

The Deacon: A Divine Right Office with Divine Uses

By C. N. Willborn

“The Bible, history, confessional Presbyterianism, and need argue for a fully functioning diaconate.”¹ Thomas Peck (1822–1893), argued that the office of deacon “is not a small office.”² That may surprise some in our day. It would have surprised many in the day of Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847). Indeed, the office of deacon had been virtually lost to the church in early nineteenth century Scotland and America.³ Although many churches have “deacons” today, the “office” is generally perceived to be a small one. It suffers from lack of definition and, in many cases, from low self-esteem. Let me reassert, “It is not a small office.” It deserves a fresh infusion of definition and esteem.

Toward the end of defining the office of deacon, elevating it in the eyes of church membership, and providing a fully functional diaconate, this essay is offered. To accomplish this goal, I shall set forth the biblical basis of the office of deacon, the biblical nature and duties of the office of deacon, and the relation of the diaconate to the eldership. In developing this paper I stand on the shoulders of various fathers of the faith, believing that the Holy Spirit has been faithful to teach godly men throughout the generations. The end product, I believe, will be a fresh examination and articulation of a rich heritage of biblical scholarship, which could enrich the church for years to come.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF THE DIACONATE

In the sixteenth century John Calvin taught that deacons find “their origin, institution, and office” in Luke’s history in Acts 6.⁴ In the following century, the scholar-pastor-biblical theologian John Owen utilized the historical account of Luke to explain the beginning of the diaconal office when he said, “[Acts 6] was the *institution of a new office*.”⁵ The eighteenth century witnessed the same view in John Brown of Haddington:

“The Divine appointment of Deacons in the Christian Church is beyond dispute, Acts 6:1–6; 1 Tim. 3:8–11; Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28; Phil. 1.1.”⁶ Likewise, in the nineteenth century, Professor John Dick said “we have an account in the sixth chapter of the Acts” of the institution of deacon.⁷ Finally, the twentieth century provided us the testimony of various scholars including Robert Reymond, who wrote: “Deacons, first chosen to assist the apostles (Acts 6:1–7), were thereafter appointed to assist the elders.”⁸ Acts 6, for Reymond, is the earliest biblical account of deacons. Thus, we have seen that

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1. C. N. Willborn, “The Diaconate: God’s Office of Temporal Affairs,” in *Confessing Our Hope: Essays in Honor of Morton Howison Smith on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Taylors, S.C.: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004) 179. “The Diaconate” offers a historical overview, particularly focusing upon American Presbyterianism.

2. Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892; repr., Taylors, S.C.: Presbyterian Press, 2005) 199.

3. For an extended account of the decline and revival of the office in Scotland see John G. Lorimer, *The Deaconship: A Treatise on the Office of Deacon With Suggestions for its Revival in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1842).

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke & Co., 1957) 2.322.

5. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould, 16 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981) 16.146.

6. John Brown, *Systematic Theology* (1782; repr., Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications and Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2002) 569.

7. John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J. Whetham, 1836) 2.498. Dick was Minister of the United Associate Church, Greyfriars, Glasgow, Scotland and Professor of Theology in the College of the United Session Church. Dick was a favorite of nineteenth century American theologians like R. L. Dabney and Charles Hodge.

8. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998) 899.

careful handlers of God's word have reckoned Acts 6 as the inaugural account of the office of deacon.

It is evident from our brief survey that there is something of a consensus in the Reformed community that "deacons" have their initial biblical basis in Acts 6. Now, I raise this early in order to address a concern that some express over the Lucan account in Acts. Some would acknowledge Acts 6 to be an account of the appointment of "those who were to oversee the distribution of what was given to meet the needs of the church's poor in Jerusalem," but deny the "seven" were "deacons." The primary ground for denying an early diaconate in Jerusalem is the subsequent ministries of Stephen and Philip as "evangelists." Stephen was "full of grace and power," and "was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8).⁹ The attesting gifts seem to be correlative to the "spreading" of the word of God (Acts 6:7). Thus, as one of the seven, Stephen is immediately related to the public proclamation of the word. Likewise, Philip was later described as "Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven" (Acts 21:8), and was said to be "proclaiming Christ" and performing signs (Acts 8:5, 6). Therefore, since the office of deacon is one of service alone and does not include the "able to teach" qualification (1 Tim. 3:2), it would appear that Stephen and Philip were not deacons as we know deacons and so Acts 6 does not present us "deacons," but some "temporary, *ad hoc* arrangement."¹⁰

In response to the "modern scholars,"¹¹ Louis Berkhof has offered a biblical rationale for the classic position on Acts 6 as the Divine inauguration of the diaconal office. His arguments include: (1) Prior to Acts 6, the term *diakonoi* is used in a general sense designating "servant," but afterwards it began to be used in a more restricted fashion to indicate those who "engaged in works of mercy and charity"; and (2) "The requirements for the office, as mentioned in Acts 6, are rather exacting, and

in that respect agree with the demands mentioned in 1 Tim. 3:8–12" (Berkhof, 587).

George Knight argues somewhat differently, but in complementary fashion to Berkhof. In 1 Timothy 3:1–13, Dr. Knight explains, we have "a twofold pattern for the official ministry of the church, that of oversight (ἐπισκοπος) and that of service (διακονος)."¹² He supports his thesis by pointing out the same pattern in Philippians 1:1 where Paul greets "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi including [σὺν— "with"] the overseers and deacons." While somewhat more reserved than others, Knight admits that the same twofold pattern of oversight and service "seems to be reflected in the early division of labor at Jerusalem between the ministry of the apostles (of prayer and ministry of the Word, Acts 6:1, 4) and the aid to widows on the part of the Seven (vv. 1–3)" (Knight, 175). Not only is the Acts passage a "conceptual parallel" to 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1, but we must also recognize "linguistic parallels," Knight suggests. For example, Peter, one of the apostles in the early Jerusalem experience, "can refer to himself as a 'fellow elder' (σὺμπρεσβυτερος, 1 Pet. 5:1)."¹³ In similar fashion, the responsibility of the Seven in Acts 6 is "referred to as the daily διακονεῖν τραπεζῶν (Acts 6:12 [sic] 6:2)," which parallels those responsibilities inferred from the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 (Knight, 175). Thus, Knight has argued that there are both "conceptual" and "linguistic" parallels between the Acts 6 passage and the other primary passages which describe the office of deacon and set it apart from the "spiritual"¹⁴ office of elder.

Although the parallels between the office of Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1 have been drawn, I have not answered the specific objection that Stephen and Philip exercised the role of an evangelist—a word ministry—and, therefore, were not singularly set apart for official "service" ministry. It is our contention that their activity in word ministry does not invalidate the classic position that the Seven of Acts 6 were the first class of deacons. I would acknowledge *first* that Stephen and Philip certainly were used as evangelists subsequent to Acts 6; but this does not invalidate the proposition that they were ordained to the Jerusalem diaconate any more than a man's subsequent usefulness as an elder would deny him an earlier role as a deacon. It is not unusual for a man to serve in the diaconal office and later in life, as he matures in his giftedness, to be recognized for his gifts and usefulness as an elder. Second, I would argue that deacons will, no doubt, have "a wider sphere of Christian usefulness" than individuals ordinarily might.¹⁵ As Douglas Bannerman explains, "There was

9. Scripture quotations offered by the author are taken from the New American Standard Bible, updated edition.

10. Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "Women in Office," at www.opc.org/GA/women_in_office.html.

11. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 586.

12. George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992) 175.

13. Knight, 175. Of course, it is clear from Tit. 1:5, 7; Acts 20:17, 28; and 1 Pet. 5:2 that πρεσβυτερος is a synonym for ἐπισκοπος.

14. Quotations are inserted here because I will argue later that the office of deacon is also a spiritual office and this has great consequences for its esteem and the qualifications for holders of the office.

15. D. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church Historically and Exegetically Considered* (1887; repr., Grand Rapids:

nothing in the fact of the seven having been set apart specially for service in the diaconship to hinder them from using freely, like the other disciples, as they had opportunity, all spiritual gifts of utterance and exhortation which might be in them" (Bannerman, 425). As the deacon attends the various needs of the congregation and the community, he will have opportunities to declare the riches of the Father's common and special grace, the sufficiency of Christ, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. One of the most natural ways for the poor to be evangelized (Matt. 11:5) will be through the diaconal ministry of the church. The deacon merely expands upon his specific work of mercy and charity to the broader sense of servant or minister, as an ambassador of reconciliation. Thus, he is ministering to the complete man—body and soul.

Having paused to answer this objection, I would offer a second line of reasoning, which would suggest that the "seven" of Acts 6 were deacons, i.e., the manner in which the men were chosen. First, the Apostles did not appoint seven men but instructed the congregation to "select from among you seven men." The congregation's selection process was to be based upon some basic qualifications which the Apostles' outlined for them.¹⁶ Once the congregation "chose" the seven, they brought them before the Apostles and the Apostles, in turn, prayed about the men, no doubt considering their qualifications and ability to do work of service. "After praying," Luke tells us, "they [the apostles] laid their hands on them" (Acts 6:6).¹⁷ From Acts 6:7, we may infer that the deacons proceeded to carry out their new task, investigating the complaint, and *caring for the existing temporal needs*. Thus, the Apostles successfully continued their work of prayer and ministry of the word, without the distraction of the temporal needs, which were met by the seven.

The mode of appointment which we have just rehearsed is not unlike that mode followed for the election, examination, and ordination of church officers today. Indeed, the church today takes its lead from NT passages such as this one. *First*, the Apostles called the people to consider whether there were qualified men among them and to identify them. *Second*, the people elected or chose qualified men. *Third*, the Apostles took the men under consideration and prayed over the qualifications of the men. Finding them qualified, we see the *fourth* step in the process as the Apostles laid hands on them, thus ordaining them to the official work of serving tables (διακονίαν τραπεζαίας).

From the mode of selection revealed in Acts 6 we learn much about the Church and the seven. First, the

Church is a commonwealth with a representative government; it is neither dictatorial nor hierarchical. Second, we see that spiritual qualifications are a *sine qua non* of official ecclesial work. Finally, the "seven" were ordained to official status *with specific purpose* in the Church and that of serving tables, which we understand from the context to be all temporal affairs of the Church. From close observation of these facts, Douglas Bannerman concluded: "All these facts taken together seem to prove beyond doubt that we have here the first recorded appointment of ordinary office-bearers in the Christian community, that the nature of the office was as stated above, that it was in one sense a new one, and that therefore the grounds on which it was established, and the mode in which the first deacons were appointed, were carefully put on record for the future guidance of the Church" (Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine*, 427).

For these reasons I believe Acts 6 belongs in that corpus of NT literature (along with 1 Timothy 3:8–13; Romans 12:7, 8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; and, Philippians 1:1) given for instruction about the office of deacon. Thus stands the Biblical basis for the Office of Deacon.

THE BIBLICAL NATURE OF THE OFFICE OF DEACON

While it may certainly be said that the deacon was "formed upon Jewish analogies," we have seen that a good portion of scholarship argues against the continuity of the "office" from OT to NT. The office of deacon as given in Acts 6 and qualified in 1 Timothy 3 is "a new one;"¹⁸ nevertheless, it has Jewish OT roots which help us understand the nature of the office. The care of the poor, orphans, and widows was certainly a responsibility of the OT Church, but the care was a general duty of *all* saints rather than the duty of an official body (Exod. 23:11; Lev. 19:10; 23:22; 25:25; Isa. 58:7, 8). A clear passage on this is Deuteronomy 15 where we read: "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955) 425. This volume has been reprinted recently by Tentmaker Publications and is available with a new introduction by C. N. Willborn.

16. The qualifications will be dealt with in a subsequent section.

17. See John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989) XVIII:238. "Laying on of hands was a solemn sign of consecration under the law. To this end do the apostles now lay their hands upon the deacon, know that they are offered to God." For OT and NT examples of consecration to special service through laying on of hands, see Num. 8:10; 27:18; Deut. 34:9; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6.

18. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16:146; Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine*, 420.

your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother” (v7). Notice that the poor are the object of the people’s generosity. Indeed, the people are to be *so* generous that “there will be no poor among you” (v4). Next, we are assured in this passage that the provisions for the poor will emanate from the covenant faithfulness of God toward His people: “the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess” (v4). The LORD makes such ample provision for His people that the needs of *all* can be met! Now this raises a third point from this passage, the definition of the object. The proper object of the Israelites’ generosity is the poor, but then God qualifies the “poor” when he says, “a poor man with you, one of your brothers” (7). In verse 9 we read “your poor brother” and again in verse 11 the people are exhorted to “freely open your hand to your brother.” Thus it is that the primary objects of the OT peoples’ charity are the poor brothers among them. All the people of Israel were to care for the poor and to do it in such proportions that there would be no poor among them.¹⁹

Having suggested, if not established, that the NT Deacon has only “Jewish analogies,”²⁰ we may say that God withheld the office, formally, for the New Covenant epoch. In the progress of revelation and redemptive history, God reserved the “office” of mercy and charity for the covenantal epoch established by the work of our precious Savior. I would suggest that while the office may find analogies in the Jewish landscape of the OT, it finds its defining characteristic in the compassion of Christ and this compassion is not only *exhibited* in the Church in Acts, but divinely *concentrated* and *constituted* in the Jerusalem diaconate. The diaconate, I would argue, is part of the “better covenant” we have in Christ Jesus (Heb. 7:22); it was revealed in the fullness of time as an abiding example of the compassion of our Savior who came in the fullness of time and

gave himself—not coming to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:28).

Just as there is movement from the OT ceremonial feasts to the New Covenant sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and from circumcision to baptism, we have a clear illustration of movement from the OT paradigm of general duty toward the poor to the NT office of deacon. The relation of the OT approach and the NT office is clearly seen in Acts 4 and Acts 6. The OT “general duty” to the poor is seen in Acts 4:34–35: “For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.” In the “congregation of those who believed” (v. 32) at Jerusalem there was provision made for the needy of their number. The rich and the poor were harmonized as God blessed the congregation.

