scene then moves to a teaching encounter with all of the Twelve, the rest of whom are angry with James and John that they have made their request (10:41), presumably because the other disciples wanted these positions for themselves. In response to this, Jesus raises the example of Gentile rulers, whose typical activities serve both to draw into relief the request of James and John, as well as to contrast with the appropriate behaviour of the disciples in the following verses. There is a question about whether any negative judgment is implied of the Gentile rulers who, according to the NIV and ESV, for example, merely 'exercise authority over' others (10:42). However, there are plenty of references in the LXX where the verb translated by the NRSV as 'lord it over', indicates violence, aggressive conquest, and oppression.⁹³ Moreover, 'exercise authority over' is translated by Boring as 'enforce their authority' and Myers as 'tyrannize' which is similar to the NRSV's own, 'are tyrants over'.⁹⁴ Thus, they are not criticised for being rulers, or for being Gentile, but for the way in which they conduct their leadership.⁹⁵ In particular, it seems that Jesus' critique is that they exercise their authority with violence and oppression. When we remember that, in the Passion prediction, Jesus said he would be handed over to the Gentiles

⁹¹ A.D.M. Kaminouchi, *"But it is not so Among You": Echoes of Power in Mark 10.32-45* (JSNTSup 249; London: T&T Clark, 2003), 98.

⁹² There is considerable debate about the meaning of the cup referred to in 10:38-39. Cleansing, communion, judgment, and martyrdom have all been suggested, but in the context of the passage as a whole, some element of suffering is certainly plausible. For an overview of the possibilities, see Kaminouchi, *Echoes of Power*, 98.

⁹³ J. Marcus, *Mark* (AB 27, 27A; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 2000, 2009), 2:748.

⁹⁴ M.E. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 298; C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 278-279. To this, we might add that when Luke wants to present the Gentile rulers as *benefactors* in his version of this saying, he removes the *kata*- prefixes from both verbs (Luke 22:25), suggesting that Mark 10:42 indeed offers a negative judgment of the Gentile rulers.

⁹⁵ Ironically, though, when Paul describes the beneficial aspects of Roman rule, he calls the ruler 'a *diakonos* of God' (Rom 13:4).

who would express their rule in precisely this way (10:33-34), we have not simply a generic comment, but one that was of particular pertinence to early Christian tradition and experience.

This damning description of the activity of the Gentile rulers is contrasted with Jesus' expectation of the disciples, with the emphatic, or perhaps ironic, 'But it is not so among you' (10:43). Therefore, until this point in the passage, there has been a sustained critique of those who seek privilege and who exercise power in an oppressive way. This has been highlighted by Jesus' own expectation of suffering coupled with his call to the way of suffering discipleship. With this in mind, we turn to the verses containing *diakon*- words.

The saying in 10:43b-44 takes Jesus' description of the Gentile rulers, 'their great ones' (10:42), and applies it to the company of the disciples, 'But whoever wishes to become a great one among you, must be your *diakonos*', which is followed by the parallel statement, 'and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'. *Diakonos* language has not been common in Mark until this point, giving the language here added weight. In this example of synonymous parallelism, *diakonos* is directly apposed with *doulos* ('slave'). Therefore, Mark expects his hearers to understand the close similarity between these two concepts, and 'servant', therefore, seems a helpful translation. However, further reflection is needed to consider quite what aspect of slavery is intended. For the translation 'servant' seems to assume that it is the nature of the relationship that is the focus of the saying: slaves are in a hierarchical relationship to a master and so are servants (albeit not being owned in the same way). A further element might be that of menial activity or status. Certainly these are possible components of the meaning of *diakonos* in this case. However, it should be borne in mind that slaves were not necessarily of a lowly status at all, and could indeed have highly important roles within civil society – almost any task could be undertaken by slaves.⁹⁶ For example, it was possible for slaves to be treasurers of Roman provinces, and slaves were often used within the higher echelons of government precisely because they were thought not to be subject to the same personal motivations for power as freemen.⁹⁷ What distinguished slaves from others was that they could not gain such privileged positions for themselves, but only if they were owned by someone of sufficient importance and were so directed by them. Similarly, any power which was exercised by the slave was exercised in the name of, and on behalf of, their owners.

