



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 11 Issue 4

January 22, 2012

The Office of Deacon, Part Two

Many of us have heard the expression: “Function dictates form”? It is quite true. When Boeing came out with the first commercial jetliner they held a press conference at which time a reporter asked the question, “Why’d you make it so beautiful?” The spokesman for Boeing said that that wasn’t their intention, but that it was designed to fly. It just so happens that that is what it takes for a plane to fly. And it is true that the forms of many things today is not predicated by the desire of the architect put the function and use of the object.

So it is with the diaconate. It is the function of the diaconate that governs its purpose and place in the body of Christ. And that is why our study of the diaconate begins with a look at the church it is to serve.

The church of Christ is a “Covenant Community.” It began with Abraham when God limited His

redeeming work to a family. At this time, quality was chosen over quantity and God established a community/family through which His redemption would be worked out. (Galatians 3:8-9, 14). Now because God is a gracious God who has chosen the weak over the wise and powerful (1 Corinthians 1:27), it is expected that the covenant community would embody this ethic: love for the hurting, poor, needy, widow, orphan, and the like. In fact, this ethic resulted in a culture/community vastly different from every nation surrounding God's people. In the ancient world, illness/weakness/poverty and the like were believed to be the consequence of sin. As a result it was believed that to help a weak person was to endorse their sin. As such, on the whole the weak and hurting were not cared for in the ancient world. Rather, they were taken advantage of, used, abused, and so neglected and forsaken.

Yet this was not to be the case amongst God's people.

Exodus 22:21-22, "And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19a, "For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien..."

What impact ought this ethic to have on us as a body? What are the implications of this teaching today? The answer to this is partly connected to the office of Deacon which God established in the New Testament. And this office is shaped by Divine design.

The Divine Place: The Church

God's design of the covenant community ought to inform our understanding of the family. During His second year of ministry while addressing a group of people in a house in Galilee, Christ's mother and brothers sought an audience with Him. When it was told that His family was outside waiting to talk to Him, Christ responded this way:

Matthew 12:49-50, "...stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, 'Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.'"

Don't ever forget that Christ did not come to abolish the Law (cf. Matthew 5:17). As such, He did not take lightly the Old Testament laws pertaining to the family. In fact, based on our understanding, we would have expected Jesus at this moment to "drop everything" and attend to His family. And yet with what would have amounted to a shocking statement (and as He did when it came to one's neighbor in Luke 10:29) Christ defined how we are to understand our family. It no longer is simply just our blood relatives, BUT everyone in the body of Christ.

Matthew 12:49-50, "And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, 'Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My

brother and sister and mother.”

Christ here was not dishonoring His blood relatives nor was He denouncing them. Rather, He was extending the Jewish understanding of the family to include all who serve the Lord. Did you get that? Christ said that what we consider to be our immediate family must now include the body of Christ!

This is rather significant. For consider with me the dynamic of family life as it exists today in America and then compare it to what passes today for “church life.” In most families, even dysfunctional ones, there is an unconditional commitment that exists among some if not all the family members. Our family may fight like cats and dogs, but there remains a capacity for forgiveness that goes beyond comprehension. And if anyone else treats you the way your parents or a sibling have you’d be done with them. But the grown man or woman shrugs it off and goes right back on caring for the family member. In family gatherings, rarely is there the anticipation that if it isn’t personally fun or engaging, we’ll leave and find a family that’s more edifying; instead we cheer each other on, often times to the chagrin of our spouses.

Why is that? Why is there such a bond in a family? The bond is there because we view the relationships as lasting for a life-time, and we aren’t willing to allow quirks or even sins to get in the way.

Now, based upon Christ’s teaching in Matthew 12, we must see that as the church of God we constitute a family. So when it comes to the church:

- Where’s the unconditional love?
- Where’s the commitment that transcends time?
- Where’s the deep well of forgiveness?
- Where’s the willingness to lock arms together to accomplish our God given calling?
- Where’s the longing to be poured out and used up for the good of others, the way a parent does for his child?

