

“The Origin of Deacon Ministry (Part 3)” – Acts 6:1-7

Brandon Holiski

Southern Oaks Baptist Church

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[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.]

Take a Bible and let's meet in Acts 6 so that we can continue our study on the nature of a healthy deacon ministry...

Let me read the story that we have considered for two weeks and then we will begin to build on that discussion. I'll begin reading in verse 1. Follow along. 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. 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.” (Acts 6:1-7)

This is week three. I thought we would finish this week. We are not going to as that will take one more sermon. In our first sermon on this text, two weeks ago, we simply covered the details of the story and tried to understand it in context. Last week we began examining the text with a particular focus on isolating some principles that relate to a healthy deacon ministry. There are seven total that I want to highlight. Last week we covered two. The first was...

Healthy Deacon Ministry Is Distinct from the Ministry of Pastors

Here we examined the analogy between the Apostles and elders/pastors. They are not the same, but one thing they do have in common is a call to pray for the flock and preach the Word of God. We also saw how the Seven, who are appointed to serve the widows, are kind of like proto-deacons. We talked about the relationship between pastors and deacons. They are a team. The deacons assist the pastors by serving the church in critical ways so that the pastors can give more focused attention to their primary calling. This leads us to the second principle we considered...

Healthy Deacon Ministry Helps Us Maintain Biblical Priorities

When the pastors (like the Apostles) can delegate to deacons (like the Seven) certain tasks, it blesses the people of the church in a variety of ways. On the one hand, it will mean that the needs of the congregation will be overlooked less often. On the other hand, it will better ensure that the pastors will dedicate themselves more fully to their ministry of prayer and preaching, which in turn will bless the congregation. Last time I even showed you how Acts 6 evidences the same priorities in the early church that we hold up as a local church—our

3GCs: Gospel-centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments. A healthy deacon ministry is essential for a growing church to maintain these priorities.

Today I would like to add for your consideration two more principles from this text. Here's the next one...

Healthy Deacon Ministry Requires Congregational Involvement

How does this principle arise from the text? Several places actually. In verse 2, the Apostles gather together "*the full number of the disciples*", which is to say, the church. When they had their ear, they laid out a plan that would help the church address the need at hand and maintain biblical priorities. The plan pleased the congregation and, in verses 5 and following, they act in accordance with that plan and "*chose*" seven men appropriate to the task. The Twelve Apostles could have unilaterally made the decision, but instead they included the whole body of believers, a body that was filled with new believers even.

Why? Matt Smethurst, who has written a wonderful book on deacons recently, suggests that there are probably at least two reasons, "one theological and one practical."¹ Let's start with the theological reason. The assumption of the text is that the members of the church, as far as could be discerned, are "born again" believers, true believers. When a person is born again and puts their faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in them. Every believer, whether they have matured in the faith over decades or have so recently believed that we haven't had time to fill up the baptistry yet is indwelt by the Spirit of God. Because the Spirit has taken up residence within them and can and does guide them, they are enabled "to pass judgment on matters in Christ's church".² The Apostles had confidence that the Spirit of God would lead and guide the congregation as a whole in these matters and that's what we see.

By the way, texts like these remind us why we are a congregational church. We have leaders who have been called by God to lead, but we also desire to see the congregation involved in the direction of the church as we together depend on the Holy Spirit to lead us as one body. So when we meet for business meetings, for example, there are often matters that the whole congregation is invited to give input and decide as we desire to see the Spirit lead us in accordance with God's Word and will for this church. That is one of the features of congregational churches.

That is also why it is important to have a regenerate membership. What do I mean by that? I mean that, as far as we can discern, anyone admitted into membership should understand and embrace the Gospel. They should believe that Jesus Christ died in their place to cleanse them of sin and condemnation and that Jesus was raised three days later. They believe not merely the fact of these truths, but in a trusting way. They have placed all their trust in Christ alone to save them and have zero trust in their own efforts. If such faith exists, then our lives will bear the fruit of Christlikeness in increasing measure. We are not perfect, but we are changed. We are not who we will be when God completes His sanctifying work in us, but we are also not who we once were.

