

PERSPECTIVE

JUNE 2020



**GENEROSITY &
THE DEACON**

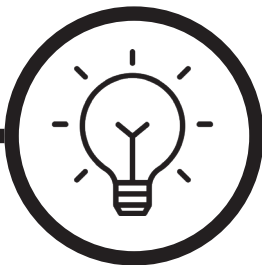
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Generosity & The Deacon

Many are familiar with Charles H. Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth-century Baptist pastor in London, England. His ministry left an indelible mark on a diverse swath of evangelical Christians to this day. One pastor and historian says Spurgeon's influence is a major reason for the resurgence of Calvinism.¹

Many are less familiar with the influential ministry of Spurgeon's church. The Metropolitan Tabernacle was a megachurch busy with activity before the age of megachurches. Arnold Dallimore describes the energetic work: "The Tabernacle was a place of almost constant activity. [Every day] the doors were opened at 7:00 in the morning and did not close till 11:00 at night, and there were persons coming and going all the time."² The church hosted numerous ministries, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and more. The newly constructed building had to be renovated after only six years because of the wear-and-tear from so much activity. And Spurgeon was not one for letting things get unkempt. He "required that everything in the Lord's work be done well, and he allowed nothing to be let go in a careless manner," including facility maintenance.³

Even with all of Spurgeon's gifts, the Tabernacle's ministry was not a one-man show. Behind him and beside him were a host of faithful members leading and serving, including elders and deacons. They each had their respective, biblical responsibilities. "The deacons looked after material matters – the finances and the physical aspects of the Tabernacle. The elders' responsibilities lay especially in the spiritual affairs."⁴

How many servants tended to the church's affairs? How many Bible studies were planned, prayer meetings coordinated, meals cooked, financial reports reviewed, and building contractors secured by people who loved the Lord and his church? Who were they? History does not record their names, but the Lord knows them and their influence. One group of servants set aside by the church were the deacons.

Since January, we've been thinking about a culture of generosity. We want to be "joyfully open-handed with what we have for the sake of those we love – family, church, community, and the world."⁵ This is what Spurgeon saw in the church he served. We want to see it in our own church as well. God has gifted us with faithful deacons. How does a deacon foster a culture of generosity? Deacons generously give of themselves – their example and gifts – out of love for maintaining the church's unity.

GOD'S CARE FOR THE CHURCH IN GIVING DEACONS

Last month, Dustin Butts reminded us "God generously gives us a plurality of elders for the good of his people."⁶ The same is true of deacons. God cares intimately for the church's unity, which is maintained, in part, through the deacons's ministry.

Jesus prayed for the church's unity. In John 17:20–21, he prayed, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Jesus wants his church to share in the oneness of the Triune God so that the world may believe. Our gospel witness is at stake where there is disunity. Unity among people who don't naturally have affinity for or with one another (e.g., Jews and Gentiles) testifies to the power of the gospel (Eph. 3:1–6).

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, disunity quickly threatened the young church of Jerusalem from *within* (Acts 6:1–7). Disunity between Greek-speaking (Hellenist) and Aramaic-speaking (Hebrew) Jewish widows threatened the church's mission to make disciples. The matter was simple – the Hellenist widows did not get their fair share of food. The church "neglected" them (6:1).

The apostles' response is fascinating. They didn't say "Oh. This isn't that big a deal. Maybe it's a little unfair, but what's most important is that the gospel is proclaimed." No. They understood both were equally important. God cared that every widow be dealt with justly and that the apostles focus on preaching the gospel. Thus, the church set aside "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of the wisdom" to deal with this matter of disunity (6:3). This freed up the apostles to devote themselves to "prayer and the ministry of the word" (6:4).

Those seven men are considered the earliest examples of how deacons serve and how God generously cares for his church through them. Diaconal ministry and preaching ministry go hand-in-hand. The diaconal ministry provides the space for preaching, and preaching empowers diaconal ministry. In setting aside those seven men, we see God's care for the church's unity. Those men set a godly example and used their gifts to provide for the widows so the church might be one. God also cared for the church's mission as the gospel continued to be proclaimed (6:7).

A DEACON'S EXAMPLE

Early on in the pandemic shutdown, Jesse and I worked closely with the Deacon and Ministry Leader

of Member Care, Bill and Sharon Luck, on how to help meet increased member needs. We discussed very practical things like communication and approval processes. We wanted to discuss these details in order to lovingly and effectively care for members.

When the church seeks members to serve as deacons, it's tempting to first ask, "Who is most gifted? Who has the experience, personally or professionally?" But the Bible asks a different question – "Who sets an example of godliness?" Someone set aside to serve as a deacon has first been generous in modeling Christ-like character.

