

## **“The Origin of Deacon Ministry (Part 2)” – Acts 6:1-7**

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August 29, 2021

*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Let's meet once more in the sixth chapter of the book of Acts...

We have taken a brief pause from our series in Matthew to examine the first seven verses in Acts 6 in anticipation of an upcoming round of deacon nominations later this year. We have some wonderful deacons who serve this church and have had a rich legacy of amazing deacons at Southern Oaks. But as we have continued to grow and some of these deacons have entered into glory, we have a growing need to enlist some new and qualified deacons. In order to do that, we as a church family, really need to wrap our minds around what the Bible teaches about deacons and their ministry in the church. So we are dedicating three weeks now (this is week two) and then a couple weeks in late October to consider these matters together.

In October we will be looking more deeply into the qualifications of deacons. But for now we are focusing more on the origin of deacon ministry and some of the biblical principles and patterns that shape it for our church. That brought us to Acts 6, which, as I mentioned last week, is commonly considered to be the place where the office of deacon was born. Last week we looked at details of the text in general. Today and next Sunday I would like to tease out seven principles from this same text that relate to the nature of healthy deacon ministry in the local church. Today we will look at two and then, Lord willing, we will consider five more next Sunday.

Let's read the text. The most important thing for you to hear and grasp this morning is what I am about to read. Listen accordingly. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 1. This is God's Word...

*“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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> 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.” (Acts 6:1-7)*

Last Sunday we considered these verses in three sections. We started in verse 1 and highlighted “The Problem Resulting from Gospel-Progress.” The early church was growing and that led to growing pains in the form of tension between members. This has always been a risk in churches. But we see in verses 2 through 6 that this problem was taken seriously by the Apostles and the early church, which is evidenced by “The Proposal Resulting from Gospel-Priorities.” This proposal involved selecting a group of men who fit certain qualifications and were set apart to serve in a specific way. God blesses this solution and, as we see in verse 7, there is continued growth and the maintenance of Christian unity in the church. We called this “The Payoff Resulting from Gospel-Proclamation.”

So we have examined the details of the text. Now I would like for us to continue extracting some of the real-world applications, particularly as it relates to what a healthy deacon ministry should look like in this church (or any church really). Today, I will give just two examples. Here's the first one...

### **Healthy Deacon Ministry Is Distinct from the Ministry of Pastors**

We have to start here. Many churches get this wrong. And this principle, at least from the perspective of this text, is really tied to whether there is a relationship between the Twelve and the Seven in Acts 6 and the elders and deacons of the local church. I believe there is and I'm certainly not alone in this.

Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that there is a difference between the "Apostles" of the early church and "elders/overseers/pastors" of the church today. There are some denominations that obscure these distinctions by calling their pastors "apostles," but I think that's misleading. Technically "apostle" just means "sent one" and we are all "sent" to the world with the message of Jesus, but when we are referring to the Twelve and men like Paul—the Apostles of the New Testament—they had a unique calling. The most obvious difference between these Apostles and the elders or pastors of the church today is, according to John Stott, that "the apostles were given authority to formulate and teach the gospel, while pastors are responsible to expound the message which the apostles have bequeathed to us in the New Testament." So my job, for example, is to pass on what these men first unpacked for God's people. They put together the script and the rest of us are not to take liberties with it. "Nevertheless, it is a real 'ministry of the word' to which pastors are called to dedicate their life."<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament makes this clear. For example, when Paul was outlining the qualifications for pastors (which he calls overseers in this instance) he gives a list of general Christian character traits that all of us are called to pursue, except for one thing—"able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). The gift of teaching is not required of all Christians. Why is it required of pastors? Because their job involves teaching the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul makes this clear in his letter to Titus,

*"He [i.e., the overseer] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught [by the Apostles], so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."<sup>10</sup> For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.<sup>11</sup> They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach."* (Titus 1:9-11)

So the qualification of teaching is stressed for pastors because theirs, like the Apostles, is a "ministry of the word," which is why we preach and counsel and train. That's the call. That's the priority. Along with prayer, which we will get to in a moment. The point for now is that there is an analogy—not a one-to-one correspondence—between the Apostles in Acts 6 and pastors in general. And the same I think could be said of the "Seven" who were appointed in Acts 6 and deacons in general.

Now, technically, these men are not referred to as "deacons" in Acts 6. In fact, nowhere in Acts is the office of deacons mentioned, though the elders of the church are mentioned repeatedly. Nevertheless the men who are appointed in Acts 6 are "deaconing" because the word for "deacon" (*diakonos*) literally means "servant" and these men are said to have been called to "serve" (*diakoneo*) in verse 2. That's the verbal form of the noun for "deacon".

