

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MINISTRY OF TODAY'S DEACON

The Word Defined

W. E. Vine, in his book, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, has given meaning to the word "minister." It comes from the Greek word diakoneo and it means "to be a servant, attendant, to serve, or to wait upon another."¹ Indeed, the fact has already been established, that the deacon is a ministering servant of the entire church; however, there are no Scriptural duties listed for deacons. So, one may well ask, "What are the ministries of a deacon in the twentieth century?" In order to understand the role of the deacon in the church and in the twentieth century, and to be able to answer the question correctly, one must first be able to identify the deacon's ministries.

Responsibilities to the Church Membership

After the glorious ordination service, the man who has been ordained a deacon, begins to realize the

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W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), 72.

awesomeness of his responsibilities. The deacon must sweep aside all idealistic, or romantic notions of an easy, advantageous position in the church membership. The stark reality of his calling and his position now in the church, make it mandatory to recapture the reality of the moment. He has, by his very ordination, promised God and the church membership, to maintain a clear, pure, honest, life of integrity, while doing his best to meet the needs of the church fellowship. The deacon, therefore, cannot be so heavenly minded that he becomes of no earthly good to the church body. He must give his best to the Lord of the work and the work Jesus died to redeem. If the prosperity of the church is, in any degree, dependent on the prompt and effectual performance of the duties belonging to the Deaconship, those who are appointed to that office must know what those duties are, their nature, extent, and¹ obligation. Without this, they can never be discharged.

The work of the deacon in the church becomes a dedicated ministry to people in need; therefore, theological concepts are applied to individual lives in order for the deacon ministries to be established in the church. The deacon must be held responsible for the following areas of ministry in the church.

¹
R. B. C. Howell, The Deaconship (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1946), 61.

To Attend Church Regularly

Since the deacon is a spiritual representative of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is vitally important that he take his marching orders from the Word of God. If this is true, the obvious question, then, is this: Does a deacon have any biblical foundation for attending church on a regular basis? The answer is yes. Yes, there is a Scriptural basis for attending church regularly. Luke writes, "And he (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day" (Luke 4.16). The author of Hebrews admonished the reader, "Not to neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10.25). Luke, speaking of the early first-century church states, "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2.49).

The deacon has promised God and the church to be faithful and fulfill the ministry of a servant in the church fellowship. The servant ministry begins by setting an example before the people. If a deacon does not support the church services, he has not only rebelled against the Scriptures, he has also lied before the people and God. He is, in the vernacular of the world, practicing something

he is not preaching or living. Obviously, the man has not counted the cost which included supporting the regular church services.

Why is a deacon's presence so important to the local church? First, the deacon makes a statement, by his very presence, that he believes in the preaching, teaching ministry of the gospel. He proclaims to the church body, by his presence, that he is concerned with the lost and a concentrated effort to win them to faith in Jesus Christ. Secondly, it speaks for his understanding of the active ministry of the church, as God's agent in the community, to encourage and to edify the believers in the fellowship, and to present them as an example in conduct and faith before an unregenerate world.

To Enrich the Fellowship

The purpose of the seven original men selected by the early church was to restore harmony to a troubled situation. Even today, deacons can be used by God to settle disruptions within the fellowship before they set ablaze the entire congregation with hostile spirits of anger and resentment. The Scripture says, "Bear you one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6.2). The deacon must bear all the problems within the church fellowship, for his example may well set the direction of the local church body.

Since deacons are role models in the church, they must "throw off" hatred, quarreling, jealousy, bad temper, selfishness, dissention, factions, and envy as well as sexual immorality, idolatry, and drunkenness (Gal 5.19-21). They must, in turn, put on the Lord Jesus which emulates love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5.22-23). Deacons will be better equipped to serve their church more effectively when they realize that their very presence may indeed set the standards for Godliness by reflecting the light of the "Son" of God.

To Assist in Church Discipline

The question will invariably arise: What about the deacon in light of church discipline? Daniel B. Weaver, retired Baptist pastor, once shared some insights regarding the deacon's role in assisting to resolve the problems of discipline. He suggested these ways:

- (1) Deacons should not give members in their care the feeling that the deacon is their moral supervisor. This would hinder the real purpose of spiritual encouragement and counsel intended.
- (2) Acute irregularities should be approached by the deacons as a body in regular assembly for the purpose of prayer and consultation among the deacons.
- (3) When it is deemed wise, the deacons may appoint a special committee to visit and counsel with the member involved. The correction of the irregularity with the church should be the aim of all such visits.

