

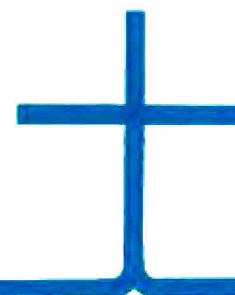


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**THE ROLE OF DEACONS
in
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES**

by Dr. Michael P. Halcomb

Revised and published by the
SPIRITUAL RESOURCES COMMISSION
of the
Congregational Christian Churches
National Association



The Role Of Deacons In Congregational Churches

By Dr. Michael P. Halcomb

**Edited and Abridged by the
Spiritual Resources Commission**

**National Association of
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*To my loving family,
Bonnie, Jonathan, Joel and Jeremy*

Preface

Churches with a Congregational form of government value their autonomy very highly. There is much to appreciate in this rich heritage, especially in terms of our freedom under Christ. Every type of Church government, however, has its strengths and weaknesses. One weakness in the free church tradition appears to be our reluctance to describe specifically the practices and responsibilities for lay leaders in the church.

This booklet is concerned with the role of deacons in the Congregational churches. It is not meant to absolutize the responsibilities; we must always be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the worship, witness and work of our churches. There are, however, scriptural guidelines and helpful precedents in our Congregational tradition which will keep us from “reinventing the wheel.”

Little has been written on the role of deacons in our churches. My purpose, simply, is to review scriptural teaching and the historical function of deacons in the Congregational tradition. The following pages will have served their purpose if they encourage lay leaders to prayerfully consider their calling. My hope is that they will stimulate meaningful dialogue between pastors and deacons, and that others will be stimulated to rethink the role of deacon more creatively than would otherwise be likely. In that spirit, this effort is offered to the people of our churches. If nothing else, perhaps it will serve as a practical aid in

reducing some of the apprehension that men and women feel when they are asked, "Would you be willing to serve?"

A debt of gratitude is owed to my wife Bonnie and my three sons, Jonathan, Joel and Jeremy, who have faithfully supported me in ministry. Thanks also must be expressed to colleagues in the ministry, such as Ralph DeBiasio-Snyder and Patti Dando-Thompson, for their suggestions in preparing the manuscript for publication. The Spiritual Resources Commission has been most kind and helpful in promoting the use of this work in Congregational churches.

Scripture citations are taken from the New International Version of the Holy Bible.

Michael P. Halcomb
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

CHAPTER I:

RECOVERING A RICH HERITAGE

When the Pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock, their leader was Elder William Brewster. He was the spiritual leader of that devout band of Christians, although he was not an ordained minister. At that time, the title of Elder was synonymous with the office which we now give the title "deacon."

The Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson, had not come with them to the New World. Some deacons have come to know such heavy responsibility when their church has been left without a pastor. At such times of transition, our understanding of the church leads Congregationalists to look for leadership within rather than without. Our free church tradition has made the choice of removing itself from any ecclesiastical authority. No bishop or council will lead the local church, assign a new pastor or oversee the ministry until that new pastor arrives. Congregationalists have placed responsible laity at the center of ministry.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Mention the "church" and some think of a building. Others define the church by a creed. Creeds are fine if they help us understand our faith, but we must never rest too long in their shade. Buildings are fine, too, but they are only meetinghouses where Christ's people meet. We see the church as people, a unique people. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church,

and the church is Christ's people, working together to build Christ's Kingdom.

If our calling is to be a people committed solely to Christ, each member has much importance and responsibility to love Christ and to serve him. We are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only; so then we must be studying the Scriptures, praying, worshipping, giving and serving. Only when the laity is so involved can Christ's church be alive and well.

A THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY

A basic tenet of the Congregational churches has been that all the people are ministers. There is solid Biblical basis for this; three truths become very evident when we read our New Testament.

1. *All ministry centers in Jesus Christ.* In Acts 8:4 we note that not just apostles, but other believers as well preached the gospel of Christ as they scattered throughout the world. They also taught, fed the poor, healed the sick and performed many other tasks. Everything was done for Christ and in the power of his Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8-12; Acts 8:35). There was no vagueness of purpose in the early church, nor should there be today. All ministry centers in Jesus Christ.

2. *The New Testament shows the entire Christian community as active participants in ministry.* There was no professional clergy, as such, in the early days of the church. The apostle, Peter, made clear in 1 Peter 2:19, that all Christians have the access to

God and power from God for ministry that the Old Testament priest claimed.

As you come to him, the living Stone –rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

This idea of the priesthood of all believers was a strong influence in shaping our Congregational concept of the church. The ideal church does not consist of the ordained clergy and the active few doing the work of ministry for the passive many. All are called to serve in the church of Christ.

