

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

Brandon Holiski  
Southern Oaks Baptist Church  
August 22, 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).]*

Take your Bible and meet me in Acts 6...

We are going to pause from our Matthew series for a couple weeks to consider the topic of deacon ministry. Here's the plan... Today we are going to set the stage by looking at a passage that many people consider to be the origin of deacon ministry. I want to walk us through the details of the text this morning. Then next time we will begin looking at why it matters for our view of deacons and deacon ministry moving forward. Once we cover that, we will jump back into Matthew and then a few weeks later we are going to spend a couple weeks considering the qualifications of deacons from the Pastoral Epistles of the New Testament.

Why are we doing this? Because we are about to enter into a season of deacon nominations at the church. This is a process that involves all of our membership and so it is vital that we all understand what the Bible teaches us about deacons and how those lessons play out in this church. I'm really excited. You should be too. And today, while we really won't talk a lot about deacons, we are laying the groundwork to do so next week.

So let's dive in. Hopefully you have found your way to Acts 6. I'll begin reading in verse 1. Follow along as I do. 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)*

I would like to consider our text in three sections this morning. The first is...

### **The Problem Resulting from Gospel-Progress (v. 1)**

The setup on verse 1 is significant. We are told that *“in those days...the disciples were increasing in number...”* That's a good thing, right? The ministry is thriving. More and more people are coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The numbers in the gathering are increasing. This is what they were hoping for. This is something to celebrate. It's the good growth. It wasn't built on gimmicks. It's gospel-centered growth. How do we know? Look at the previous verse...

*“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (Acts 5:42)*

They were consumed with preaching Jesus. Why? Because He is the hope of the world. The word for “preaching” there is literally “gospeling.” They were preaching the Gospel, which means “good news,” the good news that Jesus Christ came to save sinners and make things right in this fallen world. Every day, we are told they were sharing this good news. They are telling people that God made a way for sinners to have all their sin forgiven and to be brought into a right relationship with God and that way is Jesus. Not our own efforts, which would always come up short, but the work of another, the Son of God, the Savior sent to lay down His life on the cross to atone for the sin of all who would believe. They were proclaiming that Jesus was resurrected and through faith in Him we are given eternal life. This is the good news. This is the message that saves, the power of God for the salvation of all who would believe it. And many were believing it. Many were being born again by God’s free grace. Many lives were being changed. The Lord was adding to the Church’s number. That’s the state of things in chapter 6.

But then we are told that, in that growing season, “*a complaint*” arose among the believers. The church is growing! But the people are complaining. The language is that of grumbling. The most widely used academic dictionary these days defines the Greek word as “behind-the-scenes talk” or “complaint, displeasure, expressed in murmuring” and then it cites this passage as the illustration.<sup>1</sup> The verbal form of this word is used in the Greek Old Testament to describe what the Israelites engaged in behind the back of and at the expense of Moses. And you probably know how that worked out for Israel. God is not pleased with grumbling. It’s inappropriate behavior for Christians. But it’s threatening the church in these early days. Derek Thomas said of this scene that it has all the makings of a coming “church split” and it very well could have resulted in “*The Hellenist Mission Church versus The Continuing Church of Zion!*”<sup>2</sup>

But what are they grumbling about? The text says that the Hellenists (i.e., the ones with Greek backgrounds) were grumbling against the Hebrews because the Greek widows “*were being neglected in the daily distribution*” of food and resources. There is nothing in the text to suggest that this is being done intentionally. In fact, it was probably an accidental oversight owing to either poor administration or language barriers. The new cultural mix of the community was leading to new challenges. But it was a real problem, even if inadvertent.

These are growing pains. Everyone says they want Gospel-growth, but such growth is indiscriminate to who it reaches out to and, therefore, who it will see come into the fold. People who the world keeps apart come together in the family of God. But all those social and cultural distinctions don’t just evaporate from our memories. We have to learn to do life with people who have very different backgrounds and come at issues from different starting points, and that is not easy. It’s easy to romanticize. But on the ground it is laced with challenges. It’s worth pursuing. But it’s unrealistic to think that there won’t be tensions and oversights. And that is what we are seeing here. One group was being neglected. Bad feelings result. Division was looming. And the first sign of trouble was grumbling.

