



# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Office of Deacon, Part 6

We live in an age in which much of the church's ministry is driven by a pragmatic criterion: *if it works, do it!* This approach in many places has affected these areas:

- How the church worships.
- Its outreach ministries.
- Its approach to its ministry to its youth.
- And much, much more.

When it comes to the diaconal office and ministry, this has resulted in a variety of excesses and abuses as it relates to God's plan for this ministry. For example, in many churches today the diaconate functions in one of two extremes- either as a board of directors or a team of property managers. The board of director model typically has the "Pastor" who is the sees the deacons either

as a board to rubber stamp his ideas or the diaconate in these churches function as a session charged with the pastoral oversight and care of the church. And then there is the property manager version. Here the deacon's job is to oversee the physical property of the church and set the budget. The term that comes to mind when viewing these churches is "glorified janitors" who wax floors, mow lawns, clean bathrooms, and much more. Of course there are many diaconal boards which function somewhere between the two extremes.

This of course begs these questions: So what is the calling of a diaconate? What is God's purpose for placing this office in the church?

We have been answering these questions from Acts 6 which gives us the pattern upon which the New Testament diaconal office is based. Now, as we have seen, one of the marks the genuine working of God is the care of the weak and hurting amongst the people of God (cf. Acts 4:33-35; James 1:27). Where the weak and the hurting are neglected, the body has taken a very large step toward apostasy! On account of this (and not surprisingly), when the Kingdom of God came to the earth in the first century A.D., Luke reminds us throughout Acts that the weak and hurting had ALL their needs met, which is an incredible truth!

Yet as would be expected, this commitment eventually led to a huge problem when the church numbered in the thousands! Acts 6 records this "problem" and based on Luke's writing, it is clear that a perception arose on the part of many that the church leaders at the time were part of a purposed neglect of a "minority group" in Judaism, the Hellenists! When Alexander the Great conquered the world he imposed Greek language and culture everywhere he went. This resulted in what has been called "The Hellenization" of the ancient world in which all lands and people conquered by Greece held to a Greek cultural veneer as well as spoke the language.

Yet there were pockets which refused to "taint" their culture with this Hellenization, one of which lived in Jerusalem. Those Jews who refused to speak Greek in their worship or use Greek money in their offerings referred to themselves as "Hebrews." All other Jews, if they worshipped in Greek and looked Greek, were called "Hellenists." And it was these "Hellenists" who were neglected in our text.

Accordingly, the apostles instituted a formal ministry/an office at the time whose purpose and function was to oversee the distribution of food/money to the poor that no one in the body might be neglected! It was this act which either instituted or served as the pattern for the diaconal office.

From Acts 6 we learn much about God's purpose and intention for the diaconal office. The focus of the ministry of diaconal care involves the weak, hurting and needy primarily in the body of Christ. (Acts 6:1; 4:32-35; 2:44-45) Recall, the focus of the church's ministry at this point was the care of its own! There were many hurting and needy people in Jerusalem at the time, yet those in the church had ALL their needs met! Again, this does not preclude a diaconal board from organizing a ministry to the hurting and needy outside of the body. But, this would only occur after the needs of the body have been met.

The ministry of "diaconal care" is not the work of the diaconate, but that of the Church. The job of the diaconate is to ensure that the body does not neglect this ministry need. (Acts 6:1-2) Don't forget that one of our greatest treasures as a body is the weak and hurting amongst us (cf. 1 Corinthians

12:24-25)! Therefore godliness on our part, religion at its best is measure not merely by our personal piety and holiness (James 1:27b) but also by our ministry to the hurting and needy amongst us (James 1:27a).

Thus, the diaconal office was created by God to oversee the CHURCH'S ministry to its own hurting and needy. Never again do we want to fall into the errors of our fathers in the faith who neglected the weak and needy to their peril. Accordingly God has ordained an office in the New Testament church which says, "The buck stops here! We will make sure the church does not neglect its own!"

The intent of the ministry of diaconal care is the physical care of the weak, hurting and needy.

Acts 6:2-4, "And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable [in the sight of God] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables [to oversee the ministry of mercy]. 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.'"