Of course, everyone is called to "deacon" or "serve" in some sense (even the apostles' ministry is described, in verse 4, as a "deaconing" of the Word). But given that the "deaconing" of these seven appointed men was aimed at freeing the Apostles to focus adequately on their prayer and preaching, it's no wonder that many have viewed Acts 6 as the birth of the office of deacon.<sup>2</sup> These men are distinguished from those whose primary calling in ministry was teaching. Their stated qualifications match what we see elsewhere in the New Testament when it speaks of the qualifications of deacons (which we will get to on another Sunday). And they lead out in

directed service to the congregation. This is what deacon ministry should look like. “There is no glamour in such work, just service, but that is how the church is supposed to operate.”<sup>3</sup> They are servant-leaders or servant-examples whose service frees the pastors to serve the congregation in prayer and preaching.

Inasmuch as this analogy is fitting, then we are reminded that deacons and pastors are not the same thing. One is called to lead the church forward in accordance with God’s Word and prayer. The other is called to assist them by allowing them to delegate certain tasks related to congregational care so that they can focus on their primary and God-given role in the church. The deacons are not tasking the pastors. The pastors are tasking the deacons. They are teammates with an eye on caring for the congregation in different ways.

And this leads us to the second thing I want to linger on today...

### **Healthy Deacon Ministry Helps Us Maintain Biblical Priorities**

The biblical priorities of a pastor must still involve prayer and preaching, but pastors can sometimes sacrifice the quality of these primary things on the altar of good, but secondary, ministry. The ministry of prayer is one that can be neglected without the people of the church necessarily noticing. It’s a huge temptation then to put the greatest emphasis on the things that attract the most attention. But it is incredibly arrogant to do so because a lack of prayer is indicative of an inflated sense of self. It means we minister as though we are self-sufficient. That’s a problem. It’s a pride problem. Charles Spurgeon called out the problem like this:

“Of course the preacher is above all others distinguished as a man of prayer....The minister who does not earnestly pray over his work must be a vain and conceited man. He acts as if he thought himself sufficient of himself, and therefore needed not to appeal to God....He limps in his life like a lame man in Proverbs, whose legs are not equal, for his praying is shorter than his preaching.”<sup>4</sup>

A lot of pastors would acknowledge this in principle, but then when faced with the demands of ministry will adopt more of a “pray as you go approach.” Yet this is a failure as well. One that I have been guilty of at various times in ministry. Tony Merida speaks to this:

“Prayer is the heart of pastoral ministry. Everything begins and ends with prayer. Yet it’s the easiest thing to sacrifice. That’s why many want to multitask their prayer lives. But we need to remember that Jesus got alone on multiple occasions to spend focused time with the Father. And if anyone could multitask his prayer life, it was Jesus. Surely he could do the ‘pray as you go’ approach to ministry better than anyone, yet he sought solitude. Luke records three specific examples of Jesus withdrawing from crowds in order to commune with the Father (Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18). The apostles followed the pattern of Jesus. They understood that ministry follows from one’s communion with God. They wouldn’t neglect that which gives life to ministry.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course this is relevant to any of our ministry, not just pastoral ministry, because we all are ministers in some sense, which is why the Spirit of God has bestowed on every believer spiritual gifts. But that gifting was never meant to be detached from prayer and daily dependance on the Lord. To borrow the language of Spurgeon, if our “praying leg” is shorter than our “ministry leg,” there is a problem.

And that is the problem (or at least the potential problem) faced in Acts 6. These men were humble enough to recognize both their primary calling and their inability to fix every problem in themselves. So they enlisted others. This communicated both their commitment to prayer and preaching *and* the recognition that the widow neglect was a serious matter that required focused care and attention. But if they had redirected their attention to addressing this problem that emerged in this newly formed church then they would have done so at the expense of focused attention on prayer and the preaching of the Gospel. They also would have done so at the expense of enlisting members of the congregation to do the works of ministry to which they had been called. We all have

ministry in a local church. The more the pastors are doing, the worse it is for the church because it will mean the church members are neglecting to minister as God intends and the church will suffer because the pastors will not do that ministry as well as the congregation. Furthermore the church will suffer because of pastors will burnout because of unrealistic expectations.

About a decade ago the late R. C. Sproul wrote the following,

“Every year, seventeen thousand ministers in America leave the ministry. A primary reason is that ministers in the modern church are not encouraged, equipped, enabled, or allowed to devote themselves to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Today a minister is expected to be the CEO of a corporation. He is expected to do the administration and the work of development; he is expected to be an expert in counseling and pastoral care. As a result, we have raised up generations of pastors who are jacks of all trades and masters of none, and one of the reasons why they do not open the Word of God for the congregation on Sunday morning is that they do not know how. They have spent their time learning everything else but the texts of Scripture.”<sup>6</sup>

This is so true. It explains the rarity of biblical preaching—like actually tethered to the text and expositional—in pulpits across the country. It explains, at least in part, the epidemic of pastoral burnout. And these unrealistic expectations have also probably set pastors up to fail and be more susceptible to certain sin. But more of a shared ministry in a church would help to buck these trends. And it would be more biblical.