In which case, rather than this saying of Jesus being focussed primarily on lowliness of status or activity, in the context of the passage *diakonos* seems to refer to the pre-eminent disciple being one who does not seek after privileged position, unlike James and John, and exercises such power

⁹⁶ K. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 65.

⁹⁷ E.g. An inscription from Rome shows that Musicus Scurranus, who was the slave of the emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus, was treasurer of Gaul and had his own slaves (*CIL* 6.5197).

as they have on behalf of ‘all’, therefore, unlike the Gentile rulers, for the benefit rather than the detriment of others. Moreover, as one of the universal experiences of slaves was that they would suffer, particularly physically, then the model disciple *diakonos* is one who, as we have repeatedly heard already, is willing to suffer. While this suffering is part and parcel of discipleship, as for the slave, the fact that the disciple is ‘enslaved’ ‘to all’ (10:44), gives an indication that this is purposeful suffering, a point which is more clearly expressed in the final verse (10:45). For here, we find the climax of the passage returning to the explicit example of Jesus himself. This verse links to the previous one both through *diakon*- language, as well as through the slave metaphor, since the ‘ransom for many’ is most likely the price paid to free a person from slavery.⁹⁸ Thus, I agree with Collins that we should not break the verse into two halves, one about general service and the other about Jesus’ activity⁹⁹ – rather, ‘to give his life’ is an explanation of the nature of Jesus’ service. However, I disagree that the emphasis in this verse is so clearly on God as the one who is being served.¹⁰⁰ Rather, the verse describes Jesus’ self-giving act *for others*, which in the context of this passage and gospel, we know to result in his suffering death. It is certainly an act carried out on behalf of God, but directed towards those who will benefit, thereby establishing relationship.

Therefore, in this verse we see the same emphases we have already encountered in the discussion of *diakonia* elsewhere. It is an activity, which is undertaken for the benefit of others, which has some kind of transactional nature, just as Jesus’ ‘ministry’ here somehow buys freedom for many. Moreover, in the context of the passage as a whole, we have seen a repeated emphasis on the appropriate seeking of privilege and the handling of power; privilege is not sought but given, and power is exercised on behalf of the appointees for the benefit of the recipients. This illustrates well a potential motivation for the kinds of balanced power systems we have already encountered in the other two passages. Neither lowly status nor humble activity seem to be the focus of this passage, and therefore of the *diakon*- language. Rather, as we have previously seen, status is determined by the activity undertaken. All of this can be seen in the example of Jesus, with the expectation that his pre-eminent example will be followed by his disciples after him, and in the activities of the church.

We therefore turn now to draw these three passages together, and to consider what they might teach us about biblical ‘ministry’.

⁹⁸ There is no need to ask the question to whom the ransom is paid, as does Marcus, much less how does it work, for this is to push the metaphor too far. The focus is not on the payment, but on the means used to achieve the result. Marcus, *Mark*, 2:757.

⁹⁹ Collins, *Deacons*, 28-33. Reprinted in Collins, ‘Teaching of Jesus’, 80-83.

¹⁰⁰ Collins, *Deacons*, 33. Reprinted in Collins, ‘Teaching of Jesus’, 83.

3.4 TEN ELEMENTS OF BIBLICAL ‘MINISTRY’

Having looked at three New Testament passages significantly featuring *diakon-* words, we reach a surprising conclusion: that in spite of the fact that the texts are drawn from different genres, were written by different authors at different times in different locations to different audiences, and each describe very different situations, there is nevertheless significant overlap in the way that ‘ministry’ features in each one. This overlap has ten elements, all of which are present in at least two of the passages:

1. Biblical ‘ministry’ involves a focus on the recipients

This is perhaps the most important conclusion of this study. For, whereas the traditional translation of *diakonia* tends to focus on the activity itself (‘service’), and Collins has pointed out the importance of the initiator and authoriser of the activity, in these passages we have seen that there is at least as significant a focus on the recipients of the ministry. These three understandings are not contradictory, but do remind us of the relational nature of all ministry. Nevertheless, on the basis of these passages, it can be argued that there is no such thing as self-serving ministry, it is all undertaken for others, as we have seen with the Jerusalem church in receipt of the collection, the Greek-speaking widows in receipt of charity, and the ‘many’ who benefit from Christ’s act of self-giving.

