

The Gospel Work of the Diaconate: A Ministry “Proportioned in Number”

By C. N. Willborn

Elsewhere I wrote on the topic of the Diaconate from an historical perspective.¹ I have also written on the divine right of the diaconate and the work of the office.² In each of these essays, I have echoed the words of Thomas Peck and the sentiments of Thomas Chalmers: “It is not a small office.”³ By this I am not arguing for a “super deacon” where the deacon replaces the biblical office of elder as the spiritual overseer of the church.⁴ Rather I am arguing for a thoroughly active office, defined, designed, and dispatched along Biblical lines. When the office is utilized as it ought, it will play a great role not only in the care of saints, but also in the missionary enterprise of the church—the ingathering of the elect.

The design of this paper is to agitate for a more thoroughly active diaconate, but not just that. I wish to challenge the church in regard to the deacons’ motivational role among the saints, but particularly in the outreach to the locality in which her King has placed her. In other words, this essay will consider primarily the domestic or localized missionary enterprise of the church and propose means for better fulfilling her local or domestic mission.

The enormity of our call as the church is obvious to anyone who has sat quietly for a few moments and considered the obstacles before the church. “Obstacle” may not be the best word, but it seems appropriate when speaking of the sheer numbers of men, women, boys and girls who reside on the not-so-late great planet earth. Vast numbers, like large amounts of work, can have a crippling effect upon the laborers. The effect can often be, “Where do we begin?” or “We can never do all of this.” Thus, nothing is done.

The number of people can seem overwhelming even in a small Appalachian coalmining town of six hundred; especially when the church consists of only three or four families. Even where the population is not large, “small” numbers seem to swell when the needs of the *people* are

considered. Take the coalmining town again. While the population may be only six hundred, the enormity of the situation is exacerbated by a multitude of factors such as poverty and government entitlements that encourage laziness and generational poverty. It can hardly be disputed that difficulties face the church as she sets her face toward her God-given mission. Pious platitudes (e.g. “Numbers are not obstacles, but *opportunities*”) will not overcome the complexities of her mission. Mining the deep riches of God’s word, however, will provide her with the zeal and the means for doing the missionary enterprise of the church.

A Plea for Proportioned Numbers

As I advance to the discussion of the diaconate and its local missionary role, I need to address a very basic issue that relates to the numbers issue. I have already argued that the vast number of people on the earth, in a city, even in a small rural community, can overwhelm and stifle the life work of the church. Common sense responds: Just as a worker would divide his task into manageable portions, so the church ought to divide its tasks and responsibilities into manageable portions.

THE AUTHOR: C. N. Willborn, Ph.D. (PCA), is Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Oak Ridge, TN. He is one of the editors of *The Confessional Presbyterian*.

1. C. N. Willborn, “The Diaconate: God’s Office of Temporal Affairs,” in *Confession Our Hope* ed., Joseph Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004), 153–80.

2. C. N. Willborn, “The Deacon: A Divine Right Office with Divine Uses,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 5 (2009): 185–99.

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

4. Here we have in mind the manner in which any number of churches function and this can be illustrated by many Southern Baptist Churches.

This proportioning of numbers is vital, not only to the spiritual and physical oversight of the church, but also to the outreach of the church. The mission of the church encompasses both the building up of the saints (edification) and the ingathering of the elect (outreach). We recognize the importance of proper proportioned numbers when we consider the spiritual building up or edification of the saints. We also acknowledge that the edification necessary for the healthy spiritual growth of the church *cannot* be accomplished in corporate worship through the preaching of the word, prayer, and sacraments (although these are certainly primary). In addition to the primary means of grace—preaching and hearing of God’s word, prayer, and sacraments—there is also the necessity of individual attention to the sheep. In an agricultural as well as a pastoral context, the shepherd is not finished with his work simply by leading the sheep out in mass to graze upon the hill and drink of the stream. No, he must inspect each sheep and discern the individual need of the sheep and apply the appropriate solution to any affliction.

To use an R.A. Webb analogy, “When a physician has a case of congestion, the first thing he tries to do is to break it up.”⁵ To apply the analogy, the church, in order to meet the needs of the congregation, must “break it up” into manageable numbers if the sheep are to be properly met with care. “O happy church of Christ,” wrote Richard Baxter, “were the laborers but able and faithful, and proportioned in number to the number of souls!”⁶ Webb is arguing for small, thus, manageable groups or classes within each church, which will facilitate better knowledge of their spiritual and physical state. Baxter is suggesting the flip side of the equation; each group within the church needs “able and faithful” men in numbers proportionate to the membership. Proportioned numbers is the common denominator.

5. R. A. Webb, “The Modern Mind and Christian Service,” *Elements of Truth*, vol. II (Jackson, MS: Tucker Printing House, 1915), 14. “The Modern Mind...” was a series of addresses delivered at Belhaven College for the Synod’s [Mississippi] Training School between June 22–July 2, 1915 and published by the Committee of Synod.

6. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. John T. Wilkinson (1656; reprint, London: The Epworth Press, 1939), 72.

7. Thomas Chalmers, *On the Sufficiency of the Parochial System* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1841), 16.

8. Living in a voluntarism church-state milieu as we do in the US, it is important that we do not confuse Establishmentarianism with Erastianism. See Sherman Isbell, “Church and State,” *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

9. John Roxborough, *Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for Mission* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster and Edinburgh: The Rutherford House, 1999), 110.

As the church proportions the membership and the eldership equitably, even so I would argue the diaconate should work with proportioned numbers. In Glasgow, 1820, Thomas Chalmers set the proportion at approximately 300 individuals.⁷ That is to say, for every 300 people in a given community or parish, a deacon was assigned to labor for their good, to know them, encourage them, and, in general, promote their well-being. Elders and deacons were “proportioned in number to the number of souls.” Chalmers encouraged his students to maintain a deacon-parish ratio that promoted and did not discourage the work. “Let the number,” wrote Chalmers, “not exceed what any lay office bearer [i.e., elder or deacon] of the church might easily and beneficially overtake.” (*Ibid.*)

It may be objected that twenty-first century America is greatly removed from the industrializing context of Glasgow in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the methodology of a Baxter in Kidderminster or a Chalmers in Glasgow will not work. The former point is to be granted—the American context of today is greatly different from Glasgow in 1823. Our society, in many sections of the nation, is mobile and we do not have the advantage of an Establishmentarian relationship of church, state, and community.⁸ The latter point—that the method will not work—does not follow, and that is the next point of discussion.

Generally it has been argued that the method of a parish model will not work *because* we are so often dealing with congregations that are dispersed across a large geographical region. We have “regional churches” now, not parish-oriented churches. This is particularly true of many suburban congregations that draw its membership from large areas, often crossing county lines, and certainly city and township lines. Since neighborhoods are not attached to a “parish church,” and vice versa, the method of a minister and his deacons walking the streets, knowing the people by name, and seeing that needs are met, is passé.

In regard to this concern, it is important to remember that Chalmers neither concocted nor adapted an urban model for his urban context. As John Roxborough has correctly explained, “The principles employed were commonly known if not commonly practiced ... and his expressed intention of assimilating a town to a country parish make doubtful the necessity of going further afield in search of sources.”⁹ In other words, Chalmers consciously took the country/rural model of men like Thomas Boston of Ettrick and shaped it for use in the city. In our urban churches, we would argue that Chalmers’ parish model can be adapted to the American

context. In our suburban and rural churches, we would submit that Chalmers’s model can be adjusted for fruitful use with the proper attention to details. Whether a church is located in the congestion of a Philadelphia or Chicago, the suburban sprawl of Gwinnett County, Georgia, or the cotton fields of the Southern black belt, the principle of proportioned numbers is applicable and, we believe, inestimable in value.

In Charleston, South Carolina in 1860, Zion Presbyterian Church applied a model not substantially unlike that of Chalmers. The membership of the church was divided into groups of about fifty, according to where they lived in the city. In other words, the session and diaconate of the church looked at the church membership, determined by location where people were clustered, and organized the membership into “classes” of approximately fifty. To each of these groups of membership, the diaconate appointed a liaison from that number to watch over the needs and activities of that particular “class” within the church. The liaison reported directly to the diaconate, which held official responsibility for the people by virtue of having been appointed or placed over (Acts 6:3) the physical and fiscal affairs of the people. Upon the principle of “proportioned numbers,” the “congestion” of the six hundred members was broken up and the needs better ascertained, monitored, and met.

As intimated above, the same model could be applied to a large suburban church. The session and diaconate could sort membership by zip code, then divide those members into proportions commensurate to the number of elders and deacons *provided* the church by God. The officers of the church could select from among the proportioned numbers liaisons who could assist the elders and deacons in determining the needs of members, monitoring attendance to worship, individual progress in any number of spiritual areas, and generally stimulating one another to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

While a similar model is often employed in churches for spiritual oversight,¹⁰ I would argue that the same model should be implemented consistently for the diaconate. Thus, there would be the same attention given to the physical needs of the church as the elders are supposedly giving to the spiritual needs of the church membership.¹¹

Let it not be supposed that I am pleading my case merely from history (Chalmers, Girardeau, *et al.*) or from pragmatism (it is easier to handle fifty than five hundred). While both of these support the principle of the proportioned numbers, and common sense ought not be dismissed summarily, we find the same principle of proportioned numbers in the Scriptures. You are

no doubt familiar with the incident in Exodus 18 where Jethro advised Moses toward a more useful approach to his labors: “Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place *these* over them *as* leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.”¹² In the New Testament our Lord instructed the disciples to take the 5,000 men and “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each” (Luke 9:14).¹³ It is no secret that needs are more easily discerned and attended to in smaller groups than in larger, unwieldy groups. We can only *know* people through close contact, not from the tenth or twentieth row or the balcony of a meeting house. To “know” God and Jesus Christ is “eternal life,” according to our Savior. To *know* our brothers and neighbors is not only for their physical life, but their eternal well-being also.