Now I should say that I am very thankful for this church in this regard. I do feel like this church has been so receptive to making needed changes to foster healthy growth and reform unhealthy organizational structures. We’ve carried some sacred calves to the altar together, let’s be real, and that’s a good thing. There have been so many here who have reminded me of this congregation in Acts 6 in that they are willing to step up and contribute and do ministry and even champion and cherish their pastors prioritizing biblical things, like prayer and preaching. On the whole, we have together been willing to make healthy changes to accomplish biblical ministry objectives. You have shown a willingness to be guided by Scripture more than tradition. This is encouraging to your pastors, let me assure you.

I had the privilege of studying under a German scholar by the name of Eckhard Schnabel, who, in my opinion, has written one of the best commentaries on Acts available. When he is teasing out some applications of this text, he actually devotes a section to “Institutional Flexibility”. He writes,

“*Authentic priorities imply institutional flexibility.* The priorities of the Twelve allowed them to accept the criticism of part of the congregation, to admit that they had failed to see the problem of the neglected Greek-speaking widows, and to solve the shortfall of assistance with the proposal of a restructuring of the ministries of the congregation... Leaders with the right priorities are always willing to find flexible solutions that allow them to ‘stay on message.’ They will not be defensive, defending the status quo, but offensive, looking for creative solutions.”<sup>7</sup>

Now obviously there are aspects of the way we structure ourselves and conduct ourselves in a local church that are non-negotiable because they are prescribed in the Scripture. That’s our guide. But there are plenty of forms of ministry that may have worked in one age and are neither effective today nor mandated by God’s Word. We have to be humble enough to recognize that and, like the Protestant Reformers of old, be willing to make biblically-driven reforms as needed for the sake of effective and God-honoring ministry. The message never changes. That’s core. But there are a lot of things that churches do that are not core and are just traditions. And when the effectiveness of those traditions expires, we should not devote ourselves to maintaining the trellis while the vine is dying.

What I am trying to say is that, on the whole, I think the church here has responded well to such needs in recent years. I’m so grateful and optimistic because of that. And one example of this is seen in a growing sense of

shared ministry in the congregation and on the staff. Take our staff for instance, something happens to one of us and there are others who can step in and get the job done well. If there aren't then it would be a sign that we have not led well. We have not equipped well. But I feel confident in saying that the heart of our staff is to want to have a ministry that doesn't break down without one of us because it's not about us. So let's say I get sick tomorrow or have some accident and depart from this world, there are a handful of men in this place who could step up and I would have confidence that they would stand behind this pulpit and preach the Word faithfully. That's a good thing. You have qualified folks here. Lay and vocational. And I think that is healthy. Certainly healthier than what we see in a lot of Southern Baptist Churches that seem to be structured around one individual at the top.

That's just one example—this plurality of leadership—where this congregation has been shaped by the Scriptures and been so receptive to the commands and principles of God's Word and willing to make changes when those principles lead us to do so. I'm grateful for that. Of course we have things we need to grow in—we are talking about deacon ministry because we want to grow there for example—but by God's grace you have proven to be a people who has responded well when our proposed reforms have flowed out of God's revealed Word. What I see in Acts 6 reminds me of so many of you.

Matt Smethurst writes,

“By prioritizing Scripture and prayer, the apostles are choosing to stay focused on the whole church's spiritual welfare, even as they affirm the Hellenist's physical needs. (They more than affirm the needs, in fact; they take the initiative to set in motion a permanent, structural solution.) Nevertheless, the apostles recognize a fundamental truth: a church whose ministers are chained to the tyranny of the urgent—which so often shows up in ‘tangible problems’—is a church removing its heart to strengthen its arm. It's a kind of slow-motion suicide.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, it's how churches die. And it's why we need everyone involved in ministry and we need deacons leading out in and modeling service. A church will not survive without biblical preaching. But a church will lose its health as it grows without healthy and biblical deacon ministry. Their service is essential. “Pastors (or deacons, for that matter) who try to do everything end up doing a disservice to everyone.”<sup>9</sup> And, I might add, the service of deacons and every member in the local church is not unrelated to Christian witness. I so appreciate what Derek Thomas says about this.