3. *Thirdly, our New Testament makes it clear that Christ's Spirit has given every Christian certain gifts to make possible this ministry of the whole church.* This position of priest which each Christian enjoys has both privileges and responsibilities. We are privileged to be a part of God's people; we are responsible to do God's purpose.

In 1 Corinthians 12 and also in Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul tells us that in order to carry out our responsibilities we need to (a) discover what our gifts are and how they can be used in ministry; (b) design a

plan for using our individual gifts in ministry; and (c) determine how our many individual gifts can best be unified for the common good of the body of Christ. Paul makes clear that every Christian has some gift which can be used in ministry, and that our spiritual gifts are given to us by God not for our own pleasure or enjoyment, but for the common good of Christ's church.

In all candor, we may seldom function at the level of Paul's ideal, but that does not mean we should surrender the ideal. History has shown that the church of Jesus Christ is always renewing itself. In our own time, there has been renewed interest in lay ministries. Congregationalists, especially, have a rich heritage of lay involvement that is worth recovering.

WHAT IS A DEACON?

The word "deacon" means servant, or one who serves. Every church needs those willing to stand on the front line as spiritual leaders. As they serve in the ministry of the church, they model for others the necessity and the dignity of laity in ministry. These Christian leaders called deacons must be willing to demonstrate that Christianity is not a vocation separate from the rest of life; they must model the truth that Christian faith is not an outer coat that we put into the closet when we come home from worship. The church in every age, especially the present one, needs Christians willing to come out of the closet! The church needs teachers, social workers, parents, politicians, entrepreneurs, and artisans who have

captured a vision of their Christian citizenship and put it to work in their vocations. If this is to be so, it must begin with the deacons, who are the spiritual lay leaders of the local church.

In addition to modeling the Christian faith at work, deacons have a vital responsibility to enlist, encourage and equip others like themselves to be the church in mission. Such was the case with the Separatists in England out of which came Elder Brewster and the Pilgrims.

The church is always just one generation from extinction or from stagnation. Vibrant lay leaders are the means by which renewal comes to the church. History shows that this is so. In the Olympics, the torch is the symbol of passing on an honored tradition from one Olympiad to another. In like manner, the concept of the priesthood of believers must be relayed from generation to generation. If the church's minister is compelled, or even willing, to do all of the work of the ministry for the people, slowly but surely the dignity of the laity will decline.

If a spirit of teamwork is promoted, however, pastor and people alike will know that they are each indispensable to the effective ministry of the church. That is when the doctrine of the priesthood of believers will be caught as well as taught in the church.

CHAPTER II:

WORTHY OF THE CALLING

One problem sometimes encountered by a nominating committee is that as it asks qualified members to serve as deacons, some persons will respond by saying, "Oh, I'm not good enough to serve as a deacon!" The nominating committee then has the task of showing the individual that much specific study, prayer and thought has gone into the decision to nominate. Scriptures such as Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 tell us quite clearly what characteristics are desirable in a deacon and these following qualities should be carefully and prayerfully considered by the committee and the candidates:

1. *Is this a person of integrity?* This is the first question the Apostle Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 3:8 as being desirable in a deacon. A good test in this regard might be to ask how the community at large looks upon this individual. Is he or she a person of credibility, worthy of respect in the church and community?

A person does not have to be wealthy or socially acclaimed to be worthy of respect. Indeed, the little epistle of James warns against giving higher honor to material and social achievements. In the church of Christ, our highest respect must be reserved for spiritual integrity, which we recognize in two very ordinary ways:

a. *Spiritual integrity will show itself in our speech.* In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul counsels the young Timothy to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity." Speech is a mirror of any man or woman's inner thoughts and motives. Deacons need to possess the spiritual integrity to recognize when a conversation is becoming petty and personal. They should be mature enough as Christians to find something positive about the people and the circumstances around them. By necessity, deacons should be "people persons." They should be pleasant and personable in conversation showing genuine interest in and concern for others.

b. *Spiritual integrity should also show itself in actions.* Again in 1 Timothy 4:12, we are told that a spiritual leader is one who sets a worthy example. When choosing a deacon, a church should ask the question, "Is this person the kind of individual that we would like every member to emulate in terms of business ethics, social relationships and family life?"

2. *Is this person giving evidence of spiritual growth?* Stephen was the first deacon to become widely known in the church in Jerusalem. In the New Testament, beginning with Acts 6, it is interesting to note that each time his name is mentioned, some mention immediately follows regarding his spiritual maturity. Stephen was recognized as a "man of faith and of the Holy Spirit"(6:5). He was known as a person "full of grace and power"(6:8). His function was rather mundane, as he helped distribute aid to the widows of the church. It would have been easy for the church to

have said, "Anyone can do this simple job." But the people of the church recognized that Stephen's influence would extend far beyond the mere doing of that simple task. This is true of deacons today as well. How imperative it is, then, that our deacons follow Stephen's example and give evidence of spiritual growth.

