



New Horizons

God's Gift of Deacons

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Daniel was in church one Sunday morning when government soldiers came in and arrested the whole congregation. They were imprisoned for the crime of worshiping God. It is dangerous for church members to be in prison in that country, but it is even more dangerous for church officers. Yet despite the potential danger, Daniel was ordained a deacon while in prison. He began his ministry of compassion to the needy while in jail. He was a precious gift of God to his persecuted church. Deacons for thousands of years have been God's precious gift to his church.

Do we understand how invaluable deacons are? Let's consider:

1. why deacons were given to the church,
2. their qualifications for office, and
3. what they are called to do.

Why Deacons Were Given to the Church

Appreciation for deacons grows when we remember when and why this office began. The infant church was off to a great start after Pentecost. Even though there were thousands of believers from the start, there was not a needy person among them because church members would sell what they had to meet others' needs (Acts 4:34). But before long, some needs were being overlooked because the church was experiencing phenomenal growing pains and was being stretched to a breaking point (Acts 6:1).

In those days, there were both Aramaic-speaking Jews and Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem, and they worshiped in their own synagogues. When people from both groups were converted and added to Christ's church, the language division led to some social separation. As a result, the needs of Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked. In the first century, a widow would usually be destitute if she had no family to support her. So the church urgently needed a better way to care for the needy.

Who would lead the way to meet these critical needs? God gave his church deacons to meet this need. Acts 6 relates how the office of deacon began—or at least describes the prototype of the office that soon developed. By the time Paul mentions "the overseers and deacons" in Philippi (Phil. 1:1), the office of deacon had been formally established. Elders (as overseers) and deacons held the two offices in the church.

God gave deacons to his church to help preserve the unity and love of the church. As C. Van Dam explains,

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2014

2013

2012

2011

2010

2009

2008

2007

2006

2005

2004

2003

2002

2001

2000

1999

Let us never forget this origin of the office of deacon. Deacons are those who protect the communal joy of the congregation, and who, therefore, see to it that the exercising of the communion of saints, with all that that implies, continues. Deacons are those who see to it that there are no forgotten or neglected people in the church of God, or that there be none who are so bound and oppressed that the joy of salvation and release from all bondage in Christ is no longer apparent. They make sure that everyone can fulfill his or her calling as parents or members of the church because they are not disadvantaged. It is therefore never just a matter of seeing to it that no one is without food, but it is a matter of seeing to it that the joy in the Spirit, as free children of God, be realized in the communion of saints. (*Ordained Servant*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 14)

The Qualifications for Deacons

Appreciation for deacons grows when we remember what is required to be ordained a deacon. In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul spells out the requirements for deacons. They are to have the same high measure of spiritual maturity as is required of elders (3:8). They must be worthy of respect and exemplary in speech (3:8). They are to be role models (3:8).

A deacon will be intimately involved in the lives of people, so he must control what he says. Calvin writes: "Paul admonishes deacons not to be double-tongued, for this is a fault that is hard to avoid in that kind of work, and yet which more than any other should be completely absent from it." The deacon is to have a good marriage and care well for his children. He knows how to manage and lead his home biblically (3:12). He is to be a man with a disciplined life (not addicted to much wine, 3:8). He finds his meaning and contentment in Christ, through the filling of the Holy Spirit, not in slavery to things of this world. There is nothing shady in his business practices or finances. He is free from the love of money (3:8).

A deacon is to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (3:9). He is sound in theology. Calvin paraphrases it, "being well instructed in the faith, so as not to be ignorant of anything which it is necessary for Christians to know." Even though the diaconate is not a teaching office in the church, our Lord does not want a man unskilled in Christian living or doctrine to hold office.

It takes more to be a deacon than for a man to be sensitive, caring, loving, and willing to serve. Praise God for these graces. But he must understand and believe biblical doctrine. Why would he need to know theology to care for the poor? Because all correct living comes out of correct thinking, based on true doctrine. How can he counsel correctly or pray with those who struggle unless he knows the truth, the hope of Scripture (Heb. 5:2-14)?

So a man is first to be tested, or evaluated, before he takes office (3:10). The church in Acts 6:3 was to look for "men of good repute"—that is, men known for their integrity, maturity, and godliness. They were to be men full of the Holy Spirit, his word filling their thinking and their living.

The church must be careful that only qualified men are given the office of deacon. If a man is not qualified spiritually to be an elder, he is not qualified spiritually to be a deacon. The diaconate is not the training ground for an immature man to be

1998

1997

1996

Favorites from the Past

an elder in the future, when he grows up spiritually. When considering who would make a good deacon, we should not first ask, "Is he practical? Can he fix anything? Is he good with numbers and financial counseling? Does he have a heart for the poor and needy? Is he a nice fellow, a likeable and friendly person? Does he have organizational skills? Has he done well in the business world? Is he willing to serve?" A man can have all these qualities and not be qualified to be a deacon. Above all, he must have spiritual maturity and godliness. Therefore, the diaconate is open to *all godly men*. Those in the diaconate will have many different gifts—mercy, encouragement, counseling, administration, or giving—but they must all have spiritual maturity.

