

## Basin and the Towel and the Deacon

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Type the words 'deacon, basin, towel' into a search engine and within a few seconds half a million or more sites will respond to the search. Most of these sites will have something to do with the ministry of deacon in one or other Christian Church. Many Churches, not just Catholic ones, have adopted the symbol of the basin and the towel as part of the logo for their deacon ministry office and use these symbols on the covers of publications. There are numerous blog contributions, articles in journals and popular Christian publications, songs and conference papers from deacons and others about the basin, towel and deacons. Most of the sources want to draw out how the basin and the towel are the pre-eminent symbols of a deacon's ministry and most will want to argue what is revealed is the essence of the deacon's ministry as one of humble service.

I want to illustrate why this is not so. John 13 does not include any of the deacon words and the action that takes place in that chapter, the washing of the feet of the disciples by Jesus, is not something a deacon in the ancient world would ever do. Nor can the story be taken to mean an exhortation to humble service or servant leadership. There is a type of service indicated in the action of the washing of the feet but it is not that of humble service to another. What is indicated is something much more profound than humble service to another person. The basin and the towel, an image taken from the Gospel of John Chapter 13, have no connection at all with the ministry of the deacon.

### Why has John Chapter 13 been associated with Deacons?

There is a very simple reason why people try to connect John 13 to deacons and it has nothing to do with John 13. The connection is made through the definition given to the *diakon* group of words (*diaconos*, *diaconia*, *diaconein* and other cognates). These definitions are found in Bauer's Theological Dictionary of the Bible. Bauer was a Lutheran scholar and one of his Lutheran friends, Pastor Theodore Fliedner and his wife Frederike, instituted a new ministry for men and women who were dedicated to acts of charity and the corporal works of mercy, caring for the many poor and disposed people in industrial revolution Germany. They called the men who joined the institute deacons and the women who joined they called deaconesses. These women and men lived a common life of poverty and charitable service in deacon houses and their life style and manner of dress resembled the many new Roman Catholic religious institutes/orders which had also emerged to provide for education and the works of mercy. The Fliedners' took their inspiration for this new model of Christian social work from his own interpretation of Acts 6:1-8.



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The link has now formed between Acts 6:1-8 and the deacon and humble service and acts of charity. Fliedner took for granted that the seven chosen in Acts were deacons, as later Christian testimony (St Irenaeus of Lyons, c.202) had already made that attribution. Many translators added the words food or funds, words which never appear in any Greek manuscript of the New Testament, as the source of the complaint of the Hellenists against the others in Acts. That is the Hellenists were complaining their widows were neglected in the daily distribution of these putative food or funds. Once insertion of these words became the norm a connection between charitable works and deacons in Acts became the norm too. Even though funds and food did not originate in the text of the Bible but through editorial-translation choices the words provided an interpretative distorted lens for Acts 6:1-8.



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It is worth noting that the Greek text says the Hellenists (Greek speakers) complained that their widows were neglected in daily *diakonia* and not in fact distribution. In Acts the term *diakonia* (ministry) by itself or together with *diakonia tou logou* (ministry of the Word) always refers to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In response to the neglect of the widows in the daily ministry of the Word the apostles (Aramaic speakers) ask the Hellenists to choose seven from among themselves (i.e. Greek speaking community) for this ministry. The term to ‘minister tables’, sometimes translated as to wait on or serve tables, is a common Greek expression for a ministry within the home. The apostles were seeking a solution to the neglect of these women in the proclamation of the Gospel, confined to home because of their social status not to any material neglect. One only need look at chapter five of Acts to realise that neglect in the distribution of food or funds could not be the issue in chapter six. The whole section of chapter six and following tells of how the Word of God

spread and chronicles the ministry of preaching, catechising and witnessing of two of the Seven.<sup>1</sup>

Bauer defined the *diakon* words, as he experienced them through the deacon house movement. From the nineteenth century until the twentieth century, 1990 to be precise, the *diakon* groups of words were forever identified with service and servants and even servitude. John N Collins in his magisterial work, *Diaconia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*, made the first study of the use of the *diakon* group of words in Scripture, Christian religious usage and non-Christian usage in the centuries close to the time of the formation of the New

<sup>1</sup> See a more detailed account of this passage in Deacons and the Servant Myth. *The Pastoral Review*, December 2006. Also located on this website.