Sadly, however, something happened between Luke’s record of Acts 4:35 and 6:1 so that “a complaint arose” from one sector of the church “because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.” What caused this neglect? I would suggest that the divine providence, which led to the neglect of the widows, and the subsequent ordination of the seven deacons, is recorded for us in Acts 5:1–11. There we are told that Ananias and Sapphira “put the Spirit of the Lord to the test,” through complicity in lying, and met their death at God’s hand. This punitive act of God caused “great fear” to come over “the whole church” (5:11). Without being dogmatic and without presuming too much upon silence, I would suggest that the fear that gripped the Jerusalem Church “and all who heard of these things” (5:11) paralyzed the church, as fear is apt to do to each of us, and thus blunted its zeal for bearing burdens and meeting needs. Out of this occasion of need, the Holy Spirit of God led the church to make new, specific, and better provisions for her temporal needs, as exemplified in the “widows.” This new, specific, and better provision came through an official body of men (*ανδρας*).

Thus far we have observed the deacon as an office of compassion as exhibited in meeting the needs of the poor and widows. More will be said of this, but for now we move to the qualifications of the office and observe what this reveals to us about the nature of the office. First, the fact that this body of *διακονοι* (deacons) is exclusively *ανδρας* (men) is certainly significant and demands particular note here. While intelligent and well meaning men have suggested that passages like Romans 16:1 and 1 Timothy 3:11 offer a proviso for female deacons (deaconesses), the case lacks biblical

19. Zechariah 7:9, 10 tells us that the Israelites were to “practice kindness and compassion each to his brother and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger [in their midst] or the poor.” Because they did not as the LORD instructed, He withheld good things from them and even cast them from the land. He had provided the land and its bounty, not for some to grow wealthy at the expense of others, but for the rich and poor to be reconciled.

20. This fact notwithstanding, there are some who would attempt to equate the “Chazzan of the synagogue” with the Seven and the deacons and, thus, show more direct continuity from the OT to the NT. See Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine*, 421; Thomas Smyth, *Presbytery and Not Prelacy the Scriptural and Primitive Polity* (Boston: Croker and Brewster; New York: Robert Carter, 1843) 243.

support, particularly in the light of Luke's use of "men" (read "male") in the passage before us in Acts and the prescribed order of nature by which Paul argues consistently in 1 Timothy. The fact that the office of deacon is a leader office *and* is spiritual by nature *and* involves doctrinal acumen strongly suggests, even demands, that the office should reflect created order so that all things in the Church reflect divine warrant. Therefore, to qualify for the office of deacon one must be a male.

Second, we must not overlook the fact that the men who were first chosen to care for widows in the church were Christians. The congregation was instructed to "select from among you" in order to meet the widows' need. It is not the world's place to care for the widow of the church. "It was work among brethren and sisters," explained Bannerman, "to be done by brethren in a spirit of brotherly love and willing service" (Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine*, 423).

Third, the deacons were to have a "good reputation." The "good reputation" would appear to find a parallel and commentary in Paul's first letter to young Timothy: "Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain" (1 Tim. 3:8). Among the many things intimated in this passage, here the "deacon" is to possess personal characteristics not terribly unlike the elder. Indeed, Paul introduces the office with its title, ΔΙΑΚΟΝΟΥΣ, and immediately supplies the adverb *ὡσαύτως* (likewise), which, as Knight explains, "both distinguishes the *διακονοὶ* from the *ἐπίσκοπος* and compares the two" (Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 168). Thus the qualifications of the deacon are similar to the elder, yet distinct. The point here is that we have qualifications which are obviously those of an office of the church. The same qualifications (though in expanded form) are those demanded of the "seven" to be chosen from the congregation in Jerusalem. The seven deacons of Jerusalem were to be *μαρτυροῦμενους* ("good reputation" or "well reported ones"), which is analogous to the qualification of *σεμνους* ("men of dignity" or "worthy of respect") in 1 Timothy 3:8. Paul proceeds to define "men of dignity" in negative terms as "not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain." Thus, one may be satisfied that "men of dignity" (the overarching qualification in 1 Timothy) are "well reported men" or men of "good reputation" (the overarching qualification in Acts 6).

In addition to being men of dignity—worthy of respect, well reported men, of good repute—the seven to be chosen from among the congregation were to be men "full of the Holy Spirit." Now we have already

established that the deacons were to be Christians so why the emphasis on the Holy Spirit? The answer is simple: The offices of the Church, whether elder or deacon, require spiritually mature men, men known for being filled with the Holy Spirit. They are to be men "tested" (1 Tim. 3:10) and known for their spiritual stability and growth. While the work of the deacon is one of service to the poor and the widows; while the work of the deacon is one of serving tables and making distributions to those in need (thus, handling the monies of the church), we must never lose sight of the fact before us in Acts 6:3—the deacon is to be "full of the Holy Spirit." It is not enough that a man be respected by or successful in the world, he must exhibit a deep spirituality if he is to be considered for the office of deacon. What the Apostles were attempting to spell out for the Church was that the respect one has for a man who will engage in the work of mercy and charity must be of a high order, a spiritual order.

Paul expounds this qualification when he says deacons are "men of dignity ... holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (1 Tim. 3:8, 9). Indeed, the LORD promised to send the Holy Spirit and "He will guide you into all the truth.... He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you" (John 16:13, 15). In "holding to the mystery of the faith," the deacon is to be the possessor of the same truth content, the same objective body of doctrine, as the elder. Note 1 Timothy 1:19 where Paul exhorts Elder Timothy to "fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected." This truth content, this objective body of doctrine, this *faith*, is that teaching of Scripture, which the Holy Spirit gave through inscripturation and into which He *guides* His people. So, we see the relationship of "full of the Holy Spirit" in Acts 6 and "holding to the mystery of the faith" in 1 Timothy 3:9. If we walk in truth; if we possess "the mystery of the faith," it is only because we are full of the Spirit (see Rom. 8:1ff.).

We must not leave this point without attending to Paul's addendum to that qualification of "holding to the mystery of the faith;" he appends the little prepositional phrase—"with a clear conscience." First, one can only own the faith through the work of the Holy Spirit Who is *with* the Christian and *in* the Christian (John 14:17). Deacons must be marked, as Knight writes, by "the genuineness of their faith" and this being "evident in their godly life" (Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 169). The Church errs greatly when she chooses men "hoping" they will become deacons. The Church errs greatly when she chooses men who are not convinced of the doctrine of the Church. The Church

errs greatly when she does not choose men of the highest spiritual reputation. To be qualified for the office of deacon, a man must hold the doctrine of the Church and this with a clear conscience.

Finally, the Apostles stipulated that the men of choice for the Jerusalem Church were to be full of wisdom. This qualification I take to go hand in hand with the previous one of being full of the Holy Spirit. This is indicated by various English translations that translate “the Holy Spirit and wisdom” as correlatives. Certainly it takes little discussion to show how important it is for one to possess godly wisdom when one’s task involves discerning needs, genuine needs from false needs. In the context of Acts 6 and the complaint that arose, a man would need great wisdom, wisdom permeated with the “mystery of the faith” as taught by the Holy Spirit, in order to sort out the situation and act as a good steward of God’s wealth. The Apostle James addresses this topic and we may apply James’ general exhortation to the specific case of the deacons—if it is true of all Christians, how much more must it be true for the deacons who are to possess the very qualification. James speaks of “the gentleness of wisdom” and how it works against “jealousy and selfish ambition,” which in turn produce “disorder and every evil thing.” Certainly Acts 6:1 shows that the Jerusalem Church was divided—Jewish and Hellenistic—and this division had caused disorder, marked by complaints. In this context, James says the remedy is wisdom—“But the wisdom from above [i.e., from the Holy Spirit] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy” (James 3:17). Notice particularly that “wisdom” is “full of mercy and good fruit.” Again, if this is a general exhortation, how much more is it to characterize the church officer, especially the deacon?