If deacons only deliver flowers and fruit baskets to the sick, drop off sermon tapes, and write checks, these spiritual requirements do not have special importance. But if the deacon is going to meet people at their deep levels of need, if he is going to minister to people who hunger, thirst, and long for a friend, and who have needs of all kinds, he must have spiritual maturity. People look to him for the comfort of Scripture to point them to Christ. If the deacons are to be "encouraging members of the church to provide for those who are in want, seeking to prevent poverty, making discreet and cheerful distribution to the needy, praying with the distressed and reminding them of the consolations of Holy Scripture" (Directory for Worship, VI, C.2), then they must be men of godliness. That this holy office requires such a high spiritual qualification shows how important it is.

What Deacons Are Called to Do

Both offices of elder and deacon together model the whole ministry of Christ. As Christ on earth was "mighty in deed and word" (Luke 24:19), so now from heaven, Christ continues these two aspects of ministry through the two offices in the church. As Christ on earth went about teaching the kingdom, so Christ from heaven continues to teach and rule through the ministers and elders. And as Christ on earth went about doing good, healing, and showing mercy, so Christ from heaven continues through the diaconate to do good, carrying out deeds of mercy. Our Confession confirms this twofold ministry, when it directs the church to minister to both "the inward and the outward man"—to both soul and body (Confession of Faith, 26.1). The deacon's role complements the spiritual ministry in at least three important ways: it *frees* the church's teaching and preaching, it *validates* the church's teaching and preaching, and it *accompanies* the church's teaching and preaching.

First, the deacons' oversight of deeds of mercy *frees* the church's teaching and preaching. In Acts 6, the apostles and elders did not have the energy, time, resources, or strength for both a spiritual ministry and a mercy ministry. Not even the apostles were able to do it all. No one is. So deacons were appointed to free the apostles and elders for the task of teaching and preaching the Word. The church must have deacons to oversee practical needs, so elders are free to attend to the spiritual care of the flock.

Second, the deacons' oversight of deeds of mercy *validates* the church's teaching and preaching. After the ordination of the first deacons, the church grew greatly in numbers and health (Acts 6:7). The preaching of the Word by the apostles and elders was backed up by a reality of caring for one another's needs that the world could see. Diaconal ministry gives credibility to

the preached Word when people see practical expressions of love. Tim Keller tells of the hostile Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate, who once complained, "Let us consider that nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers ... the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well" (see *Ministries of Mercy*, pp. 87-88).

It was not because the care of widows was unimportant that it was given to deacons. It was because ministry of mercy was *so important* that a new office was created. In and of itself, it would have been good for the apostles to show Christ's love by serving tables and getting involved in the nitty-gritty of caring for widows. James, the Lord's brother, who was in the Jerusalem church at this time, would write some years later, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (Jas. 1:27). Do not think for a minute that the office of deacon is a lesser office. As George C. Fuller puts it, "To denigrate the high office of deacon is practical heresy" ("The High Calling of Deacon," in *Resources for Deacons*, by Timothy J. Keller, p. 11).

A visiting nurse was meeting with a deacon and me to discuss the care of Eleanor, one of our elderly church members. She has no family nearby and lives alone. So the deacons shop for her groceries, take her to doctors' appointments, and drive her to the bank. As Eleanor was telling the nurse all that the deacons were doing, she said, "I don't know what I would do without my church." The nurse was taken aback. "Your church does all that for you?" The name of Christ's church was validated by these diaconal deeds of mercy.

Finally, the deacons' oversight of deeds of mercy *accompanies* the church's teaching and preaching. Jesus not only taught the people, but also ministered to physical needs. Remember how he fed the multitude and they wanted to make him a king? They reacted that way because he was caring for their physical needs. But Jesus refused to become their king in that sense. His primary mission was not to feed sinners, but to die for them, so that they might be made sons of God.

Diaconal deeds of mercy are never to eclipse or substitute for the ministry of the Word. The hearing of the Word is always paramount, always the goal. We do not focus on deeds of mercy for their own sake. The gospel of Christ must always accompany diaconal ministry. It is always to be done in Christ's name, for God's glory (Col. 3:17; Matt. 5:16; Acts 3:10). Material assistance should only be given in the context of hearing the Word. So our OPC clinic in Uganda gives medical care to thousands each week, but people are first required to hear the gospel as a condition for treatment. The deacons in our church give groceries to the poor, but only to those who have attended a worship service and afterwards received a Bible. The Committee on Diaconal Ministries tries to distribute aid in the context of the ministry of the Word. We want the love of Christ to be seen in action, and at the same time we want to be sure that diaconal care doesn't eclipse the presentation of the gospel. Diaconal ministry is to accompany, but not eclipse, the ministry of the Word.

Deacons have always been God's precious gift to his church. We praise God for the office of deacon. We pray that God would raise up more deacons, that our sons would have this high calling. When we see these spiritual qualities in men, we should

urge them to consider serving as deacons.

Frederick Herzog explains the importance of the diaconate in this way:

When during World War II the Netherlands were occupied by Germans the deacons of the Dutch Reformed Church assumed the care for the politically persecuted, supplying food and providing secret refuge. Realizing what was happening, the Germans decreed that the elective office of deacon should be eliminated. The Reformed Synod on 17 July 1941 resolved:
"Whoever touches the diaconate interferes with what Christ has ordained as the task of the church.... Whoever lays hands on diakonia lays hands on worship!" (quoted by Fuller, "The High Calling of Deacon," p. 11)

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