

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONCEPT OF TODAY'S DEACON

A deacon's call to work should acknowledge the recognition by the church of Christ of his gifts for ministry and their peculiar suitability for the tasks required to meet the needs of a particular congregation.

James M. Barnett conveys this idea:

Perhaps the most misunderstood idea relating to the diaconate is the fact that its primary significance does not lie in any of its functions, whether pastoral, charitable, or liturgical. The origin of the diaconate and its development in the first centuries reveals above all the deacon as symbol. He is the symbol par excellence of the Church's ministry. In the deacon is seen the indelible character of service Christ put on his ministry and of servant on those who minister. He is the embodiment of the first principle of ministry which is sent to serve. The deacon above all epitomizes within his office the ministry Christ has given to his church, the servant ministry to which we are all called and commissioned in our baptism.¹

One needs only to read of the vast heritage left by loyal and devoted deacons in order to realize that a

¹
James M. Barnett, The Diaconate (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 141.

deacon is following in the footsteps of a "true servant" of the living Lord. A layman could not aspire to a more noble, more spiritual position within the Christian church. One would do well to realize that a deacon does not become a leader simply because he is a good, moral, upright individual, but rather because of his dedication to his Lord Jesus Christ and to his tasks within the Christian community of believers. The deacon who keeps in mind the four basic purposes of his calling, (1) to uncover sins and needs, (2) to show God's love, (3) to deal with simple problems, and (4) to maintain peace within in the church, will not expect too much from other disappointing and discouraging matters, nor will he depend too heavily upon his own human resources in making decisions within the church.

So, You Want to Be a Deacon

One must first be called by God, then by the church body, that has seen a willingness to devote one's self to the thankless task of serving one's fellowman in the mist of "widespread" scepticism and revolt. However, the most difficult part of the deacon's work is self-analysis. By becoming a deacon, one has moved from a position of "Mr. Ordinary" in the church fellowship to "Mr. Authority," with some voice in the governmental structure of the church. In order to make the necessary changes

and acquire new habits which will enable him to provide service ministries under all types of stress and difficult situations in the church, he must be willing to improve in the following areas.

Evangelism

The deacon is an evangelist in the purest sense of the word. We are witnesses. Peter admonished the church: "To always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3.15 RSV). As a deacon, one represents not only his Lord, but the church he attends. Many look up to these men as leaders, not only in the church, but, also the community in which they serve; consequently, deacons can indeed have a tremendous impact on others in their areas of involvement. After all, it is not the shepherd, but the sheep that make more sheep.

The deacon can become literally a "fisher-of-men" by accepting the challenge of evangelism through his deacon ordination. Indeed, as the man serves as a role model of witnessing in the church, God ultimately blesses the work and more evangelistic activity will take place, more than the deacon could possibly imagine in his own life-time. In addition, the blessing that deacon will bring into his local congregation will be incalculable.

The warning is clear. The deacon must consider this aspect of his ministry for Jesus Christ sent those who dare claim His name out into a lost world dying in sin so they might come to know the truth of the gospel which will ultimately set them free. It is altogether possible for a deacon to become so encased in the bubble of Christianity that he spends virtually all his working hours either caught up in his vocation or doing the administrative work of the church, and he fails to evangelize at all. The only answer to this is for the committed deacon to: (1) commit himself to the task of evangelizing, and (2) pray to build into his schedule time in order to witness. The words of Jesus should ring true in the hearts of all who become involved in the ministry of the deacon. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt 9.37-38).

The following illustration may well serve to clarify this point. Mr. Candidate, or Mr. Deacon, if you had the cure for cancer, would you withhold that vital information? Now, thousands are depending upon you. It would be criminal to withhold that information from the public. However, you do hold in your hand the key to the cure of the deadliest disease known to man, sin. Without Jesus Christ, men, women, boys, and girls will spend an eternity in hell. You hold the key. You have the cure. It is

nothing short of criminal to withhold the gospel from your lost friends and associates. The deacon would do well to understand his accountability to the Lord of the Harvest as either a faithful servant presenting the gospel or unfaithfully remaining silent while a world goes to hell. Evangelism must be at the very heart of all the deacon does and says in his vocational and advocational interests.

