

# The Role of the Deacon

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I served fifteen years as a deacon and have trained deacons for twenty years. During that time I have heard many opinions regarding the role of the diaconate. But, here are eight ways I believe the diaconate ought to serve: 1) Collecting the gifts of God's people and distributing them. 2) Collecting data on the talents of God's people—that is developing a talent bank. Then make withdrawals to help those who are in need. 3) Serving the distressed with counsel, coming alongside the afflicted and bringing appropriate wisdom from God's Word. 4) Preventing poverty within in the church. Deacons must be good stewards of the Lord's resources. 5) Seeking to understand how local community resources work. The government administers help massively, not individually. Here is where the church can help in the name of Jesus Christ. 6) Teaching the needy to make good use of all available institutions of mercy. 7) Cooperating with neighboring churches. 8) Equipping the saints.

The role of the deacon in today's Reformed and Presbyterian Churches was established by the reformer John Calvin. Calvin's reformed diaconate is the model of teaching on the diaconate and the priesthood of all believers. For Calvin, the intentional partnering of worship and ethics, love of God and neighbor, is biblical and necessary. For Calvin ministry is the work of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the believer and that Scripture is authoritative for faith and practice, regeneration and transformation.

Calvin believed that all the faithful should care for their neighbors, and that the church should give specific leadership to this common Christian duty. In 1557 he wrote a letter to the churches in Geneva. He wrote, “Let us raise in each member of the Christian Community the spiritual problem of his material life, of his goods, of his time, and of his capabilities, in view of freely putting them at the service of God and neighbor.”<sup>1</sup>

The Church in Geneva was not originally concerned with the distribution of alms or with any other means to care for the material needs of Geneva's citizenry.<sup>2</sup> It was largely the work of Calvin which changed this. Calvin structured a society where the poor could be cared for through the office of deacon. According to Benjamin Warfield, the governing authority of Geneva was helping the poor, but the church of Geneva was not.

“When I first came to this Church,” he says, “there was as good as nothing here . . . . There was preaching, and that was all.” He would have found much the same state of things everywhere else in the Protestant world. The Church in the early Protestant conception was constituted by the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments: the correction of morals was the concern not of the Church but of the civil power. . . . Calvin could not take this view of the matter. “Whatever others may hold,” he observed, “we cannot think so narrowly of our office that when preaching is done our task is fulfilled, and we may take our rest.” In his view the mark of a true Church is not merely that the gospel is preached in it, but that it is “followed.” For him the Church is the “communion of saints,” and it is incumbent upon it to see to it that it is what it professes to be. From the first he therefore set himself strenuously to attain this end . . . .<sup>3</sup>

With simultaneous movement of Reformation and Renaissance, there was a reform of inadequate and wrong relief for the poor. Calvin was one of many refugees living in Geneva hoping that some day all of France would be evangelized and that the Reformed religion would be allowed to prosper freely. Awaiting that day, he and his friends provided for the continuing stream of Protestant refugees from Roman Catholic areas by offering them food and shelter in Geneva. This hospitality was known as the Bourse Francaise--“the French fund for poor foreigners”--intended for those who came to Geneva to live according to the “reform of the Word.”<sup>4</sup>

The institution of the Bourse was a biblical response to need. Calvin was familiar with the history of the early church and its relationship to the poor. The church had always been an advocate of the disadvantaged and Christians in the early Church took care of their own and some others as well. Emperor Julian of Rome is quoted, “Nothing has contributed more 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.”<sup>5</sup> They fed the poor, nursed the sick, housed the homeless, and rescued those abandoned to die.<sup>6</sup> The Bourse contains concrete examples of Calvin's thought

put into practice, revealing that he not only preached charity but generously supported the poor as well.

Intellectual, religious and social transformation brought about the biblical concept of the priesthood of believers which replaced the ecclesiastical priest as sole channel of God's grace. Believers became priests to each other following Luther's biblical injunction, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all."<sup>7</sup>

By 1535, the cry for social reform sprang from many divergent groups. First the scholastic reformers spoke of the need to channel new life into social care. They wanted to redirect money and goods away from corrupt ministers and divert it into the hands of pious laymen for distribution to the poor. They also sought to develop a system of civic safeguards to ensure the proper administration of public charity.

