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The Office of Deacon, Part 4

Acts 6:1-7, “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Believe it or not, Acts 6 is a controversial text. Dr. Richard Longenecker describes the controversy this way:

Historically, this verse is not only one of the most important in Acts, it is also one of the most complicated and most discussed verses in the entire book. (Gaebelein, 1982, p. 327)

One of the questions which has created so much of the attention surround this passage is whether or not Acts 6 is describing the diaconal office. For example, Gordon Fee, a solid, conservative Biblical scholar, rejects the notion that Acts 6 has anything to do with the diaconate. The main reason for this is that throughout the book of Acts, “the seven” referenced here are never called deacons. In fact, they are referred to as simply, “the seven” (cf. Acts 21:8). Another objection is that when the history of the seven men selected in Acts 6 is examined (most notably Stephen and Philip), they seem more like evangelists than deacons (cf. Acts 21:8). Thus, if we assert that these seven were deacons, we must modify our understanding of the qualifications of the diaconate to include evangelism.

There are other objections that could be mentioned. Suffice it to say that there are some reputable scholars who would take issue with the notion that Acts 6 has anything to do with the New Testament office of deacon.

Now I raise these objections so that they you may examine them in light of Scripture. For example just because Luke fails to call the men “deacons” doesn’t mean that they weren’t. In fact, the omission is consistent with his approach in both Luke and Acts where his writing accurately reflects the understanding of the church *at the time*. For example, Luke never specifically appends the title of “apostle” to Paul in the book of Acts¹- even though it is clear by the end of Paul’s writings that the church had accepted him as an apostle. Why doesn’t he append the reference to Paul as he looked back upon the history? Because at the time in redemptive history the church didn’t use the title in reference to Paul and so Luke didn’t either. F. F. Bruce addressed the issue:

The record of Acts is true to its ‘dramatic’ date, i.e., to the date of the events and developments which it relates. (Bruce, 1990, p. 27)

In other words, Acts is not anachronistic! So even though Luke never formally calls Paul an apostle that doesn’t mean that Paul wasn’t. In a similar manner, for Luke not to identify the seven as deacons does not mean that they weren’t. In terms of the issue of over-qualification, the fact that the seven (or at least Stephen and Philip) clearly were evangelists, understand that the qualifications that we demand for the office must be based NOT on the men who held the office, BUT on what is prescribed in Scripture for the office. For example, Paul was an apostle who did not depend on the church to provide for his needs. He was a tent-maker. Yet to take this choice of Paul and make it a standard for the apostolic office would violate Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 9 where he clearly states that it was the acceptable practice in the church for the apostles to be supported by the church. That Paul refused to participate in the practice did not make this the standard for the office.

Likewise when it comes to the diaconate, Stephen and Philip clearly were incredible, godly men who had a heart and passion for engaging the lost around them. Yet when it comes to the qualification

and intent of the office, we must not derive our standard from their practice, but from biblical precept. And so it is my belief that Acts 6 represents the beginning of the diaconal office, and as such is of immense help as we endeavor to understand the purpose, place, and function of this office in the New Testament church.

When Christ walked the earth, He frequently spoke of the kingdom which He came to establish on the earth. Yet that Kingdom didn't formally arrive until His resurrection. And the book of Acts is the record of the birth of the kingdom of God. On the Jewish celebration of "first fruits" (Pentecost), God brought forth the first fruits of the Messianic Kingdom after which time we read this:

Acts 2:41-47, "So then, those who had received [Peter's] word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 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, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

This is an incredible description of the early stages of the Kingdom of God. We have thousands of souls entering into the Messianic Kingdom but they were only "the first fruits." Many more would follow. We have a clear declaration of that on which the Kingdom would flourish, a commitment to these elements:

- The teaching of the word of God.
- Fellowship.
- The frequent enjoyment of the Lord's Supper.
- Prayer.

