



THE ORIGIN AND SELECTION OF DEACONS

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1 Tim 3:8-13

Acts 6:1-7

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This morning we have the special privilege of installing eight new deacons at PBC Cupertino. Before we introduce and pray for them, we thought it would be appropriate to give a short exposition on the origin and qualifications for the office of deacon. The text that illuminates the origin of deacons is Acts 6. There we discover that this ministry arose out of a need to solve a particular crisis within the church. By the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy, this ministry had evolved into a regular church office.

I. The origin of the office of deacon (Acts 6:1-4)

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:1-4, NASB)

A. The problem: Dissension (Acts 6:1)

In the early church, a large number of widows who had come to Christ did not have families to support them so they were placed under the financial care of the congregation. The apostles, who had been set aside for the spiritual oversight of the body, added to their own list of duties the important task of the distribution of a daily food allowance to these widows. But then a complaint arose over what appeared to be the neglect of one group. This complaint, whether it was well founded or not, was symptomatic of something much deeper: it brought to the surface a long-standing prejudice between Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists) and Hebrew-speaking Jews.

This cleavage traced its roots all the way back to the days of Alexander the Great. The Greek warrior king had swept through Asia Minor, Palestine and Egypt and brought to these conquered lands the Greek language and culture. This language, *Koine* Greek, became the common tongue of the people, and Greek philosophy the dominant thought. The progressive Jews in Alexandria saw this development as an opportunity for greater evangelism. In the Septuagint, they translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (284-247 B.C.). They viewed this translation as a means for all nations to come to the light of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But the traditionalists regarded this development as a threat to the purity of Judaism. They boycotted the new language, and cultivated instead the vernacular Aramaic, if not the *Mishnaic* Hebrew, the language of the rabbis (just as the Medieval scholars refused to use English and insisted on retaining Latin in the church services). The result of these responses by both the progressives and the traditionalists in Judaism was a linguistic cleavage among God's people, as Hebrew-speaking Jews felt a sense of superiority over the Hellenists. Thus, when we view the complaining and murmuring in the book of Acts in this light, we can see how it perhaps had ignited al-

ready volatile feelings, and it had potential to split the body of Christ.

If a problem of like nature arose in the local church today, we would expect the leaders of the church—the elders, in other words—to handle the situation directly. But, as we will see, the apostles chose a different solution.

B. The real danger: Distraction (Acts 6:2, 4)

And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:2-4)

The apostles recognized that this dispute was a serious issue; this was why they summoned the whole congregation. But they discerned that behind this complaint lay a spiritual attack, a Satanic distraction to the work of the ministry. This is why they began their remarks by saying, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables." If they handled the crisis this way, seeking to put out the fire directly, it wouldn't be long before another crisis came along vying for their attention. If all they did was put out fires, they would lose their first calling, which was "[devotion] to prayer and to the ministry of the word." They added prayer to preaching, knowing that without it (i.e. prayer for the ministry of the Spirit to water the word), it was unlikely that the preached word would bear fruit (John Stott). What all of this telling us is that leaders must devote their full attention to their calling.

C. The solution: Delegation (Acts 6:3)

The apostles solved the problem by delegating their authority.

"But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task." (Acts 6:3)

1. The theological basis

All through the Scriptures, going back to the days of Moses, we find a clear theological basis for delegation. Moses had the gift of the Spirit and wisdom to judge the people of Israel. No crisis or concern was too insignificant for him. But listen to what Jethro, his father-in-law, said to him:

(a) In the OT: Exodus 18:13-23

"Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?...The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone...you teach...you select...then you will be able to endure." (Exod 18:13-23)

These were wise words which Moses took to heart. Verse

25 says,

And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people (Exod 15:25).

Next, we have an example from the life of Jesus.

(b) The example of Jesus: Mark 1:38

On this occasion, our Lord had come to Peter's home town of Capernaum. After he had taught the people, cast out demons and healed Peter's mother-in-law, they began bringing to him all who were ill and those who were demon possessed. But what was Jesus' response to Peter next morning when his friend excitedly came to him with suggestions for more ministry among the people? Here is what Jesus said: "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for" (Mark 1:38.) Healing was secondary to Jesus' calling of preaching, thus he refused to be distracted by what seemed to be an excellent opportunity to minister through healing.

