

Sermon 2, Deacons: A Christian Voter's Guide, Acts 6:1-7 & 1 Timothy 3:8-13

J. L. Girardeau "holds that the presbyterate and the diaconate are the two orders of the ministry; that the one terminates on persons and the other on ecclesiastical goods; the one has to do with the cure of souls, the other with the care of the bodies." --W. C. Robinson

The diaconate "is the divinely erected breakwater against the irruption of agrarianism, communism, and every kind of leveling theory 'against the peace and order of the Christian commonwealth.'" — Girardeau

"The making of stated and competent provision for its poor members is necessary to the spiritual, and to some extent the temporal, prosperity of the Church. In the first place, no body of Christians can grow in the divine life who habitually neglect the cultivation of the grace of love, a grace which the Apostle Paul, in his glowing and eloquent description of it in the thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians, crowns as foremost among the three essential and abiding attributes of our holy religion. All the other graces condition the development of this, which is the fulfilling of the law on earth, and shall infuse a thrilling rapture into the praises of the blood-washed throng above. A Christian without love would be a body bereft of the soul. We have seen that, in the judgment of our Lord himself, this sacred principle receives its chief manifestation, so far as creatures are concerned, in offices of charity to the poor and needy members of his body. **The Church, therefore, which shuts up the channel of diaconal ministrations must expect to be dwarfed in the development of experimental religion.**" — Girardeau

"when organisms designed to relieve the secular wants of men are represented as competitors of the Church of Christ, upon the theatre of a pure beneficence flowing from love, it becomes her to look to her charities. An array of facts confronts her which she cannot afford to overlook. She must provide for her needy members, or succumb to the verdict of failure pronounced by competing secular societies, and bow her head before the judgment that she is untrue to one of her most sacred responsibilities. Her own members would suck the paps of other institutions, and outsiders would shun her as a mother that refuses bread to the hungry offspring of her body." — Girardeau

"Is not our practice, to some extent, contradictory of our doctrine? **Do we not neglect to employ the deacon's office so as to free our spiritual officers from the discharge of the deacon's business?**" — Girardeau

"And when deaconships are thus instituted in our churches, not merely as a form, to conform to the orders of Presbyteries, or Synods, or even to a primitive model, but as an earnest expression of the church's desire to discharge, with new zeal and self-denial, her much neglected charitable functions, we may expect the same results as followed in Apostolic times, when " the Word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly, and a great company of the priests were obedient to the truth." — James B. Ramsay, "The Deaconship," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 12/1 (April 1859): 24

“ the vigorous exercise of the charitable functions of the church is necessary to the fullest development of her spiritual life and power, and that deacons are the divinely appointed organs of these functions.” Ibid., 8

“Is it not evident that any church that fails to gather in the poor, fails in accomplishing one great design of the Gospel, and in presenting to the world one of the most convincing proofs of the truth and power of Christianity?” — James Ramsay

“ The reason why this office has gone into such general disuse in the Presbyterian Church, whose standards teach its permanency, is just because of the want of that spirit which so strikingly characterized the primitive church, the spirit of liberality and of brotherly love.” — Ibid.

“they ought to esteem none of the things which they possess as their own ; that in their use of property all other considerations ought to be swallowed up in a paramount regard to the interests and advancement of Christ’s kingdom, admits not of a doubt. When and where this is the case, the need of this office will be felt, just as it was in Apostolic times, in order that none may be neglected who have claims upon the church for her temporal care; and when its need is felt, then it will be employed efficiently ; and until then, even if deacons were appointed, they would accomplish little more than can be done without them.” — Ibid

“This Spiritual vigor and active benevolence cannot be created by the office. The office should spring out of them as in the primitive church. If these do not exist, it becomes a mere secular office, and there is danger of its secularizing the church, instead of increasing its spirit of consecration, which is its legitimate effect.” — Ibid.

“ No man may be a deacon in the church of God unless he meets all of these qualifications [of 1 Tim. 3:8-13].” --Archie Allison

“We need not doubt, then, that the church has a distinct right to organize the work of woman after either of the fashions toward which the minds of Presbyterians turn when they speak of “deaconesses.” Bare right, however, does not vindicate wisdom. And it is to be hoped that there will be careful consideration of all the implications and, we may add, complications of the proposed action before the churches commit themselves irrevocably.” — B.B. Warfield

Proposition

Deacons are the officers Christ has given to direct the church’s charitable giving and financial affairs.

