

Deacons!

Acts 6:1-7

Something very exciting is happening right now, here, in our church. This very week! Something that is vital to our well-being and necessary for our effective functioning as a church. Something that represents a specific, tangible step forward in the life and health of our congregation. Something that has been missing for many years, something that has been lacking, a deficiency. I hope I have your attention now! We are beginning a time of training and preparation for several men who have been nominated by the congregation to serve in the office of deacon.

As we have studied through the book of Acts these past several months now, I have mentioned some good things in the early church that are evident in our own congregation, especially the sense of fellowship and belonging together, living our lives together with one accord. We are not perfect, and in proper humility, I should say that we are far from perfect. But we do have that sense of being one one accord, for which I am very thankful. It remains my joy and delight to be your pastor for that very reason. You care for one another, and it shows. That is such a good thing. And you show me care.

I also speak somewhat frequently of the way in which I and my fellow elders are able to exercise our leadership in the church, with a unity of mind and mutual respect that allows us to fully and rightly honor one another, submitting to one another even as we lead by example and with humility rather than being domineering and lording it over the members of the congregation. Again, we're far from perfect, but we are able to exercise leadership in that good and edifying context I just described.

But there is one way in which we are obviously lacking. We

don't have any deacons. Our Session has resolved not to elect or ordain a single deacon to serve alone, so we have waited for multiple nominations, with multiple men with apparent qualifications willing and able to serve. And that process of training and preparing deacons is now beginning, and the timing of this sermon is a perfect occasion to emphasize that. So let's look at our text this morning with a zeal to see this pattern repeated and enacted in our own congregation. Beginning with,

I. THE NEED FOR DEACONS.

Now, I admit, the word "deacon" is not used in this text. But the idea of the office of deacon is still as clear as it can be. That idea of the office of deacon is in its beginning stages, to be sure, but that foundational description of the office and work of deacons is clear. So that later on in the development of the New Testament church, when Paul writes some of his later letters to the different churches, we read of both elders and deacons. The clearest example is,

Phil. 1:1 "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops [or elders] and deacons: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

That's the church, his audience. All the saints, and their leaders are noted. Elders or bishops, those who rule and lead. And then the deacons, those given to the very task of service that is made so clear in Acts 6. And when Paul writes about the qualifications of the officers in the church, he identifies first the elders and then the deacons. For example, after the lengthy list of qualifications for the bishop, the ruler, who is also the elder and shepherd, after that list, we read,

1 Tim. 3:8 "Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, 9 holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. 10 But let these

also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless.”

Paul even singles out the deacons for the honor of their office by concluding that passage,

1 Tim. 3:13 “For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

So, a church is to have elders and deacons, and the need for deacons is what is shown to us in Acts 6.

v.1 “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.”

So the work of the deacons is to serve tables. In other words, the ministry of service. And what is so obvious here is,

A. The importance of the ministry of service to those in need.

In Jerusalem, in the very first days following pentecost, that meant feeding the widows. The “daily distribution” referred to in verse 1 is, I believe, “the daily distribution of food.” And guess what the Greek word is there for “daily distribution?” It is the word “diaconia.” Or “deaconing,” to use the contemporary language. It was a ministry, or a service, that was to be given to widows daily. A service which is made equivalent in verse 2 to “serving tables.” And that refers to an eating table!

In other words, the church made sure that the widows, who had no other source of sustenance and food, were given those

very provisions. And the widows represent those who have need, who have no ability to care for and provide for themselves, thus deserving of this ministry to which the church is to be devoted. And remember James’ striking words,

James 1:27 “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

So the test of true religion, of true faith, the demonstration of the sincerity of your faith, is the faithfulness with which you serve those who are in need. Evidently the ministry to widows became so well established and organized that Paul would later write to Timothy of a listing or register of widows who had no family left to support them,

1 Tim. 5:9 “Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, 10 well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work.”

