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The Office of Deacon, Part 5

The context of Ephesians 4 is one in which God is said to give gifts to the church:

Ephesians 4:7-8, "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, 'When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.'"

What are these gifts?

Ephesians 4:11, "And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers."

What is the gift referenced here? The gift of leadership! From this we conclude that to consider the

issue of church leadership is to hold a gift in our hands and examine it, as you might a gift on Christmas.

The study of the diaconate is one of great importance because it is an office which God gave to His church unto its spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. This of course raises these questions:

- What is the diaconal calling?
- What is its purpose?
- Why did God give this office to the church?

The advent of Christ's Kingdom on this earth was accompanied by various and sundry signs. For example, the gift of speaking in tongues appears only four times in the book of Acts and each time it was intended as a sign of authentication. We find it first on Pentecost when 3,000 Jews professed faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2). Then when the Samaritans were saved, we see its manifestation (Acts 8). We see it when the gospel spread to the Gentiles (Acts 10). And lastly we see it among the followers of John the Baptizer (Acts 19).

Now each of the manifestations were among distinct groups in Christ's day which would have remained separate from each other had it not been for the obvious working of God in their midst. And so for example, after Peter brought Christ to a Gentile home and then returned to Jerusalem, he was the object of severe criticism amongst his fellow Jews. *"A Gentile as a Gentile can't be saved by Christ; they first must become a Jew by accepting the Old Testament ceremonial laws."* So the banter continued until Peter said this:

Acts 11:15-18, *"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?' And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.'"*

So tongue-peaking was a mark of authentication that the Kingdom of Christ had come to the earth.

Another mark just as important was the care of the weak and the hurting amongst the people of God. Recall when John the Baptist was struggling with the identity of Jesus, Christ told him this:

Matthew 11:4-6, *"Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me."*

Christ's care of the hurting and needy helped to validate the authenticity of His messianic office.

And that is why throughout the opening chapters of the book of Acts we read again and again of the hurting and needy amongst the early church being the special object of care. Christ's Kingdom had come; the poor and needy once again had an advocate!

Acts 4:33-35, “And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. FOR there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles’ feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.”

Well this commitment to fidelity as it related to the Kingdom of God, the communion of saints, and so the essence of genuine, authentic religion (cf. James 1:27) once again created a serious problem in the early church.

Acts 6:1, “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*.”

At the time of Christ, Judaism was divided along cultural lines. The world of Christ’s day was a Greek world, at least in language and culture. Those Jews that were raised outside of Jerusalem adopted the language and some of the culture of Greece and so were called “Hellenists” by those in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, by and large the Jews sought to maintain the “old ways” and so spoke Hebrew/Aramaic. They referred to themselves as “Hebrews.” This resulted in division and two different synagogues in Jerusalem; a Greek speaking synagogue and a synagogue that worshipped in Aramaic.

When the gospel of the Kingdom of God spread, it united these two groups into one community which almost fell apart because of the perceived prejudice of the “Hebrew” Christians. Somehow and in some way the widows of the Hellenistic Christians were being neglected as a group; either they did not receive a portion of the distribution of food OR they weren’t allowed to participate in the distribution. This created a controversy which overwhelmed the apostles.

Acts 6:2-4, “And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable [or ‘desirable in the sight of God’] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables [In other words, it wasn’t a matter of personal preference; the apostles here were speaking by Divine calling!]. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.’”

This passage represents a clear distinction when it comes to the outworking of the ministry of God’s Kingdom.

- The Physical Care of the Body of Christ.
- Its Spiritual Growth and Development in Grace.

In the words of Romans 15:18 or Colossians 3:17, the outworking of the ministry was in “word and deed.” Now clearly neither ministry is more important than the other. Yet when a covenant community gets to a critical size, both ministries will undoubtedly constitute a burden for one office. Thus God, through the apostles, divided the ministry into two separate offices: An office of spiritual oversight and rule in the words of the disciples.

Acts 6:4b, "...prayer and the ministry of the word [both of which would involve organizing the daily worship, preaching, discipling, counseling, and much more]."

An office of physical care once again, in the words of the Apostles, "...[the] serv[ing] of tables." (Acts 6:2)

Acts 6:5-6, "And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."

