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as Deacon:
Upsetting the Hierarchies
of His Culture

by

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Gospel Images of Jesus as Deacon: Upsetting the Hierarchies of his Culture¹

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Introduction

I grew up in a church in Argentina where deacons were always men who collected the offering every Sunday morning, took care of the material business of the church and made occasional house calls at the request of the minister. My father was nominated to this position more than once. I remember how proud he felt for having been chosen to what was regarded as a lofty office. Deacons normally dressed up with their best clothes and strolled down the aisle with a steady and firm pace. Their private lives had to replicate their position in the church. Morally speaking they had to always dress up, never admitting a fault or a sin. It was an impeccable life lived like Sunday morning, but confined to an internal role, since their service was to the Christian community, not to the world at large.

This last statement shows that there is more than one way of understanding diaconia. Usually we associate this word, and its related terms *diakonos* and *diakoneo*,² with the early church's ministry of caring for people's material needs. Thus, we look for the biblical foundations of the office of the diaconate in passages like Acts 6:1-7 or 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Rarely, though, do we think of Jesus as a model for deacon. We tend to think of Jesus as Lord, Savior, Redeemer, King of Kings, and the like. Even if we subscribe to a liberating hermeneutics we may think of Jesus as the one who identified with the poor and ate with publicans and sinners but still the word *diakonos* does not come to mind.

But then one realizes that Jesus, even though he never gave instructions for the establishment of such an office, characterized himself as one who does the work of a *diakonos*. And here is where our study begins, with the Gospels' account concerning Jesus as a model for deacon. This will be the limit and scope of this paper, avoiding as much as possible any crossover into the understanding of this term in the later Christian communities.

1. Words and meanings

¹ I want to thank Margaret Ann Crain for suggesting this working title. I found it to be very appropriate for the discussion and so I kept it. I also want to show my appreciation to my research assistant, Debora Junker.

² In this paper I will use the letter "k" when transliterating the Greek word $\kappa\omicron\upsilon\sigma\omicron\varsigma$ and its related terms. In any other case I will use the letter "c": diaconia.

In his classical *TDNT* article, diakonevw, H.W. Beyer provides the basic meaning of the word *diakoneo* as “to wait at table,” “to provide or care for,” or the more general “to serve.”³ The related words *diakonia* and *diakonos* have similar meanings. *Diakonia* means “waiting at table,” “provision for bodily sustenance” or “discharge of service.”⁴ Likewise, *diakonos* means “the waiter at a meal” or “the servant of a master.”⁵ But he clarifies that unlike other words used to express service, like *leitourgeo* for example, which means public service to the people or to the state or like *hupereteo*, which signifies the relation to the master to whom the service is rendered, the word group *diakoneo* “has the special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another.” Beyer goes on to affirm that in *diakoneo* there is a stronger approximation than in *leitourgeo* to “the concept of a service of love.”⁶

In his book *Diakonia* John Collins criticizes Beyer for limiting the meaning of the word group *diakoneo* to the service of tables and service in general and to an understanding that is distinctively Christian. He proposes, quoting Dieter Georgi, that these words “should be viewed in the entirely different field of service under God in the delivery of his revelation, and here their uses would coincide with those in the religious language of the Stoics and Cynics, whose proselytising activities paralleled those of the Christians.”⁷ Therefore the idea of messenger, or preacher, is also implicit in *diakoneo* (cf. Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:4, *theou diakonoi*, “servants of God;” also Flavius Josephus *Antiquities* 6, 298 where service consists in the delivery of a message).

In the NT these words are often spiritualized or used in a broader sense,⁸ but sometimes they retain their original meaning.⁹ It is important, then, to analyze those passages in which these words are used to describe Jesus and /or his ministry in order to find out how the early church perceived the role of Jesus as deacon.

