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The Office of Deacon, Part 3

With many theological issues, oft-times our understanding is sharpened and clarified by examining foundational elements. Take for example the Biblical instruction on marriage found in Ephesians 5. It is tempting to begin the study with v. 22 where Paul begins his treatment of the woman's role:

Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord."

Yet to start here would be to miss the important prolog of Ephesians 5:18-21 where Paul lays down the foundation upon which a solid marriage only can rest. The office of Deacon is no different. Believe it or not, but there is much controversy that rages around this office in theological studies:

- When did it begin?
- Where did it begin?

- Why did it begin?

The answer we give to these questions will shape our understanding of the ministry, calling, purpose, and function of this office. This is why we have spent some time looking at the foundational issues of the office of a deacon. We have looked at the church and now we will look at the place of the weak and hurting in the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:1, “Now concerning spiritual *gifts*, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.”

Now the King James Version explains this term “unaware” as ignorant which means uninformed, or ill-informed. It turns out that sometime previous to this epistle the Corinthians themselves wrote a letter to Paul in which they asked a variety of questions (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:1). This section of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 12-14, was written to address some of the Corinthians’ questions which, judging from what Paul says here, included things like these:

- What are spiritual gifts? How many are there?
- Does every believer have them? How can a person know which one or ones he has?
- How important are they to individual Christian living and to the life of the church?
- What is the baptism of the Holy Spirit? And how does it relate to spiritual gifts?
- Are all of the gifts given for every age of the church? Or were some given only for a special purpose and a limited time?
- Can the gifts be counterfeited? And, if so, how can believers tell the true ones from the false?

Chapters 12-14 were written to address these questions, yet before Paul entered formally into his response, he first qualified everything he was going to say with 1 Corinthians 12:2-3.

1 Corinthians 12:2-3, “You know that when you were pagans, *you were* led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”

The city of Corinth was the epicenter of the Greco-Roman commercial world as the city was the passage way for all North/South and East/West trade. Accordingly, everything that was good in Rome could be found here. And everything bad in Rome also could be found in the city. For the Corinthians, that meant that they needed to overcome their pagan past (which was a rather formidable calling). Though the religious culture of the Roman Empire was quite diverse at the time, nevertheless there was one religion that once again was on the rise and which eventually would take the ancient world by storm, the religion of mysticism. And it was Corinth that led the way to its revitalization.

Now the religion of mysticism began at the tower of Babel where mankind endeavored to ascend into the presence of God (cf. Genesis 10). As this was the first organized false religion, God confounded the effort of man, confused their language, and so dispersed mankind. The result was that the seeds of this cult were dispersed and so adopted by many of the religions of the ancient world. Dr. John MacArthur describes it this way:

Nimrod’s wife, Semiramis (the First), apparently was high priestess of the Babel religion and the

founder of all mystery religions. After the tower was destroyed and the multiplicity of languages developed, she was worshiped as a goddess under many different names. She became Ishtar of Syria, Astarte of Phoenicia, Isis of Egypt, Aphrodite of Greece, and Venus of Rome- in each case the deity of sexual love and fertility. Her son, Tammuz, also came to be deified under various names and was the consort of Ishtar and god of the underworld. (MacArthur, 2006, p. 279)

The essential “flavor” of this false religion- by, a religion which the book of Revelation says is going to take the church by storm in the last day (Revelation 17) begins with the notion that God is NOT a person to be honored, served, loved, appreciated, and adored. BUT is rather a force to be experienced. Through a variety of means; music, drugs, dancing, sex, and the like, the worshipper ascended into the presence of the deity for the purpose of communion. Dr. S. Angus wrote this:

The ecstasy experienced by the mystery religion worshiper brought him into a mystic ineffable condition in which the normal functions of personality were in abeyance and the moral strivings which form character virtually ceased or were relaxed, while the emotional and the intuitive were accentuated. (Angus, 2011, pp. 100-101)

Benjamin Warfield describes it this way:

It is characteristic of mysticism that it makes its appeal to the feelings as the sole, or at least as the normative, source of knowledge of divine things... The common element in all these varieties of mysticism is that they all seek... the knowledge of God in human feelings, which they look upon as the sole or at least the most trust-worthy or the most direct source of the knowledge of God. (Warfield, 1978, pp. 651-654)

You say, “What does all this have to do with 1 Corinthians 12?” It was believed in mystery religions that divine giftings were appointed to the worshipper in order to enhance their ability to experience the divine. As such, when the forerunners of this religion in Paul’s day were saved, the Corinthians, they naturally brought many of their pagan notions, principles, and assumptions to their relationship with God. Accordingly, the question of spiritual gifts was a huge issue. In his response, Paul therefore began with this warning:

1 Corinthians 12:2, “You know that when you were pagans, *you were* led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led.”

