



The deacons:

Managers of congregational talents

In this article, I hope to show that, just as God's gifts to the people of God encompass far more than money and material possessions (which enable us to show mercy to those with little or nothing), so the work of deacons demands far more than handling and distributing money in the service of the Lord.

What has God given?

Some years ago, while visiting with a Western Canadian delegate to a church meeting, he said something that struck me as an interesting observation. "We have 16 elders in our church, but only two deacons. We don't need more, because we don't have much poverty in our church or neighborhood."

The comment drove home to me the narrow definition of the office of deacon so widespread today. "Deacons administer the finances of the church, and, when needed, distribute monies to the poor." If that is the Biblical definition of the office, no church needs more than two, and, since there's no authority involved, there is no reason a woman cannot hold the office.

But the question must be faced: what gifts has God given to the church? What are the resources of which the deacons must be responsible stewards? What is the fruit of faith that must be wisely utilized in the service of Christ? If the only gifts we recognize are financial or material, we have become so blinded by the gods of this world that a diaconate is of little value anyway. Certainly, we acknowledge (with the insights of Romans 12:3f to guide us) that God has entrusted many gifts to His church. Look at the list: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, showing mercy. Add to this list the many other divine endowments Scripture reveals, and you get the picture. God assembles people in His church and kingdom who can and must serve Him in many different ways. And I believe it is one of the weighty tasks of the deacons to identify and properly use those gifts as well as finances.

To whom has he given gifts?

Some recoil at the arguments of the preceding paragraph, as if I'm suggesting that deacons ought to stimulate the latent tendency in all of us to be proud, self-promoting, selfish.

Not at all! Look at 1 Corinthians 12:7: "*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*" Notice that last phrase: "*...for the common good.*" That's important! It makes clear that God's gifts are given to and for the church, not to and for the individual. The whole point is that all of us together, under our Head, are a body, variously endowed and equipped to live as the body of Christ. That point is made again and again in Scripture. Consider 1 Corinthians 12:12f and Romans 12:3f.

And that's where the deacons come in. God has entrusted you with the precious and exciting task of discovering and utilizing the talents and abilities of the "eyes," the "feet," the "fingers" and the "legs" of the church — all toward the common goal of advancing the cause of the Lord. Such is the message of Acts 6. The Apostles appointed seven men to serve among the flock so that they themselves could maintain their priority on the Word and prayer. Did the seven only distribute food? I doubt it. Did they only administer financial aid? During times of extreme poverty, such was undoubtedly a high priority. Yet, it was most certainly not the only thing done. And in such a

prosperous time as ours, with so many people trained, educated, and talented, it is an important work to identify, assign, and utilize a wide diversity of God-given gifts for the wellbeing of the church.

Practically speaking

How do you begin? Some churches use "gift inventories," where each member of the church is asked to identify areas of interest and ability. Such inventories require rather comprehensive and constant supervision, so as to avoid the danger of "inventory-itis" (You know, the ailment that afflicts groups that inventory everything but never use the knowledge for any identifiable purpose!).

Other churches make aggressive use of "Discover Your Gifts" seminars or classes. While they can be fruitful, they can also be a bit intimidating, especially with the more shy personalities that often wither with lack of use in the body of Christ.

I would probably suggest a slightly different approach. I'd begin with those people in the life of the church who aren't very active. Perhaps they are shy and unassuming; perhaps they have never been assimilated into the body of believers and think of themselves as outsiders; maybe they have never learned that membership in Christ means sacrificial discipleship. As deacons, interview each one of them (as couples, or in the family setting). Ask them to tell you what they are good at, what they are interested in. Ask the spouse to tell you about his/her mates gifts! Then find a way to use their talents, even if only, at first, in some small way. Such work is much more than just committee-assignment. Gradually, you will be ministering the Word-based principle that those ingrafted into Christ are expected to produce fruit!

I think of one person whose only "talent" was a love for books. To put it bluntly, she was a bookworm. Many thought she was a bit eccentric. But what a ministry she had when her deacons asked her to manage and develop a book table that would put into the hands of Gods people solid, Biblical reading material at affordable prices. She employed her ability and used it in service for the wellbeing of the congregation. That's what 1 Corinthians 12 means when it says *"for the common good."*

Or think of the mechanic who was used by his deacons to fix the cars of several unemployed folk both in the church and some whom the church was evangelizing. What a powerful use of his talents and of his witness.

Or the artist who found a "ministry" illustrating some booklets a local church produced for new member's classes, for Sunday School course materials and for the local newsletter. Or his wife, whose computer skills were used to assist the production and improvement of employment resumes for the unemployed.

You get the point. The gifts of God are not merely financial or material. They involve many kinds of abilities, talents and skills. Because that is so, and in light of the important Biblical truth that all such gifts are given for the common good, it is necessary for the deacons to become personnel experts for the body of Christ, fitting abilities with needs, never losing sight of the goal of the high calling of Christ.

JR Sittema

© 2012
www.christianstudylibrary.org