Can I tell you where it’s gone? The church has ceased being a family and became a product for a consuming public, which sadly is what the church has become today. The American church culture has become a marketplace where everyone tries to get the most for their money regardless of who gets hurt.

Oh family of God, may we never forget that this body constitutes our forever family!

Encouraging Unto Growth in Grace

The covenant community places a high value on encouraging the body unto its growth in grace.

1 Timothy 5:8, But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.”

The context of this verse is Paul’s discussion about widows in the body of Christ. If you have a parent or family member that is widowed and you don’t care for that one, i.e., take care of their needs, then

you have denied the faith and have placed yourself in the category of the sinner who does not know Christ! Because we are a family, we are morally obligated to care for one another! To fall short of this standard is to testify to an unhealthy soul no matter how moved you may be in your worship. Listen to the exhortation of the Hebrew writer:

Hebrew 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together...”

Notice in this passage, Hebrews 10:19-25, the writer uses three “*therefores*” to indicate the benefits which flow from the gospel; *therefore*:

- We must draw near to God, Hebrews 10:22.
- We must hold fast our confession, Hebrews 10:23
- We must strive to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, Hebrews 10:24.

It is the last “therefore” that has grave impact on our body life. There has been a lot of talk in the past about “NOT forsaking the body of Christ.” With parachurch ministries popping up all over, it is tempting to quit church in favor of a mid-week ministry, a bible study, an outreach. Accordingly, there rightly has been a response from academia and the pulpit which has sought to remind the people of God as to the priority placed in the Bible on Sunday worship, and this text is one of the main passages referenced. Yet notice with me, if you show up on Sunday morning and fail to “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” you are guilty of forsaking the body.

Hebrews 10:24-25, “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, NOT forsaking our own assembling together.”

Truly to show up and NOT engage another person unto their benefit and growth in grace is to forsake the body no matter how faithful you are in your attendance. In fact, notice the word for “stimulate”- *παροξυσμὸν*. It is used of being provoked, incited, irritated, or prodded usually in a bad way. (cf. Acts 17:16; 1 Corinthians 13:5; Acts 15:39) Yet here it carries a positive connotation and implies a fellowship in which people are challenging one another to love and serve the Lord in the various and sundry contexts of life.

That is what the covenant community is all about! In light of the commitment God has for each and everyone’s growth and maturation in Christ, WE commit ourselves to the same. Accordingly Paul gave this command in Galatians:

Galatians 6:2, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.”-

The word rendered “bear” is used in Scripture of the carrying of a rock (John 10:31) or of a cross (John 19:17). Thus to “bear the burden” of another speaks NOT of tolerating another person’s weakness, BUT taking their burden and making it your own. I love this! This is what being in a church family is all about. It is about being weak and having a stronger brother or sister come alongside you. It is lacking trust and having members of the body involve themselves in your life such that you do not quite or give up. It is about doing what we can to help carry the burdens of another. This is what it means to be in the family of God!

So what ought we to be as a covenant community? What should characterize the church of God? We ought to be committed radically to one another such that we long to prod each other on to love and good deeds. If you have been saved, this is how God intends you to live and so function in the body of Christ.

Vulnerability of the Hurting and Needy

The covenant community requires vulnerability on the part of the hurting and the needy.

Philippians 4:10-11, 14, 17, "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned *before*, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am...¹⁴ Nevertheless, you have done well to share *with me* in my affliction...¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account."

This verse reflects an understanding on the part of Paul as to how his need related to the kingdom of God. Accordingly, let me ask these questions:

- When it came to Christ's Kingdom work, what was the cause of Paul's rejoicing here?

It wasn't the Philippians' gift! Rather, it was when the "concern" of the Philippians that matured or came to fruition.

Philippians 4:10, "but I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me."