2. Biblical ‘ministry’ describes an activity that meets the recipients’ need

Such ministry does not merely turn to focus on the recipient, however, but makes a conscious attempt to meet their need. This is seen most clearly in the meeting of physical needs, as in the financial collection for those in the Jerusalem church, and the provision of money or food for the widows. However, the proclamation of the Gospel and the self-giving of Christ also aim to meet the recipients’ needs, and the latter do not seem to be distinguished from the former.

3. Biblical ‘ministry’ does not separate ‘spiritual’ activity from the ‘mundane’

Far from separating ‘spiritual’ activities from ‘non-spiritual’, *diakon-* words are deliberately used to tie them together, as we have seen in Acts with both word and works being described in the same way. Moreover, Christ’s self-giving act is described in concrete, even economic terms, as a ‘ransom’ for those in slavery (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). Similarly, the financial collection, though clearly very practical, can be described as a means of ‘glorify[ing] God’ (2 Cor 8:19), suggesting that any divide between such ‘ministries’ is an artificial division of our own making.

4. Biblical 'ministry' has a transactional nature

What characterises each example of ministry we have seen is a sense of transaction, or transfer, where goods of some kind pass from a sender to the recipient for their benefit. It is easy to see how this is the case for concrete goods like money or food, and the proclamation of words can be similarly characterised. Christ's self-giving likewise is described in terms of a transaction, with the ransom being paid for the recipients who receive freedom. However, the act of self-giving also implies a movement towards those who are in need.

5. Biblical 'ministry' is conferred by others

A surprising feature of those who undertake ministry in these example passages, is that not one is self-appointed. Paul is at pains to point out that those who travel with him have been appointed by the churches to carry the collection, and he himself, is acting on behalf of others. The Seven are chosen by the whole gathering of disciples and the apostles themselves were chosen by Jesus (although this did not feature in our passage). The model for discipleship offered by Jesus is described as a slavery 'to all', implying that 'all' are, in some sense, responsible for the ministry. Jesus' own self-giving is arguably not conferred by others, although the implication in the passage about Jesus' inability to assign the positions of pre-eminence at his side, is that his ministry is undertaken under the authority of another (i.e. God the Father). Thus, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a self-appointed ministry does not correspond with this usage of the word 'ministry'.¹⁰¹

6. Character matters for biblical 'ministry'

Rather less surprising is the idea that those who are chosen to undertake 'ministry' are not just 'anyone', but those who have a particularly suitable character and ability. This can be seen particularly in the Acts 6 passage where the Seven are known to have a good reputation, and to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. However, there is just as much concern in 2 Cor 8 to demonstrate the good credentials of those who will be administering the collection. The gospel passage demonstrates the significance of character by deliberately comparing the attitudes of James and John, the activities of the Gentile rulers, and the example of Christ. As the passage makes clear, pre-eminent discipleship is only to be found by following the latter. While we would perhaps naturally agree that those most suited to an activity should undertake it, we should be careful to note that general Christian character seems to be prioritised over particular ability. However, no class of people are singled out in this, and there is therefore no evidence of the later

¹⁰¹ It is possible that such an idea lies behind later concerns about travelling prophets and teachers, and the corresponding importance of 'letters of recommendation' (e.g. 2 Cor 3:1 and cp. 2 Cor 2:17).

clergy versus laity divide in the way that ‘ministry’ is used in these examples.¹⁰² It is perhaps also noteworthy that poor service in one area does not disqualify from ministry in another, as the apostles’ failure to adequately administer the charity for the widows only spurs them on to continue with their ministry of the word.

7. Biblical ‘ministry’ does not confer status

We have seen that simply attaching the word ‘minister’ or ‘ministry’ to a person does not confer an automatic status, whether that be a high status, such as a leader might have, or a low status, such as that typical of a ‘servant’. Rather, it is the activity that the ‘ministry’ refers to that determines the person’s status. For example, carrying the churches’ money to Jerusalem was sufficiently important that those who did so would have been regarded as high status. However, Mark 10 warns against seeking privilege for its own sake, instead pointing would-be ‘ministers’ in the direction of the cross of Christ. In this respect, there may be a hint that the natural markers of status are upturned by Christ’s example, so that his own ignominious death amongst criminals in fact results in pre-eminence. However, while none of the passages suggest that ‘ministry’ in and of itself confers status, they also do not demand undifferentiated roles among the disciples. For even the Gentile rulers are not criticised for being rulers, but for the manner of their ruling.

