

***“The Origin of Deacon Ministry (Part 4)” – Acts 6:1-7***

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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](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take a Bible and let's meet in Acts 6...

September 11<sup>th</sup> was yesterday, as I'm sure you noticed. It's a pretty heavy weekend for many of us as a result. It's hard for me to believe that it has been 20 years since the Twin Towers fell in New York City. That was a day that really shaped my generation. Some of you can remember where you were and what you were doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked, or JFK was assassinated, or the day we landed on the moon...well that was September 11 for me. I remember it like it was just yesterday.

I was a senior in high school. I came downstairs to grab a quick bite before I left for school. My dad had the television on a bit louder than usual and was washing the dishes on the other side of the room. I asked him what happened, and he told me that a plane had crashed into a building in New York. We assumed that it was an accident of some sort. Terrorism didn't cross my mind. My eyes were glued to the screen and then I saw the second plane hit the second tower. I told my dad. He told me that was probably just a replay for the first plane. I knew better. The top left of the screen assured me that this was live footage. And together we realized that this was a terroristic act. Planes were being used as missiles. I just witnessed hundreds of people killed on live TV. And then I had to go to school.

Everything was different that day. The walk into school felt different. Every conversation seemed artificial. Class felt empty. Teachers taught as if it were their first day to teach. Everyone was talking about it, and no one was talking about it. We all felt vulnerable. Very, very vulnerable. Your experience on that day was probably quite different, but eventually you probably felt an overwhelming sense of vulnerability as well. How could you not?

What happened next, over the course of several weeks, was people began to search for something to relieve that vulnerable feeling. People were searching for hope.

The politicians were trying to strengthen our hope politically. Bipartisan unity was bolstered—"Democracy," they shouted, "will not be defeated." Then there were those who tried to encourage hope militarily—"We have the greatest armed forces in the world," they said, "Our might is unsurpassed." Some tried to give us hope financially—"Don't worry, the markets will bounce back," or "your long-term investments will be fine." Others opted for geographic hope—"You're going to be ok, you don't live near any major political, military, or financial institutions that a terrorist might target." And many others, in the name of Jesus, spouted off blasphemies and false hopes that in the long run drove people far away from real hope.

But did any of these attempts really bring us lasting hope? I don't think so. Maybe the appearance of hope, but it was short-lived. Eventually it dawns on us, if we let it, that these things cannot offer lasting hope. Why? Because our political system is not indestructible. Our military cannot protect us from everything and everyone that wishes to harm us. No geographic location guarantees shelter from pain and tragedy. No financial institution can guarantee a future. And on and on...So either we forget what has happened and go on with our lives. Or we remember that day, the memory of which breeds feelings of vulnerability.

But I'm not sure that this feeling is all bad. The fact of the matter is that we are all more vulnerable to tragedy, hardship, and suffering than we like to admit. And sometimes that lack of security in earthly things can open

our eyes to God's invitation to find security in our Savior and King, Jesus. By "security" I don't mean insulation or exemption from suffering in this life (cf. 1 Peter 4:12-19). I mean a security that is more enduring. A security that is often found in the midst of suffering. A security that doesn't ignore the uncertainties of human existence, nor does it placate their acknowledgment with naïve notions of stability. But rather, I'm talking about the security that rests on two foundations: the death/resurrection of Jesus and the sovereignty of God.

Paul speaks of this in Romans 8,

*"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39)*

We know that God loves us because he "*did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us.*" All of our assurance that God loves us is anchored in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is the irrefutable evidence of love. What greater love is there than this (John 15:13)?

But it goes deeper than this, because lots of people love you but can do nothing to guarantee you a secure future. The difference here is that in God we see the greatest love ever, for God is love, merged with absolute sovereignty that only God can claim. So He loves you *AND* He can assure a future that reflects that love. So "*neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (8:38-39).

That said, we will experience life and death, the effects of angels and demons, the circumstances that time brings, powers, heights, depths, etc...God does not always grant us deliverance *from* these things, but he will deliver us *through* them.