While, Martin Luther believed that the congregation should take care of the poor and the sick, this changed when he came to believe that there were not enough people qualified to be such a diaconate. Therefore, Luther accepted—just as we do now—the idea that the government of a town should take over the care of the poor. Luther's one-sidedness (that preaching of the gospel is the sole task of the church) had shown its negative results, and too often the church neglected the misery of the poor.<sup>8</sup> Martin Bucer also gave service to mankind a fundamental place in his theology. For Bucer Jesus' acts of mercy are signs of the kingdom of God breaking in. Therefore, he said, *diakonia* also is a sign of the church in addition to the proclamation of the word and the sacraments.<sup>9</sup>

The Reformation saw a return to faith based on the authority of Scripture. Mercy, service and giving became an inescapable responsibility for Protestants. Using God's gifts properly played a prominent part in Calvin's thinking about service and love for others. He said, "All the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our

neighbor's benefit."<sup>10</sup> "We are all . . . stewards of everything God has conferred upon us by which we are able to help our neighbor, and are required to render account of our stewardship."<sup>11</sup>

The reformers brought needed change in the way gifts were made in support of the poor. New patterns of benevolence would emerge in response to the Scriptural mandate for diaconal ministry. The reformers reversed the medieval habit of giving alms to the poor as merit against years in purgatory.

To Polycarp of Smyrna (ca. 150), almsgiving would free one from death. This part of the view was further elaborated by Origen (after 200) and Cyprian (ca. 250). Chrysostom, (ca. 400) told the Church, "Clean your souls and buy them back and prevent future wrath by money."<sup>12</sup>

Earning favor and merit as the idea of charity had great influence until the Reformation. The reformers emphasized giving as a response of love to God and one's neighbor. Calvin said

For the Christian, the act of offering is an essential spiritual act, an act of worship in the highest degree. Indeed by his offering the believer certifies to God that Mammon has been dethroned. By concrete gifts, the Christian expresses to God the real measure of his faith. By these gifts, the man confesses that his Lord is really to be acknowledged master of his entire life—moral, physical, and material.<sup>13</sup>

Self-interest was, and is, a powerful motive. Reformation theology, however, destroyed this motive, for...almsgiving can neither help justify before God nor secure the reduction of purgatorial penalties.<sup>14</sup> G. Barrois writes in *Service in Christ*

When a man gives...he does not really give of his own, but he gives what he, himself, has received from God in trust. Since Christ is the beggar, the man who refuses to help, is in fact, the fraud and the beggar, appropriating to himself that which was God's.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin believed that any task to glorify God and serve a neighbor is ministry. He stated, "It is clear . . . that love of neighbor is the most unmistakable evidence of our love for God, so it is essential that the church have a diaconal office and not leave this religious duty only to individual Christians or civil authority".<sup>16</sup> Accordingly he believed that the Church's charity went beyond meeting physical needs only, but spiritual needs as well. Charity was not just philanthropic; it was a reflection of the life and community of Christ and the Bible, diffused into the daily life of the city.<sup>17</sup> Calvin looked to Scripture

for inspiration and explanation for what he did. He did not believe that poverty could be entirely eliminated, but this did not immobilize him. He condemned the world for disorder and sought a new order based on Scripture and obedience to the sovereignty of God.

For Calvin, biblical belief was a system—a blueprint for behavior, telling what a person should do or should not do in order to be humane and loving. To honor God went beyond the walls of buildings to service to the world. To worship God is to serve him in imitation of our Savior Jesus “who did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt.20:28). Calvin believed that the temporal care of the poor was no less sacred than ecclesiastical activity. While the gathering for worship always takes precedence, the love of our neighbor must be an inevitable corollary. The duties of piety and love are inseparable.<sup>18</sup> He said that *piety* is the root of love. Piety shows our fear or reverence of God, but we also fear God when we live justly among our brethren.<sup>19</sup> This is the relationship believers should have with God and with their neighbors.

Calvin founded his diaconate on ACTS 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and 5:3-10, Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Leviticus 19:9-10 and on the character and life of our Lord Jesus Christ. These would describe the deacon, the character of the people who served the poor, and the actual service of the Geneva diaconate: feed the poor, nurse the sick, house the homeless, and rescue newborn and abandoned infants.