In fact, THE word used to describe the feeling of those present was "Awe!" The Lord truly was doing something incredible in their midst. And yet as this was not a new movement in redemptive history (I remind you that to this point, the church was comprised only of Jews), the community held true to the biblical calling and standard of godliness: the care of the weak, hurting, and poor. Therefore, those who were blessed with extra shared with those who were in need. And just as Christ said, the seeing world "knew they were Christians by their love" (John 13:35) so the early church enjoyed "favor with all the people." (Acts 2:47)

Yet this universal favor didn't last long, for soon the early church began threatening the Jewish establishment (just as Christ had done when He walked the earth and was crucified as the result). After preaching an incredible sermon upon healing the crippled man in Acts 3, the apostles were arrested and brought before the Jewish Supreme court, the Sanhedrin. There they testified of the work that God was doing with great effect. In fact, the Sanhedrin didn't know what to do so they gave the apostles a requisite beating and released them with the instruction that they were not to preach any more in the name of Christ. Now the disciples rightly refused, opting to obey the command of God rather than man, and so they continued to preach. (Acts 4:31)

Once again we have added to the text an important observation on the part of Luke which demonstrated the authenticity of this divine working.

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.”

It is important to note that this wasn’t communism, for the sharing of the resources was not required, but a free will offering. Yet it also is clear that the purity of this outworking of God was validated by virtue of the Old Testament mark of godliness, which recall was caring for the poor, hurting, and needy in the Covenant Community. In fact, notice two very important “proofs” which God gave to authenticate the outworking of His Kingdom throughout this book:

- **The Gift of Tongues** which is only testified to four times in Acts- each of which involved four different people groups: the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8:), the Gentiles (Acts 10), and the followers of John the Baptizer (Acts 19). How was the early church to know that the Gentiles reception of Christ was genuine? They spoke in tongues!
- **The Care for the hurting and needy** amongst them (Acts 2, 4, 6).

Now it clearly is to the latter mark on which Luke lays emphasis in the opening chapters of Acts. Again, how are we to know that this was a genuine working of God? How are we to decide whether this was of God or not? We are to decide because it bore testimony to the purest form of religion: the care of the hurting and needy (cf. James 2:27)! In fact, it was on account of the latter that a genuine problem developed.

The Complaint

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...”

As typically happens, good things outgrow their blessing unless organization is added. And that is what happened here; the kingdom of God was growing fast. By last accounting (Acts 4:4), the number was up to 5,000 men which factoring in women and children boosts the number up to about 20,000! This size is astronomical when the time and the technology of the day are taken into account. Clearly the church had outgrown the Apostles’ ability to care for it effectively.

So “a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews.” This had the potential for great devastation as the church to this point enjoyed great unity (Acts 2:46; 4:32-35; 5:12-16). Let me give you the background to the complaint. Recall that when Alexander the Great conquered the known world in the latter part of the third Century BC, he imposed the Greek language

and culture on his conquered foes. This is what is known as the Hellenization of the ancient world. In time Palestine, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Babylon/Iraq, and Iran all spoke Greek. Greek culture therefore impacted the world. Yet there were pockets of what we might call “purists” who resisted this Greek influence. One such pocket was found in Jerusalem where Aramaic/Hebrew and Judaism remained the chosen language and culture of the people of God.

As could be imagined, this created a rift in Judaism. Jerusalem Jews (who spoke the native language) looked down upon those Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture. In fact, they referred to any non-Hebrew speaking Jew as “Hellenists.” Those in Jerusalem were the untainted, the pure, and so the undefiled. They were “native Hebrews” and proud of it. In fact the issue was so divisive, two separate synagogues emerged in Jerusalem; one which worshipped in Aramaic and the other which worshipped in Greek!

Now on account of Pentecost in which many Hellenistic Jews were saved, many of these Hellenists opted to stay in Jerusalem grow under the Apostles’ teaching. This meant that the early church began with the potential for great division as “Hellenistic Christians” were joined together with “Hebrew Christians” in their worship and service of Christ. Would the church follow the pattern of Judaism and separate into two distinct groups? At first they resisted the urge and clearly remained as one distinct group. But this decision soon would be challenged in a major way.

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*.”

