



Sermon Transcript

May 27, 2018

Shepherds and Souls

What is a Deacon?

Acts 6:1-7

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 27, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Acts 6:1-7

1 Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenus, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Introduction

So what is a deacon? What does a deacon do? For the past several weeks we have been looking at what the Bible has to say about elders. We have discovered that the elders are the spiritual leaders of the church. They oversee the affairs of the church. They are to shepherd and provide spiritual care for the people in their local church. We saw last week that they are to “guard the truth” and so they are responsible for the teaching of the church. They are also to equip and empower the people of the church for service and ministry so that the body of Christ matures. I think Hebrews 13:17 summarizes the responsibility of elders quite well when it says, *“they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”*

So if the elders are the spiritual leaders of the church, what are the deacons? This is a very relevant question for us as a church. In Article II, Section 3 of our By-laws it says, “The Executive Board shall be responsible, along with the Ministerial Staff, for the overall shepherding of the congregation. The Executive Board shall promote the spiritual welfare of the members of the church. They shall provide for the care of the sick and needy and shall perform such other spiritual offices as the Word of God teaches.” In our local setting it is the Executive Board that is tasked with providing spiritual oversight for this congregation. On this board sits seven deacons. In our governance, our deacons are functioning as elders. They are providing spiritual oversight for the church. And they are great men and they do a great job. We are blessed with godly leaders. So it is not like we are broken and we don’t have spiritual leadership. But as we seek to align our governance with what we find in Scripture, what does God’s Word tell us about deacons? How is their role different than the role of elders?

It is interesting that in the New Testament, you don’t find as much teaching about “deacons” as you do “elders.” As we have discovered through our study on elders, the New Testament has a lot to say about elders. But not so much about deacons. The word “deacon” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*. It literally means, “servant.” Often this word is used rather generically to refer to “a servant.” In fact, this word is used twenty-nine times in the New Testament but only four of those times this word is used to refer to the office of deacon.

For example, when Paul greets the church at Philippi in Philippians 1:1 he says, *“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers [that is a reference to elders] and deacons.”* In 1 Timothy 3 we see Paul giving qualifications for both elders and for deacons. They are treated as two separate offices of the church. Last week we

saw what Paul said immediately after he gave these qualifications for elders and deacons. He said to Timothy that he is writing these things to him so that he *“may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.”* In other words, this is to be the norm in the life of the church. You need elders and you need deacons. And so even though we don’t have a lot of instruction about deacons in the New Testament, at the very least we can discover that there are two distinct offices in the church—elders and deacons.

It still leaves us with the question: “What does a deacon do?” Acts 6 provides for us a wonderful picture of what a deacon does. In fact it provides a beautiful picture of what it can look like when elders and deacons are both doing what they need to do in the life of a church. At the very least, the result you find in verse 7 is rather compelling. Luke observes, *“And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”*

Now I am not suggesting that we treat this like a formula that automatically produces church growth. But what I am suggesting is that where elders and deacons are faithfully fulfilling their roles you often find a healthy church. People are being cared for and gospel of Jesus is being proclaimed in word and through the love of God’s people. This creates fertile ground for the church to multiply and to reach who we would think to be “the unreachable.” In this passage, it says that many Jewish priests became followers of Jesus. I wonder how many of these Jewish priests were part of the crowd calling for the crucifixion of Jesus. And now here they are following Jesus. May we be fertile ground for reaching people we would least expect to follow Jesus. Spiritual leadership—elders and deacons—play a key role in creating this fertile environment for the gospel to advance. So let’s take a look at the picture we find in Acts 6:1-7.

A Picture of Caring

Right in the very beginning of our passage this morning, we discover that there was a problem in the church. There was a certain group of people in the church who were being neglected. And so a complaint was brought to the attention of the apostles. It says in verse 1, *“a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”*

Let’s remind ourselves where we are in Acts 6. We are very early in the story of the church. One of the core values that marked the early church was that they were committed to taking good care of each other. In Acts 2:44-45 we see this value first

emerge when it says of the church, that they *“had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”* It is a wonderful picture of a church taking good care of each other. This value emerges again at the end of Acts 4 where it says of the church in Acts 4:34, *“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”* This “honeymoon” period of the church was a wonderful picture of the organic nature in which everyone took good care of each other.

But when we come to Acts 6 we discover that this early church is quickly growing in numbers. It says so in verse 1, *“the disciples were increasing in number.”* With this growth came some growing pains. Specifically, some people got lost in the shuffle. I don’t think that there was anything intentional that happened here. I think that as the diversity of the body grew, there needed to be more intentionality to making sure that all the people were being taken good care of in the church. When they were smaller, it was easier to do this rather organically. But like any “organization” as they grew they needed systems to support their values. It seems here that some of this neglect emerged simply because of language and cultural barriers. At this point, the church was made up of Hebraic Jews, who were native to Jerusalem and Hellenistic Jews who were from various Greek speaking regions of the Roman Empire. One group tended to speak Aramaic and the other spoke Greek. And so these Greek speaking Jewish widows who were now part of this rapidly growing church family were accidentally neglected when it came to the daily distribution of food to help meet their needs.