It is clear from this text that the apostles at this point divided the ministry into two important facets. The ministry of the word and prayers involved the study, teaching, and defense of God's word and worship. Everything else involved the oversight and care of the needs of the weak and hurting in the body.

I want to take you to a "science" class. On the chalk board is a picture of the typical Christian. On one side of the picture is a list of his spiritual needs and on the other side is his physical needs. Under the spiritual needs we find these things listed:

- How to fellowship with God.
- Being able to understand the word of God which would necessitate teaching/training in both the content of God's word, its system of theology, as well as its application to one's life. We'd also place in there the need for the person to learn how to read and study the word of God by themselves.
- Teaching them how to worship as well as leading worship in their private families.
- Making sure they understood the importance of prayer as well as how to pray.
- The priority of shepherding one another, first amongst the body of Christ, then husbands as it relates to their wives, and then parents their children.
- The ability to engage the various cultures facing each of us in the church, the family, and the lost in which we live.
- Now all of these needs and more are the calling and passion of the elders.

Now of the "Everything-Else-Needs" we would put such things as these:

- Being comforted and consoled by the body when hardship and difficulty comes his way.
- Having his "burdens" carried by another (Galatians 6:1).
- Having the expectations of the word of God to bear on their lives- which is the idea behind "visiting" in James 1:27.

- Having food and covering and the ability to provide these things both for himself and his family.
- These and much more is the ministry focus of the Diaconate!

Alexander Strauch put it this way:

The office-title of deacon (*diakonos*) conveys the idea of practical care and service to others. Also, the fact that Scripture demands that deacons be morally qualified and examined before they serve (1 Timothy 3:8-13), tells us that their service would entail delicate matters of trust... The overseers govern and teach; the deacons help to meet the many practical needs of needy people. (Strauch, 1992, pp. 52-54)

So the focus of the ministry of the diaconate is making sure the body of Christ fulfills its obligation and duty to its own; specifically as it regards the weak, hurting, and bereft.

The ministry of diaconal care is a facet of the pastoral care of the leadership.

Acts 6:3-6: “‘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.’ 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.”

There are two very important things that happened in the passage before us that is quite crucial to our understanding of the office of deacon. The first is the Apostles’ desire not to neglect the ministry of the word for the ministry of mercy, and so they conferred the responsibility for the oversight of the ministry of mercy to “the seven.” The second is the fact that the Apostles “laid their hands” on the deacons, which was an official act conveying both endorsement, as well as a commissioning.

You say, “O.K. What is the big deal?” The big deal is that PRIOR to the institution of this ministry, it obviously was the apostle’s job to oversee the care of physical needs of the body. This was part and parcel of their pastoral care! This is why our standards says this:

In a church in which there are no deacons, the duties of the office shall devolve upon the session. (Orthodox Presbyterian Church, p. XI 7)

From this we conclude that the ministry of diaconal care is a facet/subset of the pastoral care of the church! In other words the deacons aren’t just anyone who can balance a check book or wash a toilet, they are caretakers of the ministry to our greatest treasures and so the calling of God for the church, which is quite serious! This is why the apostle’s laid their hands on them. Their work is a crucial ministry in the outworking of the kingdom of God!

As the diaconal work constitutes an office in the church given to supplement the pastor’s ministry to the people of God, we are not surprised to discover biblically (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8ff) that the office is to be filled by men who are proven shepherds and caretakers of their home. They must be godly men with

proven gifts of administration and oversight as well as gifts amenable for visiting and caring for weak, hurting, and bereft people.

Now, the selection of deacons involves a process of nomination, approval, and a vote of affirmation.

Acts 6:3, 5a, 6, “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... <sup>5a</sup> And the statement found approval with the whole congregation... <sup>6</sup> And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

This is one of many passages in the Bible when it comes to the selection of church leadership which involves a process which required the active participation of the people of God. (Witherow, 2009, pp. 23-24)

One of the first things the Apostles did following the ascension of Christ was to refill the office abandoned by Judas. Two men were chosen by the body numbering 120 (cf. vv. 15, 23), Joseph and Matthias. The Apostles then prayed and we pick it up in v. 26.

