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The Office of Deacon

Today there is a lot of misunderstanding and a lack of understanding as to the purpose and calling of the diaconate, the biblical deacon.

Acts 6:6, "And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."

It is clear from this text that the diaconate is a separate office in the church. When the seven were selected and ready to be commissioned to minister, they first were set apart via the laying on of hands.

Philippians 1:1, "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons."

Paul clearly distinguishes the ministry of the overseer from the ministry of the deacon. Paul is teaching that in the church of God there are at least two distinct offices that God established for the care and oversight of the body; one is an office of oversight, the other is an office of service. The epistle of Timothy was written to instruct a young church on how to be a church (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15). And Paul gives attention to the formal offices which God established for the care and nurture of His people: the office of overseer and the office of deacon. Now after detailing the qualifications and calling of the office of overseer, Paul addressed a second office:

1 Timothy 3:8, “Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain...”

From these passages and many more, we understand that the ministry and service of the deacon is a formal office in the New Testament Church. It has a distinct calling, purpose, and place in the ministry of the church and it is my intention through this series to uncover this and much more. Yet to do that, we must begin at the beginning, in the Old Testament. In order to understand the ministry of the Diaconate, it behooves us to understand the church/institution for which they have been set apart. Thus we go back in our Bibles to Genesis where God established a peculiar people which He called His own.

Genesis 11:31-12:1, “And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran. Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you.’”

Following the Tower of Babel, God allowed mankind to go its own way. Soon whole nations developed, and with them various and sundry religions- all of which were an attempt to flee from God (cf. Rom. 1:21ff). During this time God sent no prophets; revelation was non-existent. Mankind was left to sow and reap the wages of their sin. Yet as we have seen, it was God’s plan to send a Redeemer, the Savior of Genesis 3:15. And so the Lord approached one man with and through whom He would work to bring about the blessings of the Redeemer. And to this man, the Lord gave the command to leave his father’s house and go to a foreign land having only God as His refuge and strength.

Now it is important to note that God already had prompted the patriarch and his family to leave Ur and travel to Haran (which is due north of Palestine). In this place Abram faced a huge crisis for there his father, Terah, died! Abram was faced with these questions:

- Now what should Abram do? His security was gone!
- Ought he to return to his father’s house in Ur?
- Or should he stay right where he was with his nephew in Haran?

It was at this point that God came to Abram and commanded him:

Genesis 12:1b, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you.”

What a difficult command, and yet what a calling, in essence God would be Abram’s security! And so the forsaken Abram was to leave everything that was familiar to him and trust a Being he had only just met!

Now don’t miss a very important point. Abram’s background was that of polytheism- his father’s house was steeped in idolatry (Joshua 24:2)! Yet now he was to forsake his father’s house (including his gods) and follow Yahweh to a strange land? Such is the call of faith! And yet, God’s call to Abram was not without a series of promises.

Genesis 12:2-5, 7, “‘And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan... 7 And the Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.”

Abram was alone, and no doubt frightened! And to encourage the patriarch, the Lord gave him five promises. The first promise: God would be with him and his descendants!

Genesis 12: 2, “...I will bless you...”

While the connotation of “blessing” is large, it included the idea of God binding Himself to Abram and his household. We see it in Genesis 15 and the flaming torch which passed between the halved animals (v. 17). And we see it in the words God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 17.

Genesis 17:7, “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.”

Truly through the Covenant of Grace, Abraham and his descendants became “the people of God!”- which later would be called, “the church!”

The second promise was that Abram’s name would be great!

Genesis 12:2, “...I will make your name great...”

For the rest of eternity, we will remember Abraham and God’s workings in His life. That is a status of “super-stardom” which puts to shame any and every mega-star of this world. Think of it, who in glory will know the names of?

- Paris Hilton?
- Brittany Spears?
- Brad Pitt?
- Bill Gates?

And unless they're children of God, who will even care?

The third promise is that God would give Abram and his descendants a land flowing with milk and honey!

Genesis 12:7, "...to your descendants I will give this land..."

We know that "the land" here ultimately is the New Heavens and Earth (cf. Hebrews 11:15-16). This still remains the promise and hope of the child of God!

The fourth promise is that God would bless the world through him!

Genesis 12:3, "...I will bless those who bless you..."

As Paul later would explain, this would only be as the individual comes to know the faith of Abraham (Galatians 3:7, 9) As we trust in Christ, just like Abraham did long ago, we indeed come to know blessing!