How can we recognize a person who is growing spiritually? We should certainly shun the person who displays a pretentious kind of piety. That repels more than it attracts. True spirituality is not a manner of acting. It is not just a somber set of facial expressions. Spiritual growth and maturity are shown in a genuine personal relationship with the living Christ, and this relationship influences every part of one's life.

There are two vital conditions for spiritual growth. The first is a weekly commitment to seek a regular and meaningful worship experience. We cannot grow without regularly renewing our vision of God and his purposes for his people. The second condition is regular and meaningful study of the scriptures. It is important that this be a shared study, and that together with others we grapple with the relevancy of our faith to daily living.

There is one further matter that needs to be dealt with as we speak of spiritual growth. The person who is growing spiritually should be able to talk about what God is doing in his or her life, and be able to speak with ease about Christ. We are told in 1 Peter 3:15, that we should "always be prepared to give an

answer to every one who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." There are times when people will ask us, directly or indirectly, to share our faith. More often, there are circumstances that will beg to be addressed with a word of faith and witness. If a willingness to speak out regarding faith in Christ is to mark the life of every Christian, how much more imperative it is that a deacon be able to do so. Forthrightness is a hallmark of a true spiritual leader.

3. *Is this person a good steward of life?* Stewardship goes far beyond money matters. Everything that we enjoy in life is a gift from God. He only asks that we be responsible, that we be good stewards of all that he has given us. Stewardship might be defined as "total life management under the Lordship of Jesus Christ." In 1 Timothy 3:8, Paul mentions several areas which need to be brought under this Lordship:

a. *A deacon should be temperate in living.* How do we spend our time? What leisure activities do we allow ourselves? What kind of entertainment do we indulge in? All of these are questions of temperance. The Christian leader should be free of any excesses that would injure others, impede one's own spiritual progress, or make one's witness for Christ ineffective.

b. *A deacon should be responsible in handling money.* The New International Version warns against "pursuing dishonest gain." There have been Christians who have tried to suggest that money or material possessions are evil in themselves. This is not the teaching of the Bible. The great power of money and

possessions, however, may bring out the best or the worst in an individual. What Paul is saying here is that any person who is obsessed with acquiring material wealth will not be a good spiritual leader in the church of Jesus Christ. If God is truly first in our lives, then our first priority will be to support the work of his Kingdom, not out of compulsion, but graciously (2 Corinthians 9:7).

c. *A deacon should be responsible in relationships.* The basic relationship in our society is the family relationship, and that is exactly where Paul centers his attention in 1 Timothy 3:12. If a person is struggling with primary relationships, such as a marriage relationship, or relating to one's own children, it is very likely that relational problems will follow that person into the church.

MUST WOMEN SERVE SEPARATELY?

There are some who insist that women have no place in positions of church leadership. Scripture counters the very idea. Several times, Paul speaks glowingly of how women stood alongside him in ministry. He sends his greeting to women just as often as to men. There are indications that these men and women who received Paul's greetings were equally involved in vital functions of ministry. The church at Philippi was begun by two women; Lydia, a business-woman of note (Acts 16:14), and a converted slave girl (Acts 16:16). No other church shared as closely in Paul's ministry as did this church at Philippi.

Although much of Paul's language reflects the male dominance of that first century culture, the apostle is not in bondage to the belief that women must always play a subservient role to men. In Romans 16:1, Paul gives high commendation to Phoebe. Phoebe was a woman. There is no question about it. And she carried the title of diakonos, indicating she was a deacon in the church at Cenchrea. Paul instructs the church at Rome to "receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints." Unfortunately, translators over the years have had great difficulty accepting Phoebe in the way that Paul suggests. A quick check of numerous translations will show that many translators have pretended that diakonos is feminine and have rendered it "deaconess." At other times they have become very literal and translated the term as "servant." This is fine, since that is exactly what the word means. The prejudice of the translator is in the fact that when the same word refers to a male, the translator most often chooses to render it as "deacon."

What needs emphasis is that the decision regarding a person's qualifications to serve as a deacon should not be contingent upon gender. The gifts which God's Holy Spirit has given to the individual are the important considerations. If the Spirit has blessed any person, male or female, with gifts in ministry, then those gifts should be put to use in the church. To not do so is an act of poor stewardship. In Christ there is to be no "male or female" (Galatians 3:28).

CONCLUSION

Having talked about the various qualifications for being a deacon, the reader may ask, "Who could possibly be qualified?"