Complaining is not a virtue in the Bible. Paul didn’t forget to mention it when he detailed the fruit of the Spirit. Indeed, Christians are frequently told to avoid it and warned that it leads to destruction (1 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14). Perhaps you’d push back, “Wait pastor, I see what you’re saying, but isn’t their neglect a serious matter?” Absolutely! It’s something that needed to be addressed. But grumbling against one another or behind one another’s backs was not the correct course of action. They should have taken the concern to the party who had offended them and sought reconciliation. If that didn’t work, they should have involved the leaders. But that’s not what happened. They chose to grumble. They chose to sin. There’s a lesson there for us: Just because you may have a right to be justifiably offended, doesn’t make your sinful reaction justifiable.<sup>3</sup>

The point to see is that it is the Church’s growth that led to the drama of the text. The problem exists precisely because they are doing some things very right! It exists because God is blessing their ministry. It’s flourishing. This should not surprise us. Do you think, brothers and sisters, that when a church is growing that the evil one is pleased? Do you think that he will just sit idly by and do nothing to try to thwart the Gospel’s advance and nothing to try to gain a foothold in the Christian community? Of course not! And the book of Acts makes this clear.

John Stott points out that by the end of this story we see three fronts that Satan tried to attack the church on. The first was his “crudest tactic” and that was “physical violence,” which we see in two different accounts of persecution initiated by the Sanhedrin. “In the first Peter and John are arrested, jailed, tried, forbidden to preach, warned and released (4:1-22); in the second they and others (the ‘apostles’ in general) are arrested, jailed and tried, and this time flogged before being again forbidden to preach and released [5:17-42].”<sup>4</sup> This is exactly what Jesus said would happen to his followers (e.g., Luke 6:22, 26; 12:11; 21:12ff.). But it doesn’t work. What Satan intended for evil, God intended for good. The Gospel is still advancing and the second of those persecution account ends right before Acts 6 begins, where, again, we were told that “*the disciples were increasing in number*” in those days.

But that’s not Satan’s only mode of attack in the early Church. “Having failed to destroy the church from outside, he attempted through Ananias and Sapphira to insinuate evil into its interior life, and so ruin the Christian fellowship.”<sup>5</sup> You might recall from Acts 5, “*Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds*”, even though he claimed to be giving all of the proceeds to the apostles for the good of the church. Peter rebukes him, not for withholding funds, but for lying about it. God judges Ananias and Sapphira with a swift death.

Now, in Acts 6, we see Satan coming from a different angle. He’s sowing seeds of discord in order to distract the apostles from their primary calling by roping them in to addressing other legitimate needs. Important needs, but secondary from the perspective of their primary calling. These were three of the fronts on which Satan tried to wage war with the growing church. These were the three weapons he comes at them with—“physical (persecution), moral (subversion), and professional (distraction).”<sup>6</sup> Stott also writes,

“Now I claim no very close or intimate familiarity with the devil. But I am persuaded that he exists, and that he is utterly unscrupulous. Something else I have learned about him is that he is peculiarly lacking in imagination. Over the years he has changed neither his strategy, nor his tactics, nor his weapons; he is still in the same old rut. So a study of his campaign against the early church should alert us to his probable strategy today. If we are taken by surprise, we shall have no excuse.”<sup>7</sup>

The old saying is true in this case: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” If the strategy is working, why get a new one. And, friends, Satan’s strategies are still derailing churches left and right, preventing them from focusing on what matters most. He’s doing that today. And he was trying to do that in the early church that we read about in Acts 6.

“It is a mistake to romanticize (or idealize) the church in Acts”, as Tony Merida points out. “Is it a model church? Yes. Is it a perfect church? Absolutely not!”<sup>8</sup> And if these sorts of challenges arise when the church is booming under the leadership of the Apostles themselves—who you know were preaching the Bible faithfully and some of whom actually wrote parts of it!<sup>9</sup>—then we should expect adversity in growing churches led by lesser men. And if we could replace those lesser men (like yours truly) with the first Apostles, there would still be serious challenges and threats around the bend. And that’s not necessarily bad. Because challenges allow us to showcase the power and priorities of the Gospel. Challenges provide occasions for more growth. But they have to be leveraged properly. And this is what we see modeled in Acts 6, which brings us to...

### **The Proposal Resulting from Gospel-Priorities (vv. 2-6)**

Verse 2 tells us that the Apostles got word of this relational turmoil. Let’s look at how they handled it. “*And the twelve*” Apostles, we’re told, “*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.’*” Pause. First of all, let me just say, I wish I had the minutes from this business meeting. Second, and more seriously, let’s not misunderstand what they are saying. They are not saying that “social work” is not important and only “pastoral work” matters or that the former was somehow

“beneath their dignity.”<sup>10</sup> That’s not the point. This is not a matter of the Apostles being too good to engage in certain activities. It’s a matter of the Apostles being called to certain activities, namely, the “serving” of the Word and Prayer. That was their primary task and calling.