In saying that, we are aware that the evangelists worked with traditions that were initially transmitted by word of mouth and that only about four decades later were fixed in writing. By this time the materials already betrayed the work of many editorial hands, making it practically impossible to differentiate between Jesus’ authentic words and those of the communities that transmitted them. In considering how the evangelists used the tradition of Jesus as deacon we are aware that each one of them had a theological agenda which, in the words of William Herzog, not only revealed but also concealed whatever original meaning this tradition might have had.¹⁰ We are then faced

³ H. Beyer, “diakonenvw, diakoniva, ktl” *TDNT* 2:81-93

⁴ Beyer, *TDNT* 2:87.

⁵ Beyer, *TDNT* 2:88.

⁶ Beyer, *TDNT* 2:81.

⁷ John N. Collins, *Diakonia*. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 8.

⁸ “Service, in plain, practical helpfulness to human need, whether large or small, forms the central idea in the main word for ministry, *diakonia*. It could denote anything from the daily chores of housework to the largest and most highly organized project undertaken by the primitive church, the offering for the relief of the poor in Jerusalem.” Ronald E. Osborn, *In Christ’s Place. Christian Ministry in Today’s World* (St. Louis, Miss.: Bethany, 1967), 47.

⁹ Mark 1:31; Luke 8:3; 10:40; John 2:5,9; 12:2

¹⁰ “By the time the Jesus tradition was codified into a narrative, it had already been formed in ways that made it impossible to use for the purpose of reconstructing any whole image of Jesus’ public activity. Its oral prehistory assured that it would present gaps that could not be closed. Much of Jesus’ activity would

with the difficult task of interpreting an interpretation of what the historical Jesus may have said or done.

One of the areas where this becomes self evident is the area of language. We are basing our investigation on the Greek language but we know that Jesus spoke Aramaic. He never used the word *diakonos* to describe himself or his ministry but an equivalent Aramaic word. Right there we have a first degree of separation. Second, we have the issue of culture. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew and the evangelists were Hellenistic Jews or Gentiles who lived among and wrote for mixed audiences where the Greek culture was the predominant one. In writing their versions of Jesus' life they adapted the traditions so they made sense to a Greek speaking audience. The word *diakonos* is a word that came from the Hellenistic milieu and had a fixed set of meanings in that culture. It is then imperative that we should first take a look at how Jews and Greeks viewed the idea of service implied by the words *diakonos*, *diakonia* and *diakoneo*.

2. The meaning of the word group *diakoneo* in the Greek and Jewish milieu

The notion of service as sacrifice was common in Judaism. Like other cultures, Judaism "finds nothing unworthy in serving."¹¹ The command to love one's neighbor of Leviticus 19:18 carried with it the idea of sacrificial service. Furthermore, the relationship of a servant to his or her master was accepted as common.

However, Greeks did not regard service as something free men would do. It was reserved for slaves and women. The basic Greek attitude towards service is expressed in the following formula voiced by Plato: "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?"¹² But when someone serves the state then service acquires a higher value. This service does not entail self-emptying for the sake of others but rather a service rendered to God that is expressed in the education of good citizens.¹³ The ideal of benefaction was also common in the Greek world and became the distinctive mark of a good monarch. But this benefaction, which stemmed from a person's high status and position in society and which was even expected of them, never led to self-sacrifice. These two ideas of service, one, Jewish, entailing personal sacrifice the other, Greek, requiring personal honor, would have been known in Jesus' time.

In later Judaism the idea of service, perhaps influenced by the Greek notion of service as undignified and meritorious only when pursued for individual development, "was less and less understood as sacrifice for others and more and more as a work of merit before God."¹⁴ Jesus' ministry took place in Palestine, among Jewish Palestinian and Gentile people. The Gospels record enough evidence to believe that his understanding of service was different from the Greek notion. Clearly he absorbed it from the OT where, besides Leviticus 19:18, Psalm 23 portrays God as preparing table, one of the characteristic tasks of a servant. Jesus probably also drew from Isaiah's

remain an irrecoverable mystery, replaced by a theological reading of his life and death that concealed as much as it revealed." William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech. Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 15.

