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The Office of Deacon, Part 7

Colossians 1:24-25, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known."

When it comes to public service, oft-times there is a huge disparity between the man and his office. Take for example Margaret Thatcher of whom a movie was recently made called, "The Iron Lady." In public she was a strong, unwavering leader of conviction. In fact, so strong was her persona that she was labeled "The Iron Lady" by her opposition. et privately, in her marriage and personal life, she wasn't "The Iron Lady." And from this we understand that there is a distinction that can be made between the individual and the office he/she holds or even the man and then the minister/servant which they must be in office.

From this a distinction can be made between the man who holds an office in the church and the minister who carries out the tasks of an office. With the former we are dealing with the person as they are in private. With the latter, the person as they hold office and so serve the Lord. Colossians 1 outlines the minister or servant which every deacon ought to aspire to.

The setting of Colossians for it is one and the same as Philipians. After his third missionary journey, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and detained for a good two years (Acts 24:27). Felix frequently brought the apostle before him seeking a bribe (Acts 24:26). Paul eventually appealed to Caesar and so was sent by boat to Rome to be tried in the highest court in the empire (Acts 25:11). While there, the leaders of the Roman church were threatened by Paul and so sought to humiliate him even further, yet Paul was pleased to hear that as a result, the gospel was being proclaimed (Philipians 1:15).

Paul wrote four letters to the churches in Asia Minor during this period of house arrest where he was chained to a Roman soldier; Ephesians, Philipians, Philemon, and Colossians. Each of these churches had specific needs which Paul addressed in his letters. The issue at Colossae revolved around the identity of Christ. Following Paul's ministry in the city, false leaders rose in the church and began to lead the disciples astray holding what has been identified as Pre-Gnostic tendencies. Gnosticism was dualistic, believing that the spirit-realm was pure and undefiled, while the physical-realm was sinful.

In Gnosticism, it was believed that God was a non-corporal being completely pure. As this being could have nothing to do with physical matter, He could not have created the world. Accordingly it was believed that God created a lesser being, which created a lesser being, which created a lesser being, which created the angels, which created the world. In the heresy, it was believed that Christ was an angel or an angel-type figure. Salvation therefore was through Christ, but not by Christ. Jesus possessed the secret knowledge of ascendancy, but He was not the believer's hope.

The theme of Colossians can be summarized this way:

Colossians 3:11, "...but Christ is all, and in all."- truly, Paul's message to the Colossians was that Christ is: God (Colossians 2:9), the Creator (Colossians 1:16), the Savior (Colossians 1:20; 2:13-14), and the Head of the church, and as such one who has "come to have first place in everything" (Colossians 1:18)!

Now as a servant of this most high God, Paul's place in the Kingdom of God and for that matter, our place is captured in a section of Scripture in Colossians in which Paul describes his identify and work as a minister in the kingdom, Colossians 1:24-2:7.

Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions."-

In essence Paul says that though he currently was going through intense suffering, nevertheless it was enough to know that it served Christ, for all that he suffered was for Christ's body which is the church! Did you get that? Paul was content to live a life of sorrow, sadness, suffering, sickness, and much more if it was for Christ! So though from outward appearances it looked like he had been

abandoned by God (this was the assessment of the church leaders in Rome), Paul was not discouraged. In fact, notice the calling that God had placed on his life.

Colossians 1:25, “Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the *preaching of* the word of God.”

What an incredible calling which corralled Paul’s thinking and emotions time and time again! The body of Christ, the Church, was a stewardship given to him by God! As such Paul was unimportant. His needs, wants, and desires did not matter. What was all-important was the church’s growth and maturation in the Lord!

Colossians 1:28-29, “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete [mature] in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”

Paul labored unto the maturation of the body of Christ by the glorious message which God revealed to him.

Colossians 1:26-27, “*That is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

With this glorious message, Paul committed his life to the benefit and welfare of the church.

Colossians 2:1-3, “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Christianity’s orthodoxy stands in sharp contrast to the orthopraxy of Gnosticism which understood Christ to be a vehicle of God’s wisdom and knowledge. Paul’s message here is clear: the struggles he endured were for one purpose and one purpose only, that the body of Christ might come to know Christ’s:

- Pre-eminence.
- Place.
- Glory.
- Honor.

Truly, Christ wasn’t just a vehicle of knowledge and wisdom, Christ was the source of all knowledge and wisdom and the believers in Colossae needed to understand this.

Colossians 2:4-7, “I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ. [In light of this, Paul’s exhortation was clear...]

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude.”

That’s the flow of the text at which we currently are looking. Notice the points that Paul makes regarding his calling as a minister of Christ:

- Though Paul made the statement as an apostle of Christ, nevertheless based on what we’ve seen in this series, it rightly encapsulates the mindset of all servants of Christ- much less the deacon.
- And so for the remainder of the time we are going to speak in terms of the formal Minister who is charged with the Diaconal Care of a body...
 - What does he look like?
 - What is his concern?
 - What is it that impels him?