The point is that this work of service is important work, an importance ministry, this work of deaconing! And it is also time-consuming in its obligations, such that a problem arose at the church in Jerusalem in Acts 6. It’s the first problem mentioned in the book of Acts. In a sense, it was a good problem to have, because the root of the problem is that the church was growing. People were being added. And all too easily, some of the widows were being neglected.

v.1 “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”

I don't think there is any implication of intentional neglect, certainly not any sense of racial or discrimination-based neglect, as if the Greek-speaking or Hellenist widows were being ignored intentionally or on purpose. But they were being neglected, and "a complaint" arose. A conflict was created. It was a murmuring, according to the Greek word used. Grumbling. And somewhat secret or private. The Greek widows were discontent and started to grumble because of the neglect they received. So the apostolic solution to the problem was to appoint men to be responsible for this ministry of service to the church. We see,

B. The need for responsibility for the ministry of service to those in need.

There was a problem, a complaint, a failure, albeit unintentional. And the apostles were busy. Now, remember some of the numbers we have seen. Three thousand souls added on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 4:4 we read of five thousand believers, and that number seems to refer only to the men. So thousands and thousands of new believers. And chapter six begins with the encouraging reminder that, "in those days...the number of the disciples was multiplying." There were twelve apostles. It's not hard to figure out why the ministry of providing food for the widows was not efficient enough. Some were being neglected. And the solution was to appoint men whose responsibility it was to see that that neglect ended. It was their responsibility to see that this important ministry of service to those in need was carried out just as faithfully as humanly possible. Again, the key word is "responsibility." Someone had to be responsible to see that that was accomplished.

In that context, we see the commitment of the apostles with regard to,

C. The ongoing importance of prayer and the ministry of the word.

v.2 "Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables."

Now I could read those words with a certain attitude and emphasis that would come across proud. Self-advancing, arrogant. Even dismissive of those widows in need. "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." That attitude would correspond to these words, "We have more important things to do than waiting on tables!" That work is too demeaning. It is beneath us. We're too busy for that!

I don't want to give any sense of that impression here, for I don't believe Luke intends any of that either. The point is, that prayer and the ministry of the word is important. The priority of prayer and the ministry of the word is important! And with thousands of people in the church, prayer and the ministry of the word must have been a full time job, and then some! And that was important. It's not one or the other. And it really even should have any sense of importance or priority. But as the widows in need were to be cared for, prayer and the ministry of the word must not suffer. So the apostles remained devoted to that which God called them,

v.4 "...we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

This is such an obvious solution, showing much wisdom among the apostles as they laid the foundation of the church. We will appoint men whose responsibility it will be to be sure that this important ministry is done well. But not just any man will do. So we see,

II. THE NEED FOR QUALIFIED DEACONS.

v.3

Let me say at the outset, with just a brief explanation, that the first qualification is that they be men. Not because men are superior, nor women inferior. Certainly not because men are more adept at being servants than women, because in many cases it is exactly the opposite, as women often assume roles of service much more freely and naturally than some men. The reason that deacons must be men is because the office of deacon is an ordained office, as we'll study in just a few minutes. It is an office established by the laying on of hands, what we call ordination. And thus it is an office of responsibility and authority, an office of rule in the context of overseeing the ministry of service within the church. And so the descriptions and qualifications of the office all address men alone, and in the context of the qualifications of church officers in 1 Timothy 2 and 3, there is a contrast in terms of the role of men and women with respect to teaching and exercising authority.

1 Tim. 2:12 "And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence."

That silence is defined by those other two words, to teach or have authority. And the office of deacon is an office of authority, and I am using the word "responsibility" to refer to the same duty. Deacons are to have the authority and responsibility to see to it that the ministry of service in the church is not neglected but carried out faithfully. Thankfully, in any healthy church, there are many faithful servants, male and female, who do the actual works of service, but it is the ordained deacons who bear responsibility for it. So a deacon must be a man, but not just any man. The apostles here in Acts 6 describe,

A. Godly man of good character.

v.3 "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business."

The ESV has "duty" for the word "business," either is accurate. Something very specific is being identified, the work of service, the ministry of service, the business or duty of service within the church. And the oversight of that business requires "men of good reputation." Men who have earned a good reputation. In other words, godly men, "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom," according to verse 3. Men of good character. And beloved, character matters! The preeminent qualification for leadership in the church is character!

When Paul gets specific about those qualifications for both elders and deacons, we see that the elders have the responsibility to be able to teach, and that is distinct to that office of rule and teaching. But the other qualifications are very similar for deacons.

1 Tim. 3:8 "Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, 9 holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. 10 But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless."