The great hope of the Christian, then, rests in Christ's death and resurrection, because it is there that we are convinced that His love for us knows no bounds, and in the sovereignty of God, because it is there that we are convinced "*that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28).

Though this is true, let us remember and pray for the families who have been victimized by the tragedies of September 11th. This is a very difficult weekend for so many. But let us grieve and pray with hope—real hope!—as we stand on Christ, the Solid Rock. Do you remember the hymn?

My hope is built on nothing less,  
Than Jesus blood and righteousness.  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly trust in Jesus' name.  
On Christ the Solid Rock I stand,  
All other ground is sinking sand.  
All other ground is sinking sand.

Maybe the memory of September 11<sup>th</sup> has you reminded of your vulnerability and the frailty and uncertainty of life. Well, you are frail. You don't know what even the next hour will hold for you. But if you know Jesus—if you'll turn from your sin and self in repentance and trust in Jesus as your only hope in life and death (faith)—He will save you today. And you will be able to rest, even in uncertain days, because you will be given the gracious gift of a certain future with God—fully forgiven, fully loved, forever His. Believe in Christ and live. If you want to talk to someone about that, let's talk. You can grab one of our pastors at the doors when you leave today or fill out one of those response cards in the pew and drop it in that plate at the exit when you depart so we can connect later in the week. You don't have to go another day trying to manage sinking sand on your own. You can be planted on the Solid Rock of Christ Jesus.

This is the way of salvation—trusting in Christ, His blood and righteousness. No one comes to the Father without this faith. And if your faith rests in Jesus, then your future are ultimately secure in Him. You have hope, no matter how dark the days of this life may be. The hope of everlasting life. So trust in Christ. Turn from your sin and trust in Him alone to save.

There were a lot of things that threatened the earliest Christians in the New Testament. Our text reminds us of some of them and how God moved among them. Let's take a look again at the text we have been studying for a few weeks now. Did you find Acts 6? 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)*

This is week four of our study of these verses. In recent weeks we have been looking at what principles this story offers us related to healthy deacon ministry in a local church. Remember the deacons are an appointed office in the local church that has a role of serving the congregation in ways that free up the pastors to dedicate themselves especially to prayer and preaching. We have looked at four principles related to deacons so far. Today I will add three more and then at the end we will put them all together. Here's principle five...

### **Healthy Deacon Ministry Reflects Congregational Makeup**

A couple weeks ago I pointed out some of the cultural dynamics that are in play in this text (and not just here, but throughout the book of Acts). We are told in verse 1 that *“a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”* So the church at this point consists of Jewish-Christians from two different cultural backgrounds. The Hellenists had either immigrated to Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman world or they came to visit for the celebration of Pentecost, were converted when the Holy Spirit was given as Peter preached in Acts 2, and chose to stick around now that they were followers of Christ. They were, in a sense, “the outsiders,” because those called “*Hebrews*” in Acts 6 had grown up on Palestine, where this congregation was birthed.

The Hebrews were more accustomed to the languages of Hebrew and Aramaic, whereas the Hellenists were fluent in Greek. Language really shapes culture, so these differing backgrounds would have made it harder for these new Christ-followers to know how to interact and relate to one another. Couple that with the fact that the

majority of the group would have been the Hebrews and the leadership prior to this seems to have been exclusively Hebrew, you can understand why the overlooking of these Greek widows would have occasioned complaint and could have blown up into a significant division along ethnic or cultural lines. That would have been par for the course within the Judaism of the first century. Would it be any different among these Jewish Christians?

Now, I pointed out a few weeks ago that the oversight seems to have been inadvertent, probably owing to miscommunication because of the language barriers. There is no reason to believe this oversight was intentional or the result of some sinful prejudice. I also pointed out that the Seven seem to have all been part of the minority—the Hellenists, the offended party—since they all have common Greek names. I don't think that is a coincidence. If the tension resulted from a language barrier, then it makes sense that they would want Greek speakers to address the problem because they would be most sensitive to the needs of those who were being overlooked. It communicates that the overlooked are valued. It conveys oneness. It fosters unity. And it makes this problem less likely in the future.