So when someone says they want to join the church, as pastors, we don't just say, "Great, you're in!" Some churches work like that. But that's not healthy because that means that you end up having a lot of church members who are not actually believers. They don't have the Spirit of God. So as you can imagine that can lead to confusion when the members are asked to make certain decisions because not all the members will be driven by the Spirit. So when someone wants to join, one of the pastors will sit down with the person to chat. The goal of that meeting is to hear that person's testimony of conversion, get a sense of their understanding of the Gospel, and discern, as much as possible, that there is evidence of conversion, a changed life. It's not intimidating. It's typically quite pleasant. If these things are present, we work through a person's questions about the church and how to plug in and, if they still want to join, they are presented to the congregation for vote at one of our business meetings. It may be time for some of you to initiate those conversations with us. Let's talk after service.

We do that because we want to do all we can to ensure that we have a regenerate—born again and Spirit-filled—church membership. But, of course, the pastors are not God, and we cannot see the heart. There will be people who say the right things, but in time show themselves to not really be believers after all. When that happens, a church has a responsibility to remove them from membership, hopefully not forever but at least for the moment. Why? Because if a congregation's membership is going to be asked to make decisions that are Spirit-led and in accordance with God's Word, that is going to be difficult if there are people who are not even Spirit-filled in the membership. It will breed confusion and disunity. Make sense?

But the Apostles here are operating on the assumption that the gathered church is, with few exceptions (e.g., Ananias and Sapphira), Spirit-filled. So the body is entrusted to make these key decisions. And I think this is a good principle for a local church to embrace. It doesn't mean God doesn't call leaders to lead a church under God. But it does mean that the church has a key role in discerning the directing of the Spirit at many key points. A congregation's involvement is not at odds with the role of the pastors. And, in as much as the responsibilities of the Apostles in Acts 6 are analogous (though not identical as we saw last week) to the role of the pastors/elders of a church, then we should assume that the pastors/elders of a church should lead out in directing the congregation to find deacons to serve.

All of this relates to the theological reason why healthy deacon ministry requires congregational involvement, namely, because we need to discern who God has called to serve a church as deacon and this requires the direction of the Holy Spirit, who every believer can and should be led by. But, as I mentioned earlier, there is also a practical reason for congregational involvement in this decision in Acts 6, namely, that the congregation as a whole has a vested interest in who is selected.³ These are those who will be serving them in key ways in the future. Naturally, every member should care about who is entrusted with such a charge.

So church, when the time comes and the pastors lay out the nomination process for some new deacons later in the year, we want you to be involved and to take it seriously and prayerfully. You have a role to play in the process and you will be better served if you take that role seriously. Of course, this raises a new question—how do we know who God is calling to serve as deacons? And this leads us to the next principle we can discern from the text...

Healthy Deacon Ministry Requires Qualified Candidates

The deacon selection process should not be a mere popularity contest in a church. The Bible actually provides us with some clear-cut qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. That's a text that Pastor Evan will explore with us sometime in October. But even here in Acts 6 we see that the Apostles guide the church in how to discern who is qualified to serve in this instance. The qualifications they lay out are wise and should be adopted by us as well.

Notice, in verse 3, they tell the congregation to *"pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, who you will appoint to this duty."* Do you see that? We should expect these characteristics in our deacons as well. Every deacon should, first, be a person *"of good repute,"* second, *"full of the Spirit,"* and, third, *"full...of wisdom."*

Now, pause for a second, because I think there is an important corrective here. I have served as pastor in three churches and in each of those churches, when the subject of deacons comes up, I have occasionally heard people say, "Once a deacon, always a deacon." Is that true? Is that biblical? I don't think so. The fact that the Bible actually lays out specific qualifications for deacons suggests that a person can only serve in that office as long as they fit those qualifications. In other words, a qualified deacon can be disqualified.

Some might push back, "But pastor, they are called by God, anointed for some special service, ordained even." Yeah, so was king Saul. But what happened to him? He disqualified himself and that anointing moved to David.

Again, there is a reason the Bible lays out qualifications. A person may have had a church lay hands on them in an ordination service for deacon ministry, but if they do not fit those biblical qualifications, they should not be a deacon in the church. The qualifications matter. They exist for a reason. Just because a person was qualified in the past, doesn't make them qualified in the present. And just because someone is not qualified in the present, doesn't mean they won't be qualified in the future.