Speaking on 1 Timothy during sermons in 1554-55, Calvin expounded to his congregation that the diaconate is

not at all an earthly office, but have a spiritual charge from God. They are not only in a public estate, but they belong to the spiritual regime of the Church, and they are there as God's officers. The deacons are chosen to be like the hands of God, and they are there in a sacred office.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin believed that Christians, having been bought with a price through the blood of Christ, belonged to him with all they are and all they own. He said

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore, not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us

according to the flesh. We are not our own: insofar as we can, let us therefore forget about ourselves, and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's; let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and his will therefore rule in our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.<sup>21</sup>

Belonging to God and being saved by grace through faith—not merit—gave Calvin great peace about life and serving others freely. According to Calvin, the doctrine of election was an unspeakable comfort because it eliminated all such worries and freed Christians from concern about themselves in order that they might “devote every energy to the unflagging service of the sovereign Lord.”<sup>22</sup>

The office of deacon fell right into the existing institution of hospitals. The Hôpital-Général was a religious mission as well as medical and social. Calvin ordained the hospital officers (procurers) and hospitaliers (deacons). The hospitals united the religious and practical. The book *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva* states

The magistrates thought that care of the poor was a fulfillment of God's will, a belief born in medieval piety and reinforced by new humanist and Protestant ideals. At the same time, this credo did deliver certain pragmatic results: providing for the poor engendered better social order by decreasing disease and the incidence of civic disobedience.<sup>23</sup>

The largest numbers in the hospital were children who were orphans of the plagues, abandoned or illegitimate. They received a basic education in reading and writing. Boys were apprenticed at 13 years of age and also worked in the fields. Girls of 13 years could become servants to respectable families and dowries were put up for girls intended for marriage. The next largest group was the aged and widows who had no money or family. The hospital cared for those whose only option was to accept charity. Those who were not sickly worked on the grounds, in the fields, performed household duties, made repairs, and cared for the sick. The third group consisted of the blind, crippled, weak, physically and mentally ill and pregnant women. Ordinances sought to outlaw begging.

Healthy beggars should work; those who could not were supported by the church without shame and temptation to beg. Calvin's welfare reform thus included work-fare in that able bodied people must work, literacy, dowries for young girls to be married, apprenticeships.<sup>24</sup>

For Calvin “There have always been two kinds [of deacons] in the early church. One has to receive, distribute and care for the goods of the poor, the other has to tend and look after the sick.”<sup>25</sup> Deacons visited the poor and sick, distributed money and gifts in kind. They kept strict accounts for all disbursements and for the managed, rented and kept houses they used in ministry.

The deacon according to Calvin, and later the Reformed Church, was an ecclesiastical minister whose duty was to care for the poor through benevolence individually or in cooperation with the civil authorities. Calvin accepted the possibility of the church's diaconate cooperating with a civil welfare program.

To Calvin involvement in his city was not peripheral to worship and faith. He made a consistent challenge to his hearers. Calvin was much concerned, as physician of souls, to combat the human indolence, drowsiness, dullness, coldness, the various signs that we are, in life, already half dead.<sup>26</sup> Calvin believed that Christians are under God's reign and that they must reform religion and society. Calvin sought a new order secured through obedience to God. For Calvin society existed to serve the fundamental human needs. “We are all . . . stewards of everything God had conferred upon us by which we are able to help our neighbor, and are required to render account of our stewardship.”<sup>27</sup> The basis of a Christian society, for Calvin, was a constant awareness deeply rooted in the heart, of the human community with Christ. And this community was to be rooted firmly in the gospel and equipped for every good work. According to Calvin, the laity are obligated to obey, lest they be bears instead of sheep.<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth said this about the sixteenth century reformer

We accept Calvin as an example or as a model only in the measure in which he has, in an unforgettable way, pointed out to the church of his time the road to obedience: obedience of thought and deeds, social and political obedience. An authentic and true follower of Calvin has only one road to follow: obeying not Calvin himself but the one who was the master of Calvin.<sup>29</sup>

One challenge which the Church in the twenty-first century faces is developing a new paradigm for service. I spoke earlier about a woman named Jill and her perception that the church is irrelevant to her needs. For many people, like Jill, God is not an option because the Church, itself, is not a witness of love and concern. For the Church to be perceived as credible and relevant by those living in its

community it needs to show this through joyfully serving its neighbors. However, in many cases the Church represents the mindset of earlier Greek civilization. To some Greeks living during the Old Testament era, being served was more dignified than serving. Plato wrote, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?"<sup>30</sup> To be truly human was to have little or no care for the needs of others. Serving others did not foster human development to the ancient Greek; service had a lowly position.