8. Biblical ‘ministry’ operates in a balance of powers

All of the passages considered in this lecture show concern that power should be exercised properly, and this is particularly the case in the gospel passage where the oppressive power of the Gentile rulers is contrasted with that expected of the followers of Christ. However, the other passages also illustrate this concern by the way in which the ‘ministry’ is structured. Acts 6 begins with a complaint on the part of those in need, which is heard, and as a result all parties are involved in the provision of a solution. 2 Corinthians emphasises the role of others, perhaps either the senders or recipients, in judging the success of the collection ministry, which in turn provides motivation for Paul and his companions to do a good job. This suggests that ministry in the church was expected to be public, or at least visible, so that the multiple parties involved in the relationship were able to contribute to its success, some through undertaking an activity, others by overseeing the undertaking, in a way that was beneficial to all. To put this in a modern idiom, it seems that those who ‘ministered’ were always accountable to others.

¹⁰² It could be legitimately pointed that all of the people who minister in these passage are men, and therefore women are excluded. Although there are good reasons of social context for this to be the case, it is simply worth noting that this is not the only picture we have. Paul evidently has female co-workers and travelling companions (e.g. Euodia and Syntyche, Phil 4:3), and the only humans in the Gospel of Mark who are described as doing *diakoneō* are women.

9. Biblical 'ministry' draws others together

We have observed in our first two examples that the activities undertaken draw people together, and this seems to be a deliberate purpose of these 'ministries'. However, I hesitate to place it higher in the list, important though it is, because it is not clear that every New Testament example corresponds to this. Nevertheless, in our first example text, the collection for Jerusalem will serve to strengthen the relationships between the Jewish church in Jerusalem and Paul's Gentile churches. A somewhat cynical reading of this is that Paul hopes to improve his own relationship with the Jerusalem leaders through this act. In either case, people are drawn together through this ministry, and this is part of the intention. Moreover, it is not one-way, for there is to be a mutuality and 'fairness' to the relationship (e.g. 2 Cor 8:13-14). In the same way, the ministry of the Seven serves to bridge an unfortunate divide that has developed in the Acts church, just as the 'ministry of the word' by the Twelve seeks to incorporate those outside the church within its ranks. The passage in the gospel is less clear, but it should be noted that Jesus gives his teaching in response to division within the group of disciples, and consequently calls for an undifferentiated ministry 'to all'. Moreover, his own self-giving act aims, metaphorically and theologically, at freeing the 'many' that they might be restored in true relationship with God. Hence, Paul's term, the 'ministry [*diakonia*] of reconciliation', would be a good description of the use of 'ministry' in these examples.

10. Biblical 'ministry' is derived from the example of Christ

Finally, in the gospel example, 'ministry' is clearly to be understood in light of Christ's self-giving act, and particularly his willingness to suffer. Disciples are to model their lives on this example, rather than any other competing examples, such as those of the Gentile rulers. This idea is taken up in 2 Corinthians, where Christ's self-giving takes an economic turn (2 Cor 8:9), and is used as an inspiration for those who will take part in the collection. There is no explicit reference to Christ in the Acts passage, unless the filling of the Spirit is taken, as it should be, as the Seven being full of the Spirit of Jesus (cf. Acts 16:7). However, the apostolic ministry, which has, until this point, included the distribution of charity, is clearly intended as a continuation of the ministry of Jesus, and therefore this ministry too is derived from Christ's example.

These ten features, then, are illustrative of the way in which 'ministry' is referred to, described, and used in the examples we have considered. I cannot claim that they apply to every instance of a *diakon-* word in the New Testament, and we should certainly beware of always attempting to read these ten elements into every occurrence of a *diakon-* word – meaning is always to be determined by context. However, the majority of instances of *diakon-* words do not provide enough context to know whether they support the usage just described. It is therefore significant

that, in the three passages chosen, there is such a degree of overlap and I consequently have some confidence that the features identified do not simply apply to these examples but may well extend to other examples in the New Testament also.