And let me tell you something I've never heard in these nearly two decades of pastoral ministry. In none of these churches have I ever heard someone say, "Once a pastor, always a pastor." People don't say that because we know it's not true. Pastors can leave the ministry or be disqualified. Why would it be any different for deacons. It's not. You won't find "once a deacon, always a deacon" taught in Scripture. What you'll find is a list of qualifications for those fit to serve in this office in the local church. Now let's consider each of these qualifications briefly.

When the Apostles say that these men are to be "*of good repute*," what do they mean? Well, simply put, they mean that they are men of character. They have a good reputation among the people. They have track records of Christian conduct. They are good examples of what a Christian should look like. They are not perfect, but they have evidenced growth that is becoming of a mature and maturing Christian. We will consider this more when Evan shows us how Paul elaborates this qualification in 1 Timothy 3. Suffice it to say, we are looking for deacons "*of good repute*" to serve the people of God at this church.

Let's jump to the third qualification mentioned, before we get to the middle one, and that is that these men were "*full...of wisdom*" (Acts 6:3). These men were known for wisdom. And I think, given the context, we should say that this is not just a general wisdom, but a godly wisdom, which evidences a firm grip on the teaching of Scripture and the message of the Gospel. These are not just men who are good problem solvers (though they were likely that). They are men who were wise in the truth of the Gospel. Why would I say that? Because the book of Acts goes on to describe two of these men and their ministry in greater detail for us—Stephen and Philip.

The narrative spotlight shifts to Stephen in the very next verses. Look at verse 8...

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."

Sound familiar? It should. He was one of the Seven and so he was a man "*full of the Spirit and of wisdom*" (Acts 6:3). Here we see these characteristics expressed in the way he speaks. But what is he speaking about? The things of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How do we know? Because the next verse says they accused him of speaking "*blasphemous words against Moses and God*" (6:11). So clearly Stephen is not merely expressing wise words about life in general, he is speaking about the Lord and His Word. They accuse him of blasphemy and even "*set up false witnesses*" to testify against him. Eventually, the High Priest asks him, at the beginning of chapter 7, "*Are these things so?*" and then Stephen gives the longest speech we have in Acts.

Now we don't have time to unpack this speech. But what his words here demonstrate is that Stephen has a good grasp of the Scriptures and the message of the Gospel. He starts with Abraham, he works his way through the patriarchs of the Old Testament to explain how God's people ended up enslaved in Egypt. He summarizes the Exodus story of God's deliverance. He then goes on to describe the period of wandering in the wilderness, the conquest under Joshua, the establishment of the monarchy, the building of the temple, and how repeatedly the Israelites turned away from God and missed the point of His work among them. He tells the story not just to rehearse his biblical knowledge. He tells it in a way that shows he understands how God's activity in the Old Testament pointed to Jesus Christ. Then Stephen looks at the High Priest and the others accusing him of blasphemy and drives the point home:

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (Acts 7:51-53)

So Stephen was a man who knew his Bible and knew how the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the “scarlet thread” that ties it all together. All of that biblical history pointed to Jesus. Stephen makes this clear. And what does Stephen get for it? He gets killed. He becomes the first Christian martyr. But as Tertullian famously said, “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” You know who happened to be present at Stephen’s death, even playing a part? A guy named Saul, who you probably know as Paul. The guy who would become the Apostle to the Gentiles one day in the future is there playing a role in the execution of Stephen. Imagine how Paul reflected on that when he eventually came to know Christ and came to believe what Stephen taught about the Scriptures. It is, after all, likely Paul who supplied this account to Luke. It obviously made an impression on him.

But here’s the point... What does this speech of Stephen show? It shows his wisdom. That’s the kind of wisdom the Seven were known for. That’s the kind of wisdom we should see in deacons. A wisdom marked by biblical knowledge and a firm grasp on the Gospel. Not that they need a theology degree, but they should have a hunger for God’s Word, be in their Bible’s regularly, and it should show.

What about Philip? How does he demonstrate this? Well, look at chapter 8. In verse 5, we encounter Philip again and what is he doing? He’s in Samaria proclaiming Christ by the power of the Spirit. The rest of chapter 8 describes how God is using the ministry of Philip. Probably the most famous example involves an encounter that Philip has with an Ethiopian Eunuch. This man is riding in his chariot reading when Philip happens upon him. Philip immediately recognizes that this man is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Jump down to verse 29...