¹¹ Beyer, *TDNT* 2:83.

¹² Beyer, *TDNT* 2:82.

¹³ Beyer, *TDNT* 2:82.

¹⁴ Beyer, *TDNT* 2:83.

Servant Songs¹⁵, where Israel is proclaimed as God's servant and is given the task of announcing God's salvation to the nations. Already by Jesus' time this tradition was beginning to have messianic connotations which meant that in view of Israel's failure to act as God's servant the messiah was going to take its place. The NT writers read these passages as having been fulfilled in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. Thus, Jesus is portrayed as the servant of God who embodies the true love of neighbor, waits at table and delivers God's message of salvation.

3. This paper's thesis

I would like to propose that given the differences in understanding service among Greeks and Jews, and given the rich tradition of service to one's neighbor present in Judaism, it is possible that Jesus, by presenting himself as *diakonos* (cf. Lk. 22:27), was:

- Reclaiming the rich tradition of Judaism concerning service and at the same time criticizing the Greek understanding of it as something demeaning, an idea that had found its way into the Jewish culture through the process of Hellenization.
- Upsetting the hierarchical shape of the Greco-Roman society by laying the foundations of a new society where traditional roles were being reversed in expectation of the dawning of God's kingdom..
- Elevating women as examples of *diakonia*, since in the gospels women are the only ones who, besides Jesus himself, are portrayed as serving.

We need to probe into these preliminary hypotheses by carefully studying those passages in the Gospels where the group word *diakoneo* appears.

4. Texts and meanings

The first thing we want to know is if the image of Jesus as deacon is broadly attested, that is, if it appears in more than one of the Gospel sources. Our investigation shows that *diakoneo* and related terms, as applied to Jesus, appear only in Mark and parallels and in Luke. They do not appear in John, except in 12:26 where *diakonos* is not applied to Jesus but to the disciples.¹⁶

a. *Mark's material:*

Mark 10: 42b-45

“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (*panton doulos*). For the Son of Man came not to be served (*diakonethenai*) but to serve (*diakonesai*), and to give his life a ransom for many.”

¹⁵ Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12

¹⁶ The washing of the disciples' feet has been connected, theologically, with Jesus' diaconal ministry, but the word *diakoneo* does not appear in the passage of Jn.13:1-20

[Matthew 20: 25b-28]

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave (*doulos*); just as the Son of Man came not to be served (*diakonethenai*) but to serve (*diakonesai*), and to give his life a ransom for many.”

[Luke 22: 25b-27]

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves (*ho diakonon*). For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves (*ho diakonon*)? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves (*ho diakonon*).

We notice right away that Matthew follows Mark very closely, making only some minor adjustments so as to improve on Mark's repetitive style. He also preserves Mark's narrative context: right before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Perhaps the most important difference between Mark and Matthew is the way in which Matthew introduces the saying of the Son of man giving his life as a ransom for many. He writes “*just as* the Son of man came not to be served” instead of the Markan “*for* the Son of man came not to be served.” The significance of this could be that for Matthew Jesus as the Son of man is the example of true servant-leader that the disciples need to imitate. For Mark it seems as if the disciples co-participate in Jesus' redemptive activity by extending to people the ministry of the servant-leader. Whereas in Matthew the affirmation conveys the idea of an option of lifestyle¹⁷ in Mark it is clearly an unavoidable consequence of belonging to the community of the Son of man. Those who belong to this community will have no choice but to be like Jesus, servants, even slaves, of humanity. The contrast between “great” and “servant” and “first” and “slave” is rhetorically and theologically powerful, as well as socially destabilizing. We begin to see here Jesus' program for a community of equals.¹⁸