Most often, those who are actually qualified will not, in humility, always recognize it. Those who flippantly assert themselves as worthy candidates for the office should beware. As in all Christian life, the serving role of deacon is one that involves growth. A church should never lower the scriptural qualifications for a deacon-to-be; yet the church should have the foresight to see the inner qualities that are present, even if they are sometimes obscured by uncertainty or weaknesses. The office can call out the best in a man or woman. Under the guidance of God's Spirit, the deacon can grow in grace and in God's wisdom. Over a period of time, weaknesses can be replaced by commitment and the confidence that God will use the individual who is committed to doing his will.

CHAPTER III:

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PASTOR

Laity and clergy have an interdependent relationship. The pastor's purpose is to help the people succeed in their Christian life and in the mission to which Christ has called them as a church. But the pastor cannot succeed without the support and encouragement of the people.

Those in positions of lay leadership are most influential in shaping attitudes towards the pastor. There are always a few in any church who feel for some reason that their job is to be watchdogs; they watch the pastor suspiciously, fearful that something might be done to injure "our church." They quickly become the pastor's adversaries, the loyal opposition. Their assumption is that the pastor is not a real part of "their church." The predominant attitudes that these adversaries spawn are suspicion, distrust and uncooperation. Little can ever be accomplished in a church if these attitudes are very widespread.

Most pastors welcome honest questions about their approach to ministry, and are eager to be accountable in every respect. But pastors are also human, and if confronted with suspicion and distrust, like most people, they may become a trifle defensive. Like anyone else, a pastor needs advocates rather than adversaries in order to succeed in the mission of the church. Such an advocacy relationship is well-

placed with the board of deacons, for the attitudes modeled by the diaconate will become widespread within the church.

MUTUAL SUPPORT

Several considerations can help shape healthy cooperation. First of all, the pastor is a member of the church, just as anyone else is a member. No member would be expected to serve without support and encouragement and neither should the pastor.

The advantages of mutual support in ministry are numerous. All of us are more productive when our working environment is pleasant and affirming. Moreover, a church where people are appreciated and encouraged will attract newcomers. Also, even the most difficult of problems is more easily solved by a cooperative group than by a single individual.

In this last regard, pastors who know that their strengths are appreciated will be much more candid about acknowledging their weaknesses. In some churches deacons have established within their board a pastoral support committee, to utilize as many strengths of both pastor and lay leaders as possible. At the same time the support committee can attempt to identify weaker areas, both in pastoral ministry and lay ministry, and attempt to devise a strategy for strengthening these areas. For example, the pastor may benefit from some continuing education in certain areas, or perhaps there are lay persons who are better equipped to handle certain responsibilities

than are the ministers. Mutually agreed upon solutions should be sought.

ATTITUDE

The key to success in this area of pastoral relations is an attitude. Whereas working out problems in ministry can be delegated to a pastoral support committee, the responsibility of maintaining and modeling healthy attitudes belongs to everyone. The single largest factor in a church's attitude towards its minister and ministry will probably be established in the diaconate. Some churches are known to nurture pastors; others notorious for needling their minister. How much preferable to be a church which supports and nurtures its spiritual leader!

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORT

In regard to pastoral relationships, the following suggestions should be taken to heart, not only by the deacons, but by every church member. In our congregational form of government, you are a minister to your pastor. These are some of the ways in which you can help:

1. Pray.

Pastors and their families are mere human beings, just like you. They have similar weaknesses and problems, in addition to the special difficulties associated with a public ministry. Pray for their personal needs as well as for their success in ministry. Let them

know that you are praying. What would happen if you offered to stop by your pastor's study for a brief word of prayer just before worship? Quite likely your relationship would never be the same again! A special bond of understanding and love can be born at such times.

2. Support your minister.

No pastor expects or wants unconditional support, but a pastor needs to know that you are looking to him or her for spiritual leadership. It is important for your church that you, especially deacons, acknowledge the pastor to be the significant spiritual leader of the congregation. Indicate that you are open to listen to ideas from the minister, and that you will give those constructive consideration. Your pastor will welcome your support in ministry. Every successful minister needs involved laity who will share in the creative process of determining the direction of ministry and the responsibility for the implementation of it.

"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Hebrews 13:17

3. Get busy.

Put your own gifts to work in your church. Choose a task which needs to be done and do it energetically and thoroughly. Make sure that whatever you do is consistent with the purpose and mission of the church. Consult with your pastor before beginning, so that unnecessary conflict with other programs can be avoided. Above all, do your work for the highest motive. We minister, not for self-adulation or praise, but in the words of Paul, "...whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men" (Colossians 3:23).

