

## **THE ROLE OF DEACON**

**BY JOHN R. SITTEMA**

What is a deacon? To be honest, definitions vary from denomination to denomination, and even from local church to local church. To some, the deacon is a financial officer, an accountant, answerable to the "Board of Directors" of the corporation. For others, deacons are social workers, addressing issues of justice, equity, poverty, and wealth, both inside and outside the church. For still others, deacons are merely "elders' assistants," whose job description is infinitely flexible, depending on the whims of the elders they happens to work with. One teacher I studied with called deacons 'gofers' for the eldership-- and he wasn't kidding!

At Christ Church, we talk a lot about *shepherding* God's flock. May the office of deacon be classified as shepherding? Well, let's remember that the care of the sheep involves several different aspects. First, the voice of the shepherd sounds to lead the flock. Then, his diligence and watching requires him to use his staff to keep the flock together and to defend it from predators. Finally, the whole purpose for the leading and protecting becomes clear: shearing time! The sheep give up their wool to be used in a variety of wonderful and useful ways. (No jokes about 'fleecing the flock', please!)

None, I trust, would have trouble relating the analogy to the work of the office of preacher or that of elder. Clearly, the teaching elder must serve as a pastor by enabling the sheep to hear, through his words, the voice of the Shepherd. Only then can the flock follow Him, instead of wandering about, lured by every tempting sound they hear. Likewise it is rather easy to understand the elders' role. They diligently watch the flock, seeking to maintain the unity of faith and to provide protection against the "savage wolves" mentioned in Acts 20.

But how about the deacon? The task of a shepherd does not stop with merely securing the survival of the sheep. Rather, that immediate responsibility is always seen against the backdrop of the greater purpose: the production of wool. Unless the flock is led, kept together and protected, there will be no shearing, there will be no wool. But unless there is wool, the purpose of the flock is confused, and its protection and survival is unnecessary.

This is where the work of the deacons comes in, right at the heart of the issue, where the rubber meets the road. Their pastoral (shepherding) work is to receive the wool, to process it, and to put the woven products to appropriate use.

### **The Fig Tree as Pattern**

Jesus doesn't specifically extend the analogy of shepherds to the details of the work of deacons, as I've done here. Nor does any other NT writer. But that doesn't make the point any less valid. On the one hand, precious little appears in the Bible that gives specific instructions about what deacons are to do. On the other, the inference I'm drawing is not new, nor is it radically different than the church has practiced the office in generations past. It may seem new today because the influence of the world of business and commerce has so powerfully shaped the church of today in the Western world. Yet the point I'm making is consistent with the Lord's teaching, noted as well by other writers on this subject. Berghoef and De Koster, for example, in their excellent volume **The Deacons Handbook** (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press), refer to Matthew 21:18:

"In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only.'

Their observation?

Trees bear leaves for themselves.

Trees bear fruit for others.

Diakonia (the work of deacons) hangs upon these two correlative truths: leaves for self, fruit for others!

A congregation well furnished with plant, facilities, and staff is the richly leafed tree. How well that congregation, through its diaconate, cares for its own needy and for the poor within its reach is one key measure of the fruit which this tree bears...

But the Body which neglects fruit-bearing is judged: `Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me' (Mt 25:41-43). And this is precisely the fate of the fruitless fig tree: `And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come upon you again."(Mt 21:19)'"

### **Of Figs and Wool...and Stewards**

I trust you see the point. As fig trees must produce figs to be a productive tree, so sheep must produce wool to fulfill their purpose. A flock that is merely preserved, protected, and fed, but one that is never shorn to gather the wool, is a parasite on the land, useless and worse than unproductive.

But now let's add another Scriptural analogy. Throughout Scripture, we meet the **steward**, a servant assigned to care for some part of a master's estate. The idea (if not the word) first appears in Genesis 1:26f, when man, male and female, are assigned to exercise dominion over the King's created world and in His service. When Jesus came, he frequently taught parables emphasizing stewardship. The parables of the talents (Mt 25:14f) and of the pounds (Lk 19:11f) show that the steward will be required to account for what he has done with the Master's possessions placed under his stewardship.

