

Text: Acts 6:1-7

Title: The First Deacons

Truth: God led the church to establish deacons to free the pastors for prayer and the preaching of the Word.

Date/Location: 9/6/2023 (rev. 5/20/2012) at FBC

Introduction

The church has been primarily Jewish in character up to this point. Now we see it expanding to the Greek-speaking Jews, and the priests, Samaria, Damascus, and Gentiles in Caesarea and elsewhere. This expansion is natural because the body of Christ is not ethnically bounded. Human nature is the same across all peoples of earth, and the work of Christ makes no distinction between Jews or Gentiles of any stripe.

I. A Problem Arises, v. 1

There is nothing surprising about problems arising in the church.

A. Need: Feeding the congregation's widows, v. 1a

1. The text says that the church was multiplying. This implies that growing pains would be expected.
2. Consider the numbers for a second to get an idea of the scope of the problem. If we look at our own church, we have about 5% of our people who are widows or in a similar circumstance. Without the social safety net that we have in the US today, these all might be lacking necessities. The percentage of widows in Jerusalem may have been higher, if as some suggest, Jewish widows of the dispersion came back to spend their final days in Jerusalem.

Then look at the size of the Jerusalem church at that time. There were 5,000 men (Acts 4:4), and probably more since the number of disciples was multiplying. Let us conservatively double that number to account for women and children.

At 5%, that would be about 500 widows. Supposing some of them had Christian family that was willing to help them, there might still be several hundred widows who need assistance. That is a lot of people for whom to be distributing help.

3. The daily distribution probably was food and perhaps some other necessities. It could have been money, which would allow the widows to purchase food themselves. In either case, it was a large job to see to the needs of these ones.

4. Question: what was happening to these widows *before* they were saved and the church was present to help them? They obviously did not starve. A good possibility is that they were supported by the synagogue. When they converted to Christ, they were no longer welcome at or supported by the synagogue. So, a benevolence or social need was shifted from one community of people to another.
5. Today the need for such benevolence is greatly reduced because of government programs such as Social Security and Medicare.
6. The problem of widow-needs was acknowledged because of the people's compassion and a recognition of God's heart toward the widow and orphan (see James 1:27; Isaiah 1:17, 23). They went about to solve the problem, but as we find out in v. 2, they did it in a way that was not comprehensive or forward-looking enough. Perhaps their solution was OK when the church was smaller, but it was not working now that the church was larger.

B. Problem: Neglect of some of the congregation's widows, v. 1b

1. I assume that the complaint as recorded is accurate to the actual situation. In other words, I do not believe that the Hellenists were just making a complaint because they liked to complain. Rather, their issue was a legitimate one.
2. The widows who were neglected were the Hellenists, or Greek-speaking widows. The Hebrew-speaking widows were not neglected. Evidently there was some cultural issue at play. The text does not say exactly what was happening. Perhaps:
 - i. The culturally Hebrew Christians were the ones who happened to be the distributors of daily food and they were biased against the Greek speaking women. Christians are not immune from bias of this sort, informed by historical prejudices and the like. However, Christians are also the first people who should be able to set aside those biases.
 - ii. The Hebrew Christians were giving more money into the treasury to be used for benevolence.
 - iii. The Hebrew Christians were experiencing a momentary oversight due to cultural or geographical distance.

II. Apostles Exercise Leadership to Solve the Problem, v. 2-4

Apparently the twelve met together when the problem was brought to their attention and came to an agreement on what precisely should be done.

They formulated a specific recommendation and gave it to the entire congregation.

A. Their recommendation included:

1. A general approach to solving the problem. Namely, their solution was that they would not solve the problem themselves, but that they would delegate the actual solution of it to a new group of men tasked with that responsibility.
2. A recognition that though they could theoretically be involved in solving the problem, it was not desirable for *the leaders* to use their time to solve it, because their own responsibilities and particular gifts could be better used in another way. While both things (Word/prayer and serving tables) are *needed*, they are at different levels of importance for the particular individuals gifted or given those assignments. Replacing time spent on a more important activity with time spent on a less important one was not appropriate for the apostles.
3. A process and policy for selecting qualified men to handle the matter.

B. Commentary Homer Kent suggests that “waiting tables” should not push us to conclude that they were waiters like in a restaurant. First of all, they were “appointed over this business” so they probably did not do all the table-waiting themselves. Rather, they managed it. Also, a restaurant picture in your mind may not be very accurate anyway because hundreds of widows had places to live and would probably normally eat at those places instead of gathering at a common cafeteria. Kent suggests that waiting “tables” were not food tables but banking/money tables (*Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 63). It could be also a food bank. Regardless of the details, the apostles shouldn’t leave their job to dispense food or money from the church. That is a ministry better suited to others.

C. You might think that these deacon men were “lesser” than the apostles. In a sense you could say that, but they were doing a very necessary task, as well as helping the apostles do their very important task. The importance of what you are doing has to be measured in terms of not only the thing you are doing, but also in terms of what you are freeing someone else to do.

D. Putting the relative measure of value aside because it is not important, think of the qualifications that were required. The deacons had to be Christian men (“among you”) of good reputation, fully of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These were top-notch Christian gentlemen and servants.