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Introduction

My grandfather served as a deacon at First Baptist Church in Ft. Collins, Colorado, for a period of time. During that time, he told me, the church had sixteen deacons. And why, he asked, did I think it had sixteen deacons?

“Because that’s the number of qualified men that had been found in the church,” I said (naively).

“No! It’s because there were 8 major seating sections in the sanctuary, and that number of deacons was needed to serve communion to them all!”

Needless to say, brothers and sisters, that is not why we choose deacons, nor how we determine their number. We cannot determine that we only need four deacons in this church because we have to serve communion and take up the offering across two different blocks of seats. Rather, deacons are gifts that Christ, as the risen, ascended Lord, gives to His church.

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come together this morning for a second message in our mini-series “Officers in the Church: A Voter’s Guide.” We looked last week at the office and qualifications of elders. This week we study the other permanent, necessary office which Christ has instituted in His church. That is the office of deacon, and it is an office to which you, as the congregation, have the solemn task of choosing qualified men. In fact, the nomination period officially opens after this sermon and will remain open through the entire month of September. You must nominate those men in this body who meet these qualifications. If your neighbors believe that you meet the qualifications, and you are not cherishing some sin or other disqualifying factor in your heart, then Christ may very well be calling you to assume this office within this congregation. But before you can or should nominate anyone, much less undergo training and be voted upon or vote, you need to know what a deacon is and what kind of man is qualified to serve as a deacon.

I. The Deacon’s Office: Overseeing the Church’s Funds and Charitable Ministries, Acts 6:1-7

What is a deacon? This passage in Acts shows us that deacons were appointed to have care over the poor. As usual in the Bible, this is a brief example. Yet it is packed with instruction for us.

A. The Need, vv. 1-2

The need arose in the context of massive church growth. The number of believers in Jerusalem was at least 8,000 and growing.

1. Taking Care of the Poor, v. 1

In this context, the Greek-speaking Jewish converts complained that their widows were being neglected. What does this tell us? That this church had a daily distribution, probably of food. Those who could not support themselves were supported at church expense. Later, in 1 Timothy, Paul describes what kind of widows ought to be supported at church expense. But this brand-new congregation, one which may have been only a few months or years old, already had a flourishing widows ministry. Why? Because the people were consumed with generosity. The previous two chapters describe how believers would give massive amounts to the church. They just wanted to give!

Now, how did the church spend this money? Not on Armani suits and private jets for the apostles. Not on fancy amphitheatres in Jerusalem. Not on real property of any kind, but instead, on taking care of the weak, helpless, and impoverished, with widows being the poster children for all of those conditions!

Yet things were apparently not done perfectly, or at least the Greek-speaking Jews perceived themselves to have some kind of grievance. In their minds (at least), and maybe even in reality, the Greek-speaking widows were being left out. By the way, this shows how necessary administrative skill is not only to earthly enterprises, but to the kingdom of God as well!

So the Jerusalem church was amazingly generous, but needed some help to get that money to the places where it would do the most good.

2. Allowing the Elders to Devote Themselves to the Word and Prayer, v. 2

The apostles had up to this point been responsible for the money collected (see the end of ch. 4). But they realize that this is a job they can no longer perform. Their calling is specifically to the word of God, not to distributing charitable giving.

Did you hear that? The elders of the church (the office which the apostles claimed, 1 Pet. 5) are not called to handle the charitable and financial aspects of the church. These needs are prominent enough that they need an entire new order of officers created to deal with them.

B. The Need Filled, vv. 3-6

1. Deacons Ordained to Oversee Distribution, vv. 3, 5-6

So how were officers to fill this need found? They were found by the congregation at large. The apostles didn't say, "Here's a list of approved candidates." They told the congregation to find some men who would be good at handling this charitable side of the church's work. So the congregation found men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and selected them, apparently by vote, for the job.

Again, did you get that? If you are a communicant member of this congregation, then it is your responsibility to select and vote for men who can and will faithfully handle the charitable

giving that this body engages in. You need to prayerfully select men full of the Spirit and of wisdom. You need to ask them whether they are willing to serve, and if they are, then you need to encourage them to undergo training for this office. When election day comes, you need to vote for those nominees you consider to be qualified to faithfully exercise this office.