Here the diaconal office formally began in the early church! Now I mentioned this last time, that there are some who do not believe that this passage constitutes the beginning of the Diaconate; yet I disagree. Think about it:

- The "Diaconate" is mentioned by name only two times in the New Testament: Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13- both of which speak of the office as a full-blown ministry. This means that prior to Philippians; this office had to have had a history of use and development. It came from somewhere.
- Furthermore, outside of Acts 6, there are NO examples of deacons serving in the church (unlike the office of elder where we have numerous examples). So my question is this: is it likely that God would institute a church office to oversee and so serve His bride, and yet give neither instruction nor example as to its purpose or function? Not even one word?

Those who reject Acts 6 as the first Diaconate would have us look to the Jewish Synagogue¹ whose worship was overseen by two offices: a worship leader² and those given to assist him.³ In other words, we are left to speculate as to its purpose and function from secular sources. Now it is possible that God intended us to draw a connection between the government of the Jewish Synagogue and the New Testament offices. Yet, I have a hard time believing that is the meaning of Acts 6.

Yes, the title/nomenclature "deacon" is not used here, but that hasn't stopped many of the same theologians who reject Acts 6 as a diaconate (on account of the omission of the term "deacon") from identifying God's redemptive work in David's time as a "covenant" even though the word "covenant" is not used in 2 Samuel 7. Clearly the title is not necessary!

God surely would not ordain something as important as a church office without giving instruction as to its purpose and function. So when we look for such instruction, the only possible passage is Acts 6 where though the formal term is not used, nevertheless a clear distinction is made between the ministry of "word and deed!" Thus we can conclude from Acts 6 that in the church God has instituted at least two offices: an office of spiritual oversight and care and an office of physical oversight and care!⁴

With that, let's turn our focus to what can be learned from Acts 6 when it comes to the ministry of the Office of Deacon. The focus of the diaconate care involves the weak, hurting and needy primarily in the body of Christ.

Acts 6:1, “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of* food.”

Notice the genesis for the office of deacon was the needy in the body of Christ.

Acts 4:32-35, “And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one *of them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles’ feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.”

Again, notice the focus of the diaconal care of the early church; the covenant community!

Acts 2:44-45, “And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all [who were in the body of Christ], as anyone might have need.”

From these passages it is clear that the efforts of the early church were directed at the needy and poor in the body of Christ. Many hurting and needy people lived in Jerusalem at the time, but only those of the household of faith received care. And this only makes sense when the “culture” of the covenant community is considered. Recall, in order to bring the gospel to the world, God “restricted” His saving activity to a family, that of Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17).⁵ This created a priority which rightly became part of the language and thinking of the covenant people of God; specifically that the covenant family is always our first concern. Now, this doesn’t mean that we are to ignore those outside our body, for indeed an important part of the covenant is our being “a blessing to the nations” (Genesis 12:2-3). But when push comes to shove, our first priority is the household of God and then the world. The apostle Paul says this:

1 Timothy 5:8, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.”

When it came to Christ’s instruction in the first commissioning of the disciples, not the great commission, He said this:

Matthew 10:5-6, “These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them, saying, ‘Do not go in *the* way of *the* Gentiles, and do not enter *any* city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’”

When a Gentile woman sought Christ’s help in healing her daughter, Christ at first did not help her but said this:

Matthew 15:20, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

And thus when it comes to the gospel ministry, our first priority ever and always is the covenant community.

Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Again this doesn't mean that we neglect the pagan. Rather it means that in our ministry to the non-believer, we must make sure that the needs of our family are met first!

From this perspective, I want you to notice a glorious truth. In Scripture, the widow and orphan are the special object of God's love and attention. (cf. James 1:27) That is, the ones who have neither a husband nor a dad. And a fundamental principle we learn about marriage in Scripture is that through the relationship, God who is the Bridegroom entrusts His bride- a woman- to the care of a man. Marriage from the perspective of the man is a stewardship of pastoral oversight in which the care of the soul of a woman is entrusted to him that she might be prepared for her ultimate wedding day, the final state!

From this perspective, the role of a man in marriage is first to be the feet, arms, and hands of the Lord. In light of this, when a woman is without a husband or a child without a dad, who is charged with being the "feet, arms, and hands" of the Lord? The body of Christ! And so we see from Acts 6 that the primary focus of the ministry of diaconal care is the body of Christ, and the intent is to be the arms, feet, and hands of the Savior. Alexander Strauch put it this way:

Since the first Christians did not have buildings to maintain, the first deacons were preeminently people-helpers and administrators of the church's charity. They were ministers of mercy. (Strauch, 1992, p. 75)

Now this would not preclude a diaconal ministry from organizing an outreach to the hurting and needy outside of the body. But, this ought only to be done after the needs of the body are met. The ministry of diaconal care is not the work of the diaconate, but that of the body of Christ. The job of the diaconate is to make sure that the local body is not neglecting this ministry emphasis. The standard when it comes to ministry in the Kingdom of God has always been the members of the body serving each other.