Testament.<sup>2</sup> What he discovered was that the *diacon* group of words never contain any sense of humble service or works of charity to another and so the whole semantic edifice which supported diaconal ministry defined in this way crumbled.<sup>3</sup> His work introduced a paradigm shift in the manner in which we now think about ministry in general and the diaconate in particular.

The connection between Christian social service and diaconate has become so strong in German speaking countries that a new term, *diaconie*, has become the normal German expression for Christian social service. Germans like Benedict XVI are steeped in the usage of *diaconie* and all the meaning attached to it. So much so that in his letter *Deus Caritas Est*, he has no need to refer to the Greek *diakonia* when he speaks about deacons but goes directly to the German term. Though English speakers have not invented a similar term the semantic field of Christian social service is normally expressed or intended in most writing about deacons. Deacon Christian service is a major part of the government funded social welfare system of Germany and some Nordic countries too. Many of the first proponents of the restored deacons in the Latin Catholic Church were Germans thoroughly steeped in this ‘diaconal’ experience.



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The step toward deacons and John 13:1-16 follows the trajectory already being traced above. It did not matter, in this trajectory, that none of the diacon words are found in the text. Washing of feet was seen as a humble service and Bauer had already defined the deacon as one who does humble service. Therefore without any further consideration or recourse to the text of John 13 many interpreters saw it as humble service and since deacons are humble servants so therefore this text is about them. The circularity of the logic should be apparent from the above analysis.

### **We can be certain that the foot washing is not a deacon task in John 13**

It is true, as many have noted that at a formal dinner slaves (*douloi*) would wash the feet of guests. That foot washing has nothing to do with what Jesus is doing in John 13. The slaves would wash the feet of guests when they arrived for dinner and that may have happened at this dinner. We are not given any information about it in John. But that is not the foot washing that Jesus does. Jesus takes up the towel and basin during the dinner. John writes “while they were at supper” (13:2) “he got up from the table” (13:4), so he sets the scene

<sup>2</sup> John N Collins, *Diaconia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*, London: Oxford University Press. 1990 Since Collins Anni Hentschel a German Biblical scholar has retraced much of his work in her own research and affirmed that humble service to another of charity work is simply not part of the semantic field of the diacon group of words.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the expression is should have crumbled. For although Collins and Hentschel looking at the diacon words and Brodd looking at the caritative words in relation to them, have shown charity and humble service are never part of the meaning of the words-resistance from the dominant paradigm remains strong through not in my view, academically robust.

during the meal not when the guests arrive at the house. Even if at this meal slaves had washed the feet of the disciples as they arrived Jesus is washing them now, during the meal.

When Jesus begins his explanation of the foot washing (13:16) we are conditioned to think of this in terms of servants and deacons because so many translators include the word servant and we are conditioned to think of deacons as humble servants because of the misplaced semantic attribution we have already made to the *diacon* words. Nowhere in the text of John 13:1-16, are any of the *diacon* words to be found. We might expect that we will find one *diacon* word when Jesus says (in the Jerusalem Bible translation, as well as many others), “In truth I tell you, no *servant* is greater than his master.” No Greek manuscript contains the servant word (*paidos*) but all manuscripts contain the Greek word for slave (*doulos*) and there is still no sign of the word for deacon (*diaconos*).

Foot washing was a task of slaves (*douloi*) and so it would make sense to the disciples when Jesus says a slave is not greater than his master. Jesus is referring to something from their common experience. It is clear to them that he has become a slave in this action of foot washing. It is no wonder that Peter objects so strongly to his master taking on the task of a slave.