We find other examples in Paul's writings. In his letters to Timothy, he passes on an apostolic injunction.

(c) Apostolic injunction of Paul to Timothy: 1 Tim 4:4-16; 2 Tim 2:4; 4:2

Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you...take pains with these things; be absorbed in them...pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching (1 Tim 4:14-16).

No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier...Preach the word (2 Tim 2:4; 4:2).

2. The formation of the office:

select...seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task (Acts 6:3).

What was born out of necessity—meeting a need for the care and feeding of widows in Jerusalem—had become a regular church office by the time Paul wrote to Timothy in Ephesus.

The word "deacon" comes from this verb "to serve." There are only two offices in the church: elders (who are set aside to devote themselves to preaching, teaching and discipling), and deacons (who are in charge of the caring ministries of the church). Thus the church grows in an atmosphere of order, specialization and excellence. We must remember though, that all Christians are called to be servants who care for the needy, but it is these servants of high integrity who inspire, motivate and equip the rest of the body in this high calling.

II. The qualifications for deacons (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:8-12)

But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. (Acts 6:3)

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. (1 Tim 3:8-12)

A. Integrity in Character

Notice that the apostle begins his instructions about dea-

cons with the word "likewise." What he is saying is that his words concerning elders apply to deacons as well—they should be above reproach in their character. But why should men who are merely serving tables, caring for people who feel neglected, have to be "above reproach"? It is because every ministry in the church has as its goal not possessions, but people. And in the case of Acts, it would require a very sensitive servant to care for widows who felt they had been neglected.

Paul highlights specific character traits in deacons that would be especially important and would stand out in stark contrast to the depravity of the Greek culture in Ephesus, a society dominated by greed and sensuality.

"Dignified" is the first quality mentioned. Deacons should have a sense of the majesty and honor that comes when one is associated with God. They should walk in a way that brings weight and honor to what they do. About such a person the Greeks said, "thus did he throw a cloak of majesty about himself." If a deacon is uncontrolled in speech and actions and is regarded as being foolish, he is not given weight or respect.

"Not double tongued" is the second characteristic. This is an excellent translation. It is easy to fall into this sin when one is settling disputes and controversies. A deacon must not be insincere, saying one thing to the offended party and another to the accused. He must be consistent in his speech.

A deacon must not be "addicted to much wine." He may be free to drink wine, but he must also be free of alcohol's claim on him. Thus he is to be free from the abusive evils that come from drunkenness and alcoholism.

He is "not fond of sordid gain." He will not take an honorable thing and debase it to make money. This is what the greedy merchants of Ephesus did: they debased religion and sexuality in order to make money. The temple priestesses were used by merchants to make money through uttering nonsensical oracles to the tourists who came from all over the world to visit the city. Christians are never to minister by being motivated by money or personal gain. True ministry does not require money-raising campaigns and marketing techniques to get it going.

If we need encouragement in this area, we only have to read the biographies of the great deacons of the past. Take George Mueller, for instance, who cared for orphaned children in England in the 1800's. This man trusted in prayer alone to provide for his needs and the needs of his children. I will read from his diary, dated December 16, 1842:

December 16, 1842. Nothing has come in. Three shillings five-pence, which one of the laborers was able to give, was all we had. At six o'clock this evening, our need being now very great, not only with reference to the Orphan Houses, but also the day schools, etc., I gave myself, with two of the laborers, to prayer. There needed some money to come in before 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning, as there was none to take in milk for breakfast, to say nothing about the many other demands of tomorrow, being Saturday. Our hearts were at peace, while asking the Lord, and assured that our Father would supply our need. We had scarcely risen from our knees when I received a letter, containing a sovereign for the orphans, half of which was from a young East India officer, and the other half from the produce of the sale of a piece of work which the sister who sent the money had made for the benefit of the orphans. She wrote, "I love to send these little gifts. They so often come in season." Truly, thus it was this time. About five minutes later I received from a brother the promise of fifty pounds for the orphans, to be given during the next week; and a quarter of an a

hour after that, about seven o'clock, a brother gave me a sovereign, which an Irish sister in the Lord has left this day, on her departure for Dublin, for the benefit of the orphans. How sweet and precious to see thus so manifestly the willingness of the Lord to answer the prayers of his needy children!