In other words, it appears that the congregation says that there is wisdom in appointing these men because having a more diverse leadership will help them avoid these oversights in the future. This is a good principle for us too. Deacon ministry, if possible, should reflect congregational makeup. I say "if possible" because we should never add deacons based merely on a demographic analysis. We should add them only if they are qualified. But the more diverse the body of deacons is, the more they will be sensitive to the needs of the entire church community (and even the larger community), which will better ensure that these sorts of oversights don't happen (or at least happen less frequently).

And, by the way, this is true on our pastoral staff as well. If our entire pastoral staff consisted of men in their 20s, then there would be some challenges. Can God work through such a group! Absolutely. But it wouldn't be ideal long term. That's one reason why Tony—who we might describe as a budding senior adult—has been such a valuable member of our pastoral staff. He's been here the longest and has relationships with many of our senior adults built over decades, he brings valuable perspective to our staff meetings as result, and there have been ministry decisions that would have been implemented poorly from the perspective of our seniors were it not for his contribution. There's a reason he's our senior adults' pastor. We appreciate what he brings to the table and the perspective he offers helps our pastoral staff make better decisions. That's an example of diversity on our staff. We want our staff to have the same core theological convictions. But a healthy mix of strengths, weaknesses, backgrounds, preferences, perspectives, and the like can be a healthy thing. And I think that's true with deacons as well.

When I talk about a diverse, deacon body—one that reflects the makeup of the congregation as much as possible—I'm not limiting that to any one kind of diversity. Our church has grown in recent years in various kinds of diversity. We are more diverse generationally, socio-economically, ethnically, etc. That's good. That's the way it should be because that's the way the city of Tyler is, and it is for the good of this city that the Lord has planted this church. So if a church like ours had a deacon body that consists of a bunch of guys who look the same, live in the same part of town, frequent the same kinds of places, are part of the same generation, are members of the same Sunday School classes and small groups, have the same socio-economic frame of reference, and so on...they can do a great job, but there's the risk that inadvertently there may be some folks that are overlooked among us just like in Acts 6. Not intentionally. Accidentally. Because we all have blind spots, different experiences, different sensitivities.

We want to avoid that as much as possible. It's been a while since we've had any deacon nominations. The makeup of our church and community has changed over those years. We want our deacon body to be filled with qualified individuals who have a good pulse on the needs of the entire community, as much as possible. That's one of the many reasons we are entering into this season of nominations. As God has grown our congregation, the deacon body needs to reflect that. R. C. Sproul said it well, "As the church grows, there are more tables to serve, more widows to visit, more orphans to care for," so we must grow "our deaconate proportionately."

Practically speaking that will mean that we will need an adequate number of deacons to be able to serve the congregation that God has placed here. At the moment, there are more people and needs than our current deacon body could reasonably be expected to look after. We need more “hands on deck.” And when we add to their number, that body will better reflect the makeup of our congregation. And this will help us fulfil the next principle...

### **Healthy Deacon Ministry Helps Preserve Congregational Unity**

Isn't it amazing to see these early Christians move forward as one? Don't get me wrong, there may have been some who didn't love the plan that the Apostles proposed at first. We could easily imagine one of the widows asking, “Who are you? Nicanor? Where's Peter? I want his shadow to fall on me! I'm not feeling well.” But evidently, most people were “pleased” by the proposed solution (6:5)—yes, that's right, the church was pleased with change—and this was probably because they knew the character of the men who were selected.<sup>1</sup> They trusted them. But it is also because the priorities of the Apostles were shared by the congregation too. Derek Thomas remarks in his commentary,

“It is fascinating to observe that the church agreed on the need for preaching. In an age when Christians desire ‘less preaching and more programs,’ it would be well to observe the opposite in the early church. These Christians felt the need to prioritize a Bible-based instructional ministry to feed their souls and instruct them in the way of truth.”<sup>2</sup>

That's pretty cool to see them all champion these priorities together. But the appointed men were called to a ministry that was for the sake of unity. The same is true of deacons today.