Luke departs from Mark and Matthew in more than one way. First, he avoids the word tyrant and uses instead benefactor (*euergetai*). Is he painting a milder picture of the Roman Empire? Not really. Benefactor was a title Augustus and other Roman emperors claimed for themselves, so Luke is probably being sarcastic here.¹⁹ However, another interpretation suggests that benefactor needs to be regarded in a positive light, as “an ideal well-known in the Greco-Roman world and exemplified in Jesus and in the loyal followers and representatives of Jesus in the church.”²⁰ In the ancient world

¹⁷ A similar idea is found in Matthew 5:48: “You, therefore, must be perfect, *as* your heavenly Father is perfect.” Discipleship in Matthew is a choice among other possibilities. In Mark it is the natural and unavoidable consequence of following the crucified one.

¹⁸ I am borrowing this expression from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's writings.

¹⁹ Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics and Society. A Study of Luke's Gospel* (Maryknoll, NY:Orbis, 1994), 150.

²⁰ David J. Lull, “The Servant-Benefactor as a Model of Greatness (Luke 22:24-30),” *NovT* 28 (1986): 303.

benefactors demonstrated their power and authority through service. This argument does not consider the sentence “But not so with you” as prescriptive (“you should not be like them”) but rather as descriptive (“you still are not considered benefactors...but you will”).²¹ Luke is then telling his community that like Jesus and the early Christians they also should strive to embody the ideal of benefaction that would make them acceptable in the society of the time.²²

Second, greatness is not a wish anymore but a recognized reality in the group. The expression “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” seems to point at an ecclesial setting, that of Luke’s community, where there were already fixed ideas concerning leadership.²³ Luke expects certain behavior from leaders. He accepts the structures of leadership but expects a transformation of their role and status.²⁴ The virtue of benefaction, which was demanded of the elite in the Greco Roman world, is also required of the elite members of Luke’s community. Here it is quite difficult to sift through Luke’s theological agenda in order to find out what the historical Jesus, who never anticipated that his followers were going to end up forming an structure which would rival the Jewish synagogue, may have meant by that.

Third, and more importantly, the setting of the Lukan account, unlike Mark and Matthew’s, is the last supper. In this context Jesus’ reversal of the master-servant roles in the Greco-Roman society does not mean that he was less important.²⁵ Rather than doing away with the concept of honor Jesus is redefining the meaning and importance of it among his followers. True leadership, says Jesus, is characterized by service and this attitude is rewarded not on earth but in heaven (cf. 12:28-30; also John 12:26). The patron who extends his favor (grace) to the client is not any of the human patrons but God, the supreme patron.

Luke clearly emphasizes that Jesus’ ministry needs to be understood in term of service to humanity. But, unlike Mark, he does not say that this service will entail the giving of his life for the many since the expression “for the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” is missing from his account. Whereas in Mark the saying refers not only to Jesus’ earthly ministry but especially to his impending death as a sacrificial event, in Luke it refers only to his service to humankind.²⁶ As we know Mark places this *pericope* after the three predictions of the passion and right before the entry into Jerusalem. In terms of the evangelist’s narrative strategy this saying anticipates and gives theological content to the events that are about to unfold in the city. His death, like his life, needs to be regarded as a

²¹ Lull, “Servant-Benefactor,” 296.

²² The problem with this possibility is that benefaction thus understood leaves society unchanged. It assumes that there will always be people who are benefactors and people who will benefit from that benefaction. The hierarchical structures of society remain in place. This could hardly have been Jesus’ intention. It probably reflects Luke’s theological agenda prompted by his social location.

²³ The word for youngest (*neoteros*) is used elsewhere in the NT for people in the church who performed lowliest services and the word for leaders (*egoumenos*) has also connotations of church leadership.

A.W.Swamidoss, “Diakonia as Servanthood in the Synoptics.” *IJT* 32 (1983): 47

²⁴ Halvor Moxnes, “Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. J.H. Neyrey; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 260-261.

²⁵ Swamidoss, “Diakonia as Servanthood”, 41.