The Greek position is completely opposite the attitude Jesus possessed and requires his people, the people of God, to possess. Philippians 2:5-8 speaks about the humility of Christ—his mind of total obedience to “him who sent him”—Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Romans 12 indicates that valuing others—putting them first—is important. The Apostle Paul writes to the church, “in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices . . . .” They are not to “conform any longer to the pattern of this world . . . .” and they are to “be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind.”

The entire New Testament makes clear that love which stops short of practical help is “in word only” or simply “of the tongue,” a denial of the Lord we serve. The reformers reminded us that the absence of obedience is a sign of “no faith,” “no salvation.”<sup>31</sup>

The Church is the Body of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” The Church is God representation of the incarnate Christ. “The Church,” says Lewis Smedes, “is Jesus Christ bodily present, bodily committed to, and bodily immersed in the ghetto of human history. The Church, His body, still carries on [his] work. . . . And it is vulnerable, open to wounds, because it, with Him, is still part of the [human] ghetto.”<sup>32</sup> It is this Jesus, the divine *Diakonos*<sup>33</sup> who taught us how to serve using the diversities of gifts described in Romans 12:4-7

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to

all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Stob states that the reference is not simply to differences of character or personality type, which in Christ achieves a mysterious unity across these differences. The reference is, however, “diversity of function. As the hand, foot, eye, mouth, etc., each perform the function which make for a total life and action of the body; so do the members of the body of Christ function toward the fullness of Christ's service to the world.”<sup>34</sup>

*Diakonia* is the principle by which our Lord describes His entire ministry, and of the life and ministry of His followers. Stob states

Everything that was done by the Son of Man who came, Jesus Christ, including humiliation, self-emptying, cross and death is summarized in eight letters: *d i a k o n i a*. The same single word also indicates the pattern of life for all who followed Jesus. *Diakonia*: they go into service . . . They are other-directed . . . They find themselves among those in need; it has become their natural milieu . . . They discover that they are being drawn into Jesus' diaconate and start participating in it.<sup>35</sup>

*Diakonia* is essential for the life and well-being of the Church. James Barnett says his book *The Diaconate*, “The Diaconate is about what the church is or should be.”<sup>36</sup> Again, it is not something optional, or peripheral or auxiliary to the main thrust of the church's ministry, but stands at the heart of the Gospel and its mission to the world. It is a *reasoned* concern for the well-being of another. *Diakonia* is active compassion through service.

Those concerned with benevolence are not merely concerned that no one is without food, but encouraging members to full joy in the Spirit. They should be concerned that each member of the church has a place, feels cared for, and can function according to the responsibilities each has been given. The ministering service of love not only includes taking care of the financially poor, but also sees to the relieving of other forms of oppression and affliction so that these “needy” can function in the covenant community. We must show ourselves to be a holy people who by our care for the poor, stand apart from others.

There are several ways diaconates or Church service ministries can serve its membership and its community:

**Deacons are to collect the gifts of God's people and distribute them.** Moses writes in Leviticus 27:30, “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD.” Luke tells us in Acts 4:32, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” Paul shares in 2 Corinthians 8:4, 14 that the saints “urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing . . .” He says this should be a mutual concern for one another: “At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality.” This is God’s way. Men and women are only stewards of the material possessions they have. They own nothing in any absolute sense. It all belongs to God, and he has given it to his people by grace alone without their earning it. Dr. C. Van Dam writes “All the resources God had given were to be used to keep all His people free, unburdened by poverty and want. God taught Israel as it were to put a distance between themselves and their possessions”.<sup>37</sup>

**Deacons are to collect data on the talents of God's people**—that is, develop a talent bank and a network for bank “withdrawals.” The Apostle Peter tells us in 1Peter 4:10, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.” A conscious and definite giving of spiritual gifts, talents, vocational skills, and time is an example of appropriate and biblical stewardship of God’s provisions for the benefit of others. The Apostle Paul commends this in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” And he reminds the Church of its essential unity, “. . . in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). In the New Testament every member of the Church has received the gift of grace and has been called to service. The writer of Hebrews says “[God will] equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and

ever. Amen.” The gift of the Spirit’s grace brings...“varieties of service” (1 Cor. 12:5).<sup>38</sup> Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:5-6, “There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.”