This is Paul's point in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 when laying out the qualifications for deacons. Paul is concerned with "how one ought to *behave* in the household of God" (3:14). The members are to look to the elders and the deacons as examples of godly behavior. This is why individuals should "be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless" (3:10). In other words, the congregation should observe and lovingly "test" their character and faith.

This was also the apostles' first concern in Acts 6. They weren't looking for just anyone capable of problem-solving. They weren't trying to find people gifted at relating to widows. They said, "Pick out . . . men of good *repute*" (6:3). First and foremost, find the men that have a godly reputation. Remember, Stephen, one of the first deacons was also the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54–60). He didn't learn to set that kind of example by serving widows. It already characterized his life.

Why does this matter so much? If deacons are not set apart for teaching Scripture but for tending to nitty-gritty, practical details, why is their character so important? Because when you serve in ministry, people aren't just watching what you do. They are watching how you do it. It's better to have someone serve as deacon whose gifts and experience are less than ideal than someone whose character and example are less than qualified. With the church's unity at stake, the church needs godly examples of Christ-like character to follow.

I think this is why Paul commended "Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom. 16:1). She was "a patron of many and of myself as well" (16:2). This woman had served sacrificially as a deaconess. So Paul told the church in Rome to "welcome" and "help" her. She was worthy of such a reception for she had modeled Christ-like service to "many" others.⁷

Along with trying to safely reopen the church during a global pandemic, I'm trying to plan next year's budget during an unprecedented economic collapse. (If they only offered "Pastoring in Pandemic" classes in Bible college.) Over the next few months I'll work very closely with our Deacons of Finance, Reggie Claus, and Personnel, Scott Harty. I'm thankful for their gifts. Their practical wisdom and insight in thinking about cashflow, year-end projections, and compensation benefits are invaluable.

Even more than their gifts, I'm humbled by and thank God for their example of faith and hope. There are often difficult discussions when preparing a budget. It's common in those moments for them to offer a word of encouragement of how the Lord will provide. Sometimes they'll step back and say how thankful they are for the Lord's work at Mount Vernon. They may express their confidence in the elders' leadership. They often commend the congregation for its generosity and maturity.

The point is simple. In those moments, it's not about their gifts but their example of faith, hope, and love. Those are the types of individuals I want to serve with as they generously set an example for me to follow.

A DEACON'S GIFTS

I ask two questions when considering whether someone ought to serve as a deacon. First, are they biblically qualified? That's the point about a deacon's example. Second question: are they well-suited? Answering that helps me discern if they are gifted to serve in a specific capacity because deacons are to generously use their gifts to help maintain unity.

I have many questions about the situation in Acts 6. How did it come to this? Was it an administrative problem? Maybe their distribution process was broken. Was the church overwhelmed with the number of widows? Was there discrimination in the young church? Were the Hellenist widows from the dispersion intentionally or mistakenly overlooked? We don't know. What was it going to take to fix it? Clearly it was a big problem. We know the church was not small (Acts 2:41). It took seven men, so one or two people weren't sufficient.

There was a lot to sort out, and that's why the church needed men of "good *repute* and *wisdom*" (6:4). It took a lot of wisdom and giftedness to identify and rectify the problem. They knew the end goal: make sure every widow is equally cared for. Make sure there is no disunity. Make sure the apostles could focus on prayer and preaching. But this problem could not be solved overnight. It took collaboration, prayer, thoughtfulness, and giftedness.

We can assume that because the “word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (6:7) that these men accomplished their goal. It’s safe to assume unity was restored and all the widows were provided for. They spent themselves and the gifts God gave them providing for others. This is what deacons do: they generously use their gifts for others.

We should avoid the trap of thinking we must identify our gift(s) and only serve in the capacity where God has gifted us. That approach is too narrow. Even worse, it can be selfish if we expect the church to create opportunities just so we can use our gifts. Rather, we need to serve where there are needs. I don’t want to discount the importance of having individuals serve in ways they are gifted. Everyone does not have the same gifts (1 Cor. 12:27–30). It’s to the glory of God and for the building up of the church that it is this way. It’s how God designed it (Eph. 4:7–12). Yes, deacons need to be gifted. And they are to generously, joyfully, and freely use their gifts in service to the church.

After nearly twelve years at Mount Vernon, I’m deeply indebted to all the deacons I’ve worked alongside in service and administration. I learned a lot about finances from ten years of serving with Larry Norwood and Richard Carron as Deacons of Finance. Bill Timmons helped teach me good employment practices as Deacon of Personnel. Dennis Mosby uses his gifts of helping as Deacon of Baptism in caring for each baptismal candidate in personal ways. I’ve seen David Derrer use his gift of administration to organize and train class hosts.