By 1875, George Mueller had lodged, fed and educated more than two thousand children. He refused to take a salary for himself, but trusted in prayer alone to provide for his needs and the needs of his orphans.

Next, says Paul, deacons must be seen "holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." Though the primary function of deacons is not teaching, they must be skilled in matters of the Christian faith. Thus it is required that they have a clear understanding of Christian doctrine. And the things they believe, they act upon. A guilty conscience has a paralyzing effect and renders one ineffective for service.

Thus we have the apostle's word to men deacons.

Now Paul turns to women, either wives of deacons and elders or women deacons.

Women [or wives] must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. (1 Tim 3:11)

Some scholars wonder whether Paul is referring to the wives of elders and deacons, or to women deacons. Other passages, however, reveal that women served as leaders and deacons in the church. Phoebe, for instance, was a deacon in the church at Cenchrea. Paul wrote in Romans: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant [deacon] of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper (patroness) of many, and of myself as well." (Rom 16:1,2)

Phoebe was a servant (deacon) of Cenchrea, one of the two seaports of Corinth (Acts 18:18). Apparently she had proved herself well there as a "patroness" who gave aid from her own support to Paul and to the church. She was selected to represent the church in an official way as the bearer of the letter to the Romans. What an honor! Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to be generous in supplying her needs and to welcome her into their intimate circles of fellowship.

Thus it is evident that women in New Testament times did serve as deacons. That being the case, they too, like men, must be "dignified." This is the same word Paul used concerning men. They are to live so close to God that there is worth and glory in their lives.

They are not to be "malicious gossips." They must not be slanderers. This was the Greek translation in the LXX of the word for Satan, who tries to destroy Christians by lying and bombarding them with fierce accusations. This tactic creeps into Christian circles at times under the guise of caring when people share prayer requests. Rather than being truly concerned, some are more delighted by the fact that they know of a tasty morsel of gossip about another. Proverbs 18:8 says,

**The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels,
And they go down into the chambers of the belly.**

But, like Judas, the moment one eats that morsel (John 13:27), he or she becomes the instrument of the devil. Again, quoting from Proverbs,

**A worthless man digs up evil,
While his words are as a scorching fire.**

**A perverse man spreads strife,
And a slanderer separates intimate friends.**
(Prov 16:27-28)

When we give into the temptation to use information against someone, we end up being the "worthless man." Notice the escalation here. First, we "dig up evil"; then our words become a "scorching fire"; we "spread strife"; and the result of our words is to "separate intimate friends." Intimacy that has taken years to create is destroyed by the words of a slanderer. Leaders have a greater potential to become instruments of the devil because they learn much about people that is shared in confidence. Thus it is required of deacons that they not be slanderers.

And they must be "temperate." This word was used originally to refer to the use of alcohol. But here I think it is a reference to being clear in one's thinking—to be clear-headed and thus free from distraction or cloudy thinking. A woman deacon is to be well founded on the truth of Scripture. This makes her alert and stable, enabling her to maintain a vigilant watch over the flock, because she is keenly aware of Satan's presence and malevolence.

Finally, she must be "faithful in all things." If she starts a project, she completes it. She isn't prone to taking on too much. She has learned to focus, so there are no loose ends when she is given oversight. She is loyal to people and to the task at hand.

So we have Paul's word on the character qualities of leaders of ministries. Whether they are men or women, they must be persons of impeccable, godly character.

Secondly, like elders, deacons need experience.