- (4) After New Testament procedures are prayerfully followed and when they fail to restore delinquent members, and when it is deemed wise, the deacons may refer the matter to their church for further action.
- (5) Deacons should be slow to listen to the gossip or any critical attitudes.... always encouraging the party involved to pattern his or her thinking in line with the words of Christ: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8.7).¹

A conscience on this matter of the kind of living by Christians that brings reproach to the name of the church is still needed. No group is better qualified to work in this area than the deacons. Paul's admonition is a good one to remember: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one" (Gal 6.1). Discipline certainly is to be done in a spirit of love.²

To Aid New and Prospective Members

The deacon must be a springboard of information to those who are not familiar with the church staff and facilities. The deacon can provide much-needed assistance to new members by supplying answers to many of the

¹ Howard B. Foshee, The Ministry of the Deacon (Nashville: Convention Press, 1968), 61-62.

² Robert E. Naylor, The Baptist Deacon (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 75-76.

questions which will be asked. In one particular church the author pastored, the church set aside one Sunday night out of the month in order to honor all its new members with a church-wide fellowship. Plaques were handed out, and all the new members were given a list of the staff and active deacons in the church.

Now this precluded that the deacons knew the programs, staff, and the facilities of the local church. The church staff indoctrinated the deacon body with a program entitled, "Know Your Church." Every deacon met with the staff and became familiar with certain administrative procedures. The deacons were prepared with an abundance of information and were prepared when asked questions like these: (1) Does the church have a kindergarten? (2) What is the enrollment of Sunday School? (3) Does the church provide a nursery? (4) Does the church have a children's church? (5) Does the church provide programs for the youth? (6) What type of services are available for the children? (7) What type of parking facilities are available? Each deacon was prepared to answer and respond with confidence and with accuracy. Knowledge concerning the programs, people, and facilities is vitally important, as it provides many opportunities for new and prospective members to become better acquainted with their new-found fellowship.

Responsibility to the Pastor

One would do well to simply read the very reason deacons were selected in the early church, in order to develop an understanding of the deacon's association with the pastor. In reading the early history of deacons, one quickly discovers that the first responsibility of the deacons was to assist the pastor in the spiritual ministries of the people so they (Apostles) could be free to study the Word and to pray. The Scripture indicates that there must be a close association between the pastor and the deacons; otherwise, trouble surfaces within the church. However, common sense tells one the same thing. Far too many times, a pastor has been called to a church only to find a bitter group of brothers divided. The deacon or the pastor who fails to provide a common ground of disagreement in love will ultimately discover an environment filled with confusion and destruction in the fellowship.

The Problem Identified

This author is convinced that most pastors have been forced to leave ministries prematurely as a result of a poor working relationship with the deacon body. Upon one occasion, the author overheard the daughter of a deacon say, "Oh, my father has helped fire several pastors and this one will not be an exception." The statement is very tragic. The deacons are called to

support the work of the church and to assist the pastor; they are not called to rule and reign.

The deacon's work in assisting the pastor may well be defined in Scripture. In Exodus 17.8-13, one finds the story of Israel's battle against the Amalekites. In this war, Moses stood on a rock, before the people, holding the rod of God up, toward the heavens. While the rod was raised, Israel was winning the war, but Moses' arms grew tired and the rod which he had been holding high and steady began to fall. During this period, the Amalekites began to win the war. Then in verse 12, one discovers that two men, Aaron and Hur assisted Moses in holding the rod, one on one side and the other on the other side of Moses, steadying his hands and while holding the rod up firmly before the people and God. Because of these two men and their willingness to assist God's messenger, the victory was won.

God help the church today to have deacons like Aaron and Hur who will be able to stand in the gap, stand against all odds, and stand against the opinions of the day in order to assist God's man in sharing the gospel ministry to a lost and dying world.

The Pastoral Ministry of the Deacon

The concept of the deacon becoming involved in the pastoral ministries is best described by Howard B. Foshee.

He writes:

Deacons have the responsibility of performing pastoral ministries. Deacons also have the responsibility of leading other church members to perform pastoral ministries. Since deacons and the church staff work together as a team, they will want to work together also in leading the rest of the church in this important ministry.¹

The following list reveals several ways deacons can accomplish the pastoral ministries while assisting the pastor in the work of the church. The deacons are:

- (1) to aid the pastor on Wednesday nights,
- (2) to fill the pulpit during the pastor's vacations,
- (3) to assist in the planning of special church-wide services,
- (4) to assist the pastor in planning special worship services,
- (5) to assist the many committees that work within the church organization,
- (6) to assist in regular visitation,
- (7) to assist in the crisis ministries,
- (8) to visit the sick and shut-ins of the church.