4. Be honest.

Be open and above board with your pastor. First, be honest about your minister's strengths. Everyone needs to be appreciated. Honest encouragement makes it less likely that we will become defensive when weaknesses come into view. If your pastor knows that you are supportive and affirming, your areas of concern will not be threatening. Ask for Biblical teachings which clearly support the main points of sermons you did not understand or agree with. Inquire as to the general purpose or plan which your pastor has in the pulpit ministry, if you do not discern the direction of it. If it appears to you that some individuals in the church are being neglected in terms of pastoral ministry, speak privately to your minister about it. Check the pastor's observations in such a regard, and always be willing to do what you can to solve any problems that may appear imminent.

Above all, do not spread discord or dissension by talking to others about your pastor. This erodes the very relationship that is most vital to the success of the church and its ministry at large.

5. *Be patient.*

Every human being is imperfect. In fact, you may be one of your pastor's handicaps! Encourage your minister to be patient with you and with others, and then extend the same courtesy to the pastoral staff. Don't expect ideal solutions to arise at the conclusion of every discussion. Even when a course of action is defined, do not expect perfect execution. Neither ministers nor deacons can serve effectively if they live with the fear of failure. After all, Christ's church is in the business of accepting failures and redeeming them!

CHAPTER IV:

THE MINISTRY OF THE DEACON

The scriptures do not list specific duties that deacons are to perform, but instead focus on the qualifications of the person. Therefore, differing concepts have arisen regarding the responsibilities deacons should have. Nevertheless, from the time of Stephen until the present, there have been basic spiritual responsibilities which have fallen to deacons. They may be arranged in four general categories, as follows:

1. *Assisting in worship.*

Worship keeps our love relationship with God alive. We praise his attributes, confess our failures to him, hear his promises and share our concerns with our Creator. When true worship ceases, our relationship with God begins to grow cold, just as the severance in communication hinders a marriage relationship.

Regular participation in worship will help the deacon in evaluating the effectiveness of the service at monthly board meetings. At least one meeting each year should be devoted to worship and how it may be improved in the life of the church. Deacons may wish to go through the worship service step by step, to ask two vital questions at each point: (1) Why are we doing this? and (2) Why are we doing this *now*?

Deacons and pastor alike should be able to answer these questions.

a. The Lord's Supper

The one function in worship almost always clearly associated with deacons is the sharing of the Lord's Supper. Thoughtful preparation and confident execution of responsibilities by the deacons are necessary if communion is to be a dignified and worshipful experience.

It is wise, however, to stress that a deacon's concern with the Lord's Supper is far more than logistical. Friends or members of the church may have questions about the meaning or significance of Communion; deacons should be prepared to speak to this important subject. It also needs to be explained fully to the youth of the church. Reading, prayerful consideration and thoughtful discussion can prepare deacons to share in such ways.

b. Lay participation

Scripture reading, prayer and preaching may be greatly enhanced by lay participation. With time and experience deacons who are gifted in these areas of worship will discover a new understanding of how God's Spirit works in and through worship.

c. Music

Music is an indispensable part of our worship. Perhaps a music committee within the Deacon Board can assure a purposeful and harmonious worship experience. If volunteers are needed to provide the music, the committee can assist by seeing that the musicians are knowledgeable of what is desired in the worship service and that they support these objectives. Recruitment, music selection, seasonal presentations, arrangements for instrumental or special music are just a few of the concerns which need oversight and coordination.

d. Pulpit Supply

Deacons may also be responsible for filling the pulpit in the pastor's absence. This requires a knowledge of the resources in the community, so that effective and helpful preaching is always provided. Resources within the congregation should not be overlooked. An occasional lay Sunday is quite refreshing, and allows the congregation to hear one of their own lay leaders share spiritual insights.

When a pastor leaves a church, it is wise to seek an interim pastor, if at all possible. The period between pastors is not just an awkward space of time to be filled in any way possible. Guiding a church through such an interim period is a specialized ministry. Quite often there are feelings of bereavement, or perhaps misunderstanding, that require healing. The wise deacon board will recognize this as

a time to prepare a foundation upon which the new pastor will be able to build, and will seek the help of an effective interim pastor, regardless of cost or convenience.

2. Teaching the Scriptures.

A vibrant and healthy church is one that keeps the Bible open and available to the people. At the least, it is the responsibility of the deacons to encourage and support their pastor in Bible study activities. The subject matter and style of teaching, however, can become far more diverse and engaging if capable lay persons are challenged to teach and to lead in Bible study along with the pastor.

Some churches use a book table to introduce Biblical ideas and concepts which will contribute to the spiritual maturity of their members. In addition to printed materials, there are increasing numbers of audio and video offerings that can be of great assistance. When members of our churches, both young and old, see that the practical concerns of our lives and our churches are rooted in the teaching of God's Word, they will approach the Scriptures with a new commitment.

