

The Vital Work of the Deacons

By Zack Guess

Introduction

The Lord Jesus knew what He was doing when He set up His church! Since He has all wisdom, and since He designed the church, it could not have been done any better! Many times people have tried to improve upon what the Lord did, but they have always made it worse. The dear Lord set up His church with a wonderful **simplicity**. Satan is always trying to complicate things, and to make God's church confused and ineffective. In fact, Paul warned the saints at Corinth that the Devil wanted to corrupt their minds "from the simplicity that is in Christ." (II Corinthians 11:3).

As the Lord set it up, there are only two offices in the church, the offices of **bishop** and **deacon**. The bishop is the overseer or pastor. From a comparison of verses seventeen and twenty-eight of the twentieth chapter of Acts, it is evident that the terms, "elder" and "overseer" or bishop refer to the same person. The first term designates the *dignity* of the office, and the second term denotes the *function* of the office. Writing to the saints at Philippi, Paul referred to the "bishops and deacons." (Philippians 1:1). In I Timothy, chapter three, when describing the qualifications of officers in the New Testament church, he mentioned only bishops and deacons.

Much has been written about the office of bishop. Everyone knows that there is no way that a congregation can adequately function without good leadership from a pastor. No church is complete without a pastor. But sometimes congregations think they can get along well with either no one fulfilling the office of deacon, or with the ones with the name of deacons merely serving as figureheads. This, however, cannot be true. We cannot "second guess" the wisdom of the Head of the church! While a church may "limp along" without a deacon, she cannot properly and fully function without one. John Gill expressed his opinion in his *Body of Divinity* that at least one deacon was necessary to form an organized church.

The Neglect of the Office

There are several reasons that this vital New Testament office has been neglected in recent years. One reason for this is the increasing role of the government in social welfare. The office of deacon was instituted in the church as recorded in Acts, chapter six. The apostles were having to care for the needs of those who were widows, indeed. This became a very time consuming burden to them. They had to neglect their very important work of "prayer and the ministry of the word." The deacons were to relieve them because it was not good for the apostles to "leave the word of God, and serve tables." The deacons assumed these burdens and freed the hands of the apostles to do the primary work they were called to do. The results were wonderful! "And the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of priests were obedient to the faith." If the office of deacon were really revived in the church today, perhaps we would see similar results!

However, since the government has taken so much of the dispensing of social welfare on itself, the church has let the office of deacon fall into disuse for all practical purposes. The deacons may take care of an occasional need, but the office is not seen as vitally important. I would like to issue a big challenge to the ones who read this. Is it too much to ask God's people to try to return to New Testament practices? Could we not at least **begin** to try to be more Biblical in our approach to these matters? If we do, it will require great sacrifices on our part. We will have to contribute to the treasuries of our churches so that the deacons will have adequate funds to meet legitimate needs. The early Christians were very concerned with the welfare of their brothers and sisters in Christ. They **very sacrificially** shared their financial resources with each other so that those who were **truly** in need were taken care of. See Acts 2:44,45; 4:34,35. Some people have accused them of practicing a form of so-called "Christian communism" and have criticized them for this. However, there is not even a hint of criticism in the Word of God for this loving care and concern for each other. The implication is that this generosity and spirit

of sacrifice and concern is one of the major reasons for the tremendous spiritual prosperity of the New Testament church in this period of her early history.

We might not be able to return to this wonderful New Testament practice all at once, but couldn't we prayerfully begin? We might be amazed at what God would do for us if we exercised the faith to be obedient. If we did this, our deacons would have plenty of work to do! Incidentally, the practice of the early church was not communistic. This is evident from the fact that in the twelfth chapter of Acts Mary, the mother of John Mark, had a house. This does not contradict Acts 4:34, where it is stated that "as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them . . ." It is obvious that the meaning is that they sold extra houses or possessions and made them available for charitable work. They were not practicing communal living. They were merely sharing their surplus wealth for the good of the needy, instead of hoarding it all for their own use. We would have to have the same generous and unselfish spirit in the church today in order to be able to really return to the New Testament pattern. Do you think we are too materialistic and worldly minded to do this?