**Deacon’s are to stimulate...a diaconal lifestyle** [for the use of these gifts]. They have to take care that the available charismata—spiritual gifts--of the congregation are used on behalf of people or groups with unsolved needs and problems.<sup>39</sup> God's people have received all the material things by grace alone. Similarly we should not work to insure one's own benefit alone, but to bring about the good news of God's kingdom. Man is but a steward of his material possessions, and must never be in bondage to them, but remain truly free as God's possession and use his material possessions for the well-being and the freedom of the children of God. Israel's wealth and possessions were entrusted to them for the benefit of all.<sup>40</sup> James, the brother of Jesus, writes in James 2:24, “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”

**Deacons are to serve the distressed with good counsel**—they must be good listeners. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, “. . . the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.<sup>41</sup>

Deacons are to come alongside those who are hurting. To show the extent of help required of us, Luke 10:33 shares Jesus’ narration of “The Good Samaritan.” We are told that that a man (presumably a Jew) was beaten and left lying on the ground. Three people had the opportunity to help. Two of these, “full time church workers” ignored him fearing they would become “unclean.” Luke tells us that the fallen victim’s enemy was the one to stop, help, and see that his future needs

were cared for: “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.”

Deacons are to be prepared to build up those in need. King Solomon tells us, “A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” (Proverbs 18:14). The Apostle Paul says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). To comfort others we have to get close to them and not be fearful of that contact. Andrew Purves quotes Henry Nouwen in *The Search for Compassion*

We all need people who will not be too quick to take our pain away but will have the spiritual and mental toughness to walk with us, sharing in the journey to the point where woundedness can be confronted at its source. Shared woundedness becomes mobilizing. The sting is drawn because the secret is shared.<sup>42</sup>

Deacons are in a position to restore people and community. They are catalysts for healing. By being with those who suffer, they are able to really pray and not just pray in the abstract.

**Deacons are to prevent poverty of those in the Body.** They are to seek after the poor, the sick and elderly, the fatherless and widow. In Ephesians 4:28 the Apostle Paul indicates that one of the benefits of working/earning a living is to help those in need: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” The Heidelberg Catechism says this: Q. What does God require of you in this [the eighth] commandment? A. That I further my neighbor's profit wherever I can or may... and labor faithfully that I may be able to relieve the needy.<sup>43</sup> Deacons must be good stewards of the Lord's resources. Paul commands that we use our gifts for the benefit of others and God's honor and glory—because the gifts are his and on loan to us. “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). “The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it....” (Psalm 24:1). Deacons must be pacesetters in teaching and providing wisdom and guidance to the needy. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:11-12, “He . . . gave some to be apostles, some

to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” The church is challenged to prevent poverty. This requires the church to go beyond feeding the hungry, clothing of the naked, and rescuing the oppressed. The church must actively seek to expand the kingdom in its community, that is bring of the will of God to bear upon the lives of all within the scope of its influence.<sup>44</sup> The roots of poverty are not confined to the one who is poor. Predominantly, the roots and causes of poverty are oppression, greed, deliberate abuse by the powerful of the weak, theft, hopelessness, racism, inadequate training, and indifference of the church to the plight of the poor. The poor “are God's challenge to the church to engage all [its] resources, spiritual and material, verbal and political, to extend his kingdom by attacking poverty at its roots . . . .”<sup>45</sup>

**Deacons are to understand how local community resources work.** The government administrators help massively, not individually. Here is where the church of Jesus Christ fills in. Also, the church must see that the municipal, state, and federal government are good stewards of the Lord's resources. The prophet Haggai reminds us that these resources, too, belong to the Lord. Here, God states, “The silver is mine and the gold is mine” (Haggai 2:8). This understanding allows the Church to make good use of federal, state and municipal resources while seeking to minister to people in a holistic way.