If this principle of proportioned numbers is so easily found in Scripture and deduced from the pastoral or shepherd model, why is it not more frequently and widely employed? For one thing, it takes sacrifice and labor and we are generally not easily moved from our comfortable schedules of work and family. For another, we have too often adapted a corporate model or board mentality and approach to eldership and deaconship. But the principle is nevertheless one of Scripture and common sense and ought to be employed toward the edification of the saints. For the very same reasons, I would argue, it ought to be utilized in the missionary enterprise of the neighborhood. Make the task easier and more adaptable to the schedules of the people and you will encourage more activity in the mission of the church within her locality. I shall argue that a proportioned approach to the missionary outreach of the church will make the task easier and more efficient.

The first step toward a healthier church and a more efficient and effective missionary outreach is to organize your membership and your mission field into proportioned numbers, which correspond to the resources God has given each congregation. Elders can offer spiritual care more effectively when the numbers are proportioned, as can deacons better know and meet

10. Here reference is made to a common practice within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and other reformed bodies of dividing the membership into “shepherding groups,” with an elder assigned to each group with the intention of giving closer spiritual oversight to the smaller groups than is possible to a large group.

11. The details of the diaconal labors will come later in this essay.

12. Unless otherwise noted all Scripture citations are from the *New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition* (1995).

13. In Mark 6:40 we learn that the Lord gave allowance for groups of fifty and groups of one hundred.

the temporal affairs of the church when numbers are manageable. The proportioned membership not only receives better spiritual care and physical care, it also provides a better outreach mechanism for the church.

Diaconal Labors among the Proportioned Numbers

Having established the propriety of proportioned numbers, I wish to develop the diaconate's role among the church membership and the locality (as determined by the church and its location and resources). In doing this it is important to remember that the diaconate has three primary areas of responsibility—the real property of the church, the economics of the church, and the ministry of mercy toward the poor and needy.

AMONG THE BROTHERHOOD

The first group for whom the diaconate is responsible is the church membership, or the *brotherhood* of the household of faith. In Acts 4, we find the congregation of believers (32) acting in such a responsible fashion toward any of the congregation who had need that “there was not a needy person among them” (34). Soon there arose the time, in God's providence, for the church to act not simply as individuals, but covenantally, as a congregation, through appointed means of an office, the diaconate. It is just like God to orchestrate the perfect scenario for the church to see her genuine need of leadership in the area of service and mercy and, then, to fill that need with official “ministers.” In Acts 6 we see God's *official* response to temporal needs within the brotherhood in those primitive deacons, who were appointed over the temporal task, formerly administered by the Apostles. It seems clear from Acts 6 that the neglected “widows” were not from the general public, but from the church membership and we are clearly told elsewhere that it is the church's privilege and duty to “do good” to “the household of the faith” (Gal 6:10).

In Matthew 25:34–46 our Lord calls his church to care for the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, and imprisoned among them. We reckon this list of needy to be members of the household of faith from the language Christ uses in identifying them as “brothers of mine” (40). There is a remarkable bond that exists between fellow believers. Indeed, we share all things in common for we are united as one through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul uses that unmistakable simile of the human body that

is made of individual parts (Rom 12:4–5). The Church is the body and each believer, no matter how small in giftedness, is a part (finger, toe, eye, *etc.*), and an important part (1 Cor 12:14–26). Paul's theology of the body is based upon our union with Christ and, thereby, with the household of faith through Christ.

Our union with Christ is pictured in the sacramental element of the bread and Paul utilizes this to emphasize our union in 1 Corinthians 10:17—“Since there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, since we all partake the one loaf.” We are united to one another illustratively, as those tiny particles of ground wheat are joined together in the baked dough to produce a beautiful, warm, and nourishing single loaf of bread. Yet, our union is closer than that of the powdery wheat flour in a baked loaf. Indeed, we are “linked by a closer and tenderer bond than that of blood.”¹⁴ We are “in Christ” and, thus, “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17).

So, as it is determined that there are genuine needy folk within the covenantal community, the household of faith, it is imperative upon the church to meet the needs of the brethren. It should be a nearly involuntary reflex within the communion of saints to respond to the needs of your common members. The Church can hardly expect the masses *without* to desire the comforts *within* the church if she neglects her own in times of need. Our charity towards the membership should be such that it makes the world outside her walls jealous for the faith, hope, and charity within. Thus, our deeds toward one another should and will promote our missionary enterprise among the lost and dying of the world.