Many of these topics will be discussed in another chapter under specialized ministries of the deacon. It must be stated, however, that the deacon is a vital part of his church and he must realize that the positive impact of

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Howard B. Foshee, The Ministry of the Deacon (Nashville: Convention Press, 1968), 69.

his presence in assisting the pastor can "make or break" a church.

Responsibility in the Worship Service

For the deacon, worship is essential to his responsibilities as a minister of the church. His concept of ministry will be directly proportional to his worship experience, for a deacon must transmit the idea received in corporate worship, that is the memories of people with whom God has covenanted, to the highest expression of praise in Jesus Christ. One must realize that true worship is not something one does on a particular day of the week, but rather something one has become in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, true worship involves one's entire lifestyle; however, worship takes on a new, vibrant meaning when the church is called together in corporate worship. Whenever the church is assembled together in prayer and praise, expressing its mission, the message of God's redeeming love, grace, and mercy in Jesus Christ is made known. The church was made as God's divine instrument of praise and the deacon performs a vital function in and through the worship service of the church. The following will be just a few examples of the worship responsibilities of a deacon.

Receiving the Offering

Robert E. Naylor gives one insight from his years of pastoral experiences on this beautiful part of deacons being involved in the worship services of a church. He writes:

There are many things to commend the practice that is followed in so many churches of having deacons receive the tithes and offerings at the worship services. It is a thing that needs to be done well and can be best done by an organized group. It also offers a fine opportunity to present the deacons at work in a public function. When the deacons are sitting as a group on the front seats immediately before the pastor, the receiving of tithes and offerings can be a beautiful and effective service. It will do away with the necessity of the long march down the aisle at the beginning of that part of the service.¹

The administration of the offering also allows the men in the deacon body an opportunity to pray openly and express their love and praise to Jesus Christ. This is an open expression of what Christ has done for them and their church family, and in this way, the deacons place a great deal of importance upon prayer in the life of the church. Receiving the offering also offers a fine opportunity to present the deacons at work in a public function within
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the church.

¹ Robert E. Naylor, The Baptist Deacon (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 81.

² Ibid., p. 81.

The Lord's Supper

This service is a wonderful reminder of what our Savior, Jesus Christ, accomplished through His death, burial, and resurrection. Again, this presents a great opportunity for the deacon to demonstrate his loyalty to Jesus Christ and His church. It allows the deacon an opportunity to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are reviewing their lives, in preparation for this supper event.

This ordinance also requires that the deacon body be ready to exercise their serving gifts by being sure the elements are prepared with all manner of effectiveness; consequently, they must be willing to spend time in extra preparation in order to see that the elements (bread and juice) are prepared and ready for the congregation. The pastor and the deacons must work closely together in order to make sure everything is ready so that the service will progress smoothly.

Prior to the worship period of the Lord's Supper, the deacon will be involved in prayer and devotional preparation with the pastor, so he must be willing to search his heart for unconfessed sins. This author has also chosen to honor the ordained deacon by allowing him the opportunity to serve in the service and to actually participate in administering the supper, by praying before

the dispensing of the bread and juice, and giving short devotionals and testimonies. This enhances the worship service and gives the deacon an opportunity to "stand out" before the church as God's representative. This worship service can truly be a time of remembrance.

The Baptismal Service

Usually the deacons are charged with the responsibility of caring for the physical aspects of this service. In his book, The Pastor and His Work, Homer A. Kent, Sr. gives one the duties of the deacon.

- (1) The deacons are charged with preparing the facilities at the church.
- (2) They need to see that the baptismal garments are ready when a service of immersion is to be performed.
- (3) They are responsible for providing towels for the candidates.
- (4) They are responsible to contact the candidates about necessary apparel.

He goes on to say that the deacons will handle all these matters well, in most cases, and will find joy in doing the work.¹ Making a response to the will of the church in the administration of this ordinance is the performance² of a basic function of the deacon ministry.

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Homer A. Kent, Sr., The Pastor and His Work (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 136.

²
Robert E. Naylor, The Baptist Deacon (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 81.