From the objects of the deacon’s labors (poor and widows), to the subject of their labors (temporal and fiscal), to the qualifications of the office (spiritually equipped), the church is behooved to declare the diaconal office to be of a spiritual nature. Yes, the office is one directly related to and involving the temporal affairs of the Church, an office of service, but whether the office is concerned with the physical needs of the Church or the financial welfare of the church or the care of church property, the deacon is dealing with the affairs of King Jesus. The diaconate labors as an office of a spiritual enterprise—the Church of the LORD Jesus Christ.

21. Of course, I acknowledge that a man may be dismissed from office through various biblical disqualifications (e.g., egregious sin or change of doctrinal views).

The qualifications for the deacon from Acts 6 to 1 Timothy 3 are spiritual qualifications. This should not surprise us since it is the office of the Church and not the world. Let us state it this way: The Church is a distinctly spiritual institution, her work is only spiritual by nature; thus, her officers will be of a spiritual nature (Matthew 28:18–20), even when dealing with the temporal affairs related to the church.

Finally, it should be noted that the nature of the office is also perpetual. This office demands a divine calling, in order to be recognized by the church. As such, it is perpetual. A man may not take up the work and lay it down of his own volition. God has ordained his life to one of service to the church and only God can dismiss. Ordinarily, I would submit, dismissal from the office of deacon comes only through a re-qualification process whereby a man’s gifts change to include the ability *and* desire to teach and rule in the church.²¹ As the temporal needs of the congregation and community always stand before the church, so the need of the office always exists. The office is perpetual.

Having established the Biblical basis for the Office of Deacon and the Biblical Nature of the Office, I turn next to the Biblical Duties of the Office.

THE BIBLICAL DUTIES OF THE OFFICE OF DEACON

The office of deacon is a spiritual office, but it is distinct from that of the eldership. The office of elder is specifically directed to the spiritual oversight and nurture of the congregation. He is primarily distinguished in that he is “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). In Titus we find this explicated when Paul says, “the overseer must be ... able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:7–9). This is consistent with his instruction to the elders at Ephesus to “shepherd the church of God” because there will be “savage wolves” from outside the church who prey upon the innocent sheep *and* there will even be those from within the church who will speak “perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:28–30). The elders then are overseers of all things spiritual. The deacons are spiritually mature men who administer the temporal affairs of the congregation. With this distinction drawn, let us proceed to consider the duties of the deacon.

As I develop this section, I shall set forth some basic principles which run throughout the section. Christ is Our Prophet and has given the Church her instructions and because He is also Our King we are to do all that He has commanded us. It is a common expression,

although commonly ignored, that the Church should do nothing but that which is warranted in Holy Scripture. Are we to follow only that which is explicitly or propositionally stated in God's word? We are also warranted in doing those things which we deduce from the good and necessary consequence of Scripture. John L. Girardeau sets forth the classic position on the authority of Scripture and the truths inferred from it rightly when he writes:

Without a warrant from his word, which is the constitutional law of the Church, either explicitly given in it or derived from it by good and necessary consequence, no element can lawfully exist, no office be established, no measure be adopted, within the whole extension of the ecclesiastical sphere; that a good and necessary consequence—a logical and therefore legitimate inference from facts, statements, principles, in the divine word—is, with us, formally acknowledged to be of equal authority with the word itself, and when declared to the Church bind her conscience and enforce her practice.²²

In addition to the principle of biblical warrant for all we do, it is important to consider the duties of the diaconate with this principle ever before us—Christ has made ample provisions for us, spiritually and temporally—“many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:30). These provisions he administers through elders (spiritual provisions) and deacons (temporal provisions). With these biblical principles before us let us draw from God's word the duties of the diaconate and discuss them under three *loci*—Fiscal Agent, Property Management, and Mercy Ministry.

DUTY AS FISCAL AGENT

The *First Book of Discipline* (1560) makes it plain, “The office of deacon is to gather and distribute the alms of the poor according to the direction of session.” Again, the Scottish Book says, “The deacons should take up the whole rent of the Kirk, disposing them to the ministry, the schools, and poor within their bounds, according to the appointment of the kirk.”²³ The “bounds” spoken of here is, of course, the parish or community in which the church finds here location.

The *Second Book of Discipline* (1578), the product of Andrew Melville, says of the deacon, “Their office and power is to receive, and to distribute the whole ecclesiastical goods unto them to whom they are appointed.” Again, the *Second Book* explains, “The goods ecclesiastical ought to be collected and distributed by the deacons,

as the word of God appoints, that they who bear office in the Kirk be provided for without care or solicitude.”²⁴ For use of space and time, I shall suspend further evidence from the Second Scottish Book, but iterate that early Scottish Presbyterian witness supports the role of the deacon as a fiscal agent of the church.

In the American context, Samuel Miller of Princeton wrote consistently with that of the Scottish divines when he said, “They might, with great propriety be made the managers of all the money-tables, or fiscal concerns of each congregation; and, for this purpose, might be incorporated, if it thought necessary, by law, that they might be enabled regularly to hold and employ all the property, real and personal, of the Church.” Miller proceeds to include in their work “the cause of the Bible; of Missions, foreign and domestic; of Sabbath schools; and of the various other Christian and benevolent undertakings.”²⁵ All of this he summarized when he said, “the function to which the Deacon was appointed by the Apostles, was to manage the *pecuniary affairs* of the Church, and especially to preside over the collections and disbursements for the poor” (Miller, 242). Drawing on Miller, I wish to emphasize the scope of the fiscal utility of the office; the diaconate is responsible for collection and distribution of church monies.

One last example from the American landscape will suffice to illustrate our point. In his little known but marvelously useful *Ecclesiastical Catechism*, Thomas Smyth states: “Deacons were appointed for the purpose of managing the temporal affairs of the church, and especially to attend to the needs of the poor, by inspecting their situation and supplying their wants.”²⁶ In another of his ecclesiological writings, he says, “All the reformed churches agree in believing that the scriptures clearly point out deacons as distinct *officers* in the church, whose business it is to take care of the poor—to

22. John L. Girardeau, “The Diaconate,” in *The Southern Presbyterian Review* (hereafter *SPR*) 31, no. 1 (January 1880): 138. I acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Girardeau for stimulating and directing much of my thinking about the diaconate, but especially the duties and sphere of the diaconal office.

23. *First Book of Discipline of the Church of Scotland*, VII and XVII. Author's translation. Cf. “The First Book of Discipline,” in *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (1848; repr. New York: AMS Press Inc, 1966) 2.225, 236–237.

24. Cf. James Kirk, *The Second Book of Discipline with Introduction and Commentary* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1980) 207, 210.

25. Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (1832; repr., Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1987) 237, 238.