The diaconal care of the brotherhood is not the only labor they have which will promote the missionary thrust of the church. A *second* means by which the diaconate promotes the mission of the church is through its instruction of the brethren. The diaconate is responsible for the fiscal affairs of the church. *The Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America instructs the deacons “to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed,” (9–2). We would suggest that they should take appropriate measures to enlarge the gathering of financial collections and the most appropriate measure is that of instruction. I once heard a preacher and educator say, concerning the financial needs of the church and related institutions, “Pray ... and tell His people.” The diaconate should be in the homes of the people regularly, discerning their needs, meeting

14. John L. Girardeau, “The Office of Works of Charity in the Last Judgment,” in *Sermons*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1907), 79.

their needs, counseling, and telling them of the work and needs of the church. An interjection is timely at this point: elders should often accompany the deacons on visits, especially those visits that touch on spiritual duty. For example, financial giving is not purely secular, but is of a spiritual nature, betraying the spiritual vigor of a saint. True, it is the responsibility of the diaconate to educate the church membership on the pecuniary needs of the church, but the giving of tithes and offerings is a spiritual matter, not simply an indispensable expedient. It would be most suitable, and one believes vitally important, for the elder to accompany the deacon on this errand because of the spiritual nature of giving. The presence and exhortation of the elders make clear that money for the church is not a secular matter having no soulful importance.¹⁵

How often have you heard someone in the church say, or perhaps you have said, "I wish I knew what is going on"? Or, perhaps, you have heard it said, "I'd feel better about giving if I knew where it was going." The diaconate will gather from the saints better when it educates and informs better. Pastors and elders ought to have such an open relationship with the diaconate that every officer can readily know and own the mission of the church. Once owned, participation follows. Participation breeds enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is communicable. Deacons should be in homes *infecting*, as it were, the individual members and families with the missionary enterprise of the church. Greater giving will follow for the advancement of the gospel.

A *third* labor of the diaconate among the church membership which will promote the mission of the church is delegation. By virtue of a deacon's labor in his parish or geographical area of responsibility, he will learn of needs inside and outside the church. The deacon can encourage the individual church members to become involved in the specific need. It may even concern the need for such things for which the church as the church is not commissioned. For instance, Chalmers encouraged individual philanthropists to take advantage of employment needs of the unchurched. Thus, a local businessman might invest in a small business that would employ the needy from the community or another might establish a savings bank to promote better stewardship among those whose earnings were meager. The deacons, by virtue of their visitation among the brotherhood and becoming aware of the needs of the neighborhood, would make the needs known to the local philanthropists. Diaconal labors today could easily promote the same philanthropic achievements, which would enlarge the exposure of godly men to the

world. In short, as we become aware of needs within the church (brotherhood) and without the church (neighborhood) we can delegate the needs to appropriate individuals inside and outside the church. By so doing, various gospel contacts may be made and opportunities for advancement of the Church will grow.

Thus far I have laid before the diaconate three means by which it *can and ought* to promote local missions among the proportioned numbers of the church. First, we encourage them to meet the physical needs of the membership, so as to make the world jealous for such tender charity. Here again, the diaconate is not responsible for doing all the work. They will want to and must delegate to fellow members. Second, we encourage them to instruct their numbers in what the pecuniary needs are of other individual saints as well as the church's missionary budget. Third, we encourage the diaconate to learn of community needs through the church's membership and then promote those needs before Christian philanthropists toward the common improvement of the community and the good name of the Church and the gospel. Thus, we improve opportunities for the advancement of the gospel in our neighborhoods.

AMONG THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Thus far I have discussed the diaconal responsibilities among the brotherhood, the household of faith. However, the diaconate has some responsibilities to those outside the brotherhood. First, let us consider the reality of the church's responsibility to the neighborhood. Then we shall present a structured approach to our neighborhood.

R. A. Webb, a theological descendent of J. H. Thornwell and John L. Girardeau, was a stout defender of the spirituality of the church. That is, he adhered to the belief that the church has a single mission and purpose and that purpose is a spiritual one. Therefore, the institutional church is neither to intermeddle in the affairs of the civil realm, nor is it directly to cure the social ills of the world. She is not commissioned by God to run civil government or conduct social services any more than she is to operate businesses. Behind all of this is the Biblical conviction that the gospel ought to be the solitary stumbling block to the church's mission, not partisan politics, not the price of groceries, not wages to workers, not economic theory, and the like. Nevertheless, Webb

15. This latter emphasis on elders and deacons calling on the membership for financial support is drawn from Thomas Chalmers, *Earnest Appeal to the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1846), 10.

was convinced that the church has certain responsibilities toward the poor and needy *outside* the membership of the church. Thus, the Church has a calling to offer charitable aid to the brotherhood, as we have already seen, *and* to the neighborhood.¹⁶

The law of the good neighbor can be found within the revelation of the Mosaic covenant, both positively and negatively set forth. Old Testament Israel was “not [to] oppress a stranger” (Ex 23:9); neither was she to ignore the problems of their enemies—“If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him” (Ex 23:4). Moses continues by instructing the covenant community on their obligation to assist their neighbors, even the “one who hates you” when you know of their need (Ex 23:5). Indeed, the Old Testament is clear when it says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (Lev 19:1). Webb argues from these sorts of passages that “it is easy to generalize how the Old Testament required consideration and assistance for the enemy, the stranger, and [of course] the brother Israelite” (*Ibid.*, 80).