“And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’³¹ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.’³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.’³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, ‘About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:29-35)

Again, what do we see? We see his wisdom in the things of God. He knew the Scriptures and he knew the Gospel. He knew how to find the Gospel in the Scriptures. That’s what verse 35 says—*“beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus [literally, “he shared the Gospel about Jesus”]*” with him. Philip was full of wisdom. Godly wisdom. Wisdom derived from the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of Wisdom” as He is called elsewhere (Eph. 1:17).⁴ And this brings us to the final qualification mentioned here in Acts 6... The Apostles say that these men must be *“full of the Spirit”* in verse 3. At minimum that means they’re true believers, indwelt by the Spirit, as we considered earlier. But I think this qualification means that they are believers who, to borrow Paul’s language, *“live by the Spirit”* and *“keep in step with the Spirit”* (Gal. 5:25). In other words, they have shown evidence of the Spirit’s work in their lives. What kind of evidence could that entail? Growth in godliness for one. They are maturing. There are tons of passages that could be helpful in discerning this evidence in a person’s life, but let me touch on two briefly.

The first is the most obvious, also found in Galatians, where Paul describes *“the fruit of the Spirit”*, the kind of character that the Spirit of God produces in the life of a believer in increasing measure.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

The Seven selected in Acts 6, without a doubt, were known for these attributes. Shouldn't we expect these same traits in our deacons? Absolutely! They are not going to express any of these things in perfect measure. But they are demonstrating them in increasing measure. You should not be able to say they are characteristically unloving or impatient or harsh and so on, why? Because they are *“full of the Spirit”* and so we should expect them to be marked by *“the fruit of the Spirit”*. And not just them, but all Christian people really. But they should model this for us. They are people of repute.

But there is another passage that comes to mind that I think is surprisingly neglected in these conversations and that is Ephesians 5, where Paul describes what it looks like, literally, to *“be filled with the Spirit.”* It may surprise you. Here's what he says. He begins with a contrast,

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit...” (Ephesians 5:18)

That is an interesting juxtaposition—drunkenness and being filled with the Spirit. What's the point? I think it has to do with influence. When a person is drunk they in some sense lose control and act *“under the influence”* of the alcohol they have consumed. Having an unhealthy relationship with wine can put you under its influence and this is not a good thing for, as Paul says, it *“is debauchery”*. It is sin resulting from being under the influence of the wrong thing. By contrast, being *“filled with the Spirit”* is about being under the influence of what is proper, namely, the Spirit of God.

But what does it look like to be *“under the influence”* of the Spirit of God? If we ask that question to a variety of people we may get a variety of answers. Does it look like drunkenness? Does it look like, as perhaps some charismatic Pentecostals might suggest, speaking in tongues? Does it look like something extraordinary? I don't think so. But don't take my word for it. Take Paul's, for in the next verses he actually tells us what it looks like. He commands the Ephesians to *“be filled with the Spirit”* and then he modifies that command (a Greek imperative) with a series of Greek participles that explain what the command actually looks like in action. Once again, it's just ordinary behavior we would expect of Christians. But significantly, Paul's idea of what it looks like to be *“filled with the Spirit”* has a lot to do with showing up and participating in corporate worship. Look what he says.

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:18-21)

What do we do when we gather on Sunday morning in worship? We address one another with *“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”* and we sing *“to the Lord”*. We do that with *“one another”* when we gather in corporate worship. What else do we do when we gather in these services? We prioritize *“giving thanks...to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus”* for *“everything”* He has done for us. What else do we do? We serve one another, *“submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* Notice the repetition of *“one another”* in these passages. These are not things we do solo. These are things we do together with brothers and sisters. And they happen to be the things we do when we gather for corporate worship—we sing for one another and to God, we offer up prayers of thanksgiving, and we practice all those *“one another”* commands we find in the New Testament that relate to how believers bless their brothers and sister in the body of Christ. You don't do these things solo or as some rogue agent. You do these things gathered in corporate worship.