The Object of the Deacon’s Ministry

Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”

In 1 Corinthians we read this:

1 Corinthians 1:20b, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

There is no better example of this than in the realm of suffering which is Paul’s focus here! To the world, suffering is an evil which is understood to be an indication that God must be angry. Yet in Christ, God has turned this on its head for suffering entered into this world when Adam sinned.

Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

Prior to the fall, there was no suffering, sickness, disease, or death. These things entered into the world when we rebelled against God. Thus, we must understand that in our current state, suffering is a normal part of life! But herein God did something truly amazing, God deigned to use suffering as the means to end suffering for His people.

1 Peter 1:11, “[The prophets were] Seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.”

Do you understand the implication of this verse? One of the reasons the infinite God-man, Jesus Christ, came to this earth was to suffer! He was appointed to this end! Marvel of marvels! How could someone so perfect, suffer so greatly? Yet that is why God sent His Son!

Hebrews 2:10, “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all

things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.”

From this we see that from the perspective of redemption, suffering now takes on a whole new meaning. That which entered into this world on account of OUR SIN; that is suffering, God used to destroy sin in the flesh. And He did this by submitting His Son to the sin and misery of this world. And thus from the cross forward, suffering now brings with it elements of nobility; if the King of Glory submitted Himself to suffering, ought not we? Accordingly we are charged this way:

1 Peter 4:12-13, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing...”

As one saved by grace and privy to all that we have learned, listen to Paul’s longing as a Christian:

Philippians 3:10, “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.”

And that is why the response of the disciples to suffering isn’t all that strange to us.

Acts 5:41, “So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name.”

Such was the case for Paul, he willingly suffered for Christ in the ministry. He was so willing because of the calling that rested upon him in the ministry: it was his privilege to suffer for Christ! You say, “But Paul made it clear here that the sufferings which confronted him at the writing of Colossians were for the church.”

Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings FOR YOUR SAKE...”

This is true; in fact, we’re going to consider that in a moment. Yet look at the second half of the verse:

Colossian 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”¹

It was for Christ that Paul suffered as he did! The child of God someday would be glorified, but they must endure.

Colossians 1:23, “If indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.”

That which impelled Paul in all that he did was the understanding that in and through all things, he was a servant of Christ! In fact, on many occasions, he referred to himself as nothing less than a “Servant of Christ” (Romans 1:1; 2 Corinthians 11:23; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:7; 1 Timothy 4:6; Titus 1:1!

1 Corinthians 4:1, "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."

This calling rests on the lives of all officers in Christ's church. Accordingly we must understand that while the deacons minister to the body of Christ, nevertheless ultimately they are Christ's servants! All that they do, they do for Him!

This is an important point. Oft-times it can be heard in the context of church ministry that the officers are the church's servants; and again, as we'll see in a moment, in a limited way they are. Yet it must be understood both by the church, the minister, and his family that the ultimate object and focus of their service is the Lord. Service in the Kingdom of God involves sacrifice for in it we give of our time, talents, and resources that other people might be helped.

In time, the "sacrifice" involved can become burdensome, especially when familiarity begins to breed contempt.

- *I'm giving up my time to help Mr. Ungrateful?*
- *We're spending another evening without dad and husband so that Mrs. Grumbly can be helped?*
- *Mr. and Mrs. Never-Satisfied called again and off my husband went!*

We must ever and always keep in mind that deacons ultimately are NOT servants of the people of God, BUT of God Himself. And thus, when a family goes an evening without their husband or dad, their sacrifice is an offering well-pleasing to the Lord! We need to hear this over and over again.

In marital counseling, I've dealt with marriages where one of the members had what I call an "idol of pleasure." An "idol of pleasure" is a vacation, hunting trip, or habitual get-away in which one spouse participates without the other. You have heard about them:

- *He's on his hunting trip again, and I'm left holding the bag.*
- *Not only do I have to do all the things required of me as a wife, but now I have to be the man of the house while he is off playing.*
- *I'm sick of it! And I don't ever want to do it again!*

I have heard this dialogue many times throughout the years. Idols of pleasure eventually wear out their welcome leaving one spouse resentful and bitter. Yet I'll never forget the first time I heard the dialogue which typically accompanies Idols of pleasure in association with an officer in the church.

- *He's at his deacon's meeting again, and I'm left holding the bag.*
- *Not only do I have to do all the things required of me as a wife, but now I have to be the man of the house while he is off playing.*
- *I'm sick of it! And I don't ever want to do it again!*

This represents a grave misunderstanding when it comes to the work of a Minister of God! The object

of his service is Christ! And that means anything and everything offered in support of his service of the Lord is itself an offering to the Lord! If we could come to appropriate this truth into our lives, we'd be saved a world of struggle, bitterness, and grief. When Paul was persecuting the church, he was attacking Christ (Acts 24:16). Conversely, when he brought Christ to the Gentiles, he viewed the work as nothing less than a burnt offering given in love to his King (Philippians 2:17).