In the New Testament, our Lord utilized the neighbor theme of the Old Testament to address the Pharisaical traditions which corrupted both worship, mission, and message. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:44, 45). In response to the rich young ruler, our Lord said, “Honor your Father and Mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19:19). In response to the lawyer’s question about the greatest commandment, Jesus called the man to love God with his entirety *and* “The second [commandment] is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt 22:39). When tempted by the young lawyer our Lord said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). In each of these cases, the Lord makes love of neighbor *integral* to His answers to the different scenarios. In each case, the Old Testament and New Testament stand together. “It was a high doctrine of neighborliness,” writes Webb, “but it had been the doctrine from the very beginning of divine instruction” (*Ibid.*).

From our Savior, to Paul (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14), to James (James 2:8) we see that the New Testament is no less clear than the Old Testament. There is a Christian

responsibility toward the neighborhood, but not only the brotherhood. The words of our Lord make this point when he says, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing *than others*? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matt 5:46, 47, emphasis added) The point to be taken from the contrast is obvious: love those who do not love you, and do for those who are not your spiritual brothers. One final passage promotes the law of the neighbor, and that is that of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–37—whoever lives in this world is a neighbor. The world is the church’s neighborhood.

While I am arguing for the church’s role in the neighborhood, I wish to promote proper order in our extension of aid. Peter tells us to “Honor all men [i.e., neighbors]. Love the brotherhood” (1 Pet 2:17). Similarly, Paul tells us to “do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith,” (Gal 6:10). *Honor* the neighborhood, *but love* the brotherhood. Do good to all, but do good *especially* to the household of faith. From this we see “Our attitude towards the ‘brotherhood’ is closer and more intense than our bearing towards the ‘neighbor’” (*Ibid.*, 84). Nevertheless, we do bear a relationship to the neighbor. This same order is seen in our Lord’s instructions to the nascent church to “be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We are to take the gospel to our Jerusalem first, and finally to the remotest part of the earth; even so, the diaconate should concentrate its efforts first to the household of faith (brotherhood) and then towards the world (neighborhood).

Having seen the reality of our call to minister to the neighborhood, let us consider how we may structure and execute our neighborly responsibilities. First, it behooves us to have this fixed in our hearts and minds—the need of the neighborhood to which we minister is body and soul. We must be ready to care for the entire man. To err in one direction or the other is to pervert justice and mercy. Too often the fundamentalists’ propensity is to “win souls” and this to the neglect of the neighbors’ physical needs. The social gospel error is to care for the physical needs and neglect (even distort) the gospel message. Thus, we must be convinced that our neighborhood is a mission field and just as the brotherhood needs elders and deacons, so the neighborhood needs both the spiritual and physical attention. With a commitment toward a holistic ministry, the elders and deacons are both recognized as necessary offices. With both offices on alert, they set forth to structure

16. The following discussion on the church’s role in the neighborhood is developed, and largely borrowed, from Webb, “The Modern Mind and Christian Service,” in *Elements of Truth*, II:78–90.

the neighborhood in such a way as to promote their offensive. From above, you have the argument for a proportioned field of ministry. The elders and deacons can best approach their care for the saints by dividing the brotherhood into manageable numbers—attack the congestion by breaking it up. Likewise, they can best approach the needs of their neighborhood by dividing it into manageable numbers.

This is perhaps the best place to deal with an anticipated objection or at least a concern at this point. The concern is for time. To carry out a program of genuine diaconal involvement for fifty, one hundred, or, certainly, three hundred people, someone may object, would be more than a single man could manage time wise. Why, the man will necessarily neglect his family to do such a work! Chalmers was faced with the same objection when he recommended this model to the Church of Scotland. He answered with the testimonies of his deacons.¹⁷ According to the written testimonies, on the average, the deacons spent about one hour per month on their errands of compassion in the neighborhood. Now this average does not take into account the initial investment of time to establish neighborhood lines and meet extraordinary situations, but it does speak to the *normal* amount of time a deacon spent in the average month in Glasgow. Our experience should be little different; but would it not be sad if we could not find elders and deacons willing to give an hour or so a month?

Not long before his death, Thomas Chalmers penned an *Earnest Appeal to the Free Church of Scotland* in which he pled with his brothers and friends to take up their cause and carry it through. In discussing their commitment to the mission enterprise of the church he exhorted the deacons and elders to sound the alarm for greater financial support of the missionary work of the church.

