

Finding the Deacons We Need

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Our search for new office bearers extends not just to elders, but also to deacons. What is the congregation to look for as they consider for whom to vote?

Scriptural Qualifications

The Lord has given specific instructions to us in the Bible about the qualities He wishes to see in those called to the office of deacon. Unless a person meets these criteria, no Consistory may nominate the brother for the office, and no congregation member may give him his vote. Paul was moved by the Spirit to record these criteria:

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (I Timothy 3:8-13 – ESV throughout article).

Nature of the Work

When all is said and done, every brother of the congregation ought to fit these criteria (though in the brokenness of this life not all do). More needs to be said, then, in considering the question of who can be nominated for the office, and who of the nominated brothers should receive one’s vote. As I did with the previous article on the elders, I wish to devote some space to detailing the nature of the work of the deacon. As that work comes into clearer focus, we can also determine the better who is able to do the work.

Communion of Saints

The congregation of Jesus Christ at Corinth is, says Paul, a body: *“Now you are the body of Christ”* and all the Corinthian believers are *“individually members of it”* (1 Corinthians 12:27). This reality has consequences, for a body by definition must work together. In order to impress

upon the Corinthians how important each individual believer is for the proper functioning of the congregation as a whole, Paul compares the spiritual body of Christ to the physical human body. The human body is the sum total of all its members, and each member has its unique contribution to make to the well being of the whole body. He puts it like this:

“For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:14-26).

The body of Christ functions no differently than the human body in that all the members individually make up one whole, and all the members need each other. That’s why Paul concludes, *“Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it”* (vs 27).

This reality described here by the apostle was evident in the way the believers in Acts 2 interacted with each other. For the Christian converts *“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.... And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:42-47). These people realized that as a group they were united into one body through their shared faith in Christ, and they expressed this unity in deeds that sought each other’s benefit.

The same can be found in Acts 4:32, concerning the body of believers in Jerusalem: *“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”*

The same chapters add that great numbers of people came to faith. Acts 1:15 records 120 persons, while on the day of Pentecost about 3,000 souls were added (Acts 2:41). In Acts 4:4 one reads that the number of men alone totaled 5,000, to which *“believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women”* (5:14). Hence by the time one gets to Acts 6 one could estimate that there may well have been a sizeable congregation of some 20,000 people.

Acts 6 tells us, though, that such church growth brought its own difficulties in relation to the effective functioning of the communion of saints. *“Now in these days when the disciples were*

increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). Possibly the Greek-speaking widows did not receive the food they needed. Or maybe they were not involved in the work of distributing food. Whatever the case might be, the fact is that the limitations of this broken life caused the body to malfunction. Something was not right in the church of Jesus Christ.

How were the apostles to address this problem? They recognized the importance of devoting themselves totally to the ministry of reconciliation, since God had ordained that the preaching of the gospel was the way by which people would come to faith. So the apostles came up with this solution:

“And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

If the apostles had to involve themselves in the actual functioning of the communion of saints, they would have to do so at the cost of their real work. So they appointed and ordained seven men to the office of deacon. The seven men are not called ‘deacons’ in so many words, but their task description (“*serve tables*”) captures the work characterizing the deacon; he *serves*. In fact, the Greek word ‘serve’ is simply the verbal form of the noun deacon; these seven men had to *deacon the tables*. Hence the name ‘deacon’.

Each church of Jesus Christ is a body, with each person a member. That body (like the human body) needs to function corporately; each member needs to function for the benefit of the other members. In the abiding brokenness of this life, this may require organization. It is when spontaneity does not cover a need that the deacons must get involved. Their task is the ministry of mercy: letting people taste the mercy of God. To that end deacons help and encourage the members of the congregation to look after each other, to be the communion of saints the body of Christ must be.

Encourage

Of course, in order to know the needs and ensure that the appropriate support is given by the brotherhood, the deacons need to go into the congregation and visit the members. I realize: we commonly understand the collection and distribution of *money* as forming the heart of the deacon’s task (for managing the collection bags is what we all see them do in church). But here we understand the matter wrongly. Distributing alms to the poor is only a small part of the ministry of mercy. A more important duty of the deacons is to make sure that the communion of saints functions well. Hence deacons need to make visits to all members, and in their visiting are to determine (in this order!)

1. Whether the gifts God has given to the visited are properly used for the benefit of other members of the body, and
2. Whether there are any needs at the visited address that are not being met by the brotherhood.

Where gifts are not being utilized for the benefit of others, the deacons will need to encourage and instruct in greater obedience to following the example of Christ. Where an unfulfilled need is found, the deacons will need to encourage others of the body to be the hand and foot the needy member requires. Where the need is financial, they may be able to help through the gifts earlier collected in the offerings.

Who, then, can be a deacon? The deacon's main task is not first of all to give (financial) assistance or advice to the needy, but rather to ensure that the members are willingly assisting each other, and if not, stimulating them to do so. The brother gifted in encouraging the congregation to be the communion of saints God wishes it to be: let him be called to this beautiful task.

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