None among us would deny that God has richly blessed His church today in North America with gifts, talents, resources (or, if you prefer the earlier analogies of the fig tree or shearing time, leaves and wool). We have material resources beyond measure-- buildings, money, trained workers, access to media, etc., and we have spiritual gifts. Scripture is clear on that. Take a look at passages like I Cor 12 and Romans 12.

But a tree that produces no leaves is like a sheep that produces no wool is like a gifted church that does not produce living service to God and others. The whole point and purpose of God's equipping gifts is that we must use them sacrificially in His service. Such is Jesus' definition of discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mk 8:34-36)

Exactly here is where the work of the diaconate fits. God's people must be reminded by His Word to believe, challenged by His Word to produce the fruit of faith. But how and where are they to apply those gifts wisely and appropriately? The deacons must tell them! Consider this definition of the office: deacons are God's appointed managers of congregational stewardship. I can think of no better definition of the office.

This implies several things. First, deacons must remind God's people that they have been blessed *so that* they can give faithfully and generously. Deacons must present a constant Biblical challenge to that fact, reminding the believers that giving generously is merely the "sowing of Kingdom seed" (II Cor 9:6f). In this respect, the office of deacon is a kind of ministry of the Word. Second, they must instruct believers in the various ways their time, talents, and treasures may be used. This may mean research into charities to verify faithful use of donated monies. It may mean identifying local ministries in which volunteers can apply their abilities. It also means analyzing the membership (perhaps through interview?) to determine unused gifts, talents, or abilities that lay dormant. *No body in the church is or ought to be better equipped to appoint committees, task forces, or work groups to meet specific needs in the church and the community than the managers of all these resources, the deacons.*

Remember the point: feed and tend the sheep for the use of the wool. Water and nurture the tree for the fruit. So too, care for the flock of God, so that the sacrificial fruits of all may be employed in the loving service of God and neighbor.

## **Deacons As Managers of Congregational Mercy**

Let's first consider the ministry of mercy. If I were to take a poll, I'm sure that many of you would define the major responsibility of deacons as "the ministry of mercy". Such has been the understanding of the office in most Reformed church bodies throughout my lifetime.

### **Who Is To Show Mercy?**

The idea of "ministers of mercy" has a couple of Scriptural points of origin: Jesus' words about giving the "cup of cold water in my name" (Mt 10:42), the apostolic instruction to "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal 6:9-10), and the Acts 6 pattern of appointing "deacons" to care for the daily distribution of bread so that the Twelve could tend to the Word of God and prayer. All of these grounds are valid and important; each commissions and challenges the church to mercy and compassion.

But before going any further I want to say loudly and clearly that *showing mercy is not just the duty of deacons, it is the calling of every believer.*

Remember the Beatitudes in Matthew 5? Jesus called His disciples to Himself and told them "Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy". The call to be merciful because the Father is merciful is reemphasized throughout the New Testament. Consider Mt 9:13: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Or James 3:17: "The wisdom that comes from heaven is...full of mercy and good fruit." Or Jude 22-23: "Be merciful to those who doubt...to others show mercy, mixed with fear...."

Each of these passages is clear in assigning the "ministry of mercy" *to all disciples, all to whom mercy has been shown.* (That is transparent; careful study of any concordance will establish the link between the call to show mercy with that mercy already shown all believers by the Father). *All disciples* of Christ are to be merciful in spirit; *all* who have been forgiven are to forgive; *all* who have been given much are to be generous; *all* who have tested the Father's patience are to be patient with those who test ours. Mercy is to be the heart-tone of the converted life.

### **Deacons As Professional Ministers Of Mercy?**

So why are deacons generally understood to be professional ministers of mercy?

To be honest, it is my conviction that just as evangelism committees can actually hinder evangelism in the local church by allowing church members to drift into a complacent laziness ("we have a committee to do that"), so the presence of deacons has gradually lulled the church into thinking that showing mercy is best done by the experts, "those appointed to do so". (And besides, it makes life easier for each of us if we don't have to make those awkward calls personally.)