Reverent, or dignified. It could be translated honorable, or even simply trustworthy or honest. All of that refers to character, character nurtured by the ongoing personal influence of the Holy Spirit of God himself! Godly men of good character, that's who ought to be responsible for the leadership of the ministry of service within the church. With another qualification made obvious as well, in my words,

B. Faithful men of practical wisdom.

Full of wisdom, verse 3 again. Wisdom as defined by the book of Proverbs, which of course begins with the fear of God. But wisdom that is, by definition, practical. The ability to know how to live wisely, how to make wise decisions, how to exercise wisdom

and demonstrate wisdom.

As I read in 1 Timothy 3, they must hold to “the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience,” so they must understand and affirm basic biblical truth, but unlike the elder, they don’t have to teach it or be responsible to correct those in error. But they must know “the mystery of the faith,” having some advancement in that knowledge beyond what is required for a profession of faith. So deacons in the OPC assume their office with several specific vows, including not only the question, “Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God?,” but additionally, “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?”

But with that foundational understanding of the Bible, what is necessary for deacons is the faithful exercise of practical wisdom, the wisdom needed to know how to be sure that the Grecian widows would no longer be neglected in the daily distribution of food. Now let me just say it, there are some men, even godly men, would not be at all equipped to be responsible for that. Some men just don’t have that sort of skills or ability. And they shouldn’t, therefore, be deacons. Some men don’t have the right attitude either, and to summarize that which is required, a man qualified to be a deacon shows himself to be a servant. As we might say, he has a servant’s heart. And in this context, it is easy to identify men who are qualified to be deacons, they show themselves to be servants. Naturally, freely, graciously, kindly, and obviously. Thus we read,

v.3 “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.”

Evidently, such men were obvious in that early church.

v.5 “And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.”

There we have,

III. THE ORDINATION OF DEACONS.

I always wonder what people are thinking when they say that they don’t believe in ordination, because it is something that man made up. Let me explain what “ordination” is. It is the laying on of hands by elders, by which men are installed into office in the church, and it is accomplished with prayer. Ordination as we practice it today is exactly the same thing as what we read in verse 6 with regard to these seven men installed into this office of ministry in the church, “when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.” And that is,

A. The significance of ordination.

Seven men, identified by name in the Holy Scriptures, were set apart so that the church would no longer neglect anyone in the daily distribution of food. Seven men were ordained, given the responsibility to serve tables, to serve food distributed to those who were in need. And having been approved as “men of good reputation,” they were brought to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid hands upon them. They were appointed “over this business.”

I should note nothing here means that deacons are the only ones do the works of service and ministry. Rather, it is they who have the authority and responsibility to see to it that such ministry is done, and a large part of that is recruiting and overseeing those who do it! We are all called to be servants, everyone, men and women, young and old. And deacons are called to be sure that it

gets done, and that it gets done well. In that contact, the process is important,

B. The process of ordination.

It is a process defined by Scripture, here and elsewhere, that the officers of the church are ordained, set apart, installed, if you want to use that word. There was a structure, a government, a system of oversight, centered upon this simple act of ordination. The process is the same for elders, and we read this in Paul's words to his younger disciple, Timothy,

1 Tim. 4:12 "Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. 13 Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership."

We also have reference to this process of laying on hands, or ordination, in,

1 Tim. 5:22 "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure."

So this process of ordination identifies those who exercise the authority of an office in the church. In the case of elders, the predominant emphasis of that office is what Paul describes in Acts 20:28 as the duty to "shepherd the church of God." It is what the writer of Hebrews describes in Hebrews 13:17 not only as "ruling over you" but more fully, "watching out for your souls, as those who must give account."

In the case of deacons, built upon the context of Acts 6, the predominant emphasis of that office is the ministry of service to those in need. Our denominational Form of Government defines that office this way, chapter 11, "Deacons are called to show forth

the compassion of Christ in a manifold ministry of mercy toward the saints and strangers on behalf of the church."

Our text this morning ends with a repeated theme we have seen often in these first six books of Acts. God's blessing upon the church. And so, here,

C. The blessings of ordination.

The blessings of God upon the faithfulness of his people to solve a problem in the church in a way that God defines. And so we read,

v.7 "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."

The word of God spread, the number of believers multiplied greatly, because deacons were ordained in the church. May such a blessing be ours as well!