Greeting the Visitors

This is one aspect of church worship which is extremely important to any growing church membership. Many people judge one's character on first impressions and the atmosphere which has been generated by the first meeting. This event will go a long way in determining one's judgement of another. People judge churches in a similar way. They expect to feel a warm, friendly air of excitement as man assembles to worship his God. Visitors have been involved in the "rat race" of society all week and have seen and heard negative conversation and have felt the sting of a hostile environment, and if they meet with anything in the church that resembles the worldly conflict of society or with cold, indifferent feelings, they will not want to return. Who can blame them?

The deacons can be instrumental in helping people feel comfortable, secure, and welcome in a church service. The deacon may not have many gifts or an abundance of talent, but he does have a right hand which can be extended in love, fellowship, and warmth, and a pleasant smile with which to communicate to the visitor that he is welcome. Visitors may not be able to see, in one visit, all the facilities of a church, nor experience the total ministry of the program, but they can discern the attitude of the people. It is of necessity that deacons display a warm

attitude of welcome, or a visitor will not have the desire to return.

The author feels so strongly about this aspect of the worship service that at least one deacon is positioned in the foyer of the church specifically to welcome the guests as they enter the church building. The church has indeed been the recipient of many warm and friendly complements about the way we greet our guests. This service plays a vital role in helping to build a warm, loving, spirit of fellowship in the congregation.

Responsibility to Church Administration

Many of the troubles which are commonly associated with the monthly business meeting of many churches could be resolved long before they reach the floor of the church if the group of ordained men, called deacons, would "take care of business." This concept could well be discussed in a monthly deacons' meeting. The "pros" and "cons" of any troubled area could be thoroughly discussed and debated. Each deacon in the body could give his thoughts and concepts on the potential problem and how it might relate to the entire church fellowship. Out of this meeting, the deacon body would formulate a positive approach to dealing with the problem long before it gets to the church. For this basic reason, the deacon body is essential to the church, not only as the serving agents, but also as the administrative agents within the church.

Robert Naylor clarifies the role of the deacon in an administrative capacity within the church body.

It ought to be said at once that this area of service offers unusual opportunities to a deacon who loves his church. There are no services which are particularly assigned to the deacons in the Scripture. It is customarily agreed, however, that the business area of the church is one in which the deacons may function to great advantage. This is true principally because within the deacons, churches usually have their most able men in financial and business judgements. Here are many men who themselves are owners of property or are very familiar with economic conditions. By the nature of their lives, they are peculiarly equipped to care for the church business.¹

The pastor who has a reliable deacon body can be very effective in the area of administration. The following major areas are extremely important to the church: (1) finance committee, (2) personnel committee, (3) church property, and (4) as trustees. Therefore, each area will be discussed separately as important administrative functions of the deacon in the church.

Finance Committee

There is, within any organization, the vital necessity to communicate information from one group to another. Since the deacons are considered to be, in many churches the administrators, they need to be kept informed on all

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Robert E. Naylor, The Baptist Deacon (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 89.

money, personnel, and program policies. The author supports the above statement and has implemented the plan in all his churches. This concept alleviates strain and turmoil by allowing the most prominent and the most spiritual people insight into the problems and troubles; consequently, the problems can be solved before they "flare" up and involve the entire church body.

One must remember that the deacons are not the sole authority of the church; however, they do represent a large portion of the spiritual leadership. Even though there is a need to place other responsible men and women on the finance committee, the church would do well to allow the deacons to be well represented. The author has, on many occasions, asked that the chairman of the deacons be allowed to serve as chairman of the finance committee along with one other deacon, the Sunday School Director, and two other business-oriented members of the congregation. In this way, the deacons and the church would be well represented. This concept will cover all the basis and, if a question is raised concerning a particular disbursement, several authoritative sources from different committees and different positions in the church will be prepared to answer the question with unity and authority. This policy may well save the church from an embarrassing situation while providing leadership in one of the more questionable areas of church administration.

Personnel Committee

Many of the problems within the church have developed in staff-related situations. Professionals and businessmen, can help resolve many of these dissatisfactions within the staff. This committee needs to be well represented by the deacons in order to be in a position that will be able to help the pastor eliminate troubles in personnel matters. A deacon's presence is also important in helping to create a fair staff position in terms of remuneration. The deacon who serves on this committee will have, at his disposal, vital financial information coming directly from the chairman of the deacon body, who is also the chairman of the finance committee; therefore, he can fully relate to salary norms and other commensurate adjustments.