John uses *deipnon* as his word for the supper (13:2). A *deipnon* is not like a family meal or supper but a formal meal during which certain toasts were offered and formal rules of etiquette governed the proceedings. John does not place this meal in the context of the ritual Passover (Seder) meal as do the other Gospels but at a time “before the festival of Passover” (13:1). The fact that it is a *deipnon* adds further evidence against the proposition that deacons may be indicated in the washing of feet.



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We are indebted to the work of John N Collins in helping us out of the deacon connection with this story. Collins examined, among other things, the deacon in relation to the *deipnon*. What he uncovers is significant. As noted above it was slaves (*douloi*) who washed feet and not deacons (*diaconoi*). Slaves, as we would expect had an extremely low status in society and at the time of writing the Gospels almost half of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. Generally people, even those who did not own slaves, would be aware of the social status of the slave and the tasks which they could be asked to perform. Everyone also knew that a deacon (*diaconos*) would never be asked or permitted to wash the feet of guests.

Collins tells us that to be asked to be a *diaconos* at a *deipnon* was considered a great honour. It was an honour men hoped for and if they had served in that role at a *deipnon* they would often want that fact noted on their epitaph. The men chosen to be deacons had to be free born men and never slaves. They had to be men of good reputation and known to be good citizens. They had to be chosen by the host of the *deipnon*, which might sometimes have been a single

wealthy person or a group such as a religious society, craft or artisans guild or business group. Their role was to be something like a master of ceremonies conducting the formalities of the meal and preparing the cups of wine, with the assistance of servants and slaves, for the guests for the various toasts. They acted as the go between representing the host in preparations for the meal, carrying messages and invitations, giving orders to the servants and slaves for the service of the meal and they introduced the speakers or entertainers at the symposium which followed the meal. Deacons never did wash feet or offer humble service to another person as part of their role.

We can be certain then, that the foot washing that we encounter in John 13 is neither the washing of the guests feet in preparation for a meal or the kind of task that would ever involve a deacon. We can also be certain that, because none of the *diacon* words appear in the text, it is not a story about deacons.

### A parable in action

When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples he is enacting a parable. Let's explore this action as a parable and see what insight we may gain from it. One of the rituals Catholics include in the celebration of the Mass of the Lords Supper (Holy Thursday night) is the rite of washing of the feet. Frequently the rite is considered as an exhortation to follow Jesus in lowly service, a kind of morality play for us to learn from and imitate. This is not quite correct. As we have seen above it is not a story about or an exhortation for deacons. Service is a part of what the foot washing means but it is a very specific service, that of being obedient in faith even to the point of death.

John has set this scene at the last supper and tells us that Jesus' hour or time had come to return to the Father. The washing of the feet is the first sign Jesus gives in this part of the Gospel of how perfect his love was. The second sign will be at his crucifixion.

John provides us with some clues as to the meaning of the foot washing parable in action through the dialogue between Peter and Jesus. The Greek text literally says "If I do not wash you, you can have no part in me." When Peter then says wash my hands and head as well, Jesus' reply in the Greek is, "no one who has been immersed in water (*ho leloumenos*) needs washing." Both of these terms 'to have a part in me' and 'immersion in water' are references to baptism in the New Testament. That is, Jesus is saying that you must be baptised into me to become a part of me.

We are baptised into Jesus' death. Hints about death are provided in the Greek words for 'he put aside' his clothes and 'took them up again'. John uses these same words earlier in the Gospel to refer to the Good Shepherd who will lay down or put aside (*ti-theresin*) his own life for the good of his sheep but he will take it up (*elaben*) again. Jesus has given us not just



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an example but **the** example, or paradigm of what discipleship means. Discipleship is the commitment of the whole person even if that commitment should lead us to death.

John's account of the Last Supper has no re-telling of the institution of the Eucharist as do the synoptics and Paul. It is through the ritual of the foot washing that Jesus attempts to lead his disciples to some understanding of his death on the cross. They did not understand what his death meant. It seemed to them like failure and they abandoned him out of fear. But they will understand when they have encountered the Risen Lord.