My point? Sure, deacons are to *show* mercy, but only by virtue of their role as believers, not because they are deacons. Instead, as deacons, their special role is to be... **managers** of mercy. For one thing, the "responsibility" handed over to the deacons in Acts 6:3 is not just the "meals on wheels program" of the early church, but the *management* of that program in which every believer participated (see Acts 2:45). Additional support for this conclusion is the official requirement set forth in I Tim 3:12: a deacon "must *manage* his children and his household well". That requirement, echoing 3:5, links managing the family with "managing" God's family, the church.

### **Specifically...**

What's the point?

The answer, I think, lies in that ancient saying about the difference between "giving someone a fish" and "teaching him how to fish". In the first, you meet a need; in the second, you help to alleviate needs perpetually. In the first, you do the work of ministry; in the second, you equip many others to minister in God's household. Consider (and discuss) these implications:

1. Deacons must themselves, as believers, present money or food and clothing in the name of the Lord to a needy person or family from time to time. (Notice the phrase "in the name of the Lord". That prohibits the "easy way out"--contributing to some humanistically oriented community food bank. Nothing there is done "in the Lord's Name").
2. More importantly, deacons must challenge and encourage the entire congregation to show mercy to those who have special need. Perhaps that could be done by calling for "grocery showers" for families struggling with unemployment. Or a "resume service" circulating information about both needs and opportunities for employment among Bible-believing churches in your community. How about a "work day" for church members held at the home of someone unable to do routine maintenance because of poverty or illness? Deacons should be involved in all the above, but should serve as coordinators or managers, not merely to provide 'sweat equity'. It is the believing community that is to supply the loving resources and willing spirit. Result? A multiplication of available people and resources, resulting in much better "coverage" of needs both within and outside of the congregation. (For more ideas, read the 25 year old book **Unleashing the Church**, by Frank Tillepaugh, and the new and powerful **The Church of Irresistible Influence**, by Robert Lewis).
3. Deacons ought to 'network' both resources and communication of needs. Many churches have "prayer chains"; use them as channels of communication. Other diaconates work through carefully defined small groups ("districts") in which each deacon is responsible to coordinate the resources of a small group of individuals and families to meet the needs of others within the group. When needs exceed resources, the deacon can share the needs with deacons of other groups, or, if need be, with those of other churches.

## **Deacons As Managers of Congregational Finances**

Jesus spends much of his time as a teacher dealing with issues pertaining to wealth, finances, and money. What he says about it usually is enough to scare the casual Bible reader to another part of the Bible, somewhere “more safe.” For example, remember Mt 19:23: “it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” And just when you conclude that he couldn’t possibly literally mean what he said, he piles it on: Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

But the Bible teaches us much more about money. I Tim 6:9-10 warns us against *wanting to get rich*, teaching us of the dangers such desires lead to. Later in the same chapter, Paul tells Timothy to “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth...Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.” (v 17-18)

The glorious truth of the Kingdom of God is that so many believers who have more than they need (the Biblical definition of “rich” – with such a definition, by the way, virtually every one of my readers is wildly wealthy, possessing much more than he or she needs for life’s necessities) do in fact give of their wealth to share with others. Such was evident in the book of Acts, when early believers were noteworthy for their loving sharing with others (see 2:45 and 4:36-37). Such a spirit and such a practice is still evident today among many. And because it is, the church must manage financial resources.

Sometimes financial management is simple: receiving gifts and passing them along to other ministries. This function is what many (simplistically) believe the deacons in Acts 6 were to do, although in other places I have written that their work (“waiting tables” – Gk.:“trapeza”) involved much more than that. Such simple transfer is the basic function of the “offering” in most churches today. Deacons receive requests for offerings, pass the requests along to the believing community, receive their gifts, and disburse same.