Sometimes deacons are likened to “shock absorbers” in the church. Think about what we see in Acts 6. The early church is growing and in short order, because of something as simple as an inadvertent oversight, the church is faced with the threat of disunity, or even a split. But the men were appointed to address the oversight in a way that restored unity. “They absorbed complaints and concerns, resolved them in godliness,” and the net result was that it “preserved the unity and witness of the saints.”<sup>3</sup>

The thing to notice is that on the surface this issue was about food distribution, but more fundamentally the issue is about unity. Matt Smethurst recognizes this in his book on deacons,

“Acts 6 is far more than a culinary quibble. The apostles were faced with a natural fault line that threatened to fracture the very unity Christ died to achieve. The gospel insists, after all, that our unity in Christ supersedes any worldly difference. So make no mistake: the apostles did not delegate this problem to others because it *wasn't* important, but because it *was*. They could have imposed a swift, superficial solution and moved on. Instead they laid groundwork for an ongoing solution and a permanent church office.”<sup>4</sup>

What a gift the Seven were to the early church. They were “shock-absorbers,” a model for deacons today who “should be those who *muffle* shockwaves, not make them reverberate further.”<sup>5</sup> Our deacons should follow the example of the Seven. They were pursuing unity, where there was the threat of division. They were men associated with the solutions, not the drama.<sup>6</sup> “Unity building was their primary goal; good administration was the means.”<sup>7</sup> This should then shape how we view the selection of deacons in the church. Jamie Dunlop offers one example:

“It's notable that, when laying out qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3, Paul focuses on issues of character rather than administrative skills. Accordingly, our churches should select deacons primarily for their track record of peacemaking, and only secondarily for administrative expertise.”<sup>8</sup>

He goes on to talk about how his church has “passed over” candidates who had skills that would have been useful for the deacon body “in favor of less skilled individuals who are better peacemakers.”<sup>9</sup> That strikes me as a good impulse. A humble deacon can learn skillsets, but a skillful deacon who lacks character and a heart for preserving the unity of the body will do more harm than good in the long-run. They will create disunity not unity. They will generate shocks, not absorb them. And like a cancer that will grow.

This is why the New Testament puts such an emphasis on character. “Quarrelsome persons make poor deacons, for they only compound the kind of headaches deacons are meant to relieve.”<sup>10</sup> As we saw last time, they are to be “*of good repute*” (Acts 6:3) and so when one member learns that another member is a deacon, they are going to assume that the character they see in that deacon is appropriate. If they are gossiping all the time, don’t be surprised when the people around them do the same. If they treat basic Christian practices—like gathering in corporate worship—as optional, we should expect those around them to increasingly do the same. If they speak ill of the leadership or people in the church, people will emulate their folly. If they lust for control, then they will create “ministry fiefdoms” in the church and splinter our oneness.

But the reverse is true as well. If they are known as peacemakers, they will be salt in the church—having a preserving and healing affect when trouble comes. If they pursue unity, then so will others and the more likely we will maintain the unity of the faith together. If they possess godly character, it will rub off on the people around them and you will trust them to do the right thing when it counts. If they detect issues and seek to serve as “shock-absorbers,” then the pastors will have greater confidence in them, and you will be better served as the pastors and deacons share ministry appropriately for your sakes. “Elders need deacons to serve practically, and deacons need elders to lead spiritually.”<sup>11</sup> We must look for candidates who possess godly character, evidence a concern for congregational unity, have a good attitude about the church and pastors, and a track record for peacemaking.

This is what the early church found in the Seven. Tasked by the Apostles, they pursued peace. By God’s grace they made a group of the church that was feeling like “outsiders” feel like “insiders” again. And the result was that the unity was preserved, needs were met, and the ministry of the church advanced. And this brings us to the seventh and final principles from this text that I would like to highlight...