26. Thomas Smyth, *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church*, 6th edition, ed. Geoffrey W. Donnan (1843; repr., Fellsmere, Fla., 2000) 33.

distribute among them the collections which may be raised for their use—and generally to manage the temporal affairs of the church.”²⁷

Why, it may be asked, do these varied sources from Presbyterian history maintain the fiscal agency of the diaconate? The answer is simple: from explicit warrant and inference of Scripture. Acts 6 provides us an example. The provisions to meet the needs of the widows necessitated money, which would be collected from the congregation. In Acts 4 money was collected and distributed by the Apostles. The original seven deacons are ordained to the very work previously carried out by the Apostles, other than “prayer” and “ministry of the word.” In Romans 12: 6, 7, writes Smyth, “the deaconship is immediately connected with ‘giving’ and ‘showing mercy’” (Smyth, 244). Calvin, while not relating verses 6 and 7 to the diaconate per se, explains verse 8—“he who gives, with liberality . . . he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness”—in terms of the deaconship when he writes, “By the μεταδιδόντοί, *the givers*, of whom he speaks here, he did not understand those who gave of their own property, but the deacons, who presided in dispensing the public charities of the Church.”²⁸

From the Acts passages we see explicit biblical warrant for the diaconate’s collecting and distributing the finances of the church. From the Romans passage, and I would add passages like 1 Peter 4:10, 11, we may infer from the general to the specific that, what every Christian is called upon to do, it is certainly the specific duty of the deacon to carry out. Deacons are to be “good stewards,” handling those gifts of the church with discernment of judgment, a winsome cheerfulness, and spiritual sensitivity.

27. Thomas Smyth, *Presbytery and Not Prelacy the Scriptural and Primitive Polity* (Boston: Croker and Brewster; New York: Robert Carter, 1843) 242.

28. John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (repr., Baker Book House, 1989) XIX:462–63.

29. *The Book of Church Order of Presbyterian Church in America* [hereafter BCO], Sixth edition (Atlanta: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2002) 9–2.

30. The spiritual nature of the handling of monies is set forth by Thomas Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 202—“That it is the official duty of the deacons to take charge of the pastor’s salary would probably never been questioned, if the salary had not been regarded as a pure affair of business, and not in any just sense as an expression of the communion of saints.”

31. I realize that in those exceptional times, such as a new work or church plant, before deacons are given by God, the work devolves upon the ruling elder (see BCO of the PCA 9–2), as it had on the Apostles prior to the giving of the office. However, I would argue for the ideal or norm rather than the exception.

In establishing the diaconate as the fiscal agent, we saw Samuel Miller suggest that the deacon should be the agent of missionary and benevolent enterprises. The diaconate, according to Girardeau, “is of course legitimately employed in relation to the raising of collections for congregational and benevolent purposes.” “Congregational” purposes would certainly include providing for the poor and needy of the congregation, but it would include much more. First, in the collecting of the necessary funds for the various uses of the church, the fiscal agent of the church is developing “the grace of liberality”²⁹ in the membership. It is primarily the deaconship that promotes the spiritual attitude of “generosity” (2 Cor. 9:5) and “cheerfulness” (2 Cor. 9:7). The deacons make known the financial needs of the church. The deacons make concrete or specify the need so that the prayers for generosity and preaching on liberality may be readily obeyed. As men and women generously and cheerfully and readily give of their abundance, they are further sanctified “so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed” (1 Tim. 6:19). Again, I point out the spiritual effect of the diaconal labors.

Another responsibility flowing from the fiscal agency of the diaconate is provision for the welfare of the minister.³⁰ In 1 Timothy 5:17 we learn, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor.” That “double honor” included financial remuneration as is clear from verse 18: “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” The “wages” are meant to be of such proportion that the minister is not “muzzled” or hampered by financial exigency. This is the basis for the terms of call for a Presbyterian minister, when the congregation vows “to continue to him while he is your pastor that competent worldly maintenance which you have promised” (BCO, 21–6, #4), which is the confidence the minister has that he “may be free from worldly cares and avocations” (BCO, 20–6). The diaconate is responsible for reviewing the needs of the minister(s), collecting funds and distributing as salary the necessary funds for meeting the “world cares” of the minister.

A third area of labor for the deacon in his fiscal agency pertains to the mission of the church. The deacon, as the fiscal agent given the church by her Supreme Head, is responsible for collecting and distributing funds for the missionary endeavor of the church. This, of course, means that the deacon has a proper function at every level of the church—local, regional, national, and international—where there is involvement in the missionary enterprise. We have no warrant to jettison God’s plan and place non-deacons in charge of church monies.³¹ When we do we risk confusing the offices and,

thus, we confuse “the *purse* and the *keys*,”³² as Thornwell argued.

We do have biblical precedent to argue that the mission of the church will advance significantly when the diaconate is utilized in the handling of financial concerns. In Acts 6, when the Apostles “laid hands on them” (ordained them), the very next word we read concerns the advancement of the gospel—“The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7). We may further add that the minister’s work on the field would advance more smoothly if he is complimented by a diaconate that is caring for the fiscal needs of the work.

DUTY AS PROPERTY MANAGER

The next duty of the deacon relates to his care for the physical properties or buildings of the church. Here I argue succinctly for the deacon to have charge of all matters pertaining to buildings, land, and revenues. All these are given for and used for ecclesiastical purposes and are, as such, temporal concerns of the church, for the church, and by the church. Thus, it can only be right that the diaconate is the agent responsible for meeting the demands of the properties of the church, so long as they are held for and used for ecclesiastical ends. Again, we would suggest that the diaconate’s work in relation to the properties of the church contribute to the worship and instruction of the church and so, it can easily be seen, has a spiritual end in sight.

Is there Scriptural ground for us to give the physical properties over to the diaconship for their management? I would argue support from good and necessary consequence of Scripture. J. H. Thornwell lays the argument before us so well, drawing from Acts 6:

It is certain that the reason assigned by the Apostles for ordering their [deacons] election applies just as strongly to the collection and disbursement of funds for one purpose as for another. Their purpose was not to get rid of attending to the poor, but to get rid of secular distractions: “It is not reason,” said they, “that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” What would they have gained by divesting themselves of the care of the poor, and continuing to be perplexed with the collection of funds for all other purpose? It must be perfectly obvious to every candid mind that the entire secular business of the Church was entrusted to the Deacons (Thornwell, 4.201).

The responsibility for the properties are not to be entrusted to a tertiary group of extra-biblical agents (commonly called trustees), nor placed as a burden upon the elders’ back. It is for the diaconship to manage the physical properties and this from the good authoritative inference of Scripture. “Where the ends are ecclesiastical,” explains Girardeau, “and the congregation acts in the capacity of a church, as in the case of property for religious purpose ... it ought to commit the attainment of those ends to ecclesiastical functionaries” (Girardeau, “The Diaconate,” 146). The “ecclesiastical functionaries” divinely granted to the church are elders and deacons alone. And, of these two offices, the one ordained to care for the physical/temporal matters of the church is the diaconate.

Sadly, the latter work, of attending to the physical properties of the church is too often the one work popularly attributed to the diaconate. It is often only when there is a discomfort in the church building that the deacon is called upon. Then, the office is disparaged rather than esteemed. It should be insisted that this is only one of his duties, as necessary and important as it is. Yet, it has spiritual significance since it relates to the worship and service of the church and should be taken seriously by the diaconate and esteemed in the eyes of the congregation.