²⁶ John N. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 49.

diaconia. This word does not only point at compassionate acts toward one's neighbor but should be understood, in the Markan context, as "full and perfect sacrifice, as the offering of life which is the very essence of service, of being for others, whether in life or in death."²⁷ Beyer believes that it is here where the concept of *diakonein* achieves its final theological depth.

But even though Luke 22: 24-27 avoids mentioning the Son of man saying, the eschatological dimension is not missing completely from the picture. In verses 28-30 Jesus assures his disciples that they will share at his table in his kingdom, acting as judges over Israel. Given the context of service provided by verses 24-27, this can probably mean two things. First, because the Twelve are installed as judges over Israel but at the same time they are told to imitate Jesus as the one who serves, there is a rupture with the patron-client relationship of the times whereby one who acted as patron would receive honor from the client. That would not be the case with the disciples. More importantly yet, their dual condition of servants and judges would entail a status reversal.

Thus, they are to combine male leadership roles with the role of providing food, a function within the confines of the home, performed by women and servants, at the periphery of a society dominated by free men.²⁸

Second, diaconia occurs in the earthly realm but has salvific consequences. Even when no reward or honor can be expected from service, diaconia will be rewarded with heavenly glory. Jesus, the one who was in their midst as a servant, has now been assigned a kingdom which he will also pass onto his followers. This idea is reinforced in Matthew 25:41-45 where the judgment of the nations is based on whether or not people have carried out the work of diaconia, that is, of taking care of people's physical and emotional needs. So diaconia becomes more than an ethical exigency. It becomes an activity that has Christological and Soteriological implications, since Christ, the king in the parable, remains hidden in those who suffer. Not realizing that service to him is accomplished only through service to the needy makes the difference between eternal punishment and eternal life (v.46). In a similar vein the Gospel of John 12:26 affirms that those who serve (*diakoneo*) Jesus will be honored by God the Father. This message was not missed in the Early Church, for they soon began to value very highly the office of the diaconate.

Mark 9:35:

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (*panton diakonos*)."²⁹

In this passage Jesus responds to his disciples' desire for power with a statement that inverts society's hierarchical structure: if you want greatness you have to be willing to be servant of all. Jesus then exemplifies his words. He takes a little child (he shows interest in one of the most powerless member of his society), and puts the child among

²⁷ Beyer, *TDNT* 2: 86.

²⁸ Moxnes, "Patron-Client," 261.

²⁹ Cf. Matt 23:11: "The greatest among you will be your servant (*diakonos*□."

them (he gives the child a place of privilege). Then he takes the child in his arms (he physically protects the child thus getting personally involved in the child's life) and announces that welcoming one such child in his name amounts to welcoming him, and by extension, God. The importance of the word "to welcome" should not go unnoticed. It means being aware of the child's needs and willing to serve him/her. If the disciples did that then they would be ready to become servant of all. Usually women took care of children so Jesus is asking his male disciples to do what women did in his society. As Ched Myers has suggested:

"He [Mark] goes out of his way to discredit the (male) disciples in this section, *especially* regarding their aspirations to leadership and power (9:34; 10:35ff). In contrast Jesus advocates and embodies a vocation of leadership predicated upon an ideology of "service." As I have pointed out, only women fulfill the vocation of *diakonia* in Mark, from the beginning of the story (1:31) to its end (15:41)." ³⁰

b. Luke's own material:

Luke 12:37

"Blessed are those slaves whom the master (*kyrios*) finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them (*diakonesei autois*)."

Here Luke makes an astonishing affirmation. At the end of the age, when the Messiah comes, he will perform the work of a *diakonos*: he will serve the alert slaves. The evangelist might be drawing, consciously or unconsciously, on Psalm 23 where God is depicted as preparing table "in the presence of my enemies" and of anointing the head of the guests to the eschatological banquet, a sign of eastern hospitality that was embodied by Jesus when he washed his disciples' feet (cf. Jn 13:1-20). So Luke has Jesus, who for him is the master of the house, the *Kyrios*, performing this act of service that is a sign of the presence of the new age and at the same time an affirmation of the ultimate role reversal, as seen in the image of God serving the faithful.

