

“A Beginning Place for Deacon Ministry and the Church”

1 Corinthians 12:12–31a; Luke 4:14–21

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I have often wondered what it would be like to begin in a leadership group like the deacons with what each person feels gifted for and called to do, as opposed to plugging people into established roles. There are things that have to be done, bases that have to be covered, but it should not come as a great surprise if leaders aren't passionate about serving in roles that don't fit their giftedness and calling.

Of course, this principle can be applied to the church as a whole. There are things that have to be done, and many of these, not all but many, concern central ministries – programs of Christian nurture; ministry to our community and world; the care of our facilities that provide space for education, worship, fellowship, and service. But what might the church be like, what energy might be freed and what passion stirred, if we were to begin with our gifts and interests?

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul adamantly asserts that we all have gifts of the Spirit in the body of Christ, and we are each called to use the gifts we have been given. No gift is to be wasted or looked down on; every gift is needed, as every part of the body is essential; everything we have and are is to be used for the common good. In fact, we cannot fulfill our shared purpose until it is.

But the truth is most churches tend to embrace certain gifts while struggling to recognize others, and to be sure, some gifts present a challenge. In one setting where I served, a new couple offered to share their work gifts in any way we saw fit. They ran a casino business... for entertainment only, that state had not legalized gambling at the time. If we had been making a James Bond film, we could have used those gifts, but we never quite figured out how to have a casino night at the church.

Most churches have a place for teachers and musicians, handymen and handywomen, people who work in personnel or finance, those with tech skills (thank you, AV people), those who can fix stuff (we have our crew). But

Baptist churches have not always found space for artistic gifts — painters and sculptors, actors and dancers, poets and novelists — even though scripture, as in Exodus 31, clearly affirms artistic gifts.

I met an artist in seminary who felt excluded from the church until she heard the words of Exodus 31 read in worship and realized God’s affirmation of her giftedness. It is amazing what can happen if we pay attention to scripture. And some people have gifts that seem like obvious resources for the body of Christ that churches underutilize — good listeners, people devoted to intercessory prayer, those with gifts for peacemaking and reconciliation, those with a passion for advocacy.

This church does better than most, though we still have work to do, but the key lies in openness and intentionality, a willingness to embrace people for who they are and what they bring. We need something like a human asset mapping strategy, along with a formal gift discernment process, to help guide future ministry.

We might have a yearning to develop a jazz worship service, but without jazz musicians, such a ministry isn’t possible. The previous church I served was loaded with medical professionals, which meant we had fabulous medical missions teams. But ask us to build a home or church, and you were out of luck. We have the reverse here, though some of us have neither medical nor construction skills, but that’s okay, there are other needs and gifts. All have a place in the body of Christ, we just need to use them and the church needs to embrace them.

But there is an assumption in all of this talk of giftedness — there is a purpose for which our gifts are used, to help the body do its work. To what work exactly is the body of Christ called? A parallel passage in Ephesians 4 says that gifts are given to equip the church for the work of ministry and to build up the body of Christ, that is, to strengthen our ties to each other and our outreach to the world. But what is the nature of this outreach, this work of ministry?

Some point to the so-called Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28, the making of disciples. I say “so-called” because Jesus doesn’t call it that. Others point to the two great loves Jesus references in Mark 12 and other Gospel narratives, the love of God and neighbor. And both of these callings

are central to the church — making disciples of Jesus, and increasing the love of God and neighbor. Thus, any gift in the church is given to serve these great purposes. We might ask how our gift can help others come to follow Jesus, or do so more faithfully, and how our gift can extend love to others and express love to God. This is a good place for deacons and all of us to begin.

But as we seek to clarify the purpose of the church, and therefore, the use of our gifts, we might want to consider the passage we have read today from Luke 4 wherein Jesus offers a working definition of his ministry. If we are his followers, his calling shapes ours.

We know the basic story. He has returned home to Nazareth where he grew up, where he is still Mary and Joe’s kid, even though he has been receiving a lot of recognition for his teaching. He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath — of course, he does, where else would he go? He stands up and reads scripture as part of the service that obviously has elements like ours. It is a passage from Isaiah 61.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

After reading, Jesus presents the shortest sermon on record, just one sentence, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This is his calling, he says, under the Spirit’s anointing — to bring good news to the poor, to release captives and give sight to the blind, free the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, a year of jubilee, a time when debts are forgiven. Interestingly, Jesus leaves out one phrase found in Isaiah 61 — the day of vengeance of our God. He is about good news, healing and deliverance, helping others, not seeking vengeance.

Thus, so are we. We are about the work of healing and deliverance, helping others and not seeking vengeance. As followers of Jesus, we are about the work of liberation. But we should note that the world does not

respond well to this aspect of Jesus' ministry nor will it to ours. We'll get to that part of the story next week. And we should recognize the fact that this passage from Luke is left out of many works on calling and purpose. Indeed, some think liberation theology as a whole is a product of so-called "secular liberalism" and not the Bible.

Another CBF pastor in another setting told me as much when I first met him. "Liberation theology is not in the Bible," he said, in a matter-of-fact way, to which I wanted to reply, "I guess books like Exodus, Isaiah, Amos, and Luke are not in your Bible," but I didn't because we had just met, and I didn't want to be a jerk... like him.

But the claim is baseless. This theme is not just in the Bible, it is central to Jesus' calling and ours, and there are many ways to live it out, because there are many ways people are bound, held back from their potential. Jesus sets people free from all that binds them, whether the chains are personal, social, or systemic; physical, emotional, or spiritual; a lack of food or shelter, a surplus of judgment and hostility, any guilt and shame. How might our gifts be used to set people free?

We can think of ministries we have in place to address needs for clothing, food, and shelter. What steps might we take to address emotional and spiritual needs through our own actions or as a church? And how might we address social and systemic concerns? "Advocacy" is a dirty word for many American churchgoers but not for Jesus. He is our advocate before God. The Holy Spirit is called the Advocate. Followers of Jesus not only act in the best interest of others, we speak up on their behalf, as individuals and as a church. We speak up for the poor and vulnerable, the sick and the stranger, immigrants and refugees who are at risk... anyone on the margins, and when we do, we follow Jesus.

How might our gifts be used to address any of these needs, to be about the work of liberation, with the anointing of the Spirit, like Jesus?

I'm not proposing that we change our entire approach to leadership and doing church, just that we think about it, consider the possible trajectories of ministry in which our gifts and passions might take us, especially if they are connected to Jesus. We might be surprised!