Though they are not deacons, I can’t overlook the sisters who are recognized by the elders as Ministry Leaders. Jane Hall’s thoughtfulness and eye for tasteful and modest building décor and furnishings, while navigating diverse preferences and ages, is impressive. Sharon Luck has an unusual tenderness and thoughtfulness when relating to women in need. Anna Carron has years of experience in helping excited, young brides think through details of their wedding day. And Shirley Chandler and Delaine Brannen have administered a large and growing women’s ministry with much conviction and grace. I’ve served behind the scenes with all of them and thank God for their gifts and love for the body!

CONCLUSION

Elders, deacons, and members all serve the church generously with their time and gifts. But there is something unique about a deacon’s service. Such service is frequently less public, it’s often behind the scenes, after hours, before the gatherings, and in the shadows. It often goes unnoticed until no one is doing it any more. It’s the hours of phone

calls and meetings discussing finances in order to give a five-minute presentation at a Church in Conference. It’s reviewing a five-page contract from a building contractor. It’s showing the baptismal candidate the baptistery and praying before he or she makes a public profession of faith. It’s spending an hour in the breakroom preparing the Lord’s Supper elements. I could go on-and-on with examples.

But this is exactly how a deacon’s ministry is supposed to be. Their generosity is shown in giving, not receiving. They give freely in their example and gifts, not receiving the glory and credit. Their love for the Lord and Christ’s church compels them to give all the glory to God.

Pray God raises up more deacons. Pray God gives our congregation a proper appreciation for deacons as a special gift to the body of Christ. Pray we would encourage those who serve behind-the-scenes, recognizing their service may not be very public, but it is greatly needed.

– Brad Thayer

¹ Mark Dever, “Where’d All These Calvinists Come From?,” 2014. 9marks.org/article/whered-all-these-calvinists-come-from/

² Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, (Banner of Truth, 2009), 155.

³ *Ibid.*, 156. As an administrator, I find the chapters on the Tabernacle’s ministries and facility fascinating.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

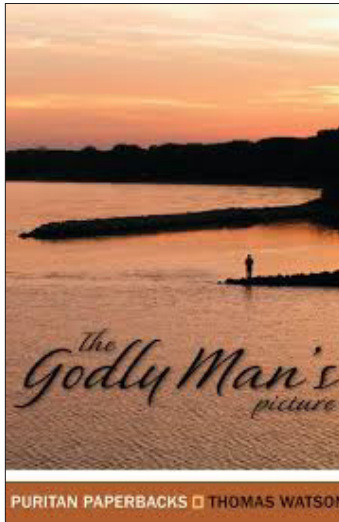
⁵ Aaron Menikoff, “A Culture of Generosity,” *Perspective*. mvpchurch.org/files/Perspective_January_2020.pdf

⁶ Dustin Butts, “Generosity & The Elder,” *Perspective*. mvpchurch.org/files/Perspective_May_2020.pdf

⁷ As you can tell, I think Phoebe was a deaconess at the church in Cenchræe and that deaconesses are permitted according to 1 Tim. 3:11. But that’s for a different article.

The Godly Man's Picture

Written by Thomas Watson



The Godly Man's Picture by Thomas Watson, first published in 1666, seeks to describe the godly person, the one “that hath clean hands and a pure heart” (7). As is often the case in Puritan literature, the book has a lengthy subtitle which provides a good summary of the work: *Drawn with a Scripture Pencil, or, Some Characteristic Marks of a Man who is Going to Heaven.*

Like a masterful artist, Watson draws the portrait of a godly person using his massive knowledge of God's Word. Following three introductory chapters

defining godliness and contrasting it with hypocrisy, the book lays out twenty-four characteristics of a godly person. These include traits one might expect like, “A Man who Prizes Christ,” “A Man of Prayer,” “A Man of Humility,” and a few perhaps unexpected and particularly interesting ones like, “A Man who Weeps,” and, “A Man who is Good in His Relationships.” Each section is a rich Biblical treatise of a particular subject that could be used profitably as a daily devotional.

The later chapters offer exhortations and motivations toward godliness. The chapter titled “Comfort for the Godly” is an excellent and helpful meditation of Matthew 12:20, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory.” Tucked into the end of the book, this chapter comforts the reader with the reminder of Christ's love and compassion toward us in our weaknesses and infirmities.

I recommend this book for several reasons. First, if you always wanted to read a Puritan author, *The Godly Man's Picture* is a great place to start. While some Puritan writers can be challenging to read, Watson writes simply, practically, and with great warmth. His style is pleasant and winsome, and his frequent colorful and ingenious illustrations are outstanding. Second, because this book is saturated with the Bible, it will convict, teach, reprove, and provide assurance. Some sections will convict the Christian of his weaknesses in certain areas, while others will encourage with evidences that the reader really is growing in godliness. Each section also includes helpful applications. Finally, because there is rich Biblical truth on every page, it will nourish and enliven your soul and bring you great joy. You will want to feast on this book.