Every Christian is called to certain things. We are all called to make disciples. We are all called to gather together in corporate worship. We are all called to love and minister to one another. We are all called to grow in the fruit of the Spirit and Christlikeness. We are all called to be active in the local church. But what that activity looks like will be different from one person to the next because, as the Bible explains, God has set up the Christian church like a human body. The body has many parts. All those parts have different functions. But they all work together toward the same goals or else the body begins to break down and die. So it is in a local church. None of us is capable or called to do everything. We are all role players.

And the Apostles knew their role. They knew that every member is a minister in some sense, but the specific ministry/service that they were called to prioritize was the preaching of the Word of God and prayer. I’m sure there was a part of them that, when they learned of the turmoil between members of the church, wanted to swoop in and try to fix things, but they were wise enough to recognize that they couldn’t do that important thing without neglecting the primary thing to which they had been called.

So what do they do? They delegate. They come up with a plan that takes the problem seriously but addresses it in a way that maintains the priority of their Gospel-witness. They say to the congregation,

*“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.”* (Acts 6:2b-4)

That seems like a good strategy. It should address the problem by engaging the members of the church in ministry to one another. It should lead to better care within the congregation. And it frees the Apostles up to continue praying for the church and preaching the Gospel. The Apostles were humble enough to admit that they couldn’t do it all and they delegated accordingly. Seems like a good strategy, right? Evidently these early Christians thought so because we read in verse 5 and 6...

*“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.”* (Acts 6:5-6)

These are sometimes called “the Seven.” And they evidently lead out well because there is no mention of the problem persisting after this. We will talk more about the qualities these men possessed next time, but you may have noticed something about the various names of these individuals. They are Greek names. They’re Hellenists. Is that a coincidence? I don’t think so.

Remember the early church was predominantly Hebrew at this point. We are still in the early stages in Jerusalem. These are mostly Jewish-Christians. They are Aramaic speakers for the most part. Since Pentecost in Acts 2, the church is growing in diversity. They are still pretty much all Jews at this point, but some of them are Jews from the Diaspora—other Greek centers, away from Jerusalem—that for one reason or another are back in Jerusalem. These are the Hellenists. They have a religious background in common with the Hebrews, but they come from different cultural contexts. And some of them, like Nicolaus (mentioned in verse 5) were definitely Gentiles, who converted to Judaism, and then later became followers of Christ. So there are not many Gentiles in the mix, but there were some.

And it would make sense for Hellenists widows to come to Jerusalem since it was a big city and they were in a vulnerable state, looking for resources. But the Hellenists (Greek speakers) are not the majority. And the Hellenist widows were a minority within the minority. No wonder they were overlooked. Again, it wasn't necessarily intentional, but sometimes those in the majority can fail to register the voices of the minority, especially when those voices may be in another language.

Merida is correct to point out,

“We must understand that failure isn't always the result of sin. Sometimes failure is simply due to human limitations. Did the apostles not care for widows? Of course they did—they did as much as they were able! But these men were human, and they were few.”<sup>11</sup>

As a result, people were slipping through the cracks of ministry. So what do the Apostles *and* the early church do? They look for godly men to address the problem. But you've got to figure that there were more options of qualified candidates among the Hebrew men than from among the Hellenists (Greeks). Nevertheless, they choose men who were from the Hellenists.

Why? Well, on the one hand, it probably made practical sense since they would be familiar with the culture and language of those widows they were tasked to serve in the daily distribution of food. But I think it's more than this. I think they were trying to send a message. They were not content to just be charitable to the ethnic minority. They wanted them to have a seat at the leadership table because, first, in Christ we are one, and, second, because that would better ensure that these kinds of oversights were less frequent. There is a lot of wisdom in their approach.

I appreciate what Scott Sauls says about this sequence of events...

“In multiple ways, the Hebrew majority could have dismissed the minority complaint. But that's not what they did. Rather than responding defensively, rather than writing off the concerns of the minority, the all-Hebrew leaders handed the entire widow-care system to the offended minority....[C]harity toward minorities by itself is not enough....Especially where injustice and inequality exist, the majority must proactively seek out ways to surrender microphone and gavel rights....Invitations to give 'input' must be replaced with opportunities to *lead*. Crumbs from the table must be replaced with a *seat* at the table. Otherwise, we remain stuck with an anemic, counterfeit diversity.”<sup>12</sup>

I can hear it now, “Oh no, pastor's gone woke!” No I haven't. Listen, I'm going to offend everyone really quick, so you may want to hold on to your “amen!” because you might be next...