3. Building Community in the Spirit.

Most people seem to think that the pastor is the key ingredient in church growth. Research has shown, however, that most people make their choice of a church home based on other factors. Preaching

and pastoral counseling are important, but relationships within the church seem to influence most decisions to either join a church or to transfer church membership. Most churches recognize this, and work hard to project an image of being a friendly church, with greeters at the door, a fellowship hour following worship, special lapel pins for visitors, or other welcoming procedures.

There is a vast difference, however, between being friendly and becoming fast Christian friends. Significant thought and commitment are needed to move past superficial conversation to meaningful Christian fellowship. The latter, in the New Testament sense of *Koinonia*, is more than doughnuts and hot chocolate in the fellowship hall. True Christian fellowship is a sharing of our lives on a spiritual level, and that is essential in the building up of the church.

a. Visiting

Visiting of members by both the pastor and the deacons is an indispensable part of making the church vitally alive. When an individual or a family has shown interest in the church by visiting on two or more occasions, a visit should be offered, at least. The purpose of the visit should not be to recruit a new member, but to show genuine interest in the individual as a person. Questions might be asked such as, "What might our church do to help you at this time in your life?" or "What are you looking for in a church home?"

The deacon should be prepared to discuss spiritual needs if the opportunity arises. Sometimes, by giving a simple statement of what one's own faith in Christ means in life, a totally new and revealing avenue of discussion will result. When we share something significant from our lives, others will be more likely to share their thoughts, decisions and values with us. Such visits need not be long, but they should attempt to move beyond the types of topics shared over coffee in the church parlor. After the visit, significant data should be recorded on notecards to be shared with the pastor.

b. Relationships in the Church

It is important for deacons to have some system for tracking the church's relationships with all persons. This can be instrumental in encouraging people to move from being a visitor to a prospective member, on to membership itself and then into active involvement in lay ministry or church leadership.

There are certain skills which deacons should develop to assist in this commitment to be a builder of a spiritual community. First, they should be intimately familiar with the resources and people of the church. As we have seen, a close working relationship with the pastor is imperative. Second, deacons must grow in the assurance of their own personal faith and develop interpersonal skills which will help in sharing that faith. A model still valid for the deacon today is Philip, who was numbered among the first seven deacons to

be chosen by the church. He is best known for doing the work of an evangelist (Acts 8).

c. New Members

One of the primary responsibilities of a deacon is to interview those who come for admission to church membership. The new members should have been visited previously in their home by the pastor and on a separate occasion, by at least one of the deacons. This assures that the new members feel familiar with at least a few of the group that is gathered. The board can be comfortable also in knowing that any personal matters or questions regarding faith or church membership have been dealt with within these private settings. Only when all questions have been answered satisfactorily should new members be introduced to the larger group of deacons.

The meeting of deacons with new members should be arranged in a comfortable setting. To begin the conversation, one or two of the deacons could share how they chose a church home and how they have benefited from the fellowship of the church. Quite naturally they may share in brief their own pilgrimage of faith, and what Christ means to them. The new members may respond by sharing their own beliefs, faith and experience in finding the church.

It may be that some individuals will respond with only a short word or two, or their answer may indicate that they have given little or no thought to their faith. Whatever the answer, it should be received graciously.

Whatever is shared, deacons should listen with understanding and affirmation. By listening carefully, they can better guide the ministry of the church and so assist members to grow in faith, regardless of how hesitantly that faith may be presented.

This particular meeting is not the time to begin recruiting members for committees or special working assignments in the church. That can come later. The same is true of the member's stewardship responsibilities. It will suffice to inform them that the deacons look forward to working with them in the ministry of the church and that the responsible persons will be approaching them to share specific opportunities.

d. Spiritual Gifts

A deacon's interest in people does not end when it is apparent that they have found meaning in their Christian faith, or when they have made a decision to join the church. As noted earlier, every Christian has been given special gifts by the Holy Spirit, which are to be used for the building up of the church. Through study and prayer, deacons may become sensitive to the wide range of gifts employed by God's Spirit. Members may be helped to discover their gifts and to implement them in the life of the church. Various instruments such as a church survey or home visits, may be used in conjunction with an overall stewardship emphasis to accomplish this.

The most important function that any person can do in maintaining the spiritual health of the church is what we might call the ministry of affirmation. It costs us nothing to say "thank you" or "well done" but we so seldom do so. In fact, a disciplined attempt to develop the affirming and nurturing role of the church might be the means to solve many of our budgetary or personal problems!

One deacon ended his term by apologizing for not doing more. He added, however, he had kept one promise to God and to himself, saying, "When I became a deacon, I resolved to do at least one thing each week which would encourage or show appreciation for someone in my Christian family. That I have done for these three years, and I feel good for it." A card, a telephone call, a hospital visit can mean so much to others when they think that no one cares or that no one has noticed when they did something helpful. The personality of a church can be changed and a whole new spirit of faith and optimism can be born out of just such a ministry of affirmation. Every deacon can and should become a specialist in it.

