

THE WORD "DEACON" IN THE SCRIPTURES

"Diakonia" is a nice Greek word, and for all its Greek-ness is really not hard to understand. It means "service," and service, you know, is what the healthy and able do for the poor and sick and weak and oppressed and needy. In the church there are functionaries who are particularly engaged in such concerns. They are called "deacons" - Greek: *diakonoi* or, shall we say, "servicemen," who take care of the ministry to the needy.

In Acts 6, the particular task of the deacons was conceived to be that of caring for the poor and attending to material things. The diaconate represents that body of persons whose major function is that of managing the Church's benevolence, charity and relief programs.

The word *diakonia*, however is not limited to any particular office, nor to only one aspect of the church's calling, but in broad reference to Christian ministry and discipleship is a "central and frequently recurring concept in the New Testament." *Diakonia*, therefore, is not something peripheral or auxiliary to the main thrust of the church's ministry, but stands at the heart of the Gospel and its mission to the world. Of particular significance is the fact that *diakonia* is the concept by which our Lord describes the motive, character, spirit and goal of His entire ministry, and of the life and ministry of those who become His followers. (Hans Kung, The Church) J.C. Hoekendyk, in The Church Inside Out, says: "Everything that was done by the Son of Man who came, Jesus Christ, including humiliation, self-emptying, cross and death is summarized in eight letters: *diakonia*. The same single word also indicates the pattern of life for all who followed Jesus. *Diakonia*: they go into service... They are other-directed... They find themselves among those in need; it has become their natural milieu...They discover that they are being drawn into Jesus' diaconate and start participating in it".

The life of the church must be imitated from the Messiah, which means living in "self-emptying" - the life of the servant. "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, who...emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men...and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8) Here is not only a strong call to but a clear fundamental outline for the Church's character, spirit and service.

This is how the Church enters into and exercises the servant character and ministry of Christ - by identification with, involvement in, and service to the world in the name of Christ. "The Church" says Lewis Smedes, "is Jesus Christ bodily present, bodily committed to, and bodily immersed in the ghetto of human history. The Church, His body, still carries on the work of reconciliation. And it is vulnerable, open to wounds, because it, with Him, is still part of the ghetto. (The Reformed Journal, January 1969). As the word became flesh and dwelt with us, we visit.

This understanding of the Church as Christ's body - present and acting for Christ in the world - permits a more fruitful understanding of what Paul writes concerning the various members of the body and the diversities of gifts. The reference is not simply to diversity of character, type, personality, which in Christ achieves a transcendent unity across differences. It is rather to diversity of function. As the hand, foot, eye, mouth, etc., each perform the function, which make for a total life and action of the body; so do the members of the body of Christ function toward the fullness of Christ's service to the world.

"For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we..." (Romans 12:4ff). And in Paul's classic passage on the body of Christ, he says "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:4ff). And so, "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places...according to the eternal purposes which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:10,11)

Here then is another profound call to the church to live in terms of servant character and service ministry in the world. To quote Lewis Smedes again: "The way of God toward the new creation is the way of involvement in history. His route takes Him through the ghetto; He does not walk around it. God became inghettoed when Jesus was born among men. Christ remains in the ghetto of human history today and until the earth is made new; He is in the ghetto because His body is there...Christ will be in the ghetto. He will have His body there. The issue for any congregation is whether it really wills to be the body of Christ, the inghettoed Lord. Christ will go on suffering in the ghetto, suffering until the world is made new in Him. His body will be suffering there, too. The issue for any congregation is whether it really wills to be His body, suffering with Christ in the ghetto of human history" (The Reformed Journal, January 1969).

By Dr. George Stob, excerpted from **DEACONS AND EVANGELISM**, Idea Series No. 35, Christian Reformed Church Board of Home Missions.