In other words, Paul is calling upon the Corinthians to be suspicious of all prior notions when it comes to the spiritual gifting that God gave them upon their redemption. Truly, they must be (as it were) babes in their thinking and so allow their minds to be shaped and formed by God’s word. With that Paul addressed the formal gifts which the Spirit of God gives to believers.

Spiritual Gifts and Their Distributions

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. [with this Paul then lists a series of gifts which the Spirit gives, and then closes with]...¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually

just as He wills.”

Paul’s emphasis here is this:

- Gifts are given by God NOT for the individual’s worship, BUT for their service in the body of Christ- that’s a radical notion for the Corinthians (~“for the common good”)!
- Each gift is given according to the will of God- not the desires of man.

When it comes to spiritual gifting, everyone ought to have an “other-centeredness” about us. God gave us gifts, and with them, ministries, to be used unto the building up of the body of Christ and NOT that of ourselves. Spiritual gifting ought to make us humble and create in us a servant’s heart. In fact, it couldn’t get any clearer than this.

1 Corinthians 12:18, “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.”

We see we are not our own. We have been redeemed by God for a purpose, and that purpose is to serve the people of God unto the praise and the glory of God’s grace! Now you must see that what Paul is teaching is the exact opposite to what the Corinthians were taught as pagans.

- In Mysticism the focus is on the worshipper — his wants, desires, likes, and needs. In Christianity, the focus is on the Lord and His Kingdom — NOT our wants, desires, likes, and needs!
- In Mysticism, everything you have is given that you might escape reality and so commune with the deity. In Christianity, everything you have has been given that you might joyously serve in the harsh realities of life giving preference to God, His purpose, and His people.
- In Mysticism, the most valuable gift is that which enhances your ability to experience the divine.

In Christianity, what is the most valuable gift? Paul addresses that in 1 Corinthians 12:20-26. Here he teaches us that the most valuable gift given to the church is its weak and hurting members. Now after addressing this gift, Paul gives a lengthy summary of everything that he had been teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:27-28.

1 Corinthians 12:27-28, “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues.”

The intention behind this was to provide order to the madness that had descended upon the Corinthian church. Notice as a church they were not free to do their own thing.\

- Rather they must view themselves as privileged members of Christ’s body and so subject to His rule and authority.
- Secondly, as the focus in life is not religious ascendancy or “ecstasy,”¹ but the honor, glory, and service of God and His Kingdom, we must be word driven in all that we do and hence

submissive to Christ's "apostles, prophets, and teachers."

- Third, all spiritual gifting must make us "other-centered" as every gift that God has ever given is service related- not self-related: "healings, helps, and administrations."
- There was a very important place for the charismatic gifts (~tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophesy, and the like), but even these were inferior to the more excellent way of "love" which Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 13.

That's the content and flow of this chapter. Now consider with me the most valuable of all the gifts given to the church: Its membership.

1 Corinthians 12:20-21, "But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

The necessary corollary of the teaching of mysticism is a denunciation of weaker/inferior people. If the focus is on how I feel in worship or my service of God, then naturally that which maximizes or intensifies my feeling will be exalted. Family of God, I can think of no greater distraction to "feeling" a certain way about God than people. You realize that? Their stench when unbathed, their demands when crossed, their cries when hurting, their needs, wants, and more dilute our concentration and focus in worship. Now using the metaphor of a body, Paul instructed the Corinthians that what they consider to be their greatest distraction was in fact their most valuable possession.

1 Corinthians 12:22-24, "On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary [the idea here is, "most important"], and those *members* of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly *members come to have more abundant seemliness*, whereas our seemly *members have no need of it.*"

Think of the human body for a moment and notice how we typically adorn it. We do NOT fashion clothing to enhance the size of our heads, do we? We do NOT wear clothes to make our bellies, hips, and thighs bigger. Our heads are big enough, as also our bellies, hips, and thighs, none of these need any more "honor" than they already have received. But those parts of our body which are easily overlooked, especially in a society where bathing didn't take place daily, we adorn our...

- Eyes.
- Hair.
- Fingers.
- Ears.
- Toes.

And so it is, by divine ordering in the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God, the Covenant Community! Recall, the Kingdom of God was founded upon the grace and mercy of God which was given to those who did not and do not deserve it! When God limited His redeeming work to a family in Genesis 12, Abram was in no way savable. He was a pagan who worshipped many gods. Yet God set His love upon the man, gave him faith, and so enabled him to leave civilization to follow the one and only true God. In the process God made a promise to be the God of Abraham AND his family. This created both a

people and a culture which was to reflect the heart of God in and through all things. And so as God was gracious, so also the community was to speak of grace in and through all things.