The word "revive" is a botanical metaphor referencing the unfolding of a flower or the leafing out of a tree after winter. In essence, Paul is saying that on account of his need the Philippians had blossomed in their concern for him and their maturation in Christ had advanced. And it was this that made Paul "rejoice in the Lord greatly!"

From this we see an important aspect of church life; allowing our needs to be known that the body of Christ might be prompted unto love and good deeds! As the purpose of every spiritual gift is the edification of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Peter 4:10), so also is God's will for the one lacking. As our needs are made known to the body, the people of God are forced to make a decision:

- Will they be a consumer and so ignore one of their own?
- Will they live as a sheep and so share the love of Christ?

As the latter is the only option for a genuine body of Christ, we see that "need" in any form in the body is a catalyst unto that body's growth in grace. It should be obvious, but what we are talking about is the ministry of need! Most want the showy gifts/ministries and others are happy to settle for the less showy. But very few want a ministry which places them in a position of need.

Yet if we are a family whom God has willed to mature in the faith, then you must see that any need

that you may have, your burdens have partly been given to you that the rest of the body might be prompted to help you bear them! It therefore behooves us as a family

- To share our needs, relying upon the sufficiency of Christ,
- To expose our underside that others might be prompted to love and good deeds.

Neglect Not the Community

The covenant community ought not be neglected.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God [speaking of the corporate body of Christ- the church], and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.”

In Paul’s day, there were many who were hostile to the church and therefore God’s kingdom. Some used the body of Christ as a means to further their own agenda- Simon (Acts 8:18). Others were gravely mistaken and so opposed the church thinking that they were doing God a favor, Paul prior to his conversion (Acts 9:1-2). Still others used the church as a means to bolster their own pride, the Philippians (Philippians 1:15, 17).

In fact, if we were to consider the circumstances one by one of men/women who have done positive harm to the body of Christ throughout Church History we no doubt would be moved to sobriety and maybe even anger. Yet of all the “harm” that has befallen the church throughout the ages, perhaps the most devastating is that of neglect! Listen to God’s exhortation in...

Ezekiel 34:1-6, “Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill, and My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth; and there was no one to search or seek *for* them.’””

First off notice that there was NO office in the Old Testament called, “Shepherd.” Accordingly, by virtue of this title God is referencing those in the body who has been charged with the oversight and care of another, which we have seen in the New Testament, really is each of us. (cf. James 1:27)! Regardless of the motive, which is quite obvious here, the crisis referenced in this passage is that of gross neglect, a neglect which did not fare well with God. The weak and helpless in the body of Christ, who should have been the object of special love and care, were forsaken! What a travesty! Again, God’s Kingdom was founded upon the grace of God given to ones who did not deserve it. As such mutual love, devotion, and care is a primary element of any covenant community.

Jeremiah 22:16, “He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what

it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord.”

And it was this theme, as we saw last time, which brought about the eventual destruction of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms in the Old Testament. Why did Judah go into exile? Because as a community it was NOT “one for all and all for one,” BUT “one for one and all for none!”

Now again, that God’s New Covenant people might not repeat the errors of the past, the Lord established at least two offices in the New Testament whose primary purpose is the oversight, care, protection, and provisioning of the body of Christ. Speaking of the Diaconate, listen once again to Acts 6.

Acts 6:1-3, “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of* food [truly at this moment in Redemptive History the church was in crises. That which led to the exile in the OT has resurfaced- a weak and hurting group in the body was being neglected. So what did God do through the apostles? We pick it up in v. 2...] And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.’”

We will take up this passage in earnest as we begin looking at the ministry of the deacons. Yet, regardless of the formal office, I hope that each of us will take a closer look at our relation to the body of Christ:

- Is it your family?
- Are you moved and burdened by it?
- Are you here to get or to give- to God and then each other?

May God prompt us all to expand our familial love and commitment to encompass this body!

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 22, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.