There is debate as to what the real problem was, on the surface it appears that the problem revolved around the issue of caring for widows; which as we’ve seen is a very important part of any covenant community (cf. Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11; 24:19–21; 26:12)! Evidently there were converted Hellenistic widows who either did not have family that would care for them (on account of their conversion) or who were bereft of all family (and so “widows indeed,” 1 Timothy 5:5). (It is interesting to note that at this time history records that many Hellenistic Jewish widows were relocating to Jerusalem so that they could die in the Land of Promise. As such, many of the early converts to Christianity involved these refugee widows.) Well there was a daily distribution of food for the needy and poor in the early church of which these women would have been a part. Yet somehow the Hellenistic Widows kept getting overlooked- in fact on account of the label in this text, “Hellenistic Jews,” the oversight clearly was believed to be deliberate on the part of some! So the complaint was brought to the apostles who already were overwhelmed with the needs of the Kingdom of God at the time.

Now that is one scenario which is favored by most commentators, yet there is another possibility because the primary word behind the phrase “daily serving of food” is a formal word typically used of a stewardship and so a ministry- it is where we get the word “deacon.” As such it has been suggested that it wasn’t that the women weren’t being fed, but that the early church had begun a ministry in which money was given to older women (here widows) who had the time and calling to minister to the younger and weaker amongst them. As such the slight/neglect here was not in not caring for the widows, but in not allowing the Hellenistic Widows to participate in the ministry that had begun in the church for the needy.

Either way, the point is that neglect was endured by some in the body; a neglect which again was believed by some to be motivated by prejudice! This truly constituted a problem which, along with the other challenges facing the Apostles, broke the proverbial “camel’s back.”

Acts 6:2, “And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable [the idea here is, ‘in the site of God’] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.”

Serving tables can mean a table or counter of a money changer or simply money matters. However it also is used of an eating table (cf. such use in Matthew 21:12; Luke 19:23) which gives further credence to the idea that it was a “ministry” from which the women were being excluded and not that of actual physical care. Regardless, to involve themselves in the details of serving meals and handling money matters constituted for the Apostles a genuine distraction to the very important work of studying and so serving up the word of God.

This is not to say that serving tables is an unimportant ministry for, as we have seen, it is! It is to say that on account of the Covenant Community there are two real needs of any body: physical and spiritual care. And no office can do justice to both when a church body reaches a certain size.

Today we live at a time when the church has become less of the body of Christ and more of an institution and so organization. As such, ministry has become the obligation and duty of “the professionals!” This sadly has resulted in grave neglect for the teaching and discipling ministry of the church. Dr. John MacArthur describes it this way:

Many in the ministry today have [abandoned] the emphasis on prayer and the Word of God. They are so involved in the administrative details of their church that they have little time left for intercession and study. Yet pastors are given to the church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). Their calling is to mature the saints so they can do the work of the ministry. By neglecting that calling, they doom their congregations to languish in spiritual infancy. Programs are no substitute for the power of God and His Word. Those whom God has called to the ministry of prayer and the Word must make it their priority. (MacArthur, 1994, p. 179)

This is an important observation. When it comes to caring for the body of Christ, visiting widows and orphans in distress, attending to the needs of the hurting- whose responsibility is it? It is everyone’s!

Yet we don’t live like this. When someone is ill, sick, or in the hospital, it is expected that the elders are going to visit them. Yet if you got elders serious about the word of God and discipleship, this will constitute a burden too great to carry if the church is of any significant size. They can’t do it all nor should they. Now as we’ll see, ultimately the buck does stop/rest with the eldership. But God in His providence has ordained an office whose sole purpose is the oversight of this ministry need so that the pastoral leadership can concentrate on the word of God and prayer. And that office is the Diaconate.

The early church was faced with a crisis threatening the unity of the church and the Apostles

responded with this plan:

Acts 6:3-4, “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 [the idea behind this is not private prayer, but public worship], and to the ministry of the word.”-

The word *choose* or *select* is a formal word denoting a formal process. The fact that the apostles suggested “seven men” was most likely due to the practice in Judaism which favored seven as the number for typical synagogue boards or ministries. (Marshall, 1980, p. 126) So “seven” is not a necessary number for the diaconate. It clearly here was arbitrary. As to their qualification, later Paul will give us a more detailed list of what is required of a candidate for the diaconal ministry (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Yet in this text, the Apostles gave five requirements.

