

# RECLAIMING AN EARLY CHURCH PARISH DIACONATE FOR LUTHERANS TODAY: THE MALE DIACONATE AS AN AUXILIARY, CHURCH-INSTITUTED ORDER

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It seems in recent times in order to protect the office of the holy ministry among us Lutherans, it seems that we may have denigrated the diaconate in the process and have reduced the to an ecclesiastical political football rather than asking the question how such a venerable tradition might be faithfully used in our day, not as a replacement for the pastoral office but to assist those men who are called and ordained to the one, Christ-instituted office.

That there is one Christ-instituted office does not mean that the church is now allowed the freedom to put in place offices or orders to assist or free up that one, Christ instituted office so that its bearers might attend better to its core duties. Even among those willing to accept the order of deaconess in our midst in the great tradition of Wilhelm Löhe, many of same are unwilling that men could engage in similar tasks for the church for the sake of order, help, decorum, and the conservation of personal energy for our pastors. Hence we come to the odd conclusion that we may have auxiliary deaconesses but not auxiliary deacons. Odd indeed!

Another problem with the term “deacon” has been that it really does not have a consistent referent throughout the centuries, especially after medieval confusion of various orders. There does seem to be a decisive shift from the early church to the medieval western church and then again in the post-Reformation era. The more clear articulation of the diaconate does seem to be in the early church and golden patristic ages.

Some have argued that the diaconate is and has always been (until “Reformed influence”) simply the pastoral office (in Lutheran terms) that is humanly limited to particular duties and is not a “lay office” or order. It has also been suggested that it was only the Reformed who began to speak of the diaconate as a “lay office” and that this understanding has no pre-Reformation foundation. In a desire to preserve the integrity of the pastoral office, and rightly so in our day of “lay pastors” or “licensed deacons” who publicly preach and administer the sacraments outside the pastoral office contrary to AC XIV, I am afraid, nonetheless, that there has been a failure to notice important data regarding the diaconate and a consequent needless neglect of this historic order of the church catholic. In confessional Lutherans shunning the diaconate, we lose rightful ecclesial freedom and deprive pastors of potential help in parish service. Respectfully, I wish to briefly make my case so that we may not precipitously close the door on the auxiliary diaconate for males and females in Lutheran parishes, while also maintaining a right observance of Augsburg Confession XIV.

With regard to the use of Acts 6:1-6 as foundational for the diaconate, it is true that the noun form of diakonia is not found there, but only the verb form. Notable is the fact that St. Irenaeus of Lyons had no doubt about the office of deacon being established distinctly. Irenaeus takes Acts 6 as the beginning of the diaconate (see *Adversus Haereses*, I.26.3; II.12.10). The importance of this observation by Irenaeus is that he is one of the last major figures in the early church who had contact with someone who personally knew an apostle. For Irenaeus that was Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (martyred around AD 155/156), who as a young was closely associated with the Apostle John. It is also worth pointing out that Dr. C.F.W. Walther as well, in his *Kirche und Amt*, finds the beginnings of the diaconate in Acts 6. John Chrysostom makes this observation:

Although it is generally accepted that deacons existed in the times of the New Testament, the truth is that the Seven are never actually designated or even referred to as deacons in Acts 6. Nevertheless, the tradition of the Church has consistently argued and affirmed that the Seven were in fact the first to be appointed and assigned as deacons. In this respect, Acts 6 is an indication of the earliest seeds of church order during the first century, although the matter probably took a number of years, even centuries, to clarify and articulate.<sup>i</sup>

In Philippians 1:1 and I Timothy 3:8, deacons are notably listed separately from the bishops. The qualifications for each in I Timothy are also listed separately. While there is certainly overlap in the qualifications, the fact that they are listed separately can also be taken to indicate that there are separate offices here signified, one being the singular Christ-instituted office of the ministry (*presbyteral-episocopal*) and the other being an order created by the church in freedom for the sake of good order to assist the pastoral office, though not to be confused with being “assistant” or “assisting pastors” or some such novelty as we hear proposed these days. J.N.D. Kelly observes regarding the relation of deacons to bishops:

Their subordinate, auxiliary role is brought out (a) by the absence of any suggestion that they were responsible for teaching or hospitality, and (b) by the hints that their preliminary scrutiny was, if anything, more rigorous than that of the overseers. Though often dismissed as colourless and general, the list of qualities required of deacons in fact bears a close relation to their duties.<sup>ii</sup>

While it is clear that *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* are really the one Christ-instituted office denoted with interchangeable titles, one cannot necessarily and conclusively say this of the diaconate. Not all uses of *diakonos* or *diakonia* have the same referent. Context there will have to be decisive. Presbyters and bishops (pastors) can take part in diaconal activities (exercise the diaconate), but that does not mean that deacons are the same thing as presbyters and bishops (pastors). The early councils of the Church seem to bear out this understanding.