This brings us to the fifth promise: Abraham would not remain alone, God would make him a great nation.

Genesis 12:2, "...I will make you a great nation..."

This is a key element to the covenant which is so easily passed over. For here we have the makings of a distinct people! By God promising to make the seed of Abraham a "great nation" God revealed His plan and will when it came to redemption; God deigned to work through a family to bring about His salvation.

This raises the question: What family? The family of Ethnic Jews? No! Paul says that it was/is those who are of the faith of Abraham (Romans 9:8) who are blessed and through whom God would work! And thus when the gospel was preached at the time of Christ, the call was rooted and grounded in the Abrahamic Covenant.

Galatians 3:8-9, 13-14, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'— in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

From all of this I hope you see that the foundation and pattern of the New Testament body of Christ,

the Church, began when God called Abram from the nations, bound Himself to the patriarch and his family, and created a peculiar people through whom He would work redemption. Thus, a distinct culture was born! Let's look at this culture...

The Culture of the Church

Psalm 146 details a very important commitment on the part of God.

Psalm 146:8-9, "The Lord opens *the eyes of* the blind; The Lord raises up those who are bowed down; The Lord loves the righteous; The Lord protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow; But He thwarts the way of the wicked."

Because the birth of the church is linked to God's commitment to a people/family, the people of Abraham, a fundamental characteristic both of the covenant and the church was born. Specifically the call for the care of the lowly, weak, outcast, and helpless in our midst!

This was a radical commitment. In the ancient world, sick, weak, helpless, and poor people were understood to be suffering the consequences of their or someone else's sin. As such, to help them was to endorse their compromise. Yet this was not the case amongst the people of God. There and in that family the poor, weak, and helpless were to be the special object of love and care as a testimony and picture of the gospel! Accordingly, God commanded His people:

Exodus 22:21-24, "And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless."

Because of God's commitment to the covenant community, a natural ethic arose: if you don't care for the needy in the body of Christ, the covenant blessings of God will be withheld! In fact, caring for the weak and hurting is THE first implication that arises from an understanding of the greatness of God!

Deuteronomy 10:17-19a, "For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe. [So how does this effect what God does? How is God's greatness manifested?] He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien..."

You say, "How does God's greatness necessitate caring for the weak and helpless?" Part of our understanding of the greatness of God revolves around His will to bind Himself to a distinct people, calling them friend. This is what the gospel is all about! As this is true, how ought this to effect the way we live?

Deuteronomy 24:19-21, "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you

beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.”

Whether you were a farmer or business man, the body of Christ was continually to be on your mind: their needs, their growth in grace, their care, their welfare! Accordingly the Word contains exhortation after exhortation linking our piety to our love of the brethren.

James 2:14-16, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? [To illustrate this, he gives the following example...] If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? [the conclusion?] Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself.”

Clearly James is connecting a living, thriving, growing faith WITH its results: being concerned for the weak and hurting in the body. From this we conclude that a mark of a thriving faith is a passion for caring for one another. In fact one couldn’t have a clearer statement of this than in James 1.

James 1:27, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit [to show pastoral concern] orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

The purity of our religion and so the gauge of a beating heart toward the Lord- is what we do with one another! Living to refresh and build up the body of Christ is a mark of spiritual vitality!

1 John 4:20-21, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”

Fidelity in our walks with God is intimately linked to our love of the brethren. You can profess the most glorious doctrinal statement, you can say that you love grace, but if you do not love this body such that you endeavor to bless it, you are self-deceived; a liar. Or as Paul put it, you are “a noising gong and a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). In fact, Christ put it best when he said this:

John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

When is Christianity at its best? When love permeates the covenant community! So when Paul set out to send a minister to Philippi to serve on his behalf, he choose a man with this qualification; Timothy.

Philippians 2:20-21, “For I have no one *else* of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.”

A mature minister of Christ is one who is concerned for the welfare of others, not their own. This always has been a mark of a healthy walk. Finally Paul exhorted us this way:

Romans 15:1-2, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."

From all of this I hope you see the covenant will of God and so the culture that emerged on account of their being a distinct people of God. Unlike the nations, Israel was to become a nation of compassion and genuine love toward one another. In light of this, notice what in Scripture constitutes a "crisis of religion."