Another reason that the office of deacon has been neglected in our day is that some pastors try to do the work of both pastor and deacon. Some men just seem to have a tendency to always be in total control. They feel that unless they personally do everything, that things will not be properly done. I know of a deacon in a church located in another state who is very discouraged. He is a very capable and conscientious man. He loves the Lord and the church. He has a great desire to express this love by faithfully serving in the office of deacon to which he was ordained many years ago. However, his pastor, a man with a very strong personality, has made him feel virtually useless. The pastor does all the things that the deacons are supposed to do, and makes all the decisions that the deacons are supposed to make. If there are any pastors who are reading this and recognize yourselves as having these tendencies, I urge you to prayerfully consider to begin to spend all your time doing what God has specifically called you to do, and to leave the deacons' work to the men who have been set aside for it. You will find that God was, indeed, exercising His infinite wisdom when he set this office up. It has been a **great relief** to me to have good deacons who freed my hands to spend my time in prayer and in the ministry of the Word. If you feel that your deacons don't know how to do their jobs, **train** them how to do them! Then **turn them loose** to do what they were ordained to do and pray for them.

If any of you brethren who read this are ordained as deacons, but you have not functioned properly in that office because of neglect or slothfulness, **shame on you!** Resolve to either do what God has called you to do, or resign from the office. Too many people consider the position of deacon to be an honorary position, but it is not. I know of another pastor whose heart just bleeds because some of the men who are deacons where he pastors do virtually nothing. They don't seem to have any idea of what they are supposed to be doing. This is a very sad situation. That church and pastor are greatly hindered in doing what they are supposed to be doing. The work of the deacons is a very necessary and important work. The church **cannot properly function** unless this work is properly done. We pastors are going to have to give an account to God for the way we have conducted ourselves in our offices. You deacons are going to have to do the same!

There is one final reason that I would like to consider that helps to explain why the office of deacon is neglected today. Some deacons have misunderstood the nature of their office. They think it is **their** job to do what God has called the pastor to do. They consider themselves to be "watch dogs" of the pulpit. They think they are called to lead and to direct the affairs of the church. I knew of one group of deacons who tacitly considered the pastor to be a kind of figurehead. He was supposed to do the preaching, but it was their job to decide in which direction the church was supposed to be going. This is simply not Biblical! The pastor is called upon to be the primary leader of the church. No pastor is to be a dictator or a lord over God's heritage. However, the pastor is supposed to lead. It is true that he should welcome input and counsel from others in the church, including the deacons, but he **must** step out in front and lead.

If you are a deacon, and your pastor is not leading as he ought, what should you do? Should you step in and fill the vacuum of leadership yourself? No! This will not work. This is not God's way. What you should do is to go see your pastor in private and to encourage him to fulfill his God-given role. You should tell him you are praying for him, and assure him that you are available to help him in any way possible. The ideal situation in a church is when the deacons are the best friends and helpers that a pastor has. This is why the job was created by

the Lord of the church. When the deacons and pastors are working together in a Biblical way, the church is strong and on its way to great spiritual growth. Satan knows this and does everything he can to cause either deacon or pastor, or both, to function in some way that is not sanctioned by Scripture.

The Actual Work of the Office

Table of the Poor

There are two primary works that the deacon is to do. These works can be clearly seen from a careful study of Acts, chapter six. Both these works are comprehended in the brief statement, “serve tables.” What tables are under consideration? From the context, it is obvious that one of the tables refers to caring for the destitute widows. Here it is easy to see why one of the qualifications for this office is that the deacon must be full of “the Holy Ghost and wisdom.” He must not be so gullible and guided by his emotions that he squanders the resources of the church on those who are merely lazy. He must not obligate the church to assume the responsibilities that should be assumed by the believing relatives of those widows. Some Biblical guidelines concerning these matters are given in I Timothy 5:3-16.