However, the usage of the words for ‘ministry’ we have been describing occurred a very long time ago. What significance, if any, should this have for a contemporary understanding of ministry? This is the subject to which we finally turn.

4. ‘MINISTRY’ IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

4.1 PRACTISING BIBLICAL MINISTRY

It may come as a surprise, after all that has been said, that, at one level, I do not think that biblical ministry should determine contemporary ministry. In particular, I do not see that the particular patterns of organisation which we see in the Bible should necessarily be mirrored today. Rather, the church should act in the most appropriate way with respect to the context in which it lives, moves and has its being. That there is no one pattern in the New Testament is evidence that this was also the practice of the ancient church. However, in our times of change, even upheaval, in the church, we do well to reassess our practices according to first principles, which, in this case, find voice in Scripture. In particular, each of the passages we have examined is intended to be an example that will be followed. In the case of 2 Corinthians, Paul was setting up an activity and practice of ministry that he expected would be carried out and continued by the recipients of his letter. In the description of the first church in Acts, Luke’s intention, as Barrett puts it, is that, ‘Christians of his own day should find in his pages an example to follow’.¹⁰³ Mark, likewise, makes clear that Jesus’ act of self-giving is exemplary for would-be disciples. Hence, these ideas should at least give cause for pause and reflection as we seek to act in our contemporary context.

One of the first observations is that we should beware of restricting the use of the term ‘ministry’ simply to those who are ordained, as we have seen no clear distinctions in this regard. Collins would take the opposite view on this.¹⁰⁴ However, since our passages are supposed to serve as examples for all their disciple-readers, this suggests, at least, that ‘ministry’ was open to all. This is not to say that all should undertake the same task, or that all will be suitable. Good character and reputation seem to have been associated primarily with the ministerial activities we have seen, along with ability for the task. This means that with whatever area of ministry we are concerned, but especially in public and ordained ministry, a person’s character should be

¹⁰³ Barrett, *Acts*, 305.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Collins, *Diakonia*, 258.

carefully tested, seeking the wisdom of various observers. A willingness to serve by, for example, going to a difficult place, or undertaking a difficult task, or a strong sense of God's call, is not a sufficient replacement for a good character that is recognised by others, although it may be an indicator of it. In particular, those who wish to minister for the status it conveys or the power that it carries, however difficult this may be to discern, should reflect on whether this is truly part of ministry. As we have seen, status may be conveyed by the particular task undertaken, but is not inherent in ministry itself. In the same way, there is no obvious hierarchy of ministerial tasks – proclamation of the word is not a superior calling to supporting the poor, indeed both are part of the same 'ministry'. It is worth asking whether our ordination and induction services help or hinder these ideas.

Then, in considering new ministries, we have seen the importance of a focus on the needs of the recipients. We should consequently find that the most needy communities receive the most ministry. It goes without saying that balancing priorities is difficult to do, not least when these include both 'material' and 'spiritual' needs. However, since ministry includes both, churches should reflect on the greatest needs in their locality and by what means, if any, they could be met. Good ideas, so often the starting point for church activity, are only ministry if they are meeting a need. Funders of mission and ministry activities, such as Home Mission, might make such considerations an element in their funding decisions also.

The examples have suggested that ministry is a partnership, between commissioner, minister and recipients, operating within a balanced system of power. If the commissioning body is, at least to some extent, a Baptist Union or Association, perhaps through a process of accreditation, then strengthening those links with the minister is important; not only for the sake of the partnership in ministry, but also for the accountability that we have seen in the biblical examples. Yet, I believe there remains resistance to systems of appraisal, for instance. Any such accountability measures should not be with a view to making individuals fear judgment, but rather as part of a mutual desire between a minister, a church and any other partners, for a ministry to be successful in achieving its ends well. Therefore, there need to be functioning, meaningful and co-operative relationships between the different parties. While much has improved in this regard over recent years, there is no doubt more that could be done. In this respect, it has to be said that the oft-criticised independency of Baptist churches does not serve the cause of ministry well. Again, there may be a case for the importance of such relationships to be emphasised more in acts of commissioning.