Jeremiah 22:16, “He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?” declares the Lord.”

Exodus 22:21-22, “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.

Deuteronomy 10:18-19a, “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...”

Because of this AND in contrast to the secular world which viewed weakness/ailment/deformity as the consequence of sin, the people of God throughout redemptive history were to be known for their love of the weak, widow, and orphan. On Judgment Day, how will genuine faith be discerned.

Matthew 25:34-36, “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’”

Truly, our care of the weak and needy amongst us is THE standard by which true godliness is measured. What in the body of Christ is THE test to measure one’s love for God? John said this:

1 John 4:20, “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.”

This passage and many more reflect a church culture which understood that the weak and hurting have been placed amongst us that we might participate in the act of grace and so proclaim the gospel of God everywhere we go!

2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Do you see God’s intent when it comes to the Covenant Community? He brings us through trials and difficulties so that we might be as Christ to another giving sympathy and compassion to ones undeserving! That is why the disciples “blew a gasket” when a prostitute used a costly vial of nard to wash Jesus’ feet:

Matthew 26:8-9, “But the disciples were indignant when they saw *this*, and said, ‘Why this waste?’ For this *perfume* might have been sold for a high price and *the money* given to the poor.”

In light of this, Paul’s teaching as to the most valuable possession of any Corinthian or churchman was

not something new, but a reminder of what the Jews had been taught for 2,000 years! In the body of Christ, our most cherished member is the weak and hurting. These are the members the strong are to adorn.

1 Corinthians 12:24b-26, "But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but *that* the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it"

Do you see it? Our most precious possession as a people is the weak and hurting. In fact, so ingrained was the thinking that during the Decian persecution (~250 A.D.) the Roman authorities stormed into a church-gathering. These Roman officials were seeking to loot the vast treasures which were believed to be held by the church. Upon entering the gathering, the Roman prefect demanded from Laurentius, the deacon, "Show me your treasures at once." Laurentius is said to have pointed at the widows and orphans who at that moment were being supplied with food and said, "These are the treasures of the church." And this mindset comes from 1 Corinthians 12.

Corinthians, you want to know that which ought to be your greatest desire when it comes to your service in Christ's Kingdom? It is NOT in possessing this spiritual gift or that! It is NOT in owning a treasure! RATHER, it is in using all that you have to build up, bless, and so encourage the weak and hurting in the body of Christ!

This must be their passion, mindset, and so focus which by way of application brings us to the plan of God as it pertains to our service in the Kingdom of God.

Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

We love this verse as it proclaims that the only explanation for our being here today is the grace of God. We've been saved by grace and our salvation continues to be maintained by grace. Praise God (cf. Ephesians 1:6)! Yet let me ask you a very important question: Why did God save you by grace? What was His intention in redeeming you? Paul answered the question.

Ephesians 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

You know the word Paul used here for "workmanship"? It is ποίημα [*poiema*] from which we get the English "poem." Now ποίημα [*poiema*] was used in Paul's day of the statue which a master builder created or the poem which the poet produced- both of whose existence were designed to testify to the greatness of the master. Why did God save us by grace? That through His gifting, calling, and providence, He might demonstrate His greatness as He writes the strophes of a poem by your life- a poem which demonstrates love of the loveless, pity for the undeserving, and grace for the infidel. According to Ephesians 2, this is what our lives are all about!

- What is our greatest asset as a people?
- It is the weak, hurting, widow, orphan, and poor! It is those whom God has given for us to

cherish as He Himself cherishes His children.

1 Corinthians 12:22-24a, "On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those *members* of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly *members come to* have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly *members* have no need of it"

Now and again, that we might not repeat the mistakes of past generations (as our Old Testament brethren did who neglected this calling and so served themselves), God has ordained offices in His church to ensure that we as church fulfill the calling set before us. And of the New Testament offices, the office given to ensure that:

- The hungry are given something to eat.
- The thirsty are hydrated.
- The stranger is invited in.
- Naked are clothed.
- The needs of the sick are addressed.
- Prisoner has his physical needs addressed.

Is the diaconate! When it comes to these needs, the buck stops here!

Endnotes

¹ This is a key word when it comes to Mysticism. Ecstasy was the term used in reference to the goal of worship- experiencing the deity. When this occurred, it was believed that the deity entered into/possessed the worshipper. The term used for this was "enthusiasm."

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About the Preacher

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