It seems to be certain that the charitable work of the deacons is not to be confined to worthy widows. The widow is a symbol of the helpless and needy. Anyone, then, who is truly in need, is an object of legitimate need for the deacon. Most of these needy ones will, no doubt, be members of the church, but not all of them. Speaking to the Galatians, Paul says, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” This is the responsibility of all Christians, but often this work is carried on by the deacons. As a practical matter, I often receive phone calls from people who claim to be in need of help from a church. On the one hand, I do not want to be heartless and unconcerned. It would be very bad to act like the priest and the Levite did in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. On the other hand, I cannot squander the limited resources of the church on the dishonest and lazy. To investigate who is worthy would take a lot of the time that I really need to be spending in prayer and the ministry of the Word. It is a great relief to me to be able to direct callers to one of our deacons. These brethren have developed the skills to discern who is a truly needy person, worthy of our support. Even though our church is small, we have been able to often help those in need, both those in our membership or acquaintance, and those who we do not know. I believe that God is pleased with this. God has said that, “Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard.” (Proverbs 21:13). He also has said that, “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.” (Proverbs 19:17).

There is another reason that the deacon must be full of the Holy Ghost. If he is not a spiritual minded man, he will not have the proper attitude toward the poor. He may have a self righteous attitude. He may give some aid, but he may do it in such a manner that the recipient is made to feel badly about it. A man full of the Holy Spirit will not be gullible, but he will have the compassion of Christ as he deals with poor, sinful humanity. He will be able to bring good, loving Biblical counsel to people as he ministers to their needs. If he can tell that the person has gotten into trouble because of faulty living patterns, the deacon may ask his pastor to become involved with some good counsel from God’s word.

Table of the Pastor

The other “table” the deacon is responsible for is that of the pastor. This should be plain from a consideration of Acts, chapter six. There we see that the office was created in order to free the hands of the apostles so that they could spend the bulk of their time in prayer and in the ministry of the Word. It is obvious that if a pastor has to spend most of his time making a living in secular labor, he will not be able to properly do the work that God has called him to do. Not only will he suffer; the church will suffer also! While it is true that any pastor should be more than willing to labor with his hands to provide for the needs of himself and his family when the church is unable to do so, it is also true that the Lord has “ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.” (I Corinthians 9:14). *[If anyone would like to read a Biblical exposition of this subject, request the pamphlet, FullTime Ministry—Full Time Support, by the editor.]*

It is the business of the entire church to be obedient to this clear Scriptural principle, but the deacons should certainly take the lead in it. I know of so many faithful and dedicated pastors among the Primitive Baptists who love the churches they serve and who long to spend most of their time in praying, studying and pastoring, but who must spend many long hours in providing for the needs of their families. They must then abuse their health by burning much “midnight oil” in study and must neglect proper rest in order to do the best they can to fulfill their tasks of preaching and pastoring. The Lord has graciously given these dedicated servants to His churches, and sometimes the churches fail to appreciate what the Lord has done. Sometimes these good pastors are neglected because those to whom they minister are covetous, but I do not believe this is the problem in most of the cases I am aware of today. I believe the neglect is usually due to ignorance or to the failure to be observant and to think clearly. The ignorance may be the fault of the ministers. Sometimes we are guilty of failing to teach what the Scriptures have to say about this subject. We do not want the people to think that we are greedy for money, so we are silent. We are wrong to do this, however. We must teach what God’s Word says at the proper time and in the proper way. If some people then misunderstand our motives, we cannot help that. We must be faithful to Him who has called us.

Sometimes it has amazed me that men who otherwise are observant and clear thinking enough to hold good jobs, totally fail to exercise those abilities when it comes to ascertaining the needs of their pastors. Speaking of pastors, Paul exhorted those at Thessalonica to “know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you...” (I Thessalonians 5:12). The church members, especially the deacons, should know and be acutely aware of the needs of their pastors. In doing this they can exercise a little of the powers of observation and a little old fashioned common sense. You men know from your own experience what it costs to live. You know what it costs to provide for housing, insurance, food, utilities, medical expenses, automobile expenses, and so on. Your pastor and his family have the same needs that you and your family do. There is nothing deep and mysterious about this. It just requires a little concern, “detective work,” and commitment on your part. If you want to please God and be a benefit to the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ, provide for the table of the pastor!