We have seen that ministry, of all different kinds, brings people together. Conversely, those 'ministries' which end up dividing the church, let alone driving a wedge between the church and its community, can scarcely adequately be called 'ministry'. When in the midst of conflict, it is difficult to take time to reflect, which is perhaps why there should be consideration in training and formation, not simply of skills for avoiding and managing conflict, but also for building

bridges as a fundamental attitude of ministry. To put it simply, the normal experience of ministry should be of people drawn together.

Finally, the call to ministry should not be taken lightly. If Christ's self-giving act serves as an example of what it means to 'minister', then this is a challenging call. However, it is a call that, ultimately, is a call to discipleship. Therefore, the call to ministry should not be seen as a call to go above and beyond what is expected of the 'ordinary' disciple, but rather that ministry is a way of expressing model discipleship,¹⁰⁵ a gift to those who receive it and a witness to God's gift in Christ Jesus.¹⁰⁶

In these brief reflections, I recognise that I offer little that is new, but I am glad to affirm so much that is good that already happens. Indeed, I recognise that I could be accused of simply reading contemporary Baptist practice back into the text, just as Collins might be accused of ending up with a position that supports the practice of the ordained diaconate in his own Roman Catholic church. Yet, I hope that this examination of the use of *diakon-* words serves to focus attention on what we mean by ministry, and what we do not. Therefore, the final consideration to which we turn is how, in light of our study, *diakonia* and its related words should be translated?

4.2 MINISTRY AS MISSION AND AS BENEFIT

As we have seen, modern readers are not necessarily helped by the multitude of different translation options used in English Bibles, as they obscure potential links between instances of relevant usage. From a linguistic point of view also, the wide variety of possible translation terms is undesirable, for it implies that the word may have a wide range of different senses.¹⁰⁷ In such an instance, it is more likely that the word itself has rather a general sense which becomes more determined in a given context, as our examples have shown.

In this particular case, the two main translation options are 'service' and 'ministry'. The artificial separation between the translation of *diakon-* words in the gospels as 'service' and the letters as 'ministry' is certainly to be avoided, but could either of these translations stand in every instance? 'Service' is a helpful portmanteau word which can cover a multitude of activities. The chief

¹⁰⁵ Willimon uses the language of 'exemplary Christians' for the public role that pastors play, which expresses a similar idea, although limiting it to the ordained. W.H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 45.

¹⁰⁶ Or to use the language of the draft BUGB *Report of the Review of Selection, Formation, Funding and CMD* (August 2014), 'Meet a minister, and in some way you should encounter Christ, and catch "the whiff of Jesus," (to use a memorable phrase from Glen Marshall)' (5).

¹⁰⁷ Turner, 'Modern Linguistics', 204-205.

problem with it, however, is the undertone of menial, low-status activity. Clarke is right to point out that service does not need to be servile,¹⁰⁸ but, on the other hand, without clear contextual indicators, it is difficult to know whether a given instance of the word should carry this sense or not. It would perhaps be best to focus the use of this term on those occasions when a servile function is clearly intended (e.g. Luke 17:8). ‘Ministry’ similarly could cover many different tasks and is therefore a plausible translation. However, the close association with particularly Christian service, as well as denominationally specific usage of the word today, has the potential for creating interpretations for the modern reader which are not really intended.

Therefore, I suggest two further translation options, which would capture some of the aspects of ‘ministry’ we have observed in our chosen passages. The first is ‘mission’, an option already occasionally mentioned by Collins. In spite of its commonality of use today, the word appears only once in the NRSV and NIV – as a translation for *diakonia* in Acts 12:25. In the most positive sense of this term, ‘mission’ implies the kind of relational activity about which we have been speaking. The one who engages in mission is commissioned by another, whether that be by God and/or some other body, and goes to another group in response to their need, and generally with the aim of drawing people closer together. At least within the British church, the role of ‘missionary’ or ‘mission-worker’ does not carry with it the same status implications as does ‘minister’, and is therefore closer to the examples we have seen, allowing the particular activity to speak for itself. Moreover, mission need not imply the same concerns about the relative value of word versus works, seeing the holistic and integral value of both. Finally, in a post-Christian culture where mission is recognised to be an ecclesial imperative, the use of ‘mission’ in place of ‘ministry’ would help to break down the artificial and unhelpful boundary between the two, reminding both churches and ministers that their activities both within and without the church are missionary activities.