But in today’s world, where deacons receive many times more requests than a church can possibly honor, and where many requests are spurious and manipulative, if not downright deceitful, the “financial management” of the deacons involves more than just simple collecting and distributing. It most certainly involves a careful and thorough analysis and assessment of requesting ministries, a close look at mission statements and a comparison of them with the local church’s own confessional identity, scrutiny of budgets and plans for the future, and all of this with a view to determining whether ministries are faithful and responsible in stewardship. God expects no less. The shameful and well-publicized demise of popular ministries in the 1980s helped contribute to a sense of moral outrage, and helped create such watchdog organizations like the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA). Such organizations monitor ministries, hold them accountable to agreed upon standards of integrity and faithfulness, and provide great resources to deacons who are serious about doing their work.

Much of this kind of assessment is done for deacons if they happen to serve in a church that belongs to a denomination, which itself scrutinizes its own denominational missions and other ministries. I say “much of this kind of assessment is done,” but not all of it! Local deacons may not plead ignorance if God’s people are contributing to an unfaithful and irresponsible ministry simply because it happens to be a denominational project! The deacons are still mandated to be stewards of the finances of the house of God!

Deacons have duties on the *originating* side of financial management as well. Not only do they receive, scrutinize, and distribute, but deacons must be part of the ministry team that challenges God’s people to

give in accordance with their blessings. No, deacons do not do this alone. Preachers must regularly preach of the principles of Scripture regarding giving. For example, the challenge of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians (II Cor 9) is required preaching material on a regular basis. Yet, deacons must take such passages (e.g. 9:6-15, and the I Tim 6 passage cited earlier) into the homes of hesitant believers, holding them accountable to the King's claim on their wealth, challenging them to contribute generously, and rebuking them if they do not do so willingly and lovingly. If stubbornness in giving persists, the deacons must enlist the involvement of the elders to press the call of Scripture with more urgency.

## **Deacons As Managers of Congregational Talents**

In the first part of this paper I defined deacons as managers (stewards) of all congregational resources, based on Scriptural teaching in Acts 6, I Tim 3, and the New Testament principle of fruit-bearing. In the second part, we looked at the first dimension of this, the (traditional) understanding of deacons as managers of congregational mercy. We saw that showing mercy is the duty of every believer, not just deacons. The work of deacons in the ministry of mercy is to be coordination and management, involving the stewardly use of congregational gifts and love, but never usurping the members' role in that work of love. In the third part, just concluded, I argued that deacons must also manage congregational finances. Again, this fits in with a more traditional view of the role and work of deacons in the Lord's church.

In this part, I will argue that just as God gives to His people far more than money and material possessions (which enable us to show mercy to those with little or nothing), so deacons are to handle and distribute--to "manage"--much more than tangible things in the service of the Lord.

### **What Has God Given?**

Some years ago, while visiting with a delegate to a church general assembly meeting, he said something that struck me. "We have 16 elders in our church, but only 3 deacons. We don't need more, because we don't have much poverty in our area."

The comment drove home to me the narrow definition of the office of deacon widespread today. The reasoning runs something like this: "Deacons administer the finances of the church, and, when needed, distribute monies to the poor." Now, in fact, if that is Biblical reasoning, the gentleman is right, and few churches in North America need more than 3 (unless you don't trust those two and figure you need backups).

But first answer the Biblical question: what kinds of gifts has God given to the church? What are the resources of which the deacons are to be responsible stewards? What is the fruit of faith (the wool of the flock) that must be wisely utilized in the service of Christ?

If the only gifts of God we can identify in the church are wrapped in dollar bills, we misread Scripture. Look at the list that God Himself identifies in Rom 12:3ff: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, showing mercy. Add to this list the many other Divine endowments the Bible talks about in places like I Cor 12 and you get a fuller picture. God assembles people in His church and kingdom who can and must serve Him in many different ways with the many gifts He has given them. And I believe it is one of the most important tasks of the deacons to identify and properly use all those gifts.

### **To Whom Has He Given Gifts?**

Some recoil at the arguments of the preceding paragraph, suggesting that if deacons involve themselves in helping people identify and use their gifts, it will inevitably stimulate the latent tendency in all of us to be proud, self-promoting, selfish.