Moxnes has suggested that at least in Luke-Acts Jesus is presenting a new concept of leadership and patronage. This is particularly clear in both the parable of Luke 12:35-40 and in the account of the Last Supper of Luke 22:27. In these two passages Jesus is presented as a broker of God's power and benefaction but instead of this being a means to honor and status it is identified with the act of serving. Jesus' example is revolutionary because he dares to subvert the traditional concept of patronage.³¹ He is relocating the place of honor from the one who is served to the one who serves.

In conclusion then, the gospels preserve oral traditions where Jesus presents himself as model of unselfish service. In so doing he is highlighting the role of women and slaves among his followers. But he also affirms that this is something that God does through the sending of the Son of man to give his life as a ransom for many. The service Jesus embodies is not the kind sought in the Greek world, where magnanimity and

³⁰ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 280-281.

³¹ Moxnes, *Patron-Client*, 259.

benefaction was something people of high status would be willing to perform in exchange for honor and praise.³² This was expected from kings and people in power, but it did not entail a self-emptying, a complete disregard for one's privileges and position in society. Actually, magnanimity was seen as the duty and privilege of the elite, one of the virtues sought after by those who cherished their status in the Greco-Roman world. Peasants and slaves were not expected to be magnanimous or to receive magnanimity, since this virtue was exchanged among free individuals, especially men. Jesus categorically forbids his disciples to imitate the charity of the Greek world. Acts of compassion and service, Jesus says, are not something you choose to do because it will bring you honor and praise. Compassion and sacrificial service is something you embody, something you *are* and not something you *do*.³³ He puts himself as the example: "But *I am* among you as one who serves." Diaconia, for Jesus, is not a virtue but an ontological reality because it has to do with one's very essence as a human being.

4. The co-opting of the "diaconia" by the male hierarchy of the early church

No doubt then that when Jesus said these things he was criticizing the structures of the contemporary patriarchal society and at the same time elevating the women and slaves among his followers as models of true discipleship. Ched Myers affirms that "[i]n a thoroughly patriarchal socio-cultural order, women alone are fit to act as servant-leaders...How else can a portrait that paints men as power-hungry and women as servants function, except to legitimate women as leaders?"³⁴

If Jesus is doing what Ched Myers says he was doing, that is, highlighting women as leaders, why then does the Lukan Jesus, who describes himself as a deacon, rebuke Martha for doing diaconia? (cf. Luke 10:38-42) This question has been aptly raised and thoroughly answered by feminist Bible scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her book *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Her argument goes something like this: already by Luke's time the terms *diakonia* and *diakoneo* had become technical terms for ecclesiastical leadership which included eucharistic table service and the proclamation of the word. These ideas come from Acts 6:1-6 where the apostles choose seven deacons who will be in charge of serving tables while the apostles dedicate themselves to the proclamation of the word. There is here a marked difference between the *diakonia* (this is the actual word used) of the word and that of the table service. Acts clearly subordinates one to the other: "It is not right that we (the twelve) should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." (Acts 6:2) But, even so, those deacons who were supposed to serve the tables are portrayed as powerful preachers and missionaries. Apparently men could do both things. Not so women. There is not a single woman in Luke-Acts who is described as doing the work of proclamation. Their proper attitude is exemplified by Mary who submissively listens to the word

³² "Those who act to benefit others, then, would be seen as illustrating the virtue of magnanimity, which is one of the traditional grounds for praise." Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 123.