Generally speaking, a very brief interval of time would suffice for their periodical rounds of visitation. All which is required is, that the duty, a very light one, shall never be omitted—shall be gone through punctually. But just in proportion to the lightness of the duty will be the heaviness of the imputation, if it be found that the Free Church cannot be upheld, because, after all their parade and professions of attachment, not one can be found for every hundred among her friends who will give up half an hour in the week, or two hours a month, in her service.¹⁸

What better use of one, two, or three hours of our time *per month* as elders and deacons than promoting the

needs and work of the church among the brotherhood and the neighborhood? How would you rather your children remember you sitting in front of a television, surfing the internet, *or* visiting the poor and needy, promoting the work of Christ and His Church? The answer ought to be an easy one. Well, you say, there is not only the time issue and our other obligations, but by the end of the day we are tired from our labor. Be reminded that Chalmers elders and deacons were tired also. Many of them labored far more doggedly in an industrial economy than many today do in a service economy. The Church is precious in the eyes of her Savior; will you not “give up half an hour in the week, or two hours a month, in her service.”

You will recall that Chalmers divided his neighborhood into groups of three- to four-hundred with an elder and deacon appointed to each proportioned area. Girardeau divided his church membership into groups of about fifty with officers delegated to attend each segment. The important factor here is to divide the numbers for better use of resources and the good of the needy.

How are neighborhoods determined? The first proportioned number should be the immediate area in which the church is located. Take a reasonable geographical area around the church facility and make that *your* Jerusalem. Remember, many if not all of your neighborhood contacts will come through the brotherhood/church membership. Begin with a modest appraisal; you can enlarge as you have resources. For your Judea and Samaria, we suggest you begin by identifying the neighborhoods of your elders and deacons and members. In a mobile society the neighborhood boundaries probably will not be nice and neat. Do not let that be a deterrent or discouragement. Begin modestly and adjust as you have resources. Assign an elder and deacon for each neighborhood, utilizing men who live within the neighborhood or are closest to the neighborhood by geographical proximity. Living in or close to the neighborhood will facilitate the officers’ contact and this for obvious reasons.

Once the neighborhoods are established and officers are assigned to the fields, it is time to begin the labor. It is perhaps good to say at this point what has been intimated above: elders and deacons ought to accompany one another *at times*.¹⁹ This is particularly true as they

17. Thomas Chalmers, *Statement in Regard to the Pauperism of Glasgow* (Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1823), 31–55.

18. Chalmers, *Earnest Appeal to the Free Church of Scotland*, 10.

19. The *times* appropriate for the elder to visit in the homes with the deacon are those times when it is known that a spiritual need

go into the homes of the brotherhood, as we have illustrated above, but it is likewise true as deacons venture into the neighborhood.

WORK OF THE DIACONATE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Once the diaconate and session has proportioned the neighborhoods, the work begins in earnest. *First*, the session and diaconate should determine and prioritize what Chalmers called errands. Make a diaconal errand list from which the diaconate can work. *Begin with a survey* to meet your neighbors, ascertain the sick, poor, hungry, and imprisoned (Matt 25). The best source for this list will be the membership of the church. We might further determine the orphans, widows, and deserted spouses, especially those with children at home (Is 1:23). How about the elderly wife who is caring for her Alzheimer's-stricken husband? This survey will provide the diaconate with a general acquaintance with all the families in his neighborhood and most certainly open doors for the gospel into the homes and hearts of the unchurched.

Second, sort out the needs according to proper "executive agency of Christian philanthropy" (Webb, 99). In other words, the diaconate, having ascertained the needs of the community must ask "how" the need can be met and "who" is best to meet the need. Of concern is to protect the gospel integrity of the church. Now, if the diaconate and session determine that the need is not one for which the church is called to minister, it is not enough for the diaconate to simply withdraw from the situation with a pious, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled" (James 2:16).²⁰ Rather the diaconate should make the need known to individual philanthropists within the church and community who can address the need. For instance, a man of the neighborhood is found to be without work and desires work. The diaconate *certainly may not* establish a business for the man, and thus open itself and the church up to all sorts of confusion surrounding the message of the gospel, but the diaconate may provide the man contact with a local business owner/philanthropist who

exists, or matters of doctrine are of concern. The elders may attend with the deacons at other times, but be careful not to place the elder in too close proximity where matters of finance are involved. It is not good for the spiritual office to be closely entangled with fiscal interests. It is too easy for the gospel to be compromised or confused in such instances.

20. We realize James is speaking of activity within the brotherhood, but the principle applies to the neighborhood as well as we see in Exodus 23:4, 5 and the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37).

