

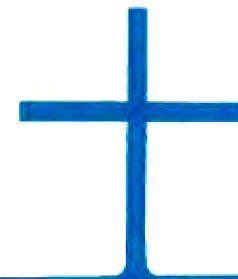
**THE ROLE OF DEACONS
in
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES**

by Dr. Michael P. Halcomb

Revised and published by the
SPIRITUAL RESOURCES COMMISSION

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Preface

*To my loving family,
Bonnie, Jonathan, Joel and Jeremy*

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