Prayer

This word is not really difficult to define; there have been volumes written on this subject. This simple word speaks well for itself. One must learn to pray effectively. The deacon would do well to learn the lesson given to us from those early disciples. They recognized in Jesus His close association with His Heavenly Father and perceived a connection between His power and prayer. Indeed, they surmised correctly. Jesus demonstrated a life committed to prayer; hence, those early disciples said, "Lord teach us to pray" (Luke 11.1). The essence of prayer is being willing to learn how "to pray" effectively.

One must learn that prayer is both personal and corporate. The deacon must be willing to pray personally for his own life and the needs of others in the congregation. The real lesson learned in prayer is this: for one

to have power with men he must first receive power from God. That power is found in no other way except on one's knees at his own private altar.

The illustration comes from Australia of a very strange animal known as the "genet." This animal will fall to its knees every time the enemy approaches. In this way the animal prepares to attack and in a moment's notice the genet springs to its feet. The deacon would do well to learn the lesson of the genet. For it's only when one falls on his knees before Almighty God that he can spring up in power to face the issues of life.

One can only imagine the depth of commitment of those early apostles. In all of Paul's works, one will discover the plea for prayer. Paul understood all too well the importance of prayer in his life. One may view Paul's ministry and wonder why he was able to turn his world upside down for the sake of the gospel. Why could Paul go into a city and preach and the people would be turned around for the sake of the gospel? Why did he become the world's greatest missionary? The answer to all of those questions is rooted in his prayer life. Paul had the entire world praying for him. Everywhere Paul went, he would ask them to pray for him. He was a man of prayer. Elijah was a man of prayer. The Bible records God's power working through His servant Elijah in 1 Kings 18.30-35. Daniel prayed three times a day and

turned his world upside down for Jehovah God (Dan 6.10). Prayer is the key. The dedicated deacon must spend time on his knees before God to faithfully serve his people.

Apart from a strict adherence to this vital principle, every deacon soon will discover that not only his prayer life, but also his serving gifts will begin to slide downhill. Time for unhurried prayer and meditation about what one is doing in light of the Scripture is the ultimate success of any deacon's ministry. The Bible teaches, "that one is to pray without ceasing, to be in a constant attitude of prayer, and to be willing to pray at all times" (1 Thes 5.17; see Col 1.9; 2 Thes 1.11).

There are many different ways a deacon may implement a long-range plan which will ultimately lead to a successful prayer life. The following is a personal approach to prayer in the author's ministry. The evaluation begins with an informative list which will allow one the opportunity to begin praying for an hour. There are several evaluation worksheets that may be helpful in trying to establish one's priorities in his prayer life. The following is a way one may begin to learn to pray for an hour:

1. One must be able to spend time in meditation in the Word of God.
2. One must spend time looking over his prayer list of personal and corporate prayer needs. He must find those prayers God has already

answered and check them off signifying God does answer his prayers while remaining diligent to unanswered prayer requests.

3. One must spend time just praising the Lord, thanking Him for all the many blessings he and his family have received. The Bible says, "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us; and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever" (Ps 117.1-2). One must realize that God does deserve the praise of His people.
4. One must spend time just listening to the voice of God speak through the written Word by simply meditating on the thoughts he receives through the Scriptures.
5. One must pray, for "the effectual prayers of the righteous will avail much in the sight of Almighty God" (Jas 5.16).

The following chart is a worksheet that will help a deacon evaluate his prayer life in order to become more effectively involved in a prayer ministry.

