

Series: Deacon Ordination 2023

Title: Why Deacon Ministry?

Text: Acts 6:1-7

Date: July 30, 2023

Baptists are known for emphasizing the fact that there are two offices within the local church. Such an emphasis is rooted in Scripture. A cursory reading of the Bible reveals that the early church regarded two distinct offices as having a special place in the ministry of the church. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he greeted them by saying, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). In addition, Paul’s list of qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:1-17 indicated that there are two offices for the church.

Many modern congregations overlook the need for the office of deacon. Those who do have regard for the office often err by either maximizing it to an unhealthy extreme or minimizing it to an equally unhealthy extreme. I recently read a review of the state of protestant, evangelical Christianity in Hungary. The author noted the weakness of congregations in that European country. In writing, he attempted to diagnose the reason for the stagnancy of local churches. He pointed to a lack of biblical leadership. Though the state church experienced reform and revival in years past, it failed to erect biblical qualifications for pastors and deacons. In parts of the country, some congregations actually hire government social workers to do the work of deacon ministry!¹

For churches to be strong and healthy, there is a need for a revival and resurgence of biblical deacon ministry. Fortunately God’s Word provides guidelines for such things. Acts 6 describes the ordination of the first deacons. We learn from that passage that God has several purposes for the biblical office of deacon. Let’s consider three.

1. The Priority of Service (Acts 6:1, 3)

Acts 6:1 reveals that the first deacon ministry was established because some widows were being neglected during the church’s “daily distribution.” History tells us that Jewish synagogues had a practice of providing what was called “tamhuy” - a Hebrew word for “poor bowl” or “poor tray.” The practice was meant to meet needs of those who were deprived of food. Provisions typically included bread, beans, and fruit. The practice was similar to a model soup kitchen. It seems the early church continued the Jewish practice in some form or fashion.

The problem in the young, growing church was that Greek-speaking widows were being “overlooked” at this meal. The first-century Jewish world involved a lot of tension between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews.² Because of linguistic and cultural differences, they often clashed over various matters, especially matters related to

¹ Szöke, Imre. *The Reformation in Hungary: Its Strengths, Weaknesses, and Consequences for Today. The Banner of Truth Magazine; 706.* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 16.

² Bruce, FF. *The New International Commentary on The New Testament: The Book of The Acts.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 28.

religion. When it comes to the story in Acts, maybe a sectarian spirit was involved. Perhaps a degree of ethnic prejudice was present.

Whatever the case, the Hellenistic widows were being neglected at the charity feasts. Such was serious considering the nature of widowhood in the first-century world. Being a widow meant one was destitute. Widows usually had no way of providing for themselves. Unless they had generous family members who agreed to care for them, they were often relegated to the outskirts of society. Many became beggars. The Bible often speaks about the dire condition of first-century widows (Ruth 1:1-5; Matthew 23:14; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; James 1:27).

The first deacons were organized in order to meet needs related to widows. This doesn't mean that the deacon ministry should only be concerned with ministering to widows; rather, it means deacons are to look out for practical needs within local congregations. In verse 3, the apostles spoke of the work of deacons as a "duty." The Greek New Testament used a word that is commonly translated "need." The office of deacon was created to meet various needs of the church so that the ministry of the Word might continue without hindrance.

The deacon ministry reminds us of the priority of service in Christ's kingdom. When Jesus was on the Earth, he said, "...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). We have salvation from sin and eternal life before God because of Christ's commitment to serve. Through our new life in Him, we are called to serve one another. The Bible says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

As you think about deacon ministry, realize that the Lord has a divine design in the ministry. He wants there to be a special office of men who serve, meeting practical needs of the church so that ministers and pastors can focus on the ministry of the Word. In addition, remember that deacons aren't the only ones who should serve in the church. We are saved by Christ's service (Mark 10:45) and we are saved to serve Christ (Galatians 5:13)!

2. The Power of the Word (Acts 6:2)

In advocating for the first deacon ministry, the apostles said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God" (Acts 6:2). The Greek word translated "right" is one that meant "pleasing" or "satisfactory."³ In the context of our passage, it referred to that which was pleasing to God.⁴ The word appeared in John 8:29 to speak of the way Jesus aimed to always please the Lord.

According to the Twelve Apostles, it would have displeased God for them to neglect the ministry of the Word. The practical church matters that were causing distraction and division could be handled by others. They felt they needed to be free to focus wholly on the transmission of God's truth. Certainly their concern was valid. The

³ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 241.

⁴ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 251.

ministry of the Word is something that requires great focus and dedication. John Calvin once said, “The ministry of the Word is so laborious that it requires a whole man, neither will it allow him to be occupied about any other business.”⁵

The apostles expressed their devotion to ministering the Word by saying, “...we will devote ourselves...to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). The Greek word translated “devote” was one that literally meant to “to stay by.” As used within our current text, it meant “to occupy oneself diligently with” or “to pay persistent attention to” something.⁶ It was “used metaphorically of steadfastness and faithfulness in the outgoings of the Christian life.” In the apostles’ estimation, it was of paramount importance for them to be faithful to the ministering God’s Word.