DUTY TO THE POOR AND NEEDY

The most biblically explicit duty the diaconate undertakes is that of care for the poor. In his relation to the poor, we see the deacon expressing the compassion of Christ and uniting the church in suffering. It is obvious that the “compassion of Christ” is exhibited through the functioning diaconate, but what do I mean by “uniting the church in suffering”? I mean that the body of Christ is one and “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). Again, Paul reminds us that “as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort” (2 Cor. 1:7). The body of Christ must never allow an attitude of indifference to separate her members. We are one body in Christ Jesus. The rich are instructed in God’s word not to be “conceited” but “to be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:17, 18). In other words, the rich are to share in the sufferings of the poor through their generosity—giving freely that which God “richly supplies us” (1 Tim. 6:17).

32. James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4 vols., ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication; New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1873) 4:155.

When one member of the body of Christ suffers—such as lacking essentials of life or a young mother left a widow—we have the opportunity to better know Christ and “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). Thus, we are united to one another as we are brought more closely to experience Christ. Our LORD gave us clear teaching on this when he said, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it [food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, visitation to the sick and imprisoned] to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me” (Matthew 26:40).

The diaconate is a representative body of men, drawn from the church, to unite the body of Christ in the sufferings of the poor and needy and, thus, make more real to the church and the observing world our union with Christ. Indeed, our care for the poor flows from our real union with Christ to produce a more experiential union with Christ. James Ramsey said it so well: “The care of the poor, relieving their wants and soothing their sorrows, and encouraging their crushed spirits is, therefore, a duty entwined in the very nature of the Christian life—springing naturally and necessarily out of the believer’s union with Christ.”³³

“What if,” someone asks, “we have no poor and needy in our midst?” What a sad and telling question. No poor in our midst! The LORD and the great preponderance of Scripture says, “For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them.” A church without poor is like unto a church without children or a church without the aged. Can it be a biblical church and be so selective in its membership? For the answer, hear the collective wisdom of men who studied the church and her diaconate and utilized the biblical office so effectively. “But, it may be asked,” writes James Ramsey, “of what use are deacons to take care of the poor in churches where there are no poor, or but two or three? *That, indeed, is a sadly defective state of the church where there are no poor; there must be something very deficient in its zeal and aggressiveness, if amidst the multitudes of poor around us, and mingling with us, there are none in the church itself*” (Ramsey, 15). John Girardeau assesses such a situation in similar fashion: “A church in which there are no poor would do well to raise the question, whether it does not lie outside the pale of God’s election. For, ‘hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom, which he hath promised to them that love him?’ Christ’s poor

relations will ever be found where Christian organizations exist, and the nominal church which neglects to provide for them confesses itself apostate” (Girardeau, “The Diaconate,” 120). Elders may preach and rule in a church where there are no poor, no widows, no orphans, argues Thomas Peck, “but deacons have nothing to do, except in a church which has life enough to show itself in a ministry to the saints” (Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 198). These men agree, a local congregation should be represented by the poor. If the local church is not thus characterized, then God gave offices without purpose and that simply cannot be for our God does all things with purpose.

Ramsey is surely correct when he avers that among the functions of the diaconate, “the care of the poor stands prominent” (Ramsey, “The Deaconship,” 9). Our union with Christ is made evident when care is provided to the poor. With the care of the poor, the union of the body of Christ is made evident. The tenderness, mercy, and compassion of Christ is exemplified in the Church when the diaconate functions among the poor. In short, Christ is honored, the Church edified, and the gospel validated, when the diaconate meets the needs of the poor.

Before we leave the topic of the poor, it is incumbent upon me to ask a thorny question. A thorny question because it is often assumed or ignored or misunderstood. The question: Who are the poor? No one would disagree that the deacons are responsible for the poor of the church membership. The widows in Jerusalem were members of the congregation and the deacons were responsible for their care. While the primary responsibility of the diaconate is the membership or brotherhood, I wish to support the position that the work of the diaconate may extend beyond the poor of the church, “when warranted by the ability of the church” (Girardeau, “The Diaconate,” 123). A number of fathers would support this position of whom I wish to cite two representatives of the Dutch and Scottish branches of the Church. Voetius, the celebrated Dutch divine, supported the thesis when he said, “That they [deacons] may exercise beneficence towards all men, especially towards those who are of the household of faith.”³⁴ The Scottish pastor and historian John G. Lorimer concluded his discussion of the question by saying, “it is an honorable light in which Christianity is presented, when she appears as the friend of the poor, even those who do not make a profession of faith” (Lorimer, *The Deaconship*, 69).

There may be some who would object to this position on grounds of the spirituality of the church—that the

33. James B. Ramsey, “The Deaconship,” *SPR* 12, no. 1 (April 1859): 10.

34. Cited in Girardeau, “The Diaconate,” 124.

nature and duty of the church is singularly spiritual.³⁵ Let me assure you that I fully support that classic distinctive of biblical Christianity and, furthermore, I do not believe this position out of accord with that halloved view. Allow me to answer this concern with a few observations. First, the doctrine of redemption is one that encompasses both body and soul. The Bible will not support the one-sided fundamentalist emphasis on the soul; neither will it support the social gospel's opposite extreme which emphasizes the body. The view of the diaconate set forth here is consistent with a full-orbed spiritual view of man as body and soul. The redemption of man as body and soul is, as Girardeau reminds us, "the genius and spirit of the gospel" (Girardeau, "The Diaconate," 126).

A second reason I believe the Church may minister to the poor and needy, regardless of church affiliation, is based upon biblical precedent. Earlier I observed that it was a general duty in Israel for citizens to care for "your brother" in the land (Deut. 15:7, 11). However, we must also wrestle with the LORD's instruction to make some provision for the "alien" or stranger who may reside within the Jewish context (Lev. 23:22). In Leviticus 25:35 we are told, "Now in case a brother of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, *like a stranger or sojourner, that he may live with you*" (emphasis added). It is the LORD's design that care for those within our local context (or, to used an old term, *parish*) be sustained so they "may live with you." Further support for this point could be drawn from the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:30–37) where the question of "Who is one's neighbor?" is answered with "The one who showed mercy toward him." Paul's instruction to the Galatians is also one with which we must reckon—"So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to *all people*, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10; emphasis added). So, I suggest that there is OT and NT precedent for defining the poor and needy more broadly than simply those within our church membership. However, we must remember that the diaconate's work with strangers is toward the end of seeing them gathered into the church. Thus, the redemptive or spiritual element is further exemplified as a work of the diaconate.

The third reason for allowing a broader definition of "poor and needy" relates to our LORD's exemplary life. Take one example, that of the LORD's care for the Syrophenician or Greek woman "whose little daughter had an unclean spirit" (Mark 7:25). He established that she was not of the covenant community, indeed she was described as one of "the dogs" (27). Yet, out of

his compassion He responded with mercy to a needy person outside the covenant community.

Here I conclude our reasons for having a broader view of "poor and needy" than simply "our brothers" of the church. As you can see, to take this view does not injure the doctrine of spirituality of the church. Rather, it supports it, if done carefully and biblically. The diaconate becomes, through the administration of temporal assistance, an agent of spiritual care with the intention and desire of having those strangers "live with you" (Lev. 25:35). Those who are far away may be brought near through the agency of the diaconate. "The Church is, in a sense," wrote Girardeau, "the representative of [Christ's] charity in the midst of an afflicted world, and the deacon is the agent of her benefactions" (Girardeau, "The Diaconate," 127).

