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THE THREE TABLES

A Proposal for the Organization of Deacon Bodies

by WYMAN RICHARDSON

IT HAS BEEN SAID that the truly great movements in human history come about not as a result of the discovery of new truths but as the result of the rediscovery of old truths. I suspect there is something to that. At the very least, the idea should encourage us not to dismiss the past in our feverish addiction to “the next new thing.”

At Central Baptist Church in North Little Rock, Arkansas — the church I am honored to pastor — we have lived out the

truthfulness of that sentiment in our “rediscovery” of the early Baptist deacon model of “The Three Tables.” This model is at least as old as the late 1700s and was appealed to by Baptists in both England and America. When these Baptists spoke of “The Three Tables,” they were speaking of:

1. The Table of the Lord: Deacons tending to the Lord’s Supper.

2. The Table of the Poor: Deacons caring for the poor and the needy.

3. The Table of the

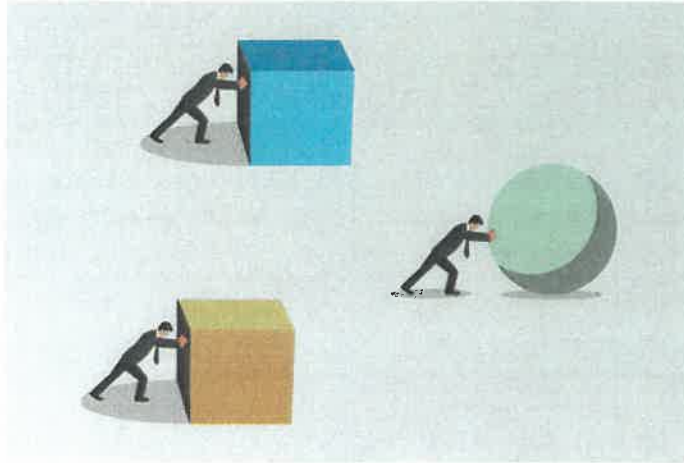
Pastor: In its earliest expressions, the deacons ensuring that the pastor was cared for in a material way.

Shortly after I began serving as pastor of Central Baptist, we were discussing how to organize ourselves as a deacon body. I mentioned to the body that the earlier Baptist model of “The Three Tables” might be helpful. After briefly explaining what the tables were, a deacon in the room said, “Wait, say that again.” Then a fascinating conversation ensued.

I was familiar with “The Three Tables” and had read and chewed on it a good bit, but in truth, I was unaware that the issue would even arise in that meeting. I give our deacons all the credit for taking the suggestion and fleshing it out in the wonderful way that they have.

After there was agreement in the room that this model might be of real service to us in our particular situation, we began to discuss what a reclaiming of this model might look like. Our deacons finally landed on an idea. At the end of the meeting, we had decided upon creating three rotating teams within our deacon body that correspond to the three tables. Every four months the teams rotate. Thus, every year every deacon will serve each of the tables. As there is no longer a necessity for deacons to serve “The Table of the Pastor” by raising his salary each month, we have interpreted this table to mean any and every way the deacon body can be of assistance to me. I value this table greatly, just as I value the other two.

Over almost a decade now, we have stayed with this model. It has become a helpful model, a helpful rediscovery of an old truth. The genius of this model is that it enables us to organize all the various functions of the deacons into three solid biblical categories. While the specific terminology of “The Three Tables” is not explicitly in Scripture, we are happy to argue along with many of our forebears that this model has been proven to be an effective tool in the



Regardless of the specifics, the model is definite enough to keep us tethered to these very biblical ideas: The Lord’s Supper, care for the poor, and pastoral assistance.

organization of the various tasks placed upon deacons in the New Testament.

Furthermore, the model of “The Three Tables” is flexible enough to be adaptable to the particulars and uniqueness of congregational practice in the modern age, yet is defined enough to at least caution churches and deacon bodies about wandering too far from practices that should be

seen as primary for the deacon body in any church.

Thus, “The Table of the Lord” may encompass many things: moving the communion table into place for the observance of the Lord’s Supper, the purchase of the bread and juice, the cleaning of the trays or instruments for serving the elements, and the practicalities of helping with the dissemination of the elements to the congregation. Similarly, “The Table of the Pastor”

can mean many things. It might refer to the spiritual advice deacons give to their pastor. It might refer to helping him with visitation in the church. It certainly includes praying for the pastor! It might, given a specific congregation and their agreed-upon organization, mean many things. And the “Table of the Poor” might encompass any number of benevolence strategies.

Regardless of the specifics, the model is definite enough to keep us tethered to these very biblical ideas: The Lord’s Supper, care for the poor, and pastoral assistance.

There is something to be said for a good model, even if the model is from many years ago. I would like to propose that “The Three Tables” be brought out of the dusty history books on our shelves and be put “on the table” for consideration. ☺

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