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Baptism and Eucharist are each a participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord. This is the meaning that Paul brings out in chapter ten of his letter to the Corinthians. 'Is not the cup we bless a participation (*koinonia*) in his blood and the bread we break a participation (*koinonia*) in his body? We are the many who are made one body by the sharing in this one bread.' (1 Cor 10:16-17) Eucharist is not only a communion with the Lord but with each other in the one Lord. We become what we receive, the Body of Christ.

The washing of the feet is linked to the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection which the synoptics and Paul make clear through the institution narrative. The example which Jesus gives in becoming a slave to all is the sign of one who submits himself fully to the will of God so that the love God has for the world will be manifested in his moment of glory on the cross. Jesus gives the first sign of selfless love in the washing and the second sign will be his death on the cross. Anyone who wishes to be a disciple of Jesus must be prepared, if necessary to give this ultimate sign too but for most it will be a case of taking up the cross daily.

### Letting go of a symbol

In this brief study of the text of John 13:1-16 we have seen that the text sheds no light on the meaning of diaconal ministry or how a deacon should minister. The text is a parable in action which elucidates the meaning of Jesus' death in the context of God's saving love. If there is an exhortation in this text it is addressed to all Christians and not specifically to deacons. It is incorrect to see in this text an exhortation to humble service toward one another because Jesus asks us for something much more profound than making ourselves servants of charity to one another. It is true that in other places in the Gospels Jesus does exhort Christians toward acts of service to those in need, but not in John 13:1-16.

Deacons, deacon organisations and diocesan diaconate offices need to let go of the symbol of the basin and the towel. It has been misinterpreted and misappropriated. It is important to jettison such imagery for two main reasons. To continue to use this imagery as something applying to deacons weakens the power of the parable in action for all Christians by

suggesting that there is something in John 13:1-16 that is uniquely diaconal and by extension clerical. The parable is intended for all Christians to ponder the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ.

### Conclusion

I have argued in this short essay that the basin and the towel and indeed the entire story of the foot washing in John 13:1-16 are not part of the Scriptures which illuminate the meaning of diaconal ministry. The text contains none of the *diacon* group of words that we might look for as indicators of a possible deacon connection. The foot washing is a parable in action, and a sign of Jesus' great act of love on the cross, which takes the place and function of the institution narratives in the synoptics and Paul. The parable in action tells us more about baptism and Eucharist than it does about Christian ministry and certainly has nothing to say about the ministry of deacons.

If we abandon the use of this imagery, as I believe we should, we will have much to gain as a Church. We will be forced to look at John 13 with fresh eyes and go beyond seeing it as a simple moral exhortation to be humble or to serve one another and depth the riches and mystery of the story of Gods saving love which touches on baptism and Eucharist. This fresh appropriation of the story takes us deeply into the mystery and demands of discipleship.

We will also have much to gain as a Church when we abandon this imagery because it removes one of the props which support a distorted conception of the ministry of deacons. The continued use of the imagery reinforces the imposition of semantic content on the *diacon* group of words, as social service words, which is totally incompatible with the findings of recent biblical scholarship. If we remove this prop we may be forced to look again at the meaning of these words and by extension the meaning of diaconate.

The meaning we give to words and our central stories has the power to shape the reality which we create. The charitable and service language for deacons has been so powerful that it has been able to justify the limitation of the scope of diaconal ministry to that of corporal works of mercy and thereby limiting the diaconate and its potential for the new evangelisation. The language shapes the reality of how we select men for formation, how we form them, how we view their status as sacred ministers. If our language tells us that deacons are 'humble foot washers' who carry the basin and the towel as their prime symbol we have already determined how their ministry in the church will be received and their status in the church perceived.

The Book of Gospels is the deacon's symbol in the Catholic Church. This is the primary symbol of his ministry which he receives at his ordination. Let go of the basin and towel and explore the meaning of the Book of Gospels, whose herald the deacon has become.



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