³³ "Service is, thus, the very identity of discipleship. It is not that one is a disciple and, as a consequence, one serves. No. One is a disciple to the extent that one serves. Disciple is the equivalent of deacon, of servant." (translation mine) Sebastião Armando Gameleira Soares, "Diaconia e profecia." *Estudos Teologicos*. Sao Leopoldo, Ano 39, No.3 (1999) p.209.

³⁴ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 281.

proclaimed by Jesus. To Luke women are members but not leaders of the Jesus movement.³⁵ So *diakonia* was co-opted by the male leadership of the early church and used increasingly to describe the ministry of the male apostles (cf. 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:23). And when a woman is mentioned doing *diakonia* it is made clear that her position is subservient to the men of the group (cf. Luke. 8:2-3) or something less desirable for her (cf. Luke 10:41-42)

All of this should make us think about the legitimacy of the word *diakonia* for describing our Christian work of compassionate service. This concept was conceived in a patriarchal system that justified the domination of a few over the many. And even though the term has been used in positive ways to describe Christian service to humankind it still connotes a basic inequality. Schüssler Fiorenza says that if we valorize the notion of service and servanthood we are in fact perpetuating the patriarchal Christian self-understanding and structure. Therefore, she suggests, “the ministry of women is no longer to be construed as ‘service’ or as ‘waiting on someone.’ Instead, ministry should be understood as ‘equality from below,’ as a democratic practice of solidarity with all those who struggle for survival, self-love, and justice.”³⁶

In the same vein we could add that a *diakonia* that is conceived from the perspective of those groups in our society that have been relegated to the margins, might necessitate a different linguistic signifier. I am thinking specifically about people upon whose shoulders the economy of this nation has been and is being built: migrant workers, cooks, landscapers, waiters, maids, factory workers, etc. Usually those who perform these jobs belong to economically deprived minorities such as Latinos/as or African Americans. How can we speak to these people of the Soteriological and redemptive nature of service/ *diakonia*? Wouldn't this affirmation perpetuate the very oppression they are being subject to by society and which our ministry should be addressing? As Rachel Richardson Smith has said:

“While servanthood without choice becomes slavery, servanthood through choice is an act of the total self. The powerlessness of servanthood can be redemptive only when it results from free and conscious choice; choosing to give up power when we have none is a meaningless endeavor.”³⁷

Surely Smith is correct here. She appropriately identifies what the problem is with demanding service from powerless people. Unfortunately she does not abandon the patriarchal language that is the source of women and minorities' oppression. She says further into her article that “servanthood requires that we teach our masters –be they family or society- that we are all persons in our own right and must be treated with dignity and kindness.”³⁸ This suggests that as long as society treats women and minorities with dignity and kindness they should continue to be expected to provide service. I believe this is not Jesus' understanding of *diakonia*.

5. Jesus' ministry and death as his *diakonia*

³⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 64-68.

³⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 73.

³⁷ Rachel Richardson Smith, “Liberating the Servant.” *The Christian Century*. December 16, 1981, p.1314.

³⁸ Smith, “Liberating the Servant,” p.1314.

Because of Mark's extension of Jesus' *diakonia* to his ministry in general and his death in particular, we could say that the Gospels as a whole can be understood as the early church's record of Jesus' *diakonia*. I contend that diaconia properly understood implies the liberation of the other through voluntary service³⁹, the bestowal of God's saving presence through acts of compassion, and through the envisioning of a community of equals where the hierarchies of the culture are subverted and done away with.⁴⁰ The following examples illustrate Jesus' activity as deacon even when the term *diakoneo* is not used in all of them:

- When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, *diakonia* is presented as the model for ecclesiastical leadership. Co-opted by the male hierarchy of the nascent church it became part and parcel of those who wanted to legitimate their authority in the church. Today we see this when the Pope washes the feet of the bishops in Rome.
- When Jesus eats with sinners and publicans *diakonia* is understood as the crossing of social and religious boundaries. The fact that the early church experienced problems with the equal distribution of food among Palestinian and Greek widows in Acts 6 shows how quickly the community forgot Jesus' example. Therefore male deacons had to be institutionally established with the additional responsibilities of proclaiming the word, something that was clearly denied to women.
- When Jesus heals many who were oppressed by a variety of diseases and liberates many who were oppressed by demonic forces and when Jesus feeds the multitudes *diakonia* is seen as a model for social change. And yet the nascent church failed to be an agent for social change. It became an institution that dispensed its blessings only to its members (cf. Mark 16:9-20), only to those who believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah. History shows how this church entered in conflict with the synagogue and the Greco-Roman world until it itself became the dominant religion of the Mediterranean basin, thus subverting the very agenda Jesus had in mind, namely, that of being the leaven hidden in the dough, the agent of God's kingdom (Mt 13:33; Lk.13:21).
- When in the account of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 the king, whom the narrative clearly identifies as the *Kyrios*, that is, the Risen Christ, condemns to eternal punishment those who had forgotten the law of love of neighbor, *diakonia* is presented as having Soteriological implications. Doctrine and dogma do not play a role in a person's final destiny, suggests Matthew. Diaconia does. Unfortunately the blatant spiritualization of this and other NT principles by the Church has made Christianity into a religion that is primarily concerned with the soul of the individual. By means of a biased and skewed reading of Paul, the Reformation consolidated the doctrine of justification by faith as the paramount principle that distinguished Christianity from Judaism and Roman Catholicism, thus not only creating antisemitic and anti-Roman Church feelings but also completely disregarding the Soteriological function of compassion and *diakonia* in Jesus' gospel.
- Jesus' death is the supreme diaconal/saving event. This is a powerful symbol: God sends God's only child to die for humanity in order to bring life and wholeness to a broken humanity. Thus understood God is the Supreme Patron-Servant. But the church has misused this life-giving symbol and turned it into a weapon for colonization and genocide. Even today, in the name of the crucified Lord, non-Christian cultures have been relativized and other people's understanding of the Sacred dismissed as

³⁹ This service can also be understood as pedagogical. In that sense Jesus' example is in itself an object lesson aimed at raising the consciousness of his disciples so that they may see the inequalities of their society. A contemporary comparison with this pedagogy is that of Paulo Freire. This has been investigated, I believe very successfully, by William R. Herzog II in the above cited work.

⁴⁰ This is clearest in Mark 10:29-30 where the evangelist describes the kind of community that Jesus has in mind. The attentive reader will notice that Jesus fails to include a father figure in the community of his followers. When Matthew and Luke use this tradition they omit the fact that Jesus' model of a new society is at odds with the prevailing patriarchal system. (cf. Matt 19:29 and Luke 18:29-30)

myth and fallacy. In a demonic reversal of the true meaning of the gospel Jesus the servant has become Christ the conqueror.

Conclusion

In spite of the discussion outlined in the present work the idea of diaconia still has validity for many of us, provided that we acknowledge its First Century cultural underpinnings. Despite the fact that the evangelists, by means of the unavoidable task of contextualizing Jesus' message, may have domesticated the gospel's radical demands,⁴¹ it is important that we recognize that the historical Jesus, acting as God's appointed *diakonos*, came to put an end to all hierarchies and servitude by providing the supreme and final example of service for liberation. His was the final, voluntary and decisive act of compassion that ushered in the power and the potential for the construction of a community of equals, the *kin-dom*⁴² of God. If the evangelists were not able to completely abandon the linguistic framework of their Greek culture thus preserving social categories that still reflected the presence of power inequalities, if they failed to see the complete scope of Jesus' salvific ministry, that is simply a vivid testimony to the human tendency to impede liberation. A theological rereading of the gospels' traditions will entail a re-couching of its affirmations in a language that reflects contemporary categories and which speaks to contemporary issues. But this should be the subject of another study.

⁴¹ This is especially clear in the case of Luke-Acts.

⁴² I borrow this expression from many contemporary feminist scholars.

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