– RECOMMENDED BY JACK LUPAS

Excerpts From the Book

1

“A godly man loves the imprecations of the Word. He knows there is love in every threat. God would not have us perish; he therefore mercifully threatens us, so that he may scare us from sin. God's threats are like the life-buoy, which shows the rocks in the sea and threatens death to such as come near. The threat is a curbing bit to check us, so that we may not run in full stride to hell. There is mercy in every threat.”

– A Godly Man is a Lover of the Word, p.61

2

“The husband should show his love to his wife by covering infirmities; by avoiding occasions of strife; by sweet, endearing expressions; by pious counsel; by love tokens; by encouraging what he sees amiable and virtuous in her; by mutual prayer; by being with her, unless detained by urgency of business. The pilot who leaves his ship and abandons it entirely to the merciless waves, declares that he does not value it or reckon there is any treasure in it.”

– A Godly Man is Good in his Relationships, p.156

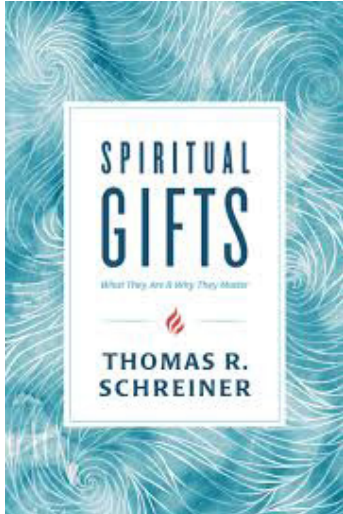
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“Hence it is, that the Lord has always been most solicitous for his bruised ones. As the mother is most careful of her children who are weak and sickly, “He shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom” (Isaiah 40:11). Those who have been spiritually bruised, who like lambs are weakly and tender, Christ will carry in the arms of free grace.”

– Comfort to the Godly, p.223

Spiritual Gifts

Written by Thomas R. Schreiner



My Christian experience is almost exclusively within the Southern Baptist Convention. I was raised, born again, and disciplined within SBC churches. My formal theological education is from an SBC school. In addition, my theological convictions and philosophy of ministry were formed within the reformed, baptistic tradition. If you know just a little about these traditions, you know the topic of spiritual gifts is not discussed much. The most I remember about spiritual

gifts “inventories” in my early twenties. The point is, my experience in a local church conscientiously practicing spiritual gifts is very limited. Thus, I was very intrigued when Dr. Tom Schreiner, a pastor and professor from my tradition, wrote *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are & Why They Matter*.

Spiritual Gifts is not a theologically dense work. Schreiner’s “desire is that this short, relatively nontechnical book could be given to people who want to read a brief discussion on spiritual gifts”. Schreiner is clear and humble about his position from the beginning: he is a “cessationist” regarding the charismatic gifts. Yet, he writes, “*I could be mistaken in arguing for cessationism*”. That’s a good example of humility on a topic that is often polemical and divisive.

Spiritual Gifts is a wonderful introduction for anyone who has not read much about it. The latter half of the book addresses the controversial topics of prophecy, tongues, and whether or not these gifts have ceased. Schreiner’s clarity and simplicity makes these topics very accessible.

Practically speaking, the first half of the book is especially helpful. There he defines spiritual gifts, offers ten truths about them, and answers frequently asked questions. The truths and explanations of 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4 are particularly helpful and encouraging to a church like Mount Vernon. We rightly place a high value on the faithful teaching of Scripture. Without it, we would be spiritually lifeless and ineffective as a church. Yet, the gift of teaching is not the only gift God gives his church. The Lord has appointed members with diverse gifts that work together, in love, to grow us into maturity. If you read just the first half of the book (though you should read all of it), you would be encouraged by the truth that God has given us his Spirit with gifts to build up his church.

– RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER

Excerpts From the Book

1

“At the same time, our understanding of spiritual gifts is important because churches have to decide whether the gifts will be exercised in the congregation.”

– Introduction, p.2

2

“Powerful experiences of God are a gift of God, but Scripture must play a foundational role so that experience is not accepted as self-authenticating. Experience is subordinate to Scripture.”

– Strengths and Weaknesses of the Charismatic Movement, p.13

3

“Our God is creative and infinitely wise, and his creativity and wisdom are reflected in the gifts he has given to the church of Jesus Christ.”

– Defining Spiritual Gifts, p.27

4

“[G]ifts aren’t given to edify ourselves but to build up and strengthen the church. Gifts aren’t a manifestation of the self but represent God’s grace in our lives for the sake of others.”

– Five More Truths about Spiritual Gifts, p.79



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