It is necessary to note that the ministry of the Word is more multi-faceted than most people think. When the apostles spoke of “the ministry of the word,” they weren’t just referencing a monologue delivered from a pulpit on Sunday morning. The ministry of the Word involves much more than a Sunday morning sermon, though it does involve that (2 Timothy 4:2). Ministers are to also lead in this endeavor through personal evangelism (2 Timothy 4:5), discipleship training (2 Timothy 2:2), and oversight of ministries (Ephesians 4:11-12) that disseminate the gospel to a lost world (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

The deacon ministry teaches us that praying, studying, preaching, teaching, discipling, evangelizing, and leading ministries are the primary responsibilities of ministers. Sure, we must avoid a priest-like syndrome wherein only ministers are allowed to handle things related to prayer and the Word. The Bible teaches us that all believers have the ability to pray and study Scripture. However, we must remember that ministers have a special role in regard to preaching and prayer.

The Word of God is important to the church for many reasons. Jesus taught that it is our devotion to his Word that determines whether or not we are spiritually strong and steadfast (Matthew 7:24-28). James revealed that the Word of God is a means of spiritual salvation: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18). The author of Hebrews indicated that the Word has spiritual power to change lives: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). When the Word of God is compromised, the power of the church is as well. It is for this reason that deacon ministry is so important. As deacons meet practical needs, ministers and pastors are free to minister the Word so that lives might be transformed.

3. The Progress of the Church (Acts 6:7)

Making more disciples is one of the primary purposes of the church (Matthew 28:18-20). Interestingly, the first deacon ministry contributed to such a purpose. Acts 6:7 spoke of the way “...the disciples multiple greatly in Jerusalem...” after the church enlisted the

⁵ Calvin, John. *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 233.

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 334.

first deacons. The Greek word rendered “multiplied” was one that spoke of rapid growth. Appearing in the passive voice, it indicated a growth by multiplication.⁷

Of importance in Acts 6 is the fact that a great number of priests “became obedient to the faith.” The idea is that Jewish priests were converted! In speaking of such things, the New Testament author used an imperfect verb that conveyed a sense of repetition. One has translated it as meaning that “one priest after another” believed the gospel.⁸ The verbiage conveyed the powerful result of the deacons’ service and the apostles’ preaching.

When the church is faithful to God’s Word, and when it follows the Lord’s plans for ministry, it will experience spiritual and numerical growth! It will even experience miraculous forms of growth. For the first-century church, some of the most unlikely converts (Jewish priests) embraced Christ. Something similar can happen in our day. When we are faithful to the Lord’s design for His church, He will be faithful to draw all types of people to Himself.

Ordaining Deacons

The word “ordination” does not appear in Scripture, but neither do words like “missions” or “Trinity.” We use the term “ordination” as a label to speak of an act that is frequently described in the Bible. One sees the act of ordination in Acts 6:6. Notice that “hands” were placed on the new deacons in front of the church.

Most likely, it was the hands of the apostles that were placed upon the men. The custom in view seems to be of Jewish background. The Mishnah reveals that members of the Sanhedrin were admitted into that group through a similar ceremony. Their practice was undoubtedly of Scriptural origin, since the laying on of hands appears early in the biblical history of Israel (Genesis 48:13-22). Jesus practiced the tradition, placing His hands on His disciples and personally ordaining them before sending them out for ministry (Matthew 10:1-4).

In the Jewish mind, the laying on of hands was a symbol of the transfer of the Holy Spirit for a special task.⁹ The Old Testament gives evidence of this perspective. Read about Gideon in Judges 6:34, Samson in Judges 14:6; Saul in 1 Samuel 10:6-9, and David in 1 Samuel 16:13. Though this was the Hebrew understanding of the Spirit, it is important to note that something different occurred in our text. The laying on of hands was only a symbol, since the seven were already “full of the Spirit.”¹⁰ The promised Spirit (Acts 1:8) had come in power (Acts 2:1-4) and the chosen men were living in surrender to its leadership.

It is important to recognize the symbolism involved with the act of laying hands on another. In the context of our passage, the act served as an official ceremony that

⁷ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 316.

⁸ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: The Acts of the Apostles*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 74.

⁹ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 1473.

¹⁰ Bruce, 130.

provided a sort of benediction or inauguration for the first deacons.¹¹ The apostles felt compelled to pray for a special anointing of the Holy Spirit on the deacon ministry. The act of placing hands on the men was symbolic of their desire. Modern congregations who engage in the laying on of hands should be aware of the biblical symbolism involved in such an act.

¹¹ Zoghiates, 643.