James 1:27a, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress..."

James 1:27 was written for the entire church! At the Last Judgment, on what basis will we stand before God? Our service to and amongst the body of Christ.

Matthew 25:40, "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even* the least of *them*, you did it to Me.'"

Paul set the direction when he wrote this:

Ephesians 4:11-12, "And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as*

evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

This is why God distributes spiritual gifts to ALL believers upon their conversion.

1 Corinthians 12:7, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit [which is another way of saying, ‘the gifting of the Spirit’] for the common good.”

1 Peter 4:10, “As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

These passages lead us to conclude that leadership is not given to supplant ministry, but to ensure that ministry takes place! And once again, that most likely is the background in Acts 6. As we look back upon Acts 1-5, we note that as the gospel spread amongst the people of God, vast sums of money were given voluntarily to be distributed amongst the needy in the body.

Acts 4:34-35, “For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles’ feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.”

Part of the ministry of the leadership in the early church was the stewardship of this money! On a daily basis, money was collected by the church. This had to be counted and placed in safe keeping. Then the needs of the body had to be identified which required wisdom as a determination had to be made between a genuine need and laziness.

2 Thessalonians 3:10b, “...if anyone will not work, neither let him eat.”

Now there was no way for twelve men to do this when the body numbered in the thousands, and then preach, oversee worship, pray, disciple, and so serve the spiritual needs of the body. Organization was required, an organization which is seen in Acts 6. Notice the words used in the text:

Acts 6:1-2, “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of* food. And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.’”

The Greek word for “tables” is τράπεζα (*trapeza*). The word is used in Scripture in a variety of ways, but figuratively it can be used to reference finances, a money table, or a bank- as in Luke 19:23. The *Good News Bible* translates the verse this way:

Acts 6:2, “It is not right for us to neglect the preaching of God’s word in order to handle finances.”

The New Testament in Modern English renders the passage this way:

Acts 6:2. “It is not right that we should have to neglect preaching the Word of God in order to look after the accounts.”

If that is how we understand the word here, then the issue before the disciples in Acts 6 was not serving literal meals to widows, BUT either one of these two things:

- The oversight of a large fund of money which clearly was being gathered since Acts 4 for the care of the weak and hurting in the body.
- The oversight of a meal which the body daily served to the weak and needy.

Either way the ministry-need referenced is that of the oversight of the care of the hurting and needy.

When it comes to the ministry of Diaconal care, the office was created by God to oversee the church’s ministry to its own hurting and needy. Never again do we want to fall into the errors of our fathers in the faith who neglected the weak and needy to their peril. Accordingly God has ordained an office in the church which will say, “The buck stops here!” Now that is not to say that deacons ought not to roll up their sleeves, gird up their loins, and so serve. For indeed as members of the covenant community, that is their calling. Rather, it is to say that a deacon’s board is made up of men who not only have the passion to care for the hurting and needy, but also the longing to help others do the same.

There are at least three more implications which arise from Acts 6 as it pertains to diaconal ministry. But for now I leave you with a challenge:

- Who here is God prompting when it comes to the physical care of the hurting and needy in this body? I hope everyone of us!
- Are there any whose passion is not satisfied simply to do the work, but want to help others to participate?
- Are there any who long to see Bethel be a more caring church? Who long to see the day that not one person in this place ever is bereft of the arms, hands, and feet of the Savior?

If you haven’t thought about these questions, please prayerfully consider them now!

End Note(s)

¹ e.g., Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 91.

² ראש הכנסת or the ἀρχισυνάγωγος.

³ חזן הכנסת or the ὑπηρέτης.

⁴ It is possible that the office of spiritual oversight and care was broken down into two offices: one given to the spiritual oversight of the flock of God and the other given to the teaching ministry of the church. Yet as our focus in this study is the office of Deacon, I’ll let that question go.

⁵ Accordingly, throughout Redemptive History and Church History the primary way God has expanded His kingdom has been through the family- what has been called, “Covenant Succession.”

Bibliography

Strauch, A. (1992). *The New Testament Deacon: The Church's Minister of Mercy*. Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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