

Acts 6:1-7 Deacons (This is an updated version from March of 2009)

Right before we left Russia, Kristen and I were talking to a believing lady and her husband, who happened to be a pastor of a large church in our city. I don't remember how the subject came up, but we were talking about deacons. I told her that one of our private NC "Christian" "Baptist" Universities' mascots was the "Demon Deacons". As I laughed to myself at this designation, she was greatly offended! She said, "*How dare anyone put "demon" in front of deacons?"*" As I listened to her, I tried to understand her seriousness and disdain for such a derogatory term added to the official "servant" in the church of Jesus Christ.

I have spoken with many pastors who may be in agreement (at least in their church) with the designation of "demon" deacons as a label. Deacons have been the subject of great controversy and friction in many local churches, especially in the context of their relationship to the pastor. Why is this so? At the least I believe it is directly related to an unbiblical understanding of what a deacon is in the NT. So, let's turn to **Acts 6:1-7** (Read) and try to answer some very important questions concerning the office of deacon. This morning I would like to give 3 reasons for appointing deacons in the local church. Then, I will give some applications.

1. Deacons are called to serve. The word for "deacon" which is translated "servant" or "minister" in English is not found in this text as a particular office in the church. However, we do see the word "deacon" as a particular office in the church in Phil. 1:1 where Paul says, "**To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops (elders) and deacons.**" We also see this word in 1st Timothy 3:8 where the qualifications of a deacon are given. Not only is the office of deacon clearly seen in the NT, but Church history supports this fact. And though Acts 6 does not use the word in this way, I believe it is the clearest example in Scripture of what a deacon is and why the local church calls deacons.

Let's consider Luke's context for a moment. He says, "**The number of disciples was multiplying**" (v. 1). Things were going great! They were preaching the simple gospel: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were suffering. In cp. 5 the Bible tells us the Apostles were beaten and they rejoiced "**that they were counted worthy to suffer for His name**" (Acts 5:41) Disciples were being made. They were having great fellowship, unity, and the Kingdom of God was growing. It couldn't be any better!

Then, something happened: probably the first real crisis with the church in Jerusalem, their first church squabble. Look at v. 1: "**There arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.**" There was a complaint. In the early Jerusalem Church, the believers were Jews. However, there were two types of Jews, the Hebrews, who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, and other Jews whose first language was Greek. For whatever reason, the Greek speaking widows were being neglected. The church (without social security or insurance, etc.) clearly met the financial needs of these widows and favoritism was being shown to the Hebrew speaking Jews.

This was a problem that threatened the unity of the church. Notice what the apostles and elders did in v. 2-3. "**They summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 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 congregation decided this was good and they had their first “business meeting” to take care of this problem.

Notice what they did in v. 5-6. “**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, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.**” They chose seven men (with Greek names) to be in charge of administrating the task of serving the widows. Verse 2 uses the word “serve tables”. There was a great need in the area of “service” (*diakonia* in v. 1, 4) and they appointed seven men.

In the same way today, deacons are called to serve, particularly to meet the PHYSICAL needs of the congregation.

2. Deacons are called to preserve unity by edifying the body. As we have seen, there was a great problem where the unity of the body was in jeopardy. If this had not gone well, we could have seen the first church split. The Greek speaking Jews could have broken off and formed “2nd Church of Jerusalem”. They could have said, “*We’ve had enough! We will take care of our own.*” So, they called the first Deacons to keep UNITY in the Church of Christ.

You may say, “*Caring for widows certainly edifies the body, but how does this service bring unity to the body?*” Because *physical* neglect was causing a *spiritual* disunity in the body. One group of Christians (Greek speaking Jews) was complaining against another (Hebrew speaking Jews) group of Christians. This conflict of interests causing disunity was very important to the Apostles. They weren’t merely trying to advance or streamline the benevolence ministry of the church. Their motive wasn’t just to fix how the distribution of physical goods went to these widows. Much deeper than this practical problem was the unity of the church. They were trying to preserve unity in a multicultural church.

Really, this is the goal for all of God’s gifts to the church: edification in unity. Paul says to the Romans, “**For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established**” (Rom. 1:11). Paul says to the Corinthians that God’s gifts are “**for the common good**” (1 Cor. 12:4-7). Later on, he tells them to excel in the gifts “**that build up the church**” (1 Cor. 12-14). As we look to the task of a deacon, we see that their “service” is greatly needed as a means where the church is edified in unity.

3. Deacons are called to support the work of the elders. In v. 2-4 the Apostles said, “**It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 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; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**” They realized that care for these widows was the responsibility of the church, and obviously the Apostles were heading up this ministry. This physical work was demanding and the Apostles were being taken away from their time in the Word of God and prayer. So, they turned this responsibility over to another group. The congregation was pleased by this decision (v. 5). By appointing these deacons to administer a

real need in the church, the Apostles were then able to minister through prayer and the Word of God.

In the same way today, deacons are called to support the work of the elders. They are not a separate power group within a legislature through which decisions of the church need to be passed. Deacons are not a “board of directors” like we see in the business world. They are simply servants who serve the whole body by helping with the responsibilities that the main teachers cannot perform. Deacons are fundamentally encouragers and supporters of the ministry of the elders. I think this has been misunderstood greatly in many SB churches. There have been great conflicts and power struggles between pastors and deacons. Why do you think they were named the “*demon deacons*”? The better we understand the differences between shepherds (elders) and deacons, the more able we will be to avoid conflicts.