A Crisis of Religion

One of the marks of apostasy when it came to the church in the Old Testament was NOT first a compromise in Israel's Theology or Christology, BUT a disregard for any in the body of Christ. The Psalmist lived at a time of gross hypocrisy when faith had fallen on hard times. Notice his plea:

Psalm 94:1-6, "O Lord, God of vengeance; God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O Judge of the earth; render recompense to the proud. How long shall the wicked, O Lord, How long shall the wicked exult? They pour forth *words*, they speak arrogantly; all who do wickedness vaunt themselves. [How do they "vaunt themselves"? What particular realm of theology was compromised on account of their pride? Notice v. 5...] They crush Thy people, O Lord, and afflict Thy heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, And murder the orphans."

Where does arrogance and the seed of ungodliness first manifest itself? In how we individually view and/or treat the weak, wounded, and hurting in the body. In fact look at any religion and you can pretty well judge the true nature of it in how they treat their weak, wounded, hurting, and poor! Listen to the call of God when it came to His compromised people:

Isaiah 1:16-17, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good [By the sound of this exhortation, obviously God's people had completely abandoned the Lord and were running headlong into paganism! Right? No... notice the particulars of the call...]; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

I remember years ago coming across verses like this and my first thoughts were these:

- *That's the evil that bothered God?*
- *That's why God's people went into exile?*

In light of all the theological battles of the day, the plea seemed laughable. I thought, "*If your greatest problem as a people is that you are not caring for the weak or hurting among you, you don't have a problem!*"

But then we come to understand the Covenant Will of God and so the place of mutual love and care in the Covenant Community and we conclude these things:

- When love fades between the people of God...
- When church members only care about themselves...
- When a member of a body can look at someone hurting and not be moved...
- The church is in crises; apostasy already has set in!

Notice the basis for God blessing His people:

Jeremiah 7:5-7, “For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, *if* you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.”

Wait a minute. At the writing of Jeremiah Judah had forty years remaining on the time clock before they would be snuffed out as a nation, and that which would have postponed the judgment was the body of Christ caring for their own?! Are we reading this correctly? Listen to God’s exhortation to the leaders of Judah during this time.

Jeremiah 22:1-5, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and there speak this word, and say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, who sits on David’s throne, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates. “Thus says the Lord, ‘Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of *his* oppressor. Also do not mistreat *or* do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place [N.B. there is no statement here about Judah’s formal theology. While that was a problem, it clearly wasn’t the only problem...]. For if you men will indeed perform this thing, then kings will enter the gates of this house, sitting in David’s place on his throne, riding in chariots and on horses, *even the king* himself and his servants and his people. But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself,’ declares the Lord, ‘that this house will become a desolation.’””

Ezekiel was written a couple of decades after Jeremiah at a time when judgment had befallen the people of God. What at this time remained God’s problem with His people?

Ezekiel 22:7-8, “They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you. You have despised My holy things and profaned My sabbaths.”

Yes Israel was guilty of profaning many holy things including the Sabbath. But most significant is the fact that lumped in the list of the church’s apostasy was their neglect for the poor and needy amongst them. There is no way around it... our treatment of the weak and helpless in the body of Christ is of great importance to God! After the return of God’s people following the exile in 520 BC, still the exhortation remained:

Zechariah 7:8-10, “Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, ‘Thus has the Lord of hosts said, “Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.””

And still a century later, listen to God's beef with His people- yes it included the 'weighty' sins of sorcery and witchcraft, but it also included the awful sin of neglect and disregard when it came to the body,

Malachi 3:5, "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me,' says the Lord of hosts."

From all of this we conclude that a mark of Spiritual vitality when it comes to the child of God and so a church is not first:

- The depth of their quiet times.
- The emotions they feel when they worship.
- The ability to quote scripture.
- How they observe the Sabbath.
- What they do with Scripture.
- How well they know theology.
- How often and deep is their prayer.

BUT their regard for the people of God! Truly, the healthy covenant community is a family of believers who are so committed to God that they take upon themselves the various and sundry needs of the body. Now God's people in the Old Testament blew it here as we've seen! Accordingly, when Christ came to the earth and brought Redemptive History to its current state, He established at minimum two offices for the oversight and care of the body; one of which is the office of Deacon!

Now it doesn't take a brain surgeon to venture a good guess as to the purpose, focus, and aim of the Diaconate. Against the backdrop of the Covenant Community, it is pretty obvious.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 18, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.