Briefly, before moving to the next duty of the deacon, another objection to our expansion of the definition of "poor and needy" is anticipated. What if the church has limited resources? Do we meet the needs of those outside the church membership when we have unmet needs within? The answer is one of common sense—No. The church does as she is able to do and she prays that God would bless her faithfulness with greater resources that she may do more and so see the church expand her roots.

The summary of the duties of the diaconate may best be offered in the words of Girardeau when he wrote: "As donations are spontaneously made, and legacies left, to the Church, he is the *receiver*; as money is to be raised for various purposes, he is the *collector*; as funds and property are to be kept and administered, he is the *treasurer and manager*; and as relief is to be extended to the poor, the stipends paid church-officers and agents, he is the *distributor*." Indeed, "it is not a small office."

THE DUTY OF DELEGATION

There is no reason to belabor this point, but it deserves to be singled-out. The Diaconate is an office of delegation and ought to delegate its duties as necessary and when possible. This duty may be deduced from Acts 6:3 where the diaconate is "put in charge of this task."³⁶ Thus, the deacons are not ordained to "do" everything,

35. For a fine development of the spirituality doctrine see Stuart Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption* (Louisville, Ky.: Davidson and Robinson, 1867) 474–88.

36. The ESV translates *καταστήσομεν ἐπὶ* as "appoint to" rather than "put in charge over" (NASB) or "appoint over" (NKJV). The NASB and NKJV both capture the force of the *ἐπὶ* better than the ESV.

but to “do” and “delegate.” In being “put in charge” they have *authority over* the various duties given them in Scripture and summarized above. In exercising the authority and duty of delegation, they will utilize the gifts of men and women in the church in various and numerous ways. This auxiliary service knows no biblical name and certainly demands no office. In a culture like ours where titles are sought, even demanded, the idea of serving in the church without the recognition or “honor” of a title is peculiar to many. However, we should act counter-to-culture when Scripture demands it and enjoy the rewards of our Savior’s words of “well done good and faithful δουλε (servant/slave)” (Matt. 25:23).

When the diaconate exercises its authority to delegate deeds pertaining to mercy, monies, and material structures, the household of faith will be more fully involved in the day to day work of the kingdom. The diaconate, when delegating as it ought, will become perhaps the primary agent for the promotion of the communion of the saints for they will be actively considering how they may “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). Having considered it prayerfully, they will then act to “stimulate” the saints to “love and good deeds.” A fully functional diaconate has the divine warrant and authority to delegate and, for the good of the church, it will.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE DEACONS TO THE ELDERS

In this final section I wish to address the relationship between the two biblically prescribed offices Christ has given His Church—elder and deacon. A discussion of the diaconal office too often reveals less than clear thinking about the nature and duties of the office, thus I have addressed those aspects above. A corresponding discussion often reveals what I consider to be a less than biblical view of the relationship of deacons to elders in

the Church. At the same time, I understand that the question of how the deacon relates to the elder and vice versa has been “one of the most debated subjects in connection with the office of deacon.”³⁷ Nevertheless, I wish to argue against the all too common view of inclusion of the lower office in the higher and for what I believe to be the biblical view of complementary offices.

Briefly, I shall argue that the office of deacon is not possessed *within* the office of elder. That is, I do not believe that the higher office includes the lower office, although certain qualifications are shared by the two offices.³⁸ I would insist upon *duæ ordines* or two orders of office. There is the ruling office (which is *duplex ordo*—one order with two distinct functions, i.e., preaching and ruling) and the distributing office. Each office is ordained to distinct functions within its specific order or office.

There are a number of substantial reasons for maintaining the *duæ ordines* of eldership and deaconship. First, unless the two orders are clearly distinguished and maintained, there is likelihood of confusion and conflict in the administration of the various functions of the offices. The purse and the keys, while both have spiritual ends, cannot be confused without deleterious results for the gospel program of the Church. For the elders to be drawn away from their labors of word, prayer, and ruling, to do the diaconal work will have substantial effects upon the spiritual health of the church. Likewise, for the deacons to falter in their weighty work will leave a body of believers without the care they need to experience the compassion of Christ. And, the failure of the diaconate will necessitate that the elders’ labors be diverted to that of the diaconate. Second, when the offices are confused or reduced to one, the “lower office” easily becomes superfluous in the eyes of the people (if not the bearer of the lower office also). Thus, it loses its status and falls out of use. This is exactly what happened in the Scottish and American *milieu* by the early eighteenth century.³⁹ Third, when the offices are not properly distinguished, the likelihood of certain functions being omitted increases significantly. In other words, the widows may not be served as they ought, due to demands upon the elders of prayer, shepherding, and preaching.

Fourth, it is not right that the two should be telescoped into one. The Apostles said “It is not desirable [“right” ESV, “reason” AV] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). J. A. Alexander explains, “The idea of *right* or *proper*, although not expressed [in ἀρεστον], is necessarily implied.” It is not right in God’s eyes for the preaching of the word

37. Peter Y. De Jong, *The Ministry of Mercy for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952) 159.

38. In anticipation of objections, let me assure my readers that there are overlapping qualifications for the two offices. And, there may be exigencies within the life of the church that requires an elder to perform a diaconal function. However, this is not to be deemed normative, nor should it provide precedence which would undermine the functionality and esteem of the “lower” office. The necessity of the office displayed in Acts 6 speaks to the necessity of maintaining the *duæ ordines* for the spiritual vitality of the church.

39. Thomas Smyth, “The Office of Deacon,” in *SPR* 2, no. 3 (December 1848): 344. Smyth (1808–73) was intimately familiar with ecclesiastical practices in both Scotland and America and he attributed the obscurity of the deacon in both contexts to “the want of a definite and clear discrimination between the sphere of duty and the ecclesiastical relations of these two classes [elder and deacon] of officers.”

to be neglected for the menial tasks of service. Thus, Christ gave the office of deacon through the apostles.

Fifth, it simply does not make good sense that what God has given to a specific office should be routinely performed by another; conflict would be certain, confusion would abound, and the work of both would suffer.⁴⁰ Indeed, ordination to specific functions would be shown to be ridiculous. Yet, when we ordain a man to an office, we are saying that he has a specific work. Notice in Acts 6:3 that the deacons were *καταστήσομεν* (“appointed” or “put in charge”) *επι* (“over”) the business or tasks which I have described in the sections above. The *ανδρας* (“men”), as deacons, are placed in an official capacity over the distinct functions of the office. Thus, they possess an authoritative role in the Church.⁴¹ An elder is not ordained to have authority over diaconal labors anymore than a deacon is ordained to rule the household of God. Therefore, ordination to a specific office makes the inclusive view unreasonable and untenable.

Finally, I would argue against the inclusion of the lower office into the higher on grounds that Christ provided distinctly different offices. The Lord of the Church did not simply supply the Church with more apostles in Acts 6, when the need for serving tables arose. Neither did He use that occasion to institute the office of elder. Rather he took the occasion to institute a distinctively new office, the office of service and distribution—the deacon. Again, when the Holy Spirit spoke through Paul (1 Tim. 3:1–13), He did not provide the Church with one set of qualifications for one office. Rather, He clearly spoke of two orders *and* two sets of qualifications. With greatest deference to all, what God has separated, let man not join.