Acts 1:26, “And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

The first thing that sticks out about Matthias’ selection is that it was not by the choice or will of the Apostle Peter. Rather, it rested with the men and brethren to whom the address of Peter was directed (120 in all, v. 15). Furthermore, the office in question was not a “minor” office with little import, but that which constituted the foundation of the New Testament church, the apostolic office (cf. Ephesians 2:20).

If there was any time when a leadership might use their position of authority to select a successor, it was when the Apostles set about the work of filling Judas’ office. Yet they do not do that here. Rather, they rely upon God working through the congregation. Next we go to Acts 14.

Acts 14:23, “And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

The word translated in this passage as “appoint” is χειροτονέω which is the compound of two Greek words “hand” (χειρός) and the word for “stretch” (τείνω). In secular Greek, the word was used in the sense of “appoint by show of hand.” In light of this, Witherow wrote this:

The case recorded in Acts 14:23, is to the same effect, though, from a mistranslation, the force of it is lost upon the English reader. The Authorized Version represents the two Apostles, Barnabas and Paul, as *ordaining* elders in every church; whereas the true meaning of the word in the original is ‘to elect by a show of hands’- a fact now admitted by the best expositors. We must not allow a faulty translation to rob us of the testimony of Scripture to an important fact- namely, that the elders of the New Testament Church were appointed to office by the popular vote. (Witherow, 2009, p. 24)

The last passage to which Witherow directs our attention is our text, Acts 6.

Acts 6:3, 5a, 6, “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... And the statement found approval with the whole congregation... And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

In this text once again we have a case study on the selection of the leadership given to serve the church. Now again, if there was any time that the Apostles in the name of expediency could have designated the men who would fill an office in the church this was it. Recall that the Apostles were overwhelmed at the time with the labor before them! Had they simply announced those who should serve, I dare say no one would have disputed their right or charged them with the exercise of a despotic authority. Instead, they adopted a course of action which demanded from the entire congregation the use of their God-given judgment.

Now be sure the decision was to be bathed in prayer and much deliberation. But the decision as to who would function in an ordained office of service in the Church rested with the congregation! Based on all of this Witherow concludes:

Here, then, are three clear facts, fully sufficient to be the basis of a principle. The first chapter of Acts supplies us with an instance of the assembled men and brethren appointing to office one who was both an apostle and a minister. The fourteenth chapter shows that the elders of the congregation were chosen by popular suffrage. The sixth chapter furnishes an example of the whole multitude of the disciples choosing seven men to be deacons. On these three facts, clear and irresistible, we found the principle of *Popular Election*. The conclusion that follows from this evidence, we find it absolutely impossible to evade, namely- that in the Apostolic Church the *office-bearers were chosen by the people*. (Witherow, 2009, p. 25)

Now Witherow makes a great point, but we can go further than this. For recall, one of the qualifications for “the seven” is that they had to be “from among the brethren” (v. 3). This means that

- It was not from a professional organization, guild, or union that the church requested men to serve the body.
- Rather, they were men amongst the body of Christ who *already* were characterized by a heart and passion for the weak and hurting. Otherwise they wouldn’t have been selected!
- Furthermore, we do not read here of a vote of determination in which some were chosen and others were rejected. Rather, the congregation clearly submitted the names of those whom they believed to be men “worthy of the task” before them.
- From this we derive a very important principle: Those men selected by the congregation “by show of hands” did not become godly servants of the church. Rather they already were doing the work before them. The congregation just recognized it as such.

In so many places men are waiting around to be recognized before they venture to serve the body. Do you know what you call those men? Unqualified! Indeed, the work of service comes first. The passion for the hurting and needy must be clearly evident. The vote taken by the congregation is not a vote of determination, but a vote of affirmation!

Because this is the case, once again we see that God’s program requires that the people of God to be actively serving the body of Christ in whatever capacity they are gifted. Thus when it comes time for selection of officers, the vote is not taken to determine if a man is called, but to affirm the calling.

This begs the question: What ought we to do? First, we need to serve the body of Christ that it might be said of us, “Not a needy person could be found among them!” And secondly, as we do this, our gifts and callings will become evident and the body of Christ will be “built up in love” (Ephesians 4:16)!

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 19, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church