Do you understand that? Just as it is your job to select faithful elders, so it is your job to select faithful deacons. Again, I cannot overemphasize the importance of this task. Family of God, many churches don't let their congregations choose elders and deacons. If you're a Methodist or a Catholic, you take the minister they send you and that's it. But as a Presbyterian, you have the God-given and awe-inspiring responsibility of nominating and voting men to lead you.

That leads to another point: are we as a congregation so charitable that we need to set people aside to handle our charity? Are we anxious enough to minister to the poor, to widows and orphans, that we recognize that the job needs some point men to get things organized?

Remember, poverty is certainly material and financial in nature — but that is not where it ends (or, for that matter, where it begins). Deacons are chosen and elected to make sure that no one in the covenant community is suffering from needs that rob them of joy. If you are unable to give your children the Christian education you want to give them because of financial burdens, deacons are here to help direct the resources of the entire body toward that need. If you would like to be a foster family but just don't see how you can afford it, deacons exist to minister to your family with the resources of the body so that you are empowered to show Christ's adopting love to the damaged, hurt children of this world. If you are in debt, or suffering from an inability to get your financial house in order, deacons help you with the resources of the body.

And if we think we don't have those needs in our church? Why are there no poor people here? How did we become a church of people with all their needs met? Deacons are here to help us minister to the poor and needy. Surely there are enough of those in the world that we need not fear that our work will be unnecessary!

2. Elders Focusing on Prayer and the Word, v. 4

At the same time, the apostles identify the twin areas of ministry that they, and by extension all elders, need to focus on. Those areas are prayer (the first half of the elder's task!) and the ministry of the word.

Prayer — lifting up the church before God and pleading with Him for His people — is something that I as your minister am duty-bound to do. I pray for each of you by name every day. My fellow elders I exhort to labor in prayer. The apostles said they needed to spend so much time in prayer that they would not be able to focus on meeting financial needs.

The ministry of the word is the other large portion of the minister's task. This is studying and proclaiming and delivering the word of God to himself, to his family, and to his congregation. If one of you asks me a Bible question, I should know the answer. Elders, like the apostles, need to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

That means that my major job is not to bring food trucks and aid concerts to Gillette. My job is not to ask each of you whether you have enough money. My job is to pray for you and apply the word of God to your life, from the pulpit and in less formal settings. But the deacons you elect have the job of applying the word of God and the love of God in tangible form to your physical needs. If you have some problem, some issue, some material thing in your life that robs you of your joy, then the deacons are here to mobilize the resources of the congregation to help you with it. But if you have a spiritual need, problem, or issue, then I as your pastor am here to help you.

That said, let's turn over now to the further qualifications that the apostle Paul gives in 1 Timothy 3.

II. The Deacon's Qualifications, 1 Timothy 3:8-12

In the same place where he lists the qualifications of an elder, Paul goes on to list the qualifications of a deacon. We already saw that deacons need to be full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Paul further commands us that deacons show a long list of exemplary behaviors.

A. His Character, v. 8

First of all, a deacon must be respectable, or worthy of respect. If you think a man is laughable, silly, pompous, or too ridiculous for words, then you may not and must not nominate him for this position or vote for him in this position. Don't vote for the silly. No. Deacons must be respectable.

They also must be honest. Someone who says one thing to one audience and an incompatible thing to another audience is not suited for the diaconate. After all, serving as a deacon is a position of great financial trust. If you can't believe what a man tells you, then the last thing we need is for him to handle the finances of the church!

Deacons must be responsible in their use of alcohol and drugs. A man who is unable to control his thirst, or his need for medication, or any other addictive behavior in his life, is unsuited for this calling. So is a greedy man. This last one in v. 8 is obvious, right? "Who should we put in charge of the charitable donations of our institutional church? Oh, yes — a known thief!" I don't think so.

B. His Faith and Practice, v. 9

Any deacon candidate must also believe in the truths of the Christian faith. That is why in our denomination we demand that a deacon have read the summary of what our church believes (the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms) and be in agreement with it. If he believes something different than what Scripture teaches, he is not eligible to be a deacon. This requirement is the same for the elder, as Titus 1 tells us.

But in addition to accurate theological beliefs, the man you select as a deacon must have a clear conscience. He must not live with unconfessed sin. If you nominate someone and he says, "You know, I'm really angry at my mom," or "I don't think I need to pay income taxes and I haven't done so for the last five years," then withdraw your nomination. Don't elect someone with a dirty conscience as a deacon.