The Council of Arles (AD 314) declared that deacons were not to pronounce the consecration of the Lord’s Supper. Why not, if they were considered pastors? The order of deacons was completely subordinate to both the priests (*presbyteroi*) and the bishops. Deacons were members of an auxiliary church-instituted office. Edward J. Enright notes regarding this canon:

The councils of the ancient church are a vital source for uncovering the history of the diaconate as it moved from the implicit in the New Testament to the explicit in late antiquity. At the Council of Arles (what is today France) in AD 314, a prohibition of deacons presiding at the celebration of the Eucharist was put into place. Although not a widespread practice, nevertheless it should not have been the case at all. In the same year, at a council held in Ancyra, Asia Minor, the same practice seems to have been forbidden as well. Other local councils in the fourth century also legislated the activities of deacons, but the first general or ecumenical council held at Nicaea in AD 325 [ruled ...that] “Deacons must remain within their own limits...”.<sup>iii</sup>

Canon 18 of the Council of Nicaea in 325 decreed:

It has come to the knowledge of the holy and great Synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer. And this also has been made known, that certain deacons now touch the Eucharist even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the deacons remain within their own bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist according to their order, after the presbyters, and let either the bishop or the presbyter administer to them. Furthermore, let not the deacons sit among the presbyters, for that is contrary to canon and order. And if, after this decree, any one shall refuse to obey, let him be deposed from the diaconate [Canon 18, Council of Nicaea].

So while presbyters and bishops held the same (Christ-instituted) office *de jure divino*, such cannot be said in the case of deacons. Subsequent distinctions between bishops and parish pastors are by human authority, as is the case between our associate and senior pastors today. Theirs was an office brought about by the church in freedom and was not divinely necessary as is the office of pastor. The diaconate is entirely an office whose authority under the pastoral office is *de jure humano*. The diaconate is something a parish or diocese can have or not have according to preference and need (relief, good order, decorum). In Acts 6, the apostles' suggestion to create an order to relieve them of non-essential apostolic tasks was answered with the consenting "Amen" of the congregation gathered there.

Regarding *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi*, Kenan B. Osborne concludes: "Only when we move into the non-New Testament data do we begin to find a clear differentiation between episkopos and presbyter."<sup>iv</sup> Osborne also argues about deacons:

Even though there is no possible way to claim that the deacons were "instituted by Christ Jesus himself," the Church has continually seen the deacon as an integral or even essential part of its ministerial structure. Over the centuries the importance of this ministry has not always been the same, but its presence in the ministry-structure has never been lacking.<sup>v</sup>

While we wouldn't cite Hippolytus as the embodiment of orthodoxy, he still gives a great deal of important testimony regarding various aspects of church practice. In his *Apostolic Tradition* he writes:

When one ordains a deacon, he is chosen according to what has been said above, with only the bishop laying on his hand in the same manner. In the ordination of a deacon, only the bishop lays on his hand, <sup>2</sup>because the deacon is not ordained to the priesthood, but to the service of the bishop, to do that which he commands. <sup>3</sup>**For he is not part of the council of the clergy, but acts as a manager, and reports to the bishop what is necessary.** <sup>4</sup>**He does not receive the spirit common to the elders, which the elders share, but that which is entrusted to him under the bishop's authority.** <sup>5</sup>This is why only the bishop makes a deacon. <sup>6</sup>Upon the elders, the other elders place their hands because of a common spirit and similar duty. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, the elder has only the authority to receive this, but he has no authority to give it. <sup>8</sup>Therefore he does not ordain to the clergy. Upon the ordination of the elder he seals; the bishop ordains. [My emphasis.]