1. What are my motives before God in preparing my prayer time?
2. How do I evaluate my prayer life?

ASSETS

LIABILITIES

ASSETS	LIABILITIES

3. Am I growing in my prayer life, or do I use the same phrases, the same appeals and the same slogans before God?
4. What have I believed God for today through my prayer life?

The following table is an outline which a deacon may employ in order to evaluate his prayer life.

DATE	PETITION REQUEST	RESULTS		
Prayer	For whom or what did I ask God	Yes	No	Unanswered

Since most of the normal, everyday routine of the deacon involves his vocation and family interest, the wisest deacon will adequately prepare a schedule which will set aside time in order to be with his Lord. Not only will the deacon benefit spiritually, but he will also be alone to collect his own thoughts and reflect on those pressing needs within the church family. The dedicated deacon must find reserve and zealously guard time for prayer, otherwise, such time will slip away.

The Desire to Study

Paul admonished Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of the truth" (2 Tim 2.15 RSV). The words "do your best" means "to exert one's self" in the study of God's Word.¹ This is written as an aorist imperative. The Scripture is taken out of the area of being optional. It is incumbent upon every born-again believer to make haste, to give diligent study to exhort one's self in order to be an approved workman who need not be ashamed before God.

In the daily grind of life, it is quite possible for the deacon to slip from commitment into conformity and "dry up" spiritually, unless he works at keeping his mind in tune with God's voice through the written Word. The dedicated deacon will set aside time for self-disciplined study. One does not receive a full gospel diet simply from a Sunday School lesson or a regular preaching calendar. For one to fully comprehend the ways of God, he must be willing to read and study and apply the messages of the Bible to his life and ministry. Solomon said, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov 27.18). For one to begin a thought process, he

¹ A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 2 vol. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 619.

must first receive enlightenment from God. This spiritual process will quicken the soul and spirit of a man and prepare him for the exchange of spiritual information.

There is no better way in which to force one to discipline himself and study than to press far and beyond the scope of one's own narrow interests and limitations. The dedicated deacon must keep in touch with what God is doing in His world. This concept can be strengthened through the teaching ministry of the deacon. The work of preparing and sharing sharpens one's mental abilities and presses him toward the limits of systematic theology which is simply "thinking about God." This growth enables the deacon to make essential generalizations, spot specific biblical concepts, and to emphasize spiritual traits that would otherwise be deleted from his ministry. This enables the deacon to broaden and expand his awareness of God and cultivate his acquaintance with everything going on around him. There are many different ways the deacon can assimilate this information. The following are just a few examples.

1. Tapes: Sermon tapes are now available by many different pastors and evangelists. The deacon can use his time while driving or relaxing to listen to certain inspirational topics.
2. News Programs: Radio and television are now filled with controversial issues. The deacon needs to be aware of what is happening around him or in his world.

3. Magazines: Spiritual publications provide a wealth of condensed knowledge of the Scripture, and topical ideas can greatly increase a man's knowledge of God's Word.
4. Books: A book may well stimulate new ideas or philosophies which may push one to analyze afresh the culture and menu of his ministry.
5. Home Study Courses: This concept allows one time to define or redefine biblical concepts and sends him back to the Scriptures to make haste, to diligently study the Word of God.

This concept is simply a pattern that will enable one to move outside himself with a desire to be better than he is at the moment, for his Lord Jesus Christ. The motive of the "true" deacon will be to make haste, to exhort, to study in order to prove his worthiness in God's Kingdom. The final element to be analyzed in a deacon's life is the spirit of bitterness and resentment which ultimately leads one to obtain an unforgiving spiritual attitude.

An Unforgiving Spirit

The offense of the cross is one thing and cannot be avoided; the offense of an unforgiving spirit is another. The deacon must develop a contrite spirit of humility that grows genuinely out of his daily walk with his Lord. The deacon must desire that the old fleshly nature which has been crucified with Christ but still lingers like a festering malignancy ready at any moment to rear its ugly

head, be placed under the blood of Christ in total submission to His Lordship. This attitude which is directed toward another brother or sister in Christ will totally neutralize the spirit of any man. This spirit creates disharmony between groups and refuses to forgive, causing a type of hate which, if left unchecked, will ruin any man's ministry. The deacon must be on guard against such assaults of Satan.