1. Wisdom is a requirement—they had to know how to handle the situation, the people, the needs, the resources they had, etc.
2. I noted the moral qualifications for a service task. Why? People who serve must be trustworthy with money, food and other resources. They cannot be swindlers, etc. If they are faithful in their life generally, that should carry over into their conduct in a new assignment. You cannot put any-old-body into these places of service.

III. Servants are Selected to Handle the Problem

A. Notice the congregational involvement in the whole process. They were summoned together by the leaders and they were told to select seven men to appoint over the matter. They did so.

1. We have congregational involvement in a similar way in our own church, and we believe that ultimately the earthly authority to do such things rests in the hands of the congregation, not a body of elders, nor an external denominational structure. Notice the interaction between leadership and congregation. The leaders suggested an approach, and there was like-mindedness on the part of the congregation (not because they were forced to be likeminded, but because it was a good and spiritually-minded approach that was suggested). There is not an absolute top-down kind of authority structure here, but a consensus kind of self-governance.
2. In our FBC constitutional setup, some of the general service or oversight matters have been pre-decided, as far as deacons and treasurer and other matters. It is appropriate to make sure each party knows what their limits are and where they are empowered to act.
3. I assume that in the assignment, the leadership was saying that the administration of this affair would be entirely in the hands of this group of gentlemen. They would have the authority to make decisions that were necessary to carry out the ministry. They would have some resources to do so. They would not be micromanaged.

B. The Men Selected

1. Stephen, an excellent Christian who would shortly become the first martyr of the Christian faith.
2. Philip
3. Prochorus

4. Nicanor
5. Timon
6. Parmenas
7. Nicolas a convert from Antioch. He was a Gentile who was “proselyte” in Jewish terms, meaning he had come out of paganism to Jewish belief; and then he came to Christian faith.

Some of these men seem to be over-qualified. Philip and Stephen were evangelists and preachers. This shows that a deacon need not only be a servant regarding or over menial tasks. He can be a servant AND a teacher or evangelist or counselor or whatever.

C. An Ordination Ceremony

1. Praying over them and laying hands on them sets them apart for the work they were called to do. This marks them out as the assigned people, delegating to them the authority to do the work. Nothing spiritual happened to them in the laying on of hands. They were already men of the character that was required before the ceremony.
2. It is not said if this was a permanent or time-limited or term-limited position. There is nothing wrong with the appointment being for a time, or with it being a long-term position. They would be responsible for training others in the task they were doing. There is no mention of the position being self-propagating. The office of deacon does not become a self-propagating, self-appointing, self-supporting bureaucracy that can run amok, like the administrative bureaucratic state has done in our federal government system.

IV. The Solution to the Problem Brings an Outstanding Result, v. 7

A. The Biblical text is not explicit in terms of stating the result of the leadership and congregational assignment of the benevolence task, but it comes pretty close to saying so when it concludes this section with the statement about the progress of the gospel. Look at the three parts of the verse:

1. Then, the word of God spread.
2. The number of disciples multiplied greatly.
3. Many of the priests were obedient to the faith. This means that they obeyed the demand/call of the gospel to repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

B. When each part of the church was doing what it was supposed to do, this freed up the men gifted in the area of teaching and preaching and evangelism to do the work they could do best. The result was growth in the church.

Application: to the extent that we do *not* have all our members working in the church in either a service oriented way (doing the service or administering it) or a way in which they are using some spiritual gift (teaching, evangelizing, etc.) then we are held back in our growth.

C. Two cautions:

1. To over-emphasize this example is to make methods and management everything. Some of the church-growth movement is guilty of this sort of thinking. You might be highly organized but not very faithful. Methods do not make disciples.
2. To under-emphasize this example is to make faithfulness and diligence inconsequential. If you just let things happen and are disorganized and do not do ministry well, you should not expect some blessing from above. Laziness does not make disciples.

The combination of faith and diligence is what we need, as over against method-centrism or the mysticism of let-go-and-let-God.

V. The Formalized Church Office of Deacon

- A. The relationship between this passage and deacons as an office may be debated, but the connection is clear. The origin of the deacons in the church is here, soon after the start of the church.
- B. What the church found necessary because of life in this world became formalized in the church instruction book of 1 Timothy.
- C. Beyond a certain size, it is evident that service matters must be handled by a separate group of men than the preachers/teachers. That size is quite small. Someone must shoulder the burden of non-preaching, non-praying matters off the hands of the pastor lest he become overwhelmed with such details.
- D. Within 30 years of the birth of the church, Paul instructed Timothy about the qualifications of such men (1 Timothy 3:8-13). They have to be spiritual men.
- E. The office and men who take up the office of deacon are more formalized than the everyday service role that we as Christians have toward one

another. We are all to be servants of one another. Whether we have the office or not, we should be “deaconing” as needed.

Conclusion/Application:

For leaders—Lead, and don’t do everything.

For deacons—Be qualified, and work hard on your assigned tasks. Be skilled in them.

For the congregation—Participate responsibly in selecting leaders, knowing who is spiritually qualified, and then help by not making their job difficult! Watch out for your teachers and prayers that they do not become overwhelmed. Do not be prejudiced. Make sure that the church focuses on its God-given tasks such as the ministry of the Word, prayer, evangelism—and taking care of poor in the church.

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