The translation term ‘mission’ works in the majority of instances. However, it assumes that readers can see beyond ‘mission’ as something that is ‘done to others’. Therefore, on occasions when ‘mission’ seems less appropriate, a possible additional translation could be ‘benefit’. This word already occurs in the New Testament, but only occasionally.¹⁰⁹ In our own context, the word can imply financial provision. In 2 Corinthians and Acts, we have seen that the particular provision is probably financial, and this is likely to be the basis of the ransom metaphor used in Mark also. Hence, ‘benefit’ or ‘beneficial act’ could be appropriate in these instances. However, at the same time, ‘benefit’ can refer to any provision that is advantageous to the needs of the

¹⁰⁸ Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 67.

¹⁰⁹ For example, it appears only nine times in the NRSV, often to communicate the sense of a phrase (e.g. lit. ‘for you’ becomes ‘for your benefit’). Where a particular word is translated, it is primarily *ōphelēō* (‘benefit’ or ‘profit’).

recipient. Collins and others would disagree with the suitability of this term.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, we have seen within all our examples, but pre-eminently in the gospel passage, that giving is an element of the way in which *diakonia* is carried out. Moreover, that which is freely and generously given, in light of the needs of the recipients, is clearly a benefit to them. The risk of using the term is that, for some, it could imply paternalism, or else a grasping receipt of what is given. Such a focus wholly on either giver or receiver is inappropriate, as we have seen. Instead, in light of our biblical passages, ‘benefit’ would imply the deliberate building of relationships between giver and receiver, for the good of all concerned.

Neither ‘mission’ nor ‘benefit’ perfectly capture all the different elements of ‘ministry’ we have encountered. Nor would they be appropriate in every instance. However, I think they are worth considering as translation options for *diakonia*, as they would broaden the application of the word to include more naturally the examples we have read, but thereby serving the important function of challenging our thinking about quite what we mean, when we talk about ‘ministers’ and ‘ministry’.

5. CONCLUSION

In this lecture, we have explored biblical ‘ministry’ through three passages drawn from different parts of the New Testament. It would be valuable to expand this survey in the future beyond our three passages, as well as to compare these uses of *diakonia* with such terms found in the New Testament as ‘overseer’ or ‘pastor’. However, building on the important work of John N. Collins, we have seen that, even though each passage describes a quite different context, there are considerable similarities in the way that the *diakon-* words are used, and the ways in which the ministries are described. In particular, we have seen a focus on the relationship with the recipients, with ministries seeking to meet their needs and thereby drawing people together in a framework where power is shared. The ministries of word and works are not separated, but are both, in some measure, practical imitations of the self-giving example of Christ. This sense of

¹¹⁰ This is based on comments about the similar word ‘charity’. Collins quotes Hentschel approvingly when she says, ‘It is not possible to establish that the *diakon-* words have an inherent semantic orientation towards expressing activities of a specifically charitable nature’, ‘From *διακονία* to *Diakonia*’, 18. Similarly, Dieter Georgi, whose views have been considered akin to Collins’, says, ‘The NT term [i.e. *diakonia*] almost never involves an act of charity.’ D. Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Studies in the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 29. As we have seen, however, Barrett takes a different view, translating Acts 6:1 as ‘charitable relief’, *Acts*, 302. Moreover, Hentschel is primarily concerned with whether there exists an order of *deacons* in the New Testament whose sole concern is ‘charitable’ activity (i.e. loving practical activity rather than proclamation). I would agree that we cannot take the title ‘deacon’ to imply this. A. Hentschel, ‘Gibt es einen sozial-karitativ ausgerichteten Diakonat in den fruhchristlichen Gemeinden?’, *Pastoraltheologie* 97 (2008): 290-306 (299-300).

movement and giving have led to the suggestion that ‘mission’ and ‘benefit’ might be considered as translation options for *diakonia*, thereby resulting in reflection on what we mean by ‘ministry’ today. It is with this aim that I offer this lecture, as a small contribution to assist those whom God has called ‘to equip the saints for the work of ministry’ (Eph 4:12).

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