Having set forth several reasons why the offices are distinct offices with distinct callings and functions, permit me to show their complementary nature. It is a sad truth that many sessions spend an inordinate amount of their energies on temporal matters and a pathetically small amount of time actually shepherding/pastoring the flock under their *spiritual* oversight. Their oversight of the covenant community resembles more the meeting of a corporate board than that of a prayerful band of shepherds interceding for their sheep. Sadly, more time is spent contemplating the future finances of the church than visiting in the homes of the sheep. Thus, the flock is ravaged by wolves and the elders know little of the true spiritual state of their brethren.

In Acts 6, the apostles would not allow the physical needs of the people to divert their attention away from the spiritual needs of the flock—“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

J. H. Thornwell suggested, and I believe his insight proper, that “our spiritual courts would soon cease to be, what they are to an alarming extent at present, mere corporations for secular business” (Thornwell, 4.155), if the diaconate functioned biblically. A revival of the diaconate places temporal cares where God placed them—in the diaconate—and does not “secularize” the eldership.

Furthermore, the revival of the diaconate would improve the spirituality of the eldership, jointly and severally, for they would have more time to devote to prayer and study of the word of God—thus, being apt to teach, which is a distinguishing and non negotiable requirement for the office! A qualitative improvement in the spiritual condition of elders would lead to a significant increase in their efforts on behalf of their charge and spiritual growth in the church membership. The improved spiritual nurture of the entire congregation would produce a correlative leavening effect in the neighborhoods or parishes affected by the church.

Elders and deacons, each performing his distinct function, would go out into the homes of the membership (often side by side) ministering to the complete needs of the congregation. They would complement one another and portray to the membership the equal importance of each office and the distinct, yet inseparable, interests of the two. Similarly, they would traverse the neighborhoods of their parish with the gospel message of a Savior who saves men from their sins and provides for their needs in this life and the life to come (Luke 18:30; Matt. 5:5).

Therefore, the maintenance of a proper and healthy relationship between the two offices is of the utmost importance to a healthy church. There is a saying, which

40. I speak of functions of the deacons’ office being “routinely performed by another,” namely elders, for I acknowledge that occasion may arise when, on a temporary basis, an elder may have to fulfill a diaconal function. This, however, should be the exception and not the normative function of an elder, who is ordained to specific functions unlike those of the deacon.

41. The authoritativeness, i.e., being in charge over the tasks, of the office of deacon, argues against the office being filled by women. As stated in the text above, I am acutely aware that some have tried to justify “deaconesses” or female deacons on the basis of passages like Rom. 16:1 where Phoebe is called a “servant” or “minister” (*διακονου*). But, since the office of deacon in Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 specify that *ανδρας* (men of masculine gender) fill the office, we are compelled to understand Phoebe’s designation as a servant to be one of general service, a general sense of service in which all Christians find themselves classified. At the same time, the deacons should delegate (since they are over the tasks and not the exclusive doers of the tasks) the work to others and in this manner, through delegation from proper authority, a woman and non-ordained man may find “ministry” or “service” opportunities a plenty in the church.

most surely is correct: “The church’s spirituality will rise only as high as that of the elders.” So long as elders are consumed with temporal matters, the congregation will be temporally minded. When the diaconate functions as the temporal agents of the church, freeing the elders for their spiritual calling and business, the church will grow in grace and the spiritual aptitude and piety of the congregation will rise to new heights. The offices are complementary and necessary for the growth of the church, spiritually and numerically.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Thomas Smyth said, “The office of Deacon is undervalued by many, only because this great function of the Church is little known and little felt.” In this essay, I have attempted to make its function and value better known and we pray more strongly felt. It is a biblical office, its nature is spiritual while its object is the temporal affairs of the church, and its duties are multifold. Why do our churches limp along like a dysfunctional

family? Because, in many (if not all) cases, the offices are not fully understood, appreciated, and utilized. This is certainly true of the diaconate.

Why does the gospel too often fall upon hard hearts and deaf ears? In many cases, we have contributed to the hardening of the hearts through our callousness toward the poor around us. Why do elders not spend time in the homes, nurturing the flock on the sweet milk of the gospel? More often than not, it is because they are entangled in the secular or temporal affairs of the church. If the church is to preach a full-orbed, robust gospel that touches the whole man, body and soul, the diaconate must function well. If the church is to resemble a true “communion of saints,” the deacon must function well. “We are one, one in Christ,” wrote James Ramsey, “and one by our union with each other, so that none shall be in want while others are blessed with plenty. By [the diaconate] we are helped to bear one another’s burdens, and so to fulfill the law of Christ, to love one another” (Ramsey, “The Deaconship,” 20).■

In Brief: “The Office of Deacon:” Extracts from The Presbyterian Quarterly (April, 1896)

I would not suggest that the deaconess is an office in the church, for the sufficient reason that whereas we have a distinct account of the election and ordination of deacons, we have no such warrant for deaconesses. No woman holds office in the regular government of the New Testament church. Our *Book of Church Order* [PCUS] puts that matter where the Scripture does, when it states that the session may appoint godly women to care for the sick, for prisoners and poor widows and orphans. The word deacon, used in the New Testament in connection with women helpers, does not seem to imply an office, for no account is given of the institution of such an office, but simply to mean servant or helper in the work of caring for the poor. There is a peculiar propriety in the gentle ministrations of woman being called into requisition by the church in behalf of the suffering and distressed.

Friction and misunderstanding between the deacons and the session ... usually arise from a misunderstanding of the provinces of these officers, and hence a confusion of jurisdiction and conflict of action.

It is clear that there cannot be two governing bodies in one church without conflict; and it is also clear that it is impossible to separate, in all cases, matters temporal from spiritual matters; as, for example, in the election of an organist and the fixing of his salary, and as in many other things.

Dr. Peck, in *Ecclesiology*, says: “In reference to all funds other than those contributed for specific purposes, as for

Home and Foreign Missions, they are under the direction and control of the session.” “To give the deacons, who are not rulers, power to dispose of the revenues as against the elders, would virtually be to create an *imperium in imperio*; for the power goes with the purse. Hence, we find the contributions in the primitive church laid ‘at the feet of the apostles.’”

Hence, we conclude that the whole power of the government of the individual church is vested in the session. The minister, of course, has an authority of his own in the preaching of the gospel, and is responsible for the proper discharge of it to the Presbytery which ordains and installs him. So the deacons are responsible to the session which ordains and installs them, for a deacon is not ordained and installed by the laying on of the hands of deacons, but of elders.

... The session has control of the church building, and to it must be referred all questions as to what purposes it may be used for. If any extension of the church building be contemplated, or any unusual and very extensive repairs, the proper method is for the session to direct the deacons to inquire into the feasibility and cost of what is proposed, or, if the matter originate with the deacons, for them to ask permission of the session, laying their plans before that body; and if the changes proposed be of a very important or expensive character, the session ought to ask the consent of the congregation in which they rule as representatives (Robert P. Kerr, “The Office of Deacon,” *The Presbyterian Quarterly* X.36 (April 1896) 206–207).■