Edward J. Enright gives comment upon this section of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus:

The distinction between the deacon and the presbyter is made very clear in the rubrics, these being supplied with reasons. Unlike the presbyter, the hands of the bishop are the only hands laid on the head of the candidate for the diaconate, because “he is not ordained to priesthood but to the service of the bishop, that he may do those things that are ordered by him.” It also pointed out that the deacon does not to the body of elders, to which only the presbyters belong, “but taking care of an indicating to the bishop what is necessary, not receiving the common spirit of the presbyterate... but that which is entrusted to him under the power of the bishop.” The sense is that the deacon carries out administrative tasks for the bishop but also that the deacon keeps the bishop informed of what needs to be done for the betterment of the community.<sup>vi</sup>

It is interesting to note, in view of medieval distortions in the liturgical duties of deacons, the comment of James Monroe Barnett: “Although the deacons would acquire the right to read the Gospel lesson at the Eucharist, it does not appear that they possessed this privilege in the third century as R.P. Symonds thinks probable.”<sup>vii</sup> This is notable also for confessional Lutherans who rightly desire to maintain sound distinctions between the pastoral office and the diaconate. Barnett further points out:

Apparently, it was in the fourth century that the deacon acquired the prerogative of reading the Gospel at the Eucharist, although it was not exclusive. There seems to be no evidence that deacons were allowed to preach at this time. The sermon was given by the presiding officer, usually a bishop, seated in his chair. One of the liturgical functions sometimes ascribed to deacons of the third century is that of bidding the intercessory prayers of the faithful at the Eucharist.<sup>viii</sup>

Now by the time the church reached the middle ages, the diaconate had suffered much decline and confusion. Presbyters became more prominent and the diaconate had become ceremonial or merely a briefly transitional order on the way to the ordained priesthood at best. This is a view described by many scholars of the diaconate and church orders. What was fairly clear and vibrant in the earliest centuries of the church had become rather muddled and cast aside. Monasticism had risen in prominence in East and West, taking up many of the charitable and administrative functions of the church.

By the time one arrives at the era of the Reformation, the distinctions between presbyter and bishop, between civil order and ecclesial order (or the two kingdoms), and between the pastoral office and auxiliary functions had become quite confused. There does seem to be a decisive shift of duties in relation to titles in ecclesiastical order of the middle ages in relation to the early church. There was a “downward” delegation often occurring, whether proper or not. In short, the Church of the Augsburg Confession inherited quite a mess, and tried to deal with what was at the time. Deacons were functioning as what we would call pastors. At the same time, bishops (and the pope) were dealing much with secular, civil matters and parish presbyters were in deep trouble on several counts. So the term deacon was appropriate by the early generations of Lutherans not in the early church sense but as a way of pastorally transforming the title into something new. The title that had been used in the early church for an auxiliary church-instituted order now, in the aftermath of medieval over-delegation of duties properly belonging to priests and bishops, by their direction, now came to be a title for the pastoral

office, as Lutheran attempted to clean up the mess. Meanwhile the function of the diaconate of the early church went elsewhere. Notable however is the fact that neither the Lutheran fathers nor the Lutheran Confessions reject the traditional distribution of ranks or orders in the church, but rather they stated that they desired to maintain them where possible. This, of course, was rather problematic for Lutherans in practice what with the medieval mess of the diaconate, the refusal of Roman bishops to ordain Evangelical Lutheran candidates for the pastoral office, and the mixing of civil and ecclesial among the bishops in trans-parochial matters.

Notable is the description of Martin Chemnitz in this regard, as it applies to the distinction between bishops and presbyters:

...because of the present dispute, the following reminder must be added: (1) that there is no command in the Word of God, which or how many such ranks or orders there should be; (2) that there were not at the time of the apostles in all churches and at all times the same and the same number of ranks or orders, as can be clearly ascertained from the epistles of Paul, written to various churches; (3) that there was not, at the time of the apostles, such a division of these ranks, but repeatedly one and the same person held and performed all the duties which belong to the ministry, as is clear from the apostolic history. Therefore such orders were free at the time of the apostles and were observed for the sake of good order, decorum, and edification, except that at that time certain special gifts, such as tongues, prophecies, apostolate, and miracles, were bestowed on certain persons by God.<sup>ix</sup>

But note also this rebuke of papal practice from Chemnitz in regard to the situation inherited from the medieval era:

But this we justly and deservedly rebuke in the papalist orders: 1. They retain and usurp titles without the reality, and the benefits of the titles without the duties; for when they had thrown the duties of the canonical ministry of the Word and sacraments out of their great churches into the small and lowly chapels in the parishes, where one or two were compelled to perform all duties of the ministry, they themselves retained the empty titles without the duties of the ministry. Nevertheless they did not retain them as empty titles, but retained the names of the orders on account of the fat allowances. Bishops no longer taught, presbyters did not administer the sacraments to the people, offerings were no longer contributed since the churches were sufficiently endowed. What need was there for either deacons or subdeacons? The custom of putting out the catechumens, the penitents, and the possessed had already long lapsed. [...] Therefore not a single rank or order of the true ecclesiastical ministry is found in that office among the papalists, such as were in the apostolic and ancient church, but they have only the empty titles. Moreover, they have made a mockery also of this, that according to the old canons no one is to be received into higher orders unless he has first been proved in the lower. For they confer all the minor orders either simultaneously or after a very short interval, and in these orders they nevertheless exercise no true functions of the ministry by which they could be prepared for the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Under these titles they have fraudulently substituted false duties, after rejecting the true and lawful ministry of the Word and sacraments.<sup>x</sup>

## SO WHAT'S A LUTHERAN TO DO?

A question arises here as to whether this stop-gap measure of the early Lutherans should remain the recommended course of action or whether better awareness of the more consistent practice of the early church would enable the Lutheran Church today to benefit from an early church type of diaconate as an auxiliary church-instituted office that assists those who hold the one Christ-instituted office of pastor (bishop/presbyter). Clearly the Lutheran Church inherited a mess from the medieval era and had to contend with emergency circumstances in its implementation of polity and orders. This would seem to suggest that we should not necessarily take every implementation of polity as normative for Lutheranism today, where we are free from the state and the Constantinian era is coming to a close.

In speaking here of the diaconate, we are not speaking of alternate routes to call and ordination to the pastoral office or emergency circumstances for the administration of the Word and Sacraments. This is not what we have in mind here. What we have in mind here is the diaconate as it was known in the early church and as Wilhelm Löhe described in regard to what we have today as deaconesses. However, what we also propose here is that males be prepared and admitted to such a diaconate for service in parishes and other churchly institutions. But this is to say, let the diaconate be the diaconate and the pastoral office be the pastoral office, even if males are occupying the diaconate. What does this mean? It means that in the liturgical context, a deacon might be a lector, but not a preacher. He might assist in the distribution of the cup in the Holy Eucharist but not consecrate. In this liturgical side, there would be a distinction, on the basis of the order of creation, between a deacon and a deaconess. He would work in the administrative and charitable works of the church (mercy) under the direction of the senior pastor loci (the effective local bishop). He would work in the outreach efforts of the church. He would also be the eyes and ears of the pastor loci to help him be aware of the spiritual needs of the congregation. In short, the deacon would help keep the pastor free to attend to those things which are unique and incumbent upon the pastoral office, so as not to neglect the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Whether such a diaconate would be a synodically-rostered order, like our deaconesses are, or whether this would be a locally ordered thing within some parishes is a question outside of this paper. Whether such male deacons would be vested with a “deacon stole” is another such question. The questions of qualifications, education, training, and installation into the order are also important questions to be answered. My hope is that we will continue to explore the diaconate in our synod as an auxiliary church-instituted order for males and females, each in their own way, according to the model of the early church rather than later uses of the nomenclature.

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<sup>i</sup> John Chryssavgis. *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today*. (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2009), p.38

<sup>ii</sup> J.N.D. Kelly. *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles – Thornapple Commentaries*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1963), p.81

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<sup>iii</sup> “The History of the Diaconate” by Edward J. Enright. *The Deacon Reader*. James Keating, ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), p.16

<sup>iv</sup> Kenan B. Osborne. *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p.50

<sup>v</sup> Osborne, pp.69-70

<sup>vi</sup> Enright, p.13

<sup>vii</sup> James Monroe Barnett. *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), p.72

<sup>viii</sup> Barnett, p.73

<sup>ix</sup> Martin Chemnitz. *Examination of the Council of Trent: Volume II*. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p.685

<sup>x</sup> Chemnitz, pp.688-689