### **Healthy Deacon Ministry Contributes to Gospel Growth**

The text begins by noting that the church was “*increasing in number*” and, as we’ve seen, it was that growth that led to the challenges and threat to unity. But notice how it ends. In verse 7 we read that the “*number of disciples multiplied greatly...*” So the growth at the end is even greater than the growth at the beginning. And they even saw conversions among the Jewish priests, who would not have been deemed likely converts by most. But they join the church’s number and I’ve got to believe, given the flow of the text, that they do so because they see something compelling in how God is moving in the church, perhaps through the ministry of the Seven. What might that imply about the way God can use deacon ministry today?

Mark Dever and Paul Alexander talk about the relationship between the elders, staff (who are sometimes also elders), and the deacon body using the metaphor of a bus. The elders, under God, have been tasked with casting the vision for ministry. They provide the map and give guidance on how to get from point A to point B, how to reach our destination. “The staff drive the bus” by leading, equipping, and enlisting the congregation to execute the work of ministry. “Deacons make sure we have enough gas to get to where we’re going.”<sup>12</sup> Or we might say that the deacons are the ones the pastors call on to troubleshoot the check engine light that comes on from time to time in the bus. They help to address the obstacles so that the rest of us can do our part effectively.

We need deacons like this. We have some great ones now, but we are in need of more. And I fully believe that God has provided us with some qualified candidates that will in time serve the church well. That excites me. And it excited me because of what I see at the end of our passage. I long to see what the early church saw in

Acts 6. I long to see the “*number of disciples*” multiply “*greatly*” among us. And I think, by God’s design, healthy deacon ministry will be one of the means God uses to bring this about. Don’t you long for that too? Then get excited about the upcoming deacon nomination process later in the year. Imagine what God can do through it!

Smethurst, after reflecting on the significance of Acts 6 for deacon ministry, concludes with the following,

“A deacon’s work is often quiet, but its effect is profound. Luke [in Acts 6] doesn’t want us to miss this....Acts 6:1-7 isn’t simply a paradigm for diaconal service. It’s also a reminder that the work of deacons...has enormous spiritual implications. There is an inseparable link between the labor of a deacon and the flourishing of the Word. Public ministry is impossible without private service. Had the seven not freed the apostles to focus on teaching and prayer (v. 4), the gospel would not have spread (v. 7). The work of a deacon, then, is freighted with significance. Its effects will reverberate into eternity...The Bible’s view of deacons is glorious. Let’s not settle for less.”<sup>13</sup>

So there you have it—seven principles of healthy deacon ministry over the course of a few sermons. Let’s review them once more as we close:

### **Healthy Deacon Ministry...**

**...Is Distinct from the Ministry of Pastors**

**...Helps Us Maintain Biblical Priorities**

**...Requires Congregational Involvement**

**...Requires Qualified Candidates**

**...Reflects Congregational Makeup**

**...Helps Preserve Congregational Unity**

**...Contributes to Gospel Growth**

These are going to be important for us to remember in the months ahead. Reflect on them. As you do, I expect you will start to get as excited as I am for what could be ahead for us. Expect some spiritual warfare because Satan doesn’t want a church to have a healthy deacon ministry. But as we trust in the Lord and prioritize what He has told us to prioritize, He will be with us. I can’t wait to see what He does. I’ve got a good feeling!

Next week we will get back into our Matthew series. I’ll be out of state for my research sabbatical, but Evan, James, and Miles will be preaching on some pretty amazing passages of God’s Word. You won’t want to miss. I’m going to miss you guys and will be counting down the days until we are together again. Seriously.

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

<sup>7</sup> Jamie Dunlop, “Deacons: Shock Absorbers and Servants,” in *Deacons are Shock Absorbers*, 9Marks Journal (May-June 2010), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>10</sup> Smethurst, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 132.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 169

<sup>13</sup> Smethurst, 56-57.