The imperative of Jesus speaks volumes of words:

"For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt 6.14-15).

Thus, one discovers a great biblical truth, "Only the forgiven are forgiven."

Jesus used an illustration of a man who owed a king "one million" dollars, which he could not pay. The day came when the king called in the account. The servant fell down on his face in front of the king and pleaded with him to increase his time. He used all manner of excuses. He said, "Oh king, I intended to pay, but my crops failed, my wife became ill and sick even unto death and trouble on top of trouble was my lot." The king was so moved by the servant's sincerity that he cancelled the debt which the servant owed.

The servant was elated; he left rejoicing. He was debt free. He left that place happy, excited, walking

on air. In his enthusiasm, he rounded a corner and saw a man who owed him a penny. In an instant of anger, his mood changed. He ran up and grabbed the man and cried, "Where is my penny, you wretched man?" "Oh," cried the man, "I intended to repay you of the debt, but I lost my crops, my wife became ill and trouble was my lot." The servant, angry with hate, refused to listen and threw the man into debtor's prison. Now, when the king heard what the forgiven servant had done, he became angry with the servant and recalled his debt and threw him into outer darkness (Matt 18.23-35).

If God Almighty, in the love of Jesus Christ, can forgive us a million dollar debt which we could never begin to repay, man would do well to forgive those who trespass against him with their penny debts. The sincere deacon will find enstrangement, resentment, and alienation in the church, but he must always be ready to forgive those who trespass against him. Jesus Christ said, "By this," by what? The fact one has a good name? The fact that one has plenty of money? "No," Jesus said, "By this, all men will know that you are my disciple, that you love one another" (John 13.35). In this life, there is nothing that one can do to another which will not require one's forgiveness.

The deacon must be able to forgive. If one cannot forgive others, God the Father cannot forgive him. This

statement has been misunderstood to mean the loss of one's salvation. It does not mean one who cannot forgive will be lost and spend eternity in hell. It does mean that one will not be released from similar pressures that he is holding against his brother or sister in Christ.

The deacon would do well to realize that this attitude brought many of God's men down in the Old Testament. Saul was a king, mighty before God and the people, but his bitterness and anger toward a simple shepherd brought him to a miserable end. Samson was a man who started out with power, prestige, and promise for God, but a bitter attitude toward an enemy nation brought Samson down into a state of childish futility. The unforgiving spirit in a child of God creates a divine friction which wears and tears and finally erodes the spirit down into a carnal life-style of hate and resentment. The deacon cannot afford this type of spirit in his ministry.

The author would ask any deacon to examine his life before God to see if there is anybody, anybody in the past or present who has wronged him, either verbally or physically and, because of that situation, there is a spirit of bitterness and resentment. If the Holy Spirit put a name or a face to that statement, one must begin to deal honestly and openly before God concerning this attitude in his spirit.

This attitude is a sin against God and will ultimately negate one's witness for Christ. This concept grieves the Holy Spirit who lives within us; it grieves the Son who saved us; and it grieves the Father who has forgiven us of a million dollar debt. To be useful, one must simply repent and be willing to forgive others. One should not rationalize, argue with God, nor try to justify his feelings. The Bible says this attitude is a sin. Consequently, one must be willing to accept the Bible and repent and get back into the center of God's will. A deacon can never serve God faithfully, hear God's voice clearly, nor act righteously while being stained with an unforgiving spirit.

Since the work of the deacon is so vital to a church family, it is imperative a man examine himself in the light of the information given and the biblical qualities found in Paul's letter to Timothy. As our attention turns to this aspect of the deacon's ministry, one must realize that the following are God's requirements and not man's. They are found in 1 Timothy 3.8:13.