B. Experience (1 Tim 3:10, 12)

And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach... Let deacons be husbands of one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. (1 Tim 3:10, 12)

The word for "tested" was used of pottery in the first century. A pot was tested in the fire before it was put to use. If it came through without cracking, it was labeled underneath "approved." What is true of pots should be true of leaders. Test leaders before they are put to work in the ministry. Test them in their homes and in their communities. Is the prospective deacon a good husband, a one-woman kind of man, a good manager of his children and household? In the Greek, this word "manage" refers not only how well you rule, but how well you care for people and engage yourself with their concerns. The best managers of companies do this, and so must the managers in the church. Are they concerned about their children's concerns or do they lord it over them?

C. No mention of giftedness, only character

Unlike the qualifications for elders, there is no mention here of speaking gifts, or indeed any gifts. With leaders, character is more important than giftedness; with deacons, no specific spiritual gift is required.

Deacons are pure of character, and they are proven out in the normal course of life, in marriage and in the home.

Next, Paul goes on to refer to the value of the office of deacon.

III. The value of the office (1 Tim 3:13)

For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim 3:13)

A. A high standing

The work of a deacon is no menial task, no small honor. Our own Ethel Smith occupies a high place of honor in our congregation. For years, she has single-mindedly concerned herself with refugees from Eastern Europe and has helped resettle scores of people in the Bay Area.

B. Much confidence in the faith

People who take on a ministry of caring for those whom the world despises face tremendous opposition. Ask Connie David Marques and the women who venture out with love and grace into the dangerous, hostile world of those who denigrate the work of the local Crisis Pregnancy Center. God grants these women courage to overcome fear when they go into high school classrooms to elevate sexual purity. They have joy in leading women to Christ in the midst of opposition from picketers, infiltrating spies and the gaze of the hostile television cameras. Through it all, they gain “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

Thus we have the origin of the office of deacon, and the qualifications for and value of the office.

Now we will go on to see the results that this kind of specialization brought to the early church.

IV. The results of specialization (Acts 6:5-7)

And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God kept spreading; and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:5-7)

A. Freedom to minister

We learn from this text that it is Satan’s strategy to keep all the ministries of a church under the control of a few leaders. This in turn leads to mediocrity in teaching, boredom for the saints, and burnout for the leaders. Pastors are not to oversee everything and seek to find solutions to all problems. This text demonstrates that Christian ministry prospers when people are set free to serve. The main job of pastors and teachers is teaching and sowing principles in the hearts of their flock.

Notice what Acts 6:3 says. As the apostles allowed other godly men and women to lead, these people were “put in charge.” The apostles were not even on the committee! They didn’t have to be, because other godly men knew what to do

in the situation under review. The key thing here is that leaders must be willing to live with the tension of neglect in order for these ministries to develop.

Thus we see that there is a freedom for all to minister.

B. Freedom for all to excel

Because the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the study of the Scriptures, there was excellence in the teaching. They were free from distraction. And there was excellence in the care of widows. Deacons could devote their full energies to the task at hand and thus do a better job than the apostles would have devoted only half their energies to it. Notice that all those chosen to accomplish the task of caring for the widows had Greek names. In order to overcome feelings of neglect on the part of the Greek widows, the apostles stacked the committee with Greek-speaking Jews!

C. Resulting in unity and love

And the whole thing “found approval.” Love was the result of freedom, order and excellence. This was in keeping with Paul’s word in Ephesians 4:16: “the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

D. Resulting in evangelism

“And the word of God kept spreading...” This delegating of responsibility allowed the apostles to continue to focus on prayer and on the word, to equip and evangelize, work which resulted in converts and godly disciples.

And the word was spread, not only by the apostles but by the deacons themselves. Philip became Philip the evangelist who led the first African convert to Christ. Stephen, the first martyr, preached a sermon heard by Saul of Tarsus, and what he heard he could not forget. How important is the work of deacons? Had the apostles not said no to this work, Stephen might not have been equipped, he would never have made that speech, and Paul would not have found Christ. May this wondrous result be our heritage as well.

With this textual background I am privileged to introduce to you our eight new deacons at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino.

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord... cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for your you; so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (1 Thess 3:11-13).

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