

## Acts Chapter 6

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Acts chapter 6 is regarded in the tradition of the Church as the text which tells the story of the “institution” of the ministry of the deacon. We should keep in mind that Vatican II does not refer to this text (Acts 6) in any discussion on the restoration of the diaconate. The Seven are mentioned in the Rite of Ordination of a Deacon in the Latin Rite Catholic Church.

Eusebius in his history of the Church is the first one to make this attribution and it has come down to our present age in this way. However he cannot mean institution as in, that’s when such a ministry first appeared in the Church. The term *diaconos* (deacon) and *diaconia* (ministry) appear in the writings of Paul which are older than Acts of the Apostles, and so we had deacons before we had Acts 6. The verb form *diaconein* is also prevalent in many New Testament contexts before Acts. Because this text plays such an important part in ideas about the ministry of deacon and what was instituted in it, we need to read it closely.

### Lost in translation

One of the interesting things about Acts 6 is that Luke does not use the noun *diaconos* (deacon). That is, he never explicitly says that the Seven are deacons. He does use some related words about their mission in Acts 6 and the following sections in Acts 7-9 tell us much about what their ministry was in the Church. The Apostles entrust them with a *diaconia*, as we shall see, and so they may be called *diaconos* (deacons).

When translators deal with *diaconein* (to minister) tables they are frequently tempted to add prepositions that are not found in the Greek. They sometimes add “on” or “at” tables and thereby change the meaning of the Greek phrase “to minister tables”, a phrase which would readily be understood by Greek speakers of the time. The phrase indicated a sacred function in the context of a meal (*symposia*).

Another feature of the text, which is the source of much confusion and misinterpretation, is that translators have added words to the English version of the text which are not found in any Greek manuscript. Some translators add “food”, “funds” or “money” when the Greek text only says that they complained because “their widows were neglected in the daily *diaconia*”.

This is compounded by similar additions to the response of the Apostles which has them complaining that they do not want to give out “food” or “funds” and neglect the word. These recent additions naturally lead those who read the English version to assume that the Seven are chosen to alleviate the material needs of the widows. That is the Seven, by extension, have a ministry to the poor and marginalised or to the neglected or of charity or of corporal works of mercy or some such as the central aspect of the ministry assigned to them.

This sense is so imbedded in the understanding of Acts 6, because of the translations, that Benedict XVI takes it for granted without consideration of the Greek text when he refers to this episode in his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*. He uses the German word *diaconie*



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which is a word the Germans coined for “Christian social or charitable service”, when he refers to the ministry of the Seven and not the Greek word *diaconia*. It is the most taken for granted understanding implied in most recent church documents on deacons, most homilies on the diaconate and the focus of many papers and talks on “diaconal” spirituality.

That understanding, of diaconal ministry and of this episode in Acts 6 being about service to the poor or humble service done to another is not reflected in the Greek text. Such a meaning would never have been conveyed to the original communities who heard these texts. The meaning of the story has been lost in translation.

### What is happening?

The Greek speaking Jewish followers of Jesus are complaining that their widows (i.e. Greek speakers) are being neglected in the daily *diaconia*. We know they are fellow Jews because this term (Hellenists) is used through Acts 6-9 as the term to refer to Greek speaking communities of Jews in contrast to Aramaic/Hebrew speaking communities. Stephen and Philip as well as Paul visit some of these Greek speaking synagogue communities. Many Jews lived in the Hellenic world of the Mediterranean basin and they spoke Greek and read the Scriptures in Greek (Septuagint version) and these communities had synagogues in all of the major cities including Jerusalem. They may not have spoken the Aramaic language of Jesus and the Apostles.

When the Apostles are approached they do not want to give up their preaching and practice of prayer, which Acts tells us happened in the Temple precinct, to *diaconein* (to minister) tables. That is, to provide the *diaconia* for the Greek speaking widows so that they are no longer neglected. Instead they ask the Greek speaking community to choose seven of their own to make sure the widows are not neglected in the daily *diaconia*.

What is this *diaconia* which the widows are missing out on? In the Acts of the Apostles (and in the New Testament generally) *diaconia* alone or which the qualifier *tou logou* (the word) is always used to mean the ministry of the word and the ministry someone is commissioned to perform on behalf of the one who sent them. It is used by Paul to describe his being commissioned by Christ to be an apostle; it is used by Jesus to describe his work of being sent by the Father to proclaim the Kingdom and to give his life for others in faithfulness to the commission from the Father.