4. Caring and Serving in Special Ways.

Read once again the origin of the office of deacon in Acts 6. The early church was in crisis; there were widows and others without means, who were beginning to feel as though no one cared for them. This was so important that the apostles decided to appoint special people to oversee the care of needy people. Thus, from the very beginning deacons have been

people who care. The meaning of the word "deacon" is "to serve" and, therefore, emphasis should be placed upon the serving ministry. Ministry to those in physical, emotional or spiritual need may go tragically unnoticed unless given priority by spiritual leaders on the deacon board.

Some churches have found it wise to establish a Deacon Fund from which resources may be drawn confidentially, to deal with the diverse needs of those coming into contact with the church. A Deacon Fund may be used to help a counselee seek psychiatric evaluation if needed; or perhaps a young couple could benefit from professional marriage counseling which would otherwise be beyond their budget. Some recipients will feel better about themselves and their relationship to the church if the Deacon Fund offers only a portion of their expenses while they take responsibility for as large an amount as they are able. Some will insist that they consider the assistance a loan. While this should neither be expected nor anticipated, any repayments should be gratefully received with the assurance that they will be used to help others in their time of special need.

Deacons may help in other ways. In decades past, those with a strong personal faith in Christ and a commitment to live under the authority of God's Word have found themselves at the forefront of significant efforts to bring social reform. Penal reform, the abolishment of slavery, child labor laws, the ongoing fight against poverty, labor reform, civil rights, fair housing and equal employment are just a few of the

issues affected deeply by Christians who cared enough to get involved. The little epistle of James is as fresh as today's newspaper when it admonishes us:

"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; Keep warm and well fed", but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

James 2:15-17

One last area needs to be addressed as we think about the caring ministry of the deacon. Occasionally, scandalous business practices break out into the light of day. Churches have been victimized by officers who in a weak moment have misused funds. Sexual misconduct occurs in our churches, too, just as it did in the church of Corinth in Paul's day. When these things happen, the deacon worth his or her salt will not just turn the head and pretend nothing has happened. People will talk regardless of whether or not deacons act. The problem will either be approached honorably, or it will be dealt with through whispered opinions in the dark corners of church hallways.

When such incidents occur, it is wise for one or two deacons, with the counsel of the pastor, to meet privately with the person at the center of the controversy. The spirit of Galatians 6:1 should always guide a pastor or deacon with the unpleasant duty of visiting members in such uncomfortable situations:

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

It is the leadership responsibility of deacons to remind all members that Christ came to redeem and not to condemn. When any person has failed publicly, the stabbing wounds of failure and humiliation are undoubtedly felt. Judgmental attitudes and actions in the church have all too often driven the offender to take a defensive position, or to leave the church altogether. Even then, someone needs to go and let that person know that he or she is cared for. God's love will never be known or felt unless it is expressed through the lives of God's people.

The personal spiritual concerns of people must always take precedence over our agendas and the tasks which preoccupy us. Deacons who are helpers, teachers, builders and carers will find that God will use them in surprising ways.

CHAPTER V:

THE WAGES OF THE DEACON

There is a bumper sticker which reads, "Christians have a retirement plan that is out of this world!" The rewards of serving Christ in the local church are not generally apparent: most often, service to our Lord is rendered at considerable sacrifice and cost of personal time, energy and resources. Deacons sometimes joke about doubling their own salaries in the upcoming budget — of course, they never have and never shall receive any tangible wage for serving, but there are other kinds of rewards.

One special reward is spiritual growth. When God gives us challenges, we are more likely to grow as we strive to meet them. We may feel uncomfortable being stretched, but this has always been symptomatic of a growth spurt. Psychiatrists tell us that most people are far more productive when under a moderate degree of tension. The sizable responsibilities of being a deacon will bring periods of tension; let's be honest about it! The realization will soon come that we are not capable of dealing successfully with all of these matters in our own human wisdom and strength. Our only hope for success is in allowing God's power and wisdom to flow through us. There is no more rewarding realization in life than to know we are being used by God.

Another reward is the satisfaction of deepening relationships. When a pastor and deacon have struggled and prayed together, and perhaps even disagreed with one another, there is usually a special bond that develops. Having shared together in the sacrifice and the satisfaction of ministry, their lives will always be intertwined to a degree. The same is true of the deacons who have truly sought to be united in discovering God's will for their church: having worked together in their ministry, their relationships will never be the same.