1. **But select from among you, brethren:** this indicates more than the obvious truth that those qualified to serve as deacons must be believers. They must also be **“from among you.”** That is, they must be part and parcel of the body to which they are called. Occasionally you get men who fancy themselves as leaders who waltz into a church with the attitude, “Rejoice! I have come to save the day!” Qualification for leadership requires that the church know the individual- there is an element of bleeding together here. Accordingly, until a congregation “knows” an individual, the man is not qualified to serve regardless of his background, maturity, or experience.
2. **But select from among you, brethren, seven men:** secondly, those who would serve in the diaconal office must be men. Women certainly have vital roles to fill in the ministry of the church (cf. Titus 2:3–5). In fact, in the early church such women as Dorcas, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Philip’s daughters were greatly used by God. Nevertheless on account of “headship,” (cf. 1 Timothy 2:12-15) God’s design for the church is that men assume the leadership roles (1 Corinthians 11:3, 8, 9; 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11–12).
3. **But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation.** They must be men of integrity, above reproach, as is required of elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Leaders are an example of godliness for the body of Christ to follow. As it relates to their calling as Deacons, a “good reputation” is essential as they will be entrusted with large sums of money.
4. **full of the Spirit:** they must be “Spirit filled” and so “Spirit-led/driven.” In fact the word used here was a mariner’s term used of the wind that fills the sails of a boat and so drives it on the water. Accordingly church leadership requires men who are Spirit-driven in all that they do. What does this mean? It is not mystical, but rather practical. Think of it with me: if the Spirit of God inspired the word of God such that we can say with authority, “This is the mind and will of the Spirit of God,” then to be Spirit-driven (guided and directed by the Spirit) is one and the same as being word-driven. A fourth qualification for a leader in Christ’s church is that they not only are in the word of God, but that the word is molding and shaping them which naturally leads to the fifth qualification.
5. **Of wisdom:** As you know, Biblical “wisdom” speaks of the ability to apply the word of God to life situations. A wise man is a man who has supped on the word of God long enough that it has gotten into him, infected his thinking, and so is controlling his judgments.

1 Chronicles 12:32b, “...understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should

do...”

That is the essence of Biblical wisdom!

Now again, we are going to return to the qualifications which Scripture holds for the Diaconal Office. Yet for now notice the point: When the Apostles were faced with inability in their ministry, they organized and so implemented an office in the church whose purpose was to oversee a specific ministry emphasis: the physical care of the hurting and needy in the Covenant Community.

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 [who very soon thereafter would be martyred for his faith, Acts 7], and Philip [who in Acts 8 brought the gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch], Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch [the remaining five we know little to nothing about]. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

Upon hearing of the apostle’s solution, the early church received it immediately. It truly was a stroke of genius, which makes sense since it obviously came from God. The result is that the church choose seven men who embodied the qualifications referenced by the apostles in Acts 6:3. Ironically, the men all had a Greek name which most likely indicates that they were Hellenistic Jews, truly the oversight was not motivated by prejudice; it was an honest mistake!

The apostles then “laid their hands on [the seven men]” which constitutes a formal commissioning. This wasn’t just a group of men loosely organized. Rather, the apostles began a formal church office/ministry at this point! Now with this formal organization in place, what was the result? God’s kingdom continued to grow and expand.

Acts 6:7, “And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

The fact that the kingdom was expanding “greatly” tells us that there were so many new converts being added that they lost count of the exact number. This is rather incredible. Yet it was but half of it! Notice, that at this time, “a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7) These were, of course, not the chief priests or members of the Sanhedrin, but a very large number of the rank and file priests who ministered in the temple. In fact, it could very well be that the impact of the gospel on the priests caused the opposition that soon arose against one of these deacons, Stephen.

There are implications which arise from this view of the diaconal office. Yet, I trust that this will give you a greater appreciation for the ministry that God has given each of us in terms of this body. The church is an organic entity of which we are the hands, feet, arms, and legs. As such, we have been hand selected by God to serve this body. May God give us diligence and humility so to do.

End Notes

¹ Acts 14:4 & 14 are ambiguous in their reference. Paul is lumped in with the “apostles,” but in the words of Bruce, “Nowhere in Acts is Paul called ‘apostle’ in the special sense in which he uses the designation of himself in his letters.” (Bruce, 1990, p. 319)

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 5, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church