Some Very Practical Matters

Sometimes we speak the truth, but we speak it in such generalities that it is hard to know how to actually put it into practice. I would now like to address myself to several very practical matters. One is that many, if not most, churches among the Primitive Baptists do not pay their ministers if the minister is not actually at the church to preach on a given Sunday. In other words, if the minister fills his appointment, he is paid. However, if the minister is away preaching at another church and a visiting minister fills his place, the visitor is paid, but the pastor is not. This is hurtful to the pastor for several reasons. One is that he will not likely receive the same amount when he is away as he does when he is at home. This is especially true if the home church is trying to fully support him as he does what God has called him to do. Another disadvantage of this practice is that it makes it appear that the minister is being supported only in his efforts to actually preach, and is receiving no support for the equally important work of pastoring. I know this is not actually the case, but it makes it appear as if it were.

I know that I am speaking of a delicate matter, and hope that I will not be misunderstood. I am not preaching for money. God knows my heart and He is my witness. I am simply speaking things which ought to be spoken for the sake of my fellow servants in the ministry and for the cause of God and of truth. Some men cannot successfully speak of these things, because their congregations have not been properly taught over the years, or because they may have some carnal minded and covetous people among them who would falsely and maliciously accuse their pastors of wrong motives. It has been my great blessing to have known some faithful servants of God who have been unafraid and have made pioneering efforts in my generation to educate God’s people from the Bible on these vital matters. I salute brave and true men such as Elder Hassell Wallis, and Elder H. D. Fulmer, who taught these things two and three decades ago, in a time when such teaching was exceedingly rare and unpopular among many Primitive Baptists. I also salute many good deacons who loved God’s servants and who tried to take as much load off them as possible. Brother Claude Ewing was one of those

faithful deacons with whom I was blessed to serve during the early part of my ministry. Since then, the Lord has raised up several deacons who have loved the ministers of God, and who have done all they could to help them carry the load. I am thankful that the church where I pastor, Grace Chapel, has for many years faithfully supported their pastor, whether he was there preaching or whether he was away. This has given me the freedom to, without having to worry about it, be gone to preach elsewhere, when I think the Spirit of the Lord has directed me to do so. I have tried not to abuse this privilege. I know other faithful preachers who do not feel this freedom. They would like to go somewhere, but they also know they must meet their financial obligations, and they find themselves in a dilemma.

There are other practical matters that concern God's servants, especially those who are trying to devote most or all of their time to the work of the ministry. Under the present system of reporting income to the I. R. S., most full time ministers must report their income as self employed persons. This means that they must pay both the employer's and the employee's portion of the Social Security tax. At present rates, this is more than ten per cent. This means that if a church is giving a minister say \$500.00 per week, he has to withhold over \$50.00 of that for "Uncle Sam." Deacons should also recognize that pastors have a lot of traveling expenses, postage, the buying of a library to help them study, and many other ministerial expenses.

If there are some good deacon brothers or others who have been stirred up and made to think by this article, why don't you consider going and talking with your pastor. Tell him that you love him and appreciate his dedication to the service of the Lord. Tell that you would like to better understand the needs of him and of his family. Let him know that you care and will pray for him and support him in anyway you can. Ask him questions about his needs. Use your common sense and think about what your needs would be if you were in his circumstances.

One church I know of has had the foresight to give their pastor a sum each month with which to purchase an Individual Retirement Account. They realize that if that man lives to an advanced age, or falls into poor health, he will need some income.

Again I wish to state that I hope I will not be misunderstood. I am giving my full time to the ministry because I want to. No one is forcing me to do this. I have a wonderful wife and some precious children who believe in what I am doing. I have some fellow pastors who fully support me in what I am doing, and encourage me and the church in it. I have three very spiritual minded and dedicated deacons who hold up my hands in every way. My father in the ministry, Elder H. M. Wallis, taught me and the people the right way. I am in a position to speak out when many of my fellow servants cannot because of circumstances. I would be wrong and unfaithful not to speak out. I want to encourage anyone who reads this to try it by the Scriptures. If it passes the test, put it into practice. If you know of a preacher who needs to read it, make a copy of this article and give it to him. If you know of a deacon who needs to read it, make a copy and give him one. If any of you feel you have learned something and have been convicted that you have failed, confess that failure to the Lord, repent, and spend the rest of your life doing the best you can.

I ask each of you to pray diligently to our God that not only will He raise up dedicated preachers, but that He will also raise up many dedicated deacons! If we do things God's way and see a GREAT REVIVAL in the offices of bishops and deacons, properly functioning as they were designed to, there is no telling what God will do for us in the way of blessings!