Other relationships are also significant. Any deacon who has had the privilege of praying with a young person about some special matter will find that person will carry warm feelings about those few minutes for years to come. Some deacons have experienced the gratification of teaching the youth in the church, and then serving alongside them in the church some years later when the students have become mature adults. Perhaps a deacon may be privy to some struggle that a family has gone through. The rest of the world may be oblivious, but the special caring relationship which began there will most often continue to grow. The grateful look, the warm hand-clasp in passing — these are the only indications which say that such caring is deeply appreciated. These are the wages of the deacon.

There are other rewards for deacons that we could enumerate, but let us simply say in conclusion that the deacon is privileged to witness miracles. Wherever lives are opened to the power of Christ's gospel,

miracles do happen. Lives are changed. Great things are attempted and the seemingly impossible is accomplished. No one is in a better position to witness and participate in these things than is the deacon. With so large a purpose in life as sharing the love of God in Christ, even our daily routines will be redeemed and filled with greater significance. What other wages could one want?

Being led by God into spiritual growth and deeper relationships — and the privilege of participating in miracles — these are the wages of the deacon.

Appendix

The Ordination or Installation of Deacons

In the early Congregational churches, deacons were often ordained to the office for life. The churches recognized that the gifts and abilities needed for ministry by a deacon were not developed quickly, and close spiritual relationships could be maintained over a period of years. However, aged deacons were sometimes strongly opposed to changes in the life of the church which younger people deemed desirable, so that by the early part of this century, widespread opposition arose to this custom.

In most churches today, it is customary for deacons to be elected to a term of three or four years, with constitutional provisions prohibiting the deacon from immediately succeeding himself or herself.

There is much to be said in favor of a service of ordination. Such a service stresses the scriptural purposes of deacons, to remind the congregation of their special calling as spiritual leaders. The service may also inspire the deacons themselves to a deeper commitment in their service to Christ and the church.

Outlined below is one form which could be used for a service of installation. This service could also be adapted as a service of ordination for deacons. However the service is ordered, the purpose throughout

should be to unite the church in the service of Christ and His Kingdom, and to symbolize for the deacons the importance of the office to which the congregation is appointing them.

A service of Installation to the Office of Deacon

Congregational Hymn

"Ye Servants of God,
Your Master Proclaim"

Minister: Mr. Moderator, would you come before the congregation and share with us the purpose of this service?

Moderator: Pastor Smith, fellow members and friends of this congregation. It is my pleasure and privilege to present to you the persons who are soon to be appointed to the office of deacon. They were chosen after much prayerful consideration, by the vote of our congregation. We are told in the book of Acts that when the early Christian church selected deacons, they chose those who were "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." So also we look to our deacons to lead us toward spiritual growth and in the service of Christ our Lord. As I read their names, I would like to invite them to come to the front of our meetinghouse and take their place in the seats provided.

Our deacons are:

Charge to the Diaconate: (This is best offered by the minister of the church or someone chosen by the minister who is respected and knowledgeable of the church and its objectives.)

This is an auspicious day in the life of our church. We are about to appoint these people in the biblical office of deacon. Let us listen carefully to the biblical account of the first appointments which were made to the office of deacon. It is found in Acts 6:1-8. (Other texts which may be used for this brief address are 1 Timothy 3:8-13 or 1 Peter 4:1-11.)

Charge to the Congregation: (This may be done by a second minister on the staff or a Minister Emeritus. On occasion, the moderator or some elder statesman from among the church membership may be called upon to prepare these brief remarks.)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the welfare and growth of our fellowship is a responsibility shared by all of us. These people before you are appointed to lead us. The Scripture has much to say about our responsibility to them as our spiritual leaders, as the deacons of our fellowship. (The speaker may choose to use texts such as 1 Peter 2:9-17 or Hebrews 13:7-21.)

The Vows of Installation
(Deacons are asked to stand.)

Minister: As those about to be appointed to the office of deacon, do you publicly reaffirm your own personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord?

Deacons: We do.

Minister: Will you by both word and deed strive to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour both in the church and in the world?

Deacons: By God's grace, we will.

Minister: Will you share in the shepherding of this flock, giving of yourselves to care for all our members — the old as well as the young, the new as well as the familiar, the sick as well as the whole, the needy as well as the affluent?

Deacons: God being our helper, we will.

Minister: Do you dedicate yourselves to encouraging the faith, freedom and fellowship of this congregation with whom you worship and serve?

Deacons: We do.

Minister: And will you work in harmony with others to lead this church in providing the essential experiences of worship, education, discipleship and ministry so that our people will grow in Christ?

Deacons: God being our helper, we will.

Minister: Having heard your willingness to serve as deacons in the church of Jesus Christ, as pastor of your church, I joyously and with earnest prayer commend you to the Lord of the Church for His blessing and favor as you serve. Would the congregation please stand with these deacons as we join in prayer, asking God to bless these leaders and our fellowship through them.

Congregational Hymn

"The Church's
One Foundation"

Benediction

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