21. Chalmers, *On the Sufficiency of the Parochial System*, 91.

will employ the man. Just as the diaconate informs the brotherhood of the financial needs of the church and her mission, thus promoting giving to the church, the diaconate should be active in informing the membership of the needs of the poor of the neighborhood; thus, encouraging private Christian charity. Again, the diaconate will often delegate this duty to others within the brotherhood to perform.

Here then is the *third function of the diaconate in the neighborhood*— to place the needs of the neighborhood before "private and voluntary philanthropist."²¹ As the deacons survey the communities and interact with the brotherhood within their neighborhoods, they will come across jobless, sick, hungry, orphaned, and widowed. They can promote good will toward the church, not by making the church an orphanage, or hospital, or employment agency, but by being so concerned as to make contacts for the needy with men and women who can help them. These contacts will ordinarily come from or through the brotherhood. Thus, we continue to expose the neighborhood to Christians and Christian charity and the ultimate gospel answer to their greatest need.

Once the deacons have canvassed the neighborhood, they should begin a secondary phase of their labors, which will include *regular visits into homes for the purpose of general encouragement*. This then is the *fourth function* of the diaconate through which the office is able to extend the outreach of the church through these visits, whereby they may bring cheer into the midst of what are often very difficult home situations. Consider the case of a neglected or abused wife that has been discovered by a church member and made known to the diaconate. It might well be that the deacon could arrange a visit from his wife who could offer the lady of the house a more sympathetic ear. Or the deacon might even arrange a visit into the home by a female member of the church who has had a similar experience. What a marvelous way for the deacon to delegate to other members of the church work for which they are better suited. Again, through this merciful expression of sympathy and empathy the gospel is more easily expressed to a lost and dying world.

The deacon is to be a "man full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Along this line, he is to be a good manager of his family (1 Tim 3:12). In addition then to being a general encouragement to his neighbors, we see his *fifth function* as an able advisor and resource to husbands. As Chalmers puts it, he can provide instruction on "how to husband their own resources and make their own hands minister to their own necessity" (Ibid., 116).

The diaconate can serve the church and community as a bright *example of and instructor in Christian family management* and once again provide a platform for the life-changing message of the gospel. An example of this would be counsel on the advantages of a unified family. The Christian promotes family unity through corporate dining, family readings, and especially through family worship. Again the example of the deacon can be used to promote envy in the neighbor for the family life of a Christian home.

There are a number of other labors that may emanate from the five general functions we have just suggested, but they will be discerned by the diaconate through their encounters. The application of biblical wisdom to each case will result in a number of additional efforts on the diaconates part for the neighborhood. Through all of this, the church will gain, in Chalmers’s words, “familiar converse with the common people,” and the end of “familiar converse” is “to provide a habit of universal church-going” (*Ibid.*, 21). This is true in regard to both the work of the deacon and the private Christian philanthropist. For in each case, the efforts should be so saturated with the love and compassion of Christ and the express teaching of Scripture that the recipients are made to envy the communion of saints, which is found in the church, the brotherhood.

Practical Approach of the Diaconate

Having established the diaconate’s role among the brotherhood and the neighborhood, let me discuss how a deacon might evaluate a situation he comes upon in the neighborhood and how he might direct the needy.²² In the *case of joblessness*, for instance, the deacon would determine what kind of work the neighbor could do and whether he could sustain full-time employment. With this information, the diaconate can better make recommendations and appropriate contacts. Second, *ascertain the relation* of family, friends, and neighbors who might be true “neighbors” to the needy. It is certainly good and proper for the wealthy to use their wealth to assist the needy (1 Tim. 6:17–19), but it is important for *all* to do good for the neighbors. So the diaconate ascertains whether neighbors, friends, and family are aware of the needs and gives the first opportunity for philanthropy to those closest to the situation. Chalmers lamented the tendency in Glasgow for people to think first of organizations, even charitable organizations, when family and neighbors could own the situation and promote not only their neighbors good but the quality of the entire neighborhood.

I never, during my whole experience in Glasgow, knew a single instance of distress which was not followed up by the most timely forthgoings of aid and of sympathy from the neighbours;... I remember going into one of the deepest and most wretched recesses in all Glasgow, where a very appalling case of distress met my observation—that of a widow, whose two grown-up children had died within a day or two of each other. I remember distinctly seeing both their corpses on the same table; it was in my own parish. I was quite sure that such a case could not escape the observations of neighbors. I always liked to see what amount of kindness came spontaneously forth upon such occasions, and I was very much gratified to learn a few days after, that the immediate neighbors occupying that little alley or court laid together their little contributions, and got her completely over her ... difficulties (Hanna, 2.305).

In this case, Chalmers and his deacons informed the neighborhood of the need and it was met without the aid of any organization. Remember, these were people who *were* accustomed to a welfare system. Not unlike our context today, the people of Glasgow were accustomed to seeking assistance from governmental agencies and other legal charities. However, due to the ongoing labors of the diaconate and their promotion of the biblical responsibilities of family and neighbors, the needs were met immediately by people who cared. “Were it right,” asks Chalmers, “that any legal charity whatever should arrest a process so beautiful?” The question demands and expects a resounding, “No!”