Another important reason for selecting deacons to serve on this committee deals with a deacon's ability to work well with a group of different men who have different personalities and interests. The deacon must learn to adapt, and must be willing to work with others. This is exactly what a staff member must be willing to do and many have not been willing to make the adjustment. So, the deacon must use his introspective feeling to gauge and judge the staff member in order to discover his willingness

to adapt to the procedures that seek genuine participation of the existing staff.

Finally, the most important aspect of the personnel committee is the possibility of the dismissal of a staff member. This is one of the most difficult aspects of administration within the church. During this time of crisis, the church will need people who can approach the problem objectively and lovingly, but sternly, in order to resolve the issue. It is of vital importance to the church that the deacon be aware of these problems, for this issue will bring two major problems with it. There will be one group, who regardless of the issues, will support the existing staff member and "take up arms" in his behalf; the other group who will not really understand how or why a church would "fire" a Christian staff member. Therefore, the church will need people who can bring a very delicate balance of love and authority. No other group is more capable than the ordained deacon body. During this period, the church will need to rely on men who are ordained and in whom they can place their trust and who can help in resolving the hurt and confusion, fairly and honestly within the church fellowship. Without a deacon representative on this committee, the church may well face one of its darkest hours, for the work of the church can be hindered by ineffective leadership.

Trustees

In many churches, deacons have literally been given the legal authority to direct the church's legal business and to transfer the church's property through the proper legal channels. Robert E. Naylor sums up this concept by saying:

It sometimes is wise for a church to select its trustees from among the deacons. In fact, this is quite common in Baptist churches. Some churches recognize the whole body of active deacons as the trustees of the church, and the offices of the deacons, by vote of the church, sign the church's legal papers. Trustees are not directors but simply the legal channels through which the will of the church is expressed. The need for correct legal procedure can be seen, for example, in the transfer of church property, where lawyers are quite concerned that the wording of a resolution to be adopted at a regular church business meeting will meet all of the requirements for title. Care in such action is proper and right according to Baptist pattern and tradition.¹

Here again, one finds professional businessmen who have already been introduced to the legal system, by their very entrance into the business world, taking the lead role within the church and directing, channeling, and guarding the interest of the Lord's property.

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Robert E. Naylor, The Baptist Deacon (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 92.

Church Property

Even though the deacon may not be placed on the building and grounds committee, he will surely be willing to take an active role in protecting the facilities from damage or being ruined by a lack of proper maintenance. Something is wrong with any child of God who does not take pride in the church buildings and the grounds. For one to ignore God's house and the grounds is nothing short of barbaric, and the deacon, more than any other person, ought to oversee the maintenance and up-keep of the buildings and grounds.

Many years ago, the author experienced a situation where two visitors complained and refused to return to the church simply because the building and grounds committee had overlooked several sprigs of grass growing through the cracks in the back parking lot. They said, "We would not allow our home to look so tacky and surely we are not going to worship with people who do not care any more about God's buildings and grounds." Needless to say, the deacons, after being informed, rectified the situation.

It is very important for the deacon body to become aware of potential problems on the grounds or to the buildings. This author agrees with the statement of the two visitors. When our homes need repair, or renovation which might make them more attractive, the work is done. Can the

church, which is God's storehouse, be anything less and still give a positive testimony to those who worship inside? The deacon can provide much-needed insight and help in promoting a conducive environment of worship with well-maintained building and grounds.

Conclusion

The subjects that have been covered in this chapter merely skim the surface of many of the everyday responsibilities of today's deacons. They are men who have given their very lives to the ministry of the church, and, many times, it is a very thankless task the deacons have undertaken. The church expects them to be supermen, able to leap trouble in a single bound with enduring strength and durability, spidermen, with unusual moves and stick-ability in times of trouble, and wisemen who have all the answers during a time of crisis.

They are expected to be all things to many different people within the church. They are men who are expected to present a whole picture of the power of a redemptive Christ while living as close as possible to God's ideals mentioned in 2 Timothy. When they slip, or make a mistake, people are quick to condemn and criticize them and "jump on a band wagon" of opposition against them; however, in today's troubled world deacons are still needed in our churches.

The church of the twentieth century has experienced a great deal of change over the last twenty years and much of this change has seen more complicated problems within our churches than any other generation. In this generation, the role of today's deacons has become increasingly difficult. But it is still very obvious that the church looks toward the deacon and expects much from his leadership. The church not only expects him to be responsible to the membership of the church, to the pastor, to the worship service, and the administrative procedures, but also calls him into special areas of ministry which will be discussed in the next chapter.