Why would they miss out? There are two reasons. The first is simply the language barrier; the Apostles are Aramaic speakers and the widows Greek speaking. The second is that convention required they stay at home and they needed someone to bring the message to them in their homes. They needed someone commissioned by the Church to be sent to them for the ministry of the Word. The Church did not want to neglect anyone in the proclamation of Christ’s saving death and resurrection, no matter their circumstances and language.

If food or funds were meant as the source of neglect, we might expect perhaps that the



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whole community might drop dead as happened to Ananias and his wife Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) who had held back from giving to the common fund. The news of this struck fear into the whole community (5:11). We might expect that Luke would use one of the Greek words for food or funds but he doesn't, he uses a word (*diaconia*) which had a very specific meaning for his audience. We might also have expected that the qualifications for the task would not be so elevated; ability to count, add, divide and other distributor functions rather than being witnesses full of the Spirit and with wisdom. Raymond Brown in his Anchor Bible commentary on this text makes it clear that these were not the qualifications for a servant and this episode represents the transmission of the Apostolic mandate from the Apostles themselves to the Seven.

So the Greek speaking widows and others in the Greek community too possibly (judging from Acts 6:8-8:40) were neglected in the daily ministry of the word, the proclamation of the Gospel and the Name of Jesus. The apostles, who wished to continue their ministry, asked others to take the apostolic ministry to the Greek speakers. They laid hands on them to commission them and to hand on some share in their apostolic ministry that is, the ministry of the word and witness.

### **Diaconos not servants**

A critical; distinction missed by those not familiar with the Greek language of the time, is that Luke does not use the word servant (*paidos*) to describe the Seven. Nor is there any use of the other word, slave (*doulos*) which is associated with menial tasks and household duties.



John N Collins (1990) in his landmark study on the *diakon* group of words, which has received validation from the work of Anni Hentschel (2006), has shown that the term *diaconos* and *diaconia* are related to the realm of the sacred and to a religious activity of a commissioned agent (*diaconos*) who is entrusted with the task of performing a service for the one who commissions him (most frequently with the delivery of a message) and never service to another, especially a menial service.

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Only men of noble and free birth could be chosen as a *diaconos* for a sacred meal (*symposia*). A slave (*doulos*) or a domestic servant (*paidos*) could never be entrusted with such a function in the ancient Greek world. This is because the commission (*diaconia*) itself was regarded as a noble and sacred duty.

Collins, Hentschel and also Sven Brodd, have shown that *diaconos* and *diaconia* are never associated with social service or charity or pastoral concern for the welfare of another in the New Testament and other contemporaneous Greek pagan sources. Brodd has shown that the *agape/caritas* group of words are never used as synonyms for *diakon* words and in fact the two groups of words belong to entirely different semantic fields.

## Interpretation and conclusion

Acts 6:7 tells the reader what the problem was and that a successful resolution occurred, “And the Word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied.” Then to show how effective this *diaconia* entrusted to the Seven is, Acts 6:8-8:40 tells us that Stephen and Philip, fulfil the commission to proclaim the word. They provide a demonstration of the essential character of the ministry of the *diaconos* which is to deliver the message they are commissioned to deliver.



**The challenge is to apply this research and our renewed understanding of what a *diaconos* (deacon) is in the New Testament and early Church to our present understanding of the diaconate.**



Throughout the New Testament we see those who are called *diaconos* or who exercise a *diaconia* proclaiming the word, establishing and leading communities and similar tasks. We never see anyone in the New Testament with this title or that task serving the poor, or engaging in acts of charity directed to another.

If Acts 6 is the institution of the diaconate it is not a ministry which is instituted for the primary purpose of a ministry of charity. The research on the use of the *diakon* group of words makes clear that no one of the New Testament era, Christian or not, would have ever thought of a *diaconos* in this way.

The challenge is to apply this research and our renewed understanding of what a *diaconos* (deacon) is in the New Testament and early Church to our present understanding of the diaconate so that it will be a ministry which will bear fruit as intended when the Apostles first proposed this solution to the problem of proclamation of the Gospel.

Perhaps the Spirit has brought about the renewal of this ministry in the Church now, because there are so many neglected in the daily *diaconia* of the word and a new evangelisation is required to develop the fruits of the Gospel in the life of the Church and world.

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*\*I have written on this text more extensively in Deacons and the Servant Myth, The Pastoral Review. Nov-Dec 2006. For a more in depth treatment see John N Collins, Deacons and the Church, and for those who want solid scholarly stuff and are not put off by reading a little Greek, John N Collins, Diaconia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources. Oxford: Oxford Uni Press. 1990. Diaconia has been reprinted in 2009 by popular demand.*