When this complaint was brought to the attention of the apostles, they readily acknowledged that this was a problem that needed to be addressed. They didn’t want these widows to be neglected. One of their core values was to make sure that the church would take good care of each other. But now they are at a point where they need to organize to make sure that this need is met.

It is very interesting what the apostles do here. They readily acknowledged that this need had to be met, but they also reminded this growing congregation that as spiritual leaders of the church, they needed to keep doing what they were called to do. They couldn’t continue doing what they were called to do and take on the additional responsibility of meeting this important need. In verses 2-3 they respond to this complaint by saying to the congregation, *“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to*

this duty.” They were not saying that “serving tables” was beneath them. As we have looked at elders in this series, we have gone to great lengths to show that at the heart of an elder is the heart of a servant. Besides, growing up as a pastor’s kid, I spent many times helping my dad set up tables and take tables down. To this day, I do a good bit of that as well. But instead, what the apostles are saying here is that as spiritual leaders, they must devote their primary energy to the ministry of the word and prayer. That is exactly what they say of their role in the early church in verse 4, “*But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.*” So in order for this need with the Hellenistic widows to be adequately met, they needed to establish another group who will focus on making sure this need and others like it are met. And so they were to choose seven men from among them who could devote their attention to making sure these widows didn’t fall through the cracks.

I need to pause here and explain something for you. We are looking to Acts 6 to help us understand what a deacon does and how the role of a deacon is different than the role of an elder. But curiously, you don’t find the word “elder” here and nor do you find the word “deacon.” You do find the verb form of the word “serve” in verse 2. The verb *diakoneo* is used to describe the task of taking care of these widows, “*to serve tables.*” So can we even apply this passage to elders and deacons?

Again, it is important to remember that in Acts 6, we are very early in the life of the church. At the very beginning of the church, the apostles were the leaders of the church. Who were the apostles? In Acts 6:2 they are identified as “*the twelve.*” The apostles were the twelve disciples of Jesus. They witnessed the resurrection of Jesus and through their teaching they are the foundation of the church. At this point the church is pretty much located in one place, the city of Jerusalem. The apostles were the leaders of the church.

But when you come to Acts 15, a council was convened in Jerusalem to wrestle through the issue of Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus and now being a part of the church. The question they had to wrestle through was whether or not the Gentiles had to observe Old Testament Jewish law and tradition. How was this predominantly Jewish body going to respond to the growing number of Gentiles coming to faith through Paul’s missionary endeavors? In Acts 15 you can already see the transition of spiritual leadership begin to take place. In Acts 15:6 it was the apostles and the elders who were processing how to respond to this movement of the Spirit of God through Paul’s missionary endeavors. As you move from Acts 15 and as the church spreads throughout the Roman Empire, it is the elders who become the spiritual leaders of the local church. Have we not seen how the role of an elder is to tend to the ministry of prayer and the word?

And so, quite naturally, this group of seven men called to care for the needs of the widows becomes the template for what deacons do. They are the first example for us of the kind of ministry a deacon does. They are there to make sure that the church is taking good care of each other and meeting the various needs that exist in the life of the church. This enables the elders to do what they need to do and at the same time it ensures that systems are in place to help the church take good care of the needs that are among us.

In Acts 6, the church chose seven quality men to carry out this responsibility in the church. Like elders, they were to be *“of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”* I don’t think the number seven was “magical” or a “prescribed” number. It was probably what was needed to meet the need and it reinforced the importance of a plurality of leaders. Their names were, *“Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenus, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.”* What is fascinating about most of these names is that they are Hellenistic names. Nicolaus is from Antioch and church tradition suggests that Nicanor was from the island of Cyprus and that Timon was a Hellenized Jew who ended up leading the church in Greece. The point is that the church in Jerusalem named people from among the group that was being neglected to ensure that the need would be met.

So once the congregation identified this group of “deacons” to address this need in the church, the apostles commissioned them to fulfill this role. It says in verse 6, *“These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”* Next week we are going to “lay hands” on our leaders here and commission them for their service this coming year. We will talk next week about the implication of the laying on of hands. But for now, we see that this group was commissioned and set apart by the apostles for this sacred task in the church.

And what was the result? The apostles were able to continue tending to the ministry of the word and prayer as they led the church. At the same time, this growing church was able to continue taking good care of each other. Consequently, *“the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.”* Why? Jesus was faithfully proclaimed by a prayerful church and the love of Jesus was on display by the way the church took good care of each other. This is the kind of ministry that flourishes under godly elders and deacons. Acts 6 is a wonderful picture of a caring church.

With Acts 6 as our background, I would like to share four things that are important to keep in mind when we think about the role of deacons in the life of the church.

Caring for People is Important

First of all, the core value of caring for each other in the church is an important part of life in the church. Sharing what we have with those in need within the church is a value that ought to mark us as a church. Paul says in Galatians 6:10, *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”*

It is pretty impressive to read Acts 2 and Acts 4 and see the extent to which the early church cared for each other. People in the church were liquidating their assets to help meet the needs of people in the church. That is pretty impressive. Now it is important to know that when you read something like this that you keep in mind that what is “descriptive” is not necessarily “prescriptive.” In other words, these passages are not telling us that is wrong to have assets and to hold on to assets. Even in this setting the selling of assets and using it to meet the needs of the church was strictly voluntary. For example, in Acts 5 we encounter a very dramatic scene when Ananias and Sapphira sold property and brought a portion of it to the apostles to be used to help meet the needs in the church. But when they presented their gift to the apostles, they lied about it and said that they had donated the full amount from the sale of their property. Due to their deception, God brought swift judgment against them and they died. Their motive for doing this was self-serving. They wanted people to think that they gave the full amount when they only gave a portion of what they sold. The problem was not in what was given, but in their deception. They were not coerced to do this nor were they required to do this. Rather, it was to be done from the heart and it was to be voluntary.

That being said, the heart of what we find in Acts 2 and Acts 4 must be at the heart of the local church. As a church family, we are to care for the needs of each other. The answer to caring for each other is not to just get a bunch of deacons who will do all the caring for us. Like in Acts 2 and Acts 4, there is a lot of organic caring for each other that happens in the life of the church. There is a lot of caring that happens within this church family that no one ever hears about. It is quiet and it is person to person. Often groups of people band together to come around a need to meet it. It is a beautiful thing.

And yet, in any church, it is possible for people to fall through the cracks and get lost. Or it is possible to neglect some need that is prevalent in the church and requires some group to organize a united effort in meeting that need. That is the role of deacons. They are there to help ensure that the needs of the people in the church are being met and where organization is needed to do so, it is given.

Did you know that we have a “Deacon Fund?” People from the church donate money to this fund and it is administered by a group of our deacons when we are presented with a financial need within the church. If someone from the church is in need, they fill out an application and are followed up by one of our deacons or pastors. They assess the need and how best to respond to that need. Often they come around that person and are able to provide real tangible help. Funds given for this purpose need to be marked for “deacon fund.” It is one way we are living out this principle of caring for each other.

Spiritual Maturity is Important

We have already established that in the New Testament, the office of deacon was one of two offices in the church. Therefore, the qualifications for someone to serve in this capacity are very similar to the qualifications of an elder. Like in Acts 6, those who step into this role need to be marked with spiritual maturity. This too is important.

After listing the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul gives us the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. *“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”*

This list sounds a lot like the qualifications for elders. Again, the qualifications concentrate on the spiritual maturity of the person and their character. Nothing is even mentioned in this list of qualifications about their duties or their responsibilities. One difference, though, between the list of qualifications for elder and the qualifications for deacons is that nowhere on the list of qualifications for deacons does it mention *“able to teach.”* Knowing what you know now about the role of elders and deacons, that should not surprise you. Teaching and the ministry of the Word is a major responsibility of elders. Deacons, on the other hand, are tasked with making sure that the church family is appropriately caring for each other and that everyone is experiencing this kind of care within the church family.

The absence of listing any responsibility in the qualification for deacons is instructive. The context of the local church is going to determine the need the deacons will be

addressing. For example, the issue in Acts 6 is not our issue. It is not that we don't look for ways to care for widows, but we live in a culture where pensions and insurance policies and Social Security and Medicaid are able to meet many of the financial needs long after a husband or a wife has passed away. So each local context has to evaluate the needs that are present and to consider how to mobilize the body to care for each other. It takes spiritually mature people to genuinely put the needs of others first and to wisely discern how to meet that need in a way that is most helpful.

Representation of the Body is Important

I said at the beginning of the sermon that there are four places where the office of deacon is mentioned in the New Testament. You find this office mentioned at the greeting of Paul's letter to the Philippians. We also see the office of deacon mentioned twice in the qualifications we just read in 1 Timothy 3. The fourth instance is rather interesting and somewhat debated. It is found in Romans 16:1-2. Paul writes, *"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreae."* The word *"servant"* here is the word *diakonos*. It is the word for "deacon." So was Paul referring to Phoebe in general terms as a "servant." Or was he referring to her as a "deacon" or a "deaconess?" In verse 2 she seems to have some role in the church because Paul encourages the church to *"help her in whatever she may need from you."* And he