John N. Collins


Since the publication of his seminal monograph in 1990, _Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources_, the influence of John N. Collins’ work on academic writing about the origins, theology and practice of Christian ministry has grown steadily, if somewhat slowly and inconsistently. Readers of this journal are likely to have some familiarity with its leading ideas through articles published by and about him in past issues; indeed, three of the fourteen chapters in this book are pieces that have previously appeared here. So how does it add to the case he has consistently been making since 1990 for a break from the post-1960s ecumenical consensus on _diakonia_ as meeting the needs of others, the renewed diaconate as dedicated to such _diakonia_ and ministry as the common work of all baptised Christians?

It is not Collins’ intention here to present here anything substantially different from what he has already written. As he summarises his purpose in the Preface, ‘I have excused myself from the tedium of developing a newly constructed apologia for _diakonia_ and have turned instead to making a collection of what I consider to be effective earlier writings. I would like to think that they will appear attractive to a younger and, I hope, broader range of readers’ (p. x). The selection of texts spans twenty years, from 1992 to 2012, and includes chapters from previous books, articles from specialist journals and two pieces that have not been previously published. They are helpfully organised into three inevitably overlapping parts: the first considers ‘Diakonia from the Nineteenth Century to Today’, the second ‘Diakonia in the Early Church’, and the third ‘Toward Ministry for the Twenty-First Century’.

Although Collins has continued to develop his arguments since 1990, not least in their relation to current practices of ministry in the Church (hence the more recent character of the material in the third part), the thesis he set out in his first major publication has not altered substantially. There are no chapters here from _Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources_, presumably because Collins considers his later presentations of the relevant material to be more concise and more accessible, as well as refining his approach to particular passages. His case remains, however, fundamentally an exegetical one, and in the second (and longest) part of this book we have the opportunity to consider together his interpretations of critical New Testament texts where the _diakonia_-words appear, including Mark 10:42–45, Acts 6:1–7, 1 Cor. 12:4–6, 2 Corinthians (on Paul as _diakonos_ and the collection as _diakonia_), Ephesians 4:11–16 and Philippians 1:1. He moves carefully between the analysis of specific texts and...
usage across and beyond the New Testament, including an impressive survey of relevant passages in classical literature in chapter 4. He also treads a careful line in arguing for connections between the different uses of the terms in the New Testament, while continuing to insist that there is no single, ‘basic’ meaning from which all other uses derive (as he has been accused of doing by some critics, p. 181). Such connections are expressed differently at different points, but perhaps the phrase ‘ministry under mandate’ (p. 233) might be considered a helpful shorthand. Diakon- words in different New Testament passages generally indicate that someone is being commissioned by another to undertake some kind of important activity on their behalf.

The placing of the primarily exegetical material between two sections on the modern Church indicates that Collins is well aware that the study of Christian origins cannot be detached from the life of the Church here and now. His work originated in the desire to respond to a particular situation: the growing dominance through the twentieth century of the theme of diakonia as humble, benevolent service for the theology of ministry, for movements to reinvigorate specific ministries of deacons and deaconesses and for the development of large-scale church involvement in social work and charitable activity. The material in the first part of the book outlines this, as well as Collins’ critique of the foundations for it. Yet as he ruefully notes, while the significance of his argument has come to be acknowledged in much New Testament scholarship, it has had only a very limited effect on the situation he originally wanted to address. Indeed, the third part of the book not only shows how some of Collins’ thinking about ministry in the New Testament might be related to the challenges facing the Church today but also discloses his frustration that, at the official and organisational levels of, e.g., the Roman Catholic Church to which he belongs, the EKD as the most influential of the European Protestant churches and the World Council of Churches with its global reach, his work has had little if any discernible effect on the trajectory he sought to correct.

There are surely many reasons for that, but perhaps chapter 5, on the teaching of Jesus, points the way towards some of the difficulties. To begin with, Collins appears to accept that the references in the Synoptic Gospels that link diakonos to doulos (‘slave’) and the need for disciples to take the lowliest place do not relate in any clear way to the cluster of uses he identifies elsewhere around ‘ministry under mandate’. That admission seems to limit his case significantly. Moreover, to explain Jesus’ meaning here, Collins claims he is proposing that ‘discipleship functions at a level where power does not exist’ (p. 86), as he will argue regarding ministry in Paul that it operates in a ‘sphere … of powerless faith and knowledge’ (p. 120). In both cases, the positing of human relations without power seems to indicate a kind of vacuum, an inability to