If that's what the New Testament says being *“filled with the Spirit”* looks like and if we believe that our deacons, like the Seven in Acts 6, should be *“full of the Spirit,”* then it's reasonable that you should expect to see your deacons in corporate worship. That's kind of a no brainer. If they don't show up, and their absence is

not owing to some providential reason (like personal or family health issues or vacation on Labor Day weekend), then it's indicative of one of two things, both of which are problems. Either they don't understand the purpose of corporate worship and its importance to the health of a local church. If that's the case, then it evidences that they don't possess the spiritual "*wisdom*" called for in Acts 6. They just don't know their Bible's well enough to know that we are commanded, for example, in Hebrews 10...

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."
(Hebrews 10:23-25)

Now, let's say a person is not ignorant of such commands, but they just treat them as optional, then that's a problem too. Again, that kind of obstinacy does not evidence spiritual maturity. Even worse, it could evidence a kind of pride that is dangerous to the individual and the body, the kind of pride that says, "I'm just going to do things my way." But what did James say about that? You remember, don't you? He said, "*whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*" These are not people, therefore, who should be called to serve as deacons. They are people who should be called to repentance. Rogue agents don't make good deacons. Good deacons, as we saw last week, need to work well with the pastors of the church and serve in ways that help them do the work God has called them to do. If the pastors don't have confidence in the deacons (or vice versa) they will not function well together, and the church will be harmed. And every pastor, and rightly so, will not have confidence in a candidate who doesn't see the value and priority of corporate worship.

So if we are looking for people who are "*filled with the Spirit*" to serve as deacons, then we should take the lead of the New Testament and start by looking here, in corporate worship. Not parachurch organizations. Not secondary ministries that are entirely optional and modern inventions. The heart of the church's ministry together—what we do when we gather in corporate worship.

Now, again, this is not just relevant for deacon candidates is it? Of course not! They are to be "*full of the Spirit*", but so is every Christian. And in as much as Paul described what that looks like in terms of participation in worship, then this should be a priority for all of us, should it not? Again, I know sometimes we just can't gather. We get sick. Our loved ones need our care. We are taking precautions because of a pandemic. Travel. And things of this nature. But generally speaking, this should be a priority for all of us.

We are evidencing the fullness of the Spirit when we come together and sing praises. We are seeing the fullness of the Spirit when we offer up prayers of thanksgiving in worship. We see the Spirit's work overflowing when we put one another's interests before our own. That's what being filled with the Spirit looks like, at least in part, according to Paul. So if you are going to walk in the Spirit, then gathering with God's people in worship should be a priority for you, even a non-negotiable unless kept by some providence or unique circumstance for a season.

That's why I'm glad to see you this morning. That's why I hope you are glad to be here this morning. God has gathered us. We come together as a blood-bought people, the Bride of Christ. And our gathering, being that it is at God's initiative and command, can please the Lord. We hope it does every week. There is so much more I could say on the importance of the church gathering, but let me close with one final thought. As a church family, we gather, scatter, and then gather again. We don't cease to be a part of the church when we are not assembled, but, nevertheless, a church is by definition a gathered assembly. That's what the word "church" means (*ekklesia*). And when we gather, God blesses us in unique ways and we, by His grace, can bless God's holy name in return. I'll close with these words from an old puritan by the name of David Clarkson.

"The Lord engages himself to let forth as it were, a stream of his comfortable, quickening presence to every particular person that fears him, but when many of these particulars join together to worship God,

then these several streams are united and meet in one. So that the presence of God, which, enjoyed in private, is but a stream, in public becomes a river, a river that makes glad the city of God.”⁵

To be continued...

Let's pray...

¹ Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 48.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 48-49.

⁴ And this relates to the next qualification mentioned in Acts 6—they were to be “*full of the Spirit*.” Why? Because elsewhere in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is called “*the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him*,” who is given to you when you believe that you might have “*the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you*” (Eph. 1:17-18). “To be filled with the Spirit is to be filled, increasingly, with wisdom” (Ibid., 50). Godly wisdom. Biblical wisdom. But I think being “*full of the Spirit*” involves even more than such wisdom.

⁵ David Clarkson, *The Works of David Clarkson, Vol. 3* (Carlisle, PA; Banner of Truth, 1988; originally published 1696), 190.