“A good deal of the church's authority and influence is bound up in her proper execution of ministries of service. Sometimes the church's enemies have understood that better than her own members. For example, in the fourth century, Julian the Apostate sought to quench the church's rise to power by creating an imperial system of social welfare that would outdo the Christians. He failed miserably; no one could outgive and outserve the covenant community in those days. In twentieth-century Russia, Stalin's Communist Party put a ban on ‘charitable or cultural activities by churches,’ since, as a Kremlin spokesperson explained, ‘The State cannot tolerate any challenge to its claim on the heartstrings of the Russian people.’ The Communists knew that any institution that helped the poor would have the loyalty of the people.”<sup>10</sup>

Service is powerful. Particularly when connected to Gospel witness and shared among all the members of the church. When pastors seek to do it all the church suffers because their pastors burn out or neglect their gospel witness. And the church suffers, as we've seen, because the saints are not walking in their God-given calling to care for one another and exercise their spiritual gifts for the edification of the body and the glory of God. That's a lose-lose.

But deacon ministry—when done in view of biblical examples like here in Acts 6—results in a win-win. Or, in light of our mission statement and philosophy, we might say it's a win-win-win. What's our purpose statement?

*We Exist to GLORIFY GOD through GOSPEL-TRANSFORMED LIVES...*

And how do we do this? What's our plan?

*We do this by ACTIVELY EMBRACING Three GCs: GOSPEL-CENTRALITY, the GREAT COMMISSION, and the GREAT COMMANDMENTS.*

Why are these important to us as a church? Because they are biblical priorities! And guess what we see in this text? All of these GCs being maintained by the congregation. The Apostles were championing Gospel-centrality when they say to the church, we can't be the ones that address this problem because that would mean we would have to neglect preaching, which in Greek is literally "proclaiming the gospel" or "good news," as in the verse that transitions us into this story (5:42).<sup>11</sup> It literally has the word Gospel embedded into the word. It's the verbal form of Gospel. We see, therefore, the Great Commission being prioritized as they are allowed to keep going, teaching people to observe what Jesus instructed, and baptizing those who respond in faith. And we see the Great Commandments—the call to love God and neighbor—in action because they, on the one hand, have taken seriously what God has called them to prioritize in ministry and, on the other hand, the community at last is lovingly caring for one another. So these core values at our church are not arbitrary. They were quite literally the values the early church prioritized.

Therefore, a healthy deacon ministry—one that consists of qualified servants operating in similar ways—is essential for our ministry as a church moving forward.

And like every other ministry it should have a cruciform-shape to it. In other words, it should allow Christ and His cross to shape how we carry out deacon ministry. If deacons are servants, then their primary example is Jesus, who the prophet Isaiah even described as a Suffering Servant.

As we prepare to share the Lord's Supper together, if you are Christian—one who has recognized Jesus as Savior and trusting in His work alone as the sole basis for your salvation—and you are participating with us today, then let me invite you to peel back the tabs on the container as we prepare to share the elements of this ordinance together. As we prepare our hearts, let me remind you that the New Testament says that Jesus,

*"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8; NIV)*

Paul says that Christ became a servant when He took on our humanity. He served His Father and He served us—all the way to the point of dying on the cross. He substituted Himself for us on that tree, took upon Himself our sin, bled and died so that death would be defeated for us, and three days later rose again to welcome all those who believe into His resurrected glory. In other words, He served. And we—all of us, not just deacons—are called to adopt this "mindset" of Christ, as the previous verses states. He is our example. We serve because Jesus served us. We serve others in sacrificial ways because Jesus served us in making the ultimate sacrifice, one that we in no way deserved. He humbled Himself, so we are humble ourselves and serve one another.

Listen to how Isaiah described this Suffering Servant...

*"See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.<sup>14</sup> Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—<sup>15</sup> so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?<sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or*

majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. <sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. <sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. <sup>11</sup> After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Isaiah 52:12-53:12)

Jesus did that for our sakes. We are fully forgiven through faith in Jesus because He allowed His body to be broken and His blood to be spilled. We have no condemnation to receive from God, because Jesus drank down the full cup of God's wrath in our place. We are called children, because the Son of God was called cursed. And we are called to a ministry that is patterned after this work—cruciform in every way, Gospel-shaped—which is why we serve one another—the brothers and sisters you share this meal with—and lay down our lives and interests for our neighbor—who we hope to call brother and sister one day.

So I invite you, family, to remember Christ who made it so. His broken body. His shed blood. His service to us. Take. Eat. Drink. And remember...

Let's pray...

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 123.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., R. C. Sproul, commenting on Acts 6, wrote, "This is how the diaconate was founded. Here they are simply called 'the seven,' but out of this group of seven the institution of deacons was established in the early church." *Acts* (SAEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 128. An earlier example of this line of thinking would be Irenaeus, see *Haer.* 1.26.3; 3.12.10; 4.15.1.

<sup>3</sup> Sproul, 128.

<sup>4</sup> From Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, quoted in Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 94.

<sup>5</sup> Merida, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Sproul, 127.

<sup>7</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 338.

<sup>8</sup> Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 162.

<sup>11</sup> "The 'ministry of the word' [6:4] denotes preaching and teaching of the good news of God's revelation in Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah and the exalted Lord and Savior..." Schnabel, 332.