**Deacons are to empower the needy** to make good use of all available institutions of mercy. The Church need not develop a co-dependent relationship with those coming for help. One principle to follow is this: “Don’t work harder than the person(s) coming for help.” Churches should develop a list of community resources and offices of public advocacy so people know exactly where to go for help. Kenneth Haugk says in *Christian Caregiving, a Way of Life*, “Christians are responsible for care. God is responsible for cure.”<sup>46</sup>

**Deacons are to cooperate with neighboring churches.** Service ministry should not be duplicated or be redundant if another local church is doing the same thing. Churches should obtain

information on what resources and ministries are available within its geographic area and beyond. Then it should partner for mutual care of the people in its community. Cooperation will also prevent a major portion of “scams” from taking place (i.e., people seeking cash money for “tyranny of the urgent” type emergencies).

**Deacons are to equip and mobilize the saints.** One of the most important responsibilities of the diaconate is teaching the how-to's of ministry to the members. By doing this and by being good stewards of our own gifts and talents we can actually "unleash" the church. It is our job to encourage and motivate others to use their gifts in an evangelical witness of word and deed. Ephesians 4 calls for “. . . some to be teachers for the equipping of the saints.” For the health and maturity of the Church, deacons must become those teachers. Teaching, equipping, and motivating members to volunteer in a church's ministry is vital and the numbers involved will usually indicate the spiritual temperature of a congregation. Although the dictionary definition of the word volunteer is “One who enters into or offers himself of a service of his own free will”<sup>47</sup> those who follow Christ do not have a choice. The Scriptures say that "we have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). Everything we are and possess belongs to God. The Heidelberg Catechism states that “I am not my own but belong to my faithful savior Jesus, both in this life and the next.”<sup>48</sup> Christ says "If you love me keep my commandments" (John 14:15). In other words, “if you will follow me do as I do.”

*Diakonia* has do with our style of life and its influence on our relationship with Jesus the *Diakonos* and his representatives on earth, people in distress and in unjust situations. The quality of life is more important than the quantity of acts.<sup>49</sup> Since Jesus qualified his life as *diakonia*, *diakonia* ought to be essential [for us].<sup>50</sup>

The Church needs to be those equipped with towels, ready to clean the wounds and sores of a suffering world. Church leaders must stimulate deacons in helping the Body of Christ follow their Master, who said the He came to serve (to deacon), not to be served (Matt. 20:28). Christians must be taught the full Word of God in order to develop spiritually

and experience renewal. Then God will use them will in a way that will expand geometrically for joyfully bearing others' burdens.

The ministry of diaconia stands at the heart of the gospel and its mission to the world. Diakonia is a total surrender of life for the benefit of others. The basis for Christian discipleship is not knowledge or power or wealth. The basis for being a disciple is service. The model for the disciples in their following of Christ is therefore not the secular ruler nor the learned scribe. The only valid model is that of a person who serves (Luke 22:2). There are four aspects in which the church's life and ministry, patterned after Christ, come into view: a) Surrender of self-regard or concern for self-service. b) Assumption of the servant character. c) Full identification with those whom we are called upon to serve. d) Obedient-unto-death servanthood. To be Christian is to be merciful, even as our heavenly Father is merciful. "The issue for any congregation," as Lewis Smedes is quoted above, "is whether it really wills to be His Body, suffering with Christ in the ghetto of human history."

The role of the deacon and deaconess is to model Christ while discipling and apprenticing others. It is not their job to do all of their ministering. But it is their job to see that ministry gets done. A simple summation of the deacon's and deaconess's role is 1) to be an evangelical witness of word and deed in worship and service and 2) to encourage and motivate others to use their gifts in an evangelical witness of word and deed in worship and service.

### **Acts 6:1-6**

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup>And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup>But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup>And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup>These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

### **1 Tim. 3:8-13**

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup>They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup>And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup>Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup>For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

### **1 Tim. 5:3-10**

Honor widows who are truly widows. <sup>4</sup>But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. <sup>5</sup>She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, <sup>6</sup>but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. <sup>7</sup>Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. <sup>8</sup>But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

<sup>9</sup>Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, <sup>10</sup>and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

### **Romans 12:8**

the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

### **1 Cor. 12:28**

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

### **Leviticus 19:9-10**

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup>And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

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