Likewise, when a deacon visits Mr. Bitter, or attends to Mrs. Irresponsible, or helps the “Strangers”—that new family that just came to church last week, or endeavors to encourage the “Without” family and his support network stays behind praying or compensating for his absence, know that this is what Christ says:

Matthew 25:40, “...to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even* the least of *them*, you did it to Me.”

The object of the deacon’s service ultimately is the Lord! And yet, on account of Christ’s commissioning, the Minister also has become a servant of the church.

The Earthly Focus of the Deacon’s Ministry

Colossians 1:25, “Of *this church* I was made a minister [or “servant”]...”

Paul’s wording is rather interesting. There are many words in the Greek used to denote the idea of “serving.” For example:

- δουλεύω meant to serve as a slave, with a stress on subjection.
- θεραπεύω emphasized willingness for service and the respect and concern thereby expressed (esp. towards God).
- λατρεύω meant to serve for wages. In the NT it came to be used predominantly for religious or cultic duties.
- λειτουργέω denoted official public service to the people or to the state. Accordingly in the LXX it came to be used for service in the temple and in the NT it was used for service in the Church.
- ὑπηρετέω meant at root to steer. In terms of service, it insinuated the existence of a relationship with the master to whom the service was rendered.
- διακονέω, distinct from all the other forms, had the special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another. As such, it denoted a service rendered on account of love. (Gerhard Kittel, 1985, pp. Vol 2, Page 81)

It is this latter word that Paul chose to use in this text to describe the calling given to him by God. He was a servant of the church, and as such endeavored to benefit the body of Christ on account of love!

Colossians 2:1, “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face.”

There is no question that a hallmark of Paul’s work as a servant of Christ was a concern for the body of Christ which impelled him to live his life for its welfare. Truly as a minister, he was a διακονος.

Of the six words used to denote “service” in the Apostolic Age, THE word used of the formal office of the Deacon and so the ministry which concerned itself with the poor, weak, bereft, sick, or widowed was διακονέω. The church could have used any number of Greek terms to designate an office of service, but they chose the one which conveyed “a service rendered in love.” That was Paul’s calling... that is our calling... and that is the Deacon’s calling!

Now is this the ideal or the reality of a Deacon’s service? The answer is, “Yes!” The title given to this office, διακονος, ought to remind all deacons everywhere that they must serve the body in love. Accordingly, it is this to which they must aspire. Yet they are sinners and so will always struggle here. Love is not a natural component of any man. Always remember that it is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Toward that end, let me encourage you NOT to be discouraged by their lack of love for the body, BUT RATHER to endeavor to cultivate a heart of love. You do this by “humbling ourselves in the sight of the Lord” (James 5:12). To do this we remember the sin from which we have sought forgiveness. Peter after describing all the fruit of the spirit describes it this way:

1 Peter 1:9, “For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins.”

Unloving people are arrogant people. The person who can’t forgive another is one who considers themselves above the sin they can’t forgive, “*I would have never done that!*” So again, if you want to foster love in your heart consider that from which you have been redeemed!

Ephesians 2:4-5, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).”

Seldom do we consider the implication of this truth, that Christ loved us “when we were dead in our transgressions.” We tend to impute our mental conception of ourselves to the moment we were saved- and honestly, we’re not that bad.

- *We aren’t like the drug dealers or murders.*
- *While we were sinners deserving of death, we hadn’t really harmed anyone.*

Accordingly, we weren’t such a bad lot when Christ set His love upon us! Yet notice that this text says that Christ loved us “when we were dead in our transgressions.”

Have you ever approached a dead animal in the road? Their guts are hanging out and they are covered with maggots. They have the smell of death upon them that is indescribable, an odor so foul! It is this image that Paul has in mind when he describes our condition when God saved us in love. In fact, notice he describes it this way:

Romans 7:24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from ^{the} body of this death?”

Do you know what Paul means by “a body of death”? In the ancient world, one way capital crimes were addressed was by attaching the naked body of the victim to the bare back of the murderer. What would happen is that the maggots of the dead would eat into the back of the living eventually killing him. That is what Paul had in mind when he thought of our fallen humanness! It is this that Christ loved!

If when you think of yourself aside from Christ you picture yourself more nobly than a maggot infested corpse, you have too high a view of yourself. And as that is the case, we always will struggle with love. In contrast the deacon is one who serves the church in love. That means that they must be maturing in their faith such that when they see —

- Mr. Grumbly.
- Mrs. Ungrateful.
- Mr. and Mrs. Never-satisfied.

—They are not provoked to anger or resentment, but pity, sorrow, and compassion. For so goes each of us save for the grace of Christ!

End Note

¹ Compare also Col. 3:23-24

Bibliography

Gerhard Kittel, G. F. (1985). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: (10 Volume Set)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 26, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church