That's always a danger, but is not necessarily the case. Look at I Cor 12:7: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good*." Notice that last phrase: "...for the common good." It makes clear that God's gifts are given to and for the church, not to and for the individual. The whole point is that all of us together, under our Head, are endowed and equipped to live as a functioning whole. And not only is the functioning of each part 'for the common good', but the 'opening of each gift' comes with a warning: 'do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment' (Ro 12:3).

And that's where the deacons come in. God has entrusted to them the precious and exciting task of discovering and utilizing the talents and abilities of the "eyes", the "feet", the "fingers" and the "legs" of the church--all toward the common goal of advancing the cause of the Lord. In the church I serve, we call such diaconal work 'deployment'. We get the term from the military: as the church is the mighty army of the Lord, the deacons are those officers (Captains? Sergeants?) who 'deploy' the troops for the engagement with the enemy and in pursuit of the objective set by the Commander-in-Chief.

Such seems also to be the thrust of Acts 6. The Apostles appointed seven men to serve among the flock so that they themselves could maintain their priority focus on the Word and prayer. Did the seven only distribute food to neglected widows? I doubt it. Did they only administer financial aid? During times of extreme poverty, such may well have been a high priority, but it was most certainly not the only thing done. The Greek-sounding names that appear in v. 5 are striking, appearing as they do against the background of the apparent Hebrew bias reported in v. 1. Clearly, the new deacons' role was to blend and to use the gifts of diverse peoples for a common cause. And in such a prosperous time as ours, with so many people trained, educated, and talented, it is an important work to identify, assign, and utilize the wide diversity of God-given gifts for the well-being of the church.

### **Practically Speaking:**

How do you begin? Some churches use "*spiritual gift inventories*", in which each member of the church is asked to identify areas of interest and ability. Such inventories require rather comprehensive and constant review, so as to avoid the danger of *inventory-itis* (the ailment that afflicts groups that inventory everything but never use the knowledge for any identifiable purpose). But, if you have access to a computer, a data base of such gifts is an invaluable tool to match needs with willing servants.

Other churches make aggressive use of "*Discover Your Gifts*" seminars or classes. Some require attendance at such a seminar as a prerequisite for membership. While they can be fruitful, they can also be a bit intimidating, especially with the more shy personalities that often wither with lack of use in the body of Christ.

There are other approaches. You might begin with those people in the life of the church who aren't very active. Perhaps they are shy and unassuming; perhaps they have never been assimilated into the body of believers and so think of themselves as "outsiders"; maybe they are members who never learned that membership in Christ means disciplined and stewardly discipleship. As deacons, interview each one of them (either as individuals, as couples, or in the family setting). Ask them to tell you what they are good at, what they are interested in. Ask the spouse to tell you about his/her mate's gifts. Find out what they

did in previous church homes (if any). Then find a way to use their talents, even if only at first in some small way. Such work is much more than just 'make work'; in the long term, you will be teaching by example the essential Biblical principle that those ingrafted into Christ are expected to produce fruit!

### **For Example...**

- One person's only "talent" was a love for books. To put it bluntly, she was a bookworm. Many thought she was a bit eccentric. But what a ministry she had when her deacons asked her to manage and develop a book table that would put into the hands of God's people solid, Biblical reading material at affordable prices! She employed her ability and used it in service for the well-being of the congregation. That's what I Cor 12 means when it says "for the common good."
- How about the mechanic who was used by his deacons to fix the cars of several unemployed folk and single moms both in the church and some whom the church was evangelizing. What a powerful use of his talents and of his witness 'for the common good.'
- Or the artist who found opportunity to serve by illustrating some booklets his local church produced for various educational and evangelistic purposes. His involvement enhanced those ministries significantly. Or his wife, whose computer skills were used to assist the production and improvement of employment resumes for the unemployed.
- You get the point. The gifts of God are not limited to financial or material resources. They involve many kinds of abilities, talents, skills. Because that is so, and in light of the important Biblical truth that all such gifts are given for the common good, the deacons must become effective stewards for the body of Christ, fitting multiple abilities to multiple needs, never losing sight of the goal of the high calling of Christ.