Now, someone may say, but it will not work in our entitlement- riddled welfare state. Remember again, Scotland too had the entitlements, but Chalmers said, “I never found it otherwise.” What he meant was that when family, friends, and neighbors were given the plight of their neighbor, he never found the need to go unmet. Yet he warned “that whenever there was ostensible relief obtruded upon the eyes of the population, they did feel themselves discharged from a responsibility for each other’s wants, and released from the duty of being one another’s keepers” (*Ibid.*, 305). He believed it was a gospel responsibility of the church to educate the neighborhood of their responsibility to their neighbor and not let them avoid their neighborly responsibility. Surely the same is true, that Christians are responsible for their neighbors in need. The diaconate helps

22. The practical approach is adapted from Thomas Chalmers and may be found most easily in William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Sutherland and Knox, 1860), 2:299.

the brotherhood, individual Christians, to meet their neighborly responsibility.

Having determined the real need and ascertained the ability and willingness of family, friends, and neighbors to aid in the situation, the diaconate should *determine the relationship of the needy person or family to any church*. If they are indeed part of another congregation, the deacon should contact the leadership of that body to verify data and determine manner of proceeding. It may be that there is an opportunity for two congregations to work together, thus showing a semblance of biblical connectionalism.²³ It may be the case that the deacon will uncover an undeserving party who is unwilling to work and so should not eat (2 Thess 3:10). It may be that one may discover a situation where a person has not received the treatment he deserved from the body of Christ and has become ambivalent toward the church, and an opportunity is provided for regaining a brother or evangelizing a neighbor.

Once the diaconate has determined the true need and the available resources from family, friends and, perhaps, another church body, then informed compassion can be administered as needed and as the diaconate is able. Of course, the diaconate should follow-up on legitimate cases on a regular interval to show its genuine concern. These follow-up visits may and ought to be mixed with spiritual instruction. Deacons ought to include elders in their visits, especially for further teaching on topics of doctrine. We must never lose sight of our goal to minister to the whole man—body and soul.

Conclusion

The Church has a responsibility to both the brotherhood and the neighborhood. In order to promote the mission of the Church we should break up the numbers into manageable proportions. As Chalmers has said, “Gargantuanism and the care for souls cannot coexist.”²⁴ Deacons ought to be at work in determining the true needs of the brotherhood and neighborhood. From the needs we move to the proper form of meeting the need, whether it is directly met by the diaconate (the church) or through individual philanthropists. The diaconate is

the God-given means for honoring and doing good to all men, but especially the brotherhood. This is an ongoing labor, for “you always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7; Deut 15:11). Thus, it is important to “not grow weary of doing good” (2 Thess 3:13). Do not become discouraged with little or slow results. Continue your labor. Be faithful in small things. Remember that you are not accountable for the timing of the harvest, but for the labor. When tempted to stop short, when uncertain how you can keep your heart and hand open to the needy, hear these words from R. A. Webb: “But when I see that the Lord Jesus identifies himself with them, then as long as I have any interest in Him, and any love for Him, they have claims upon my affections for His sake” (Webb, 113).

The diaconate is no small office. It meets enormous obstacles and presents to the world an enormous God who cares for sparrows and much more for the sick, and naked, and hungry, and widowed, and orphaned. It has a great role to play in the gospel work of the church. Where the diaconate is not plowing the hardened hearts with the compassion of Christ, is it any wonder the gospel is falling upon hardened hearts? Rather, let our deacons work, cultivating through compassion the hard hearts of this world, and let us observe the power of the gospel to transform lives. If we, living by faith, dare not say to our brothers, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” how can we display a vibrant and vital faith in our neighborhood with similar heartlessness? “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people” (Gal 6:10a). “The beneficence of Christianity,” wrote Webb, “has been its shining crown, and its crowning glory. . . . It has filled the world with its ministries of mercy and with its institutions of kindness. It has softened the heart of man, and modified his savage brutalities towards his fellow-creatures. For the abject and forlorn . . . for all the handicapped and broken-down specimens of the human race Christianity has sought to make a friend in its disciples” (*Ibid.*, 104). Indeed, the office God gave to meet the physical needs of the church and her locality is a vital instrument in the missionary enterprise of the church. It is no small office. ■

23. A single NT example of churches exhibiting their organic unity and connectionalism is found in 2 Cor 9:1–5 where the churches of Asia Minor are urged to give for the church in Jerusalem.

24. Quoted in “Memorial Sermon,” by Rev. James Lorimer, pastor of Free St. David’s, Edinburgh, on June 6, 1847 (after Chalmers died on May 31, 1847).