On the one hand, just because someone cares about injustices in society or desires to see the church reflect the diversity of the community or whatever, does not mean they are “woke” (by whatever definition you have) or a “social justice warrior” or a “champion of critical race theory” or a “closet Marxist.” Stop it. It may just mean that they read in the Old Testament that one of the three major things that the prophets talked about was God's displeasure with the injustice in society (along with idolatry and religious ritualism). But we live in a time when people are locked and loaded, critical in spirit, cynical in general, unwilling to give others the benefit of the doubt, and quick to label people some kind of way in order to virtue signal and garner some extra likes on social media. Can you imagine if the Apostles proposed this course of action in our day and setting? They would be labeled and misconstrued in all of these ways by some. And those some would be wrong. They were none of those things. And, please notice, these early Christians didn't accuse them in such fashion.

On the other hand, just because there may have been a racial component (or, perhaps better, an ethnic component or, more precisely and assuredly, a linguistic component) to the original problem, it was not because the Apostles were racists or prejudice. They are not accused of that. There is no indication that the grumbling construed them in that way. And given the actions taken, it seems clear that they were deeply concerned for the

vulnerable minorities among them. I imagine they were crushed to learn of the oversight. Again, what a corrective for our day. Sometimes people are overlooked because they are overlooked, not because they are *intentionally* overlooked. And when that happens we would do well to give others the benefit of the doubt and not misconstrue their motives or chalk it up to some sinister plot for power or the maintenance of power through suppression or whatever. Do those things happen? Of course. But most Christian people (I would hope) would gladly change their way if they realized that something that they were doing (or not doing) was directly contributing to the suffering of another. We are certainly called to do so.

This is what the Apostles model for us here. They preached the Gospel faithfully and indiscriminately. People from all kinds of background responded in faith and were converted. This new diversity in membership led to challenges. They didn't run from those challenges, but enlisted the church to enact practical solutions. This led to restored harmony and greater unity. This was a powerful thing for a divisive world to behold. And in this case, the Lord blessed their efforts, which brings us to...

### **The Payoff Resulting from Gospel-Proclamation (v. 7)**

What is the result of all of this? Look at verse 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.” (Acts 6:7)*

The progression of the text suggests that this doesn't happen if the Apostles neglect the preaching of the Word and prayer. Growth—meaningful growth that actually advances the kingdom, not that counterfeit stuff—doesn't happen if the Gospel is not preached faithfully and the ministry is not bathed in prayer. These things go together. And together they, by God's grace and power, bear fruit.

And did you notice that, in this case, that fruit included the conversion of many Jewish priests? Those would not have been considered “low hanging fruit” or “likely converts.” But the Gospel is “*the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*” (Rom. 1:16). And Luke's language here is that these priests “*became obedient to the faith*” which is probably his way of saying that these were “lasting conversions,” the real deal.<sup>13</sup>

So what can we learn in this story? Among other things, we can learn that “Gospel growth always brings blessing, problems, and opportunities.”<sup>14</sup> If by God's grace we continue to see growth in this church, we should expect to be confronted with significant challenges. How we approach those challenges matters. Will we demonstrate, like the Apostles, Gospel-priorities? If we do, then those challenges will prove to be opportunities to showcase the transformative and conciliatory power of the Gospel. And as the world sees that happening in us, it will stand out and some are going to be attracted to it and start asking questions. Those questions have Gospel answers. And as we share that answer—the Gospel—more growth may result, and the cycle continues.

That's what we see in Acts 6. That's a pattern that we can see in our church. But if we are going to see it, then it may call for some changes from us.

And this brings us to where we are heading next week. Some of you may be asking yourself, “I thought he was going to talk about deacons, so why hasn't he brought them up yet?” Well, next week, Lord willing, we will. What can this text teach us about deacon ministry? Can it teach us about deacon ministry? Does it have anything to do with deacon ministry? These are some of the questions we will consider next week. Spoiler alert: I think there are a lot of valuable things we can learn in this passage about how we must see deacon ministry play out in our church. And it's something that is going to involve all of us. So do your best to be here next week, because we are going to cover some important lessons that are going to shape our deacon ministry moving forward.

To be continued...

Let's pray...

---

<sup>1</sup> BDAG, γογγυσμός.

<sup>2</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 158.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 91.

<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 89.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Merida, 90.

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

<sup>10</sup> Stott, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Merida, 90.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Sauls, *Befriend: Create Belonging in an Age of Judgment, Isolation, and Fear* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers), 128.

<sup>13</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 335-336.

<sup>14</sup> Merida, 88.