I believe Acts 6:4 is one of the most important verses in the NT for pastors (elders) and their role. The elder’s primary responsibility is to pray and preach the word of God. Deacons give freedom to the pastors, so they won’t be side tracked. I read of one pastor of a small church who said that it took him from Monday through Thursday to perform his administrative duties, which left Friday and part of Saturday to prepare a message. It is my strong opinion that if this becomes the norm for any church, they will suffer greatly, and eventually move away from even the Gospel itself. I am thankful for a church and a leadership team that encourages me often to preach, to pray, and to make disciples. **Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God.**

In Summary, Deacons are called to serve. Deacons are called to preserve unity by edifying the body. And, Deacons are called to support the work of the elders. I am sure there are other reasons I have missed, but these are the primary ones I see. Now, let’s look at some applications.

1. What can deacons do? At GBC what will we expect our deacons to do? We have a very different cultural situation than the early church at Jerusalem. In many cases in that culture, if your husband died, you had no source of income whatsoever. We have social security, insurance, family income, and as far as I can see, at least in our own body, our widows’ greatest need is not finances, much less a daily meal provided by the church. But, this may not always be the case in our culture. Since the example we have from Acts 6 as well as other verses like James 1:27 which says, “**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**” we must take care of our widows.

Deacons are appointed to SERVE. They are to be the servant-officers of the church, overseeing the practical and material needs of the body of Christ. They are to care for the sick and the poor and the overall physical needs of the church.

Other than the example from Acts 6, we have no clear job description for deacons. I believe, that in God’s providence this allows deacons flexibility to serve in a variety of roles. In one church there might be so much hospital visitation that the elders have no time to study and prepare. In another church it may be an aging building that requires maintenance. There may be

great administrative or financial tasks that must be attended to. There may be great needs in benevolence ministries. Other needs include funerals, weddings, needs with providing meals at special times. Sound and technology are areas of physical attention. And lots more. In the end, deacons are appointed to oversee these needs. If the overall ministry of the church is described as “word” and “deed”, the elders function primarily in the word while deacons function in deed. (See Rom. 15:18; col. 3:17; 1 Pet. 4:11)

Let me mention something about the wives of our deacons. Though we are calling Michael as a deacon today, the Bible also includes qualifications for the “wife” of a deacon. So when we call Michael, we also see these qualities in Page and expect her (as well as all our deacons’ wives) to serve alongside Michael. There are SO many things us men can’t do in the area of service that our women can. And some of the areas men serve, women are able to do it a lot better. With this in mind, at the end, we will pray for both Michael and Page together this morning.

2. How many deacons do we have and how do we appoint them? There is no biblically mandated number of deacons a church should have. One commentator wrote, “*If the church in Jerusalem only chose seven for a church with several thousand members, by comparison most Baptist churches have too many deacons.*” (G. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?*, 114.)

I believe the wisest course of action is to consider two factors: the needs of the church and the number of qualified candidates. I don’t see the example in Scripture to simply assign deacons to families (although I believe we are free to do this). If we follow the example from Acts 6, there was a clear need in the body, and they appointed qualified deacons to fill this need. Physical needs of the body help determine the number of deacons. We have great flexibility here to do what we think is good and right as a church.

Also, in some way, the biblical example is for the congregation to choose these deacons with the approval of the elders. Verse 3 says, “**Brethren, seek out from among you seven men . . . whom we may appoint over this business.**” Then, in v. 6 the Bible says, “**whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.**” This will be the simple model we follow. Also, we have quite a bit written in our constitution as to the process of calling deacons.

3. A deacon’s work is directly related to the spread of the Gospel. Look at 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 office of deacon filled a great need of service in the early church where the church was protected from division and conflict. The body as a whole was unified. The Apostles were free to pray and preach the Word and the **Word of God spread greatly**. Many disciples were made. In our context, the office of deacon allows and enhances the teaching ministry of the church. The elders are able to spend time equipping the church in the ministry of the word and the elders put feet to our faith in the gospel by good works. In the end, as a church, even as a local church, the word of God will spread in this community and to the ends of the earth. God is practical! It just makes sense!

4. Finally, the office of deacon proves that service is at the heart of God. Caring for people, especially for other Christians and those of our own congregation is so important for their

physical well-being and their emotional well-being. It is also a reminder that God cares for his people which is a witness to those outside the church. What did Jesus say? **“The world will know you are my disciples by the love you have for one another.”** And how do we practically know we love one another except that we serve each other. Deacons put feet to the love of God in the local congregation.

William Barclay tells this story. *In the days of the terrible Decian persecution in Rome, the Roman authorities broke into a Christian Church. They were out to loot the treasures which they believed the Church to possess. The Roman prefect demanded from Laurentius, the deacon: “Show me your treasures at once.” Laurentius pointed at the widows and orphans who were being supplied, “These,” he said, “are the treasures of the church.”*

Jesus said, **“If you have done it unto any of the least of these, you have done it unto me.”** As we serve, we show who our ultimate treasure is: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. How does God serve us? He sent His Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not ultimately perish, but live forever in His service.

I will close with these words. **“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.**

(Some Extra-biblical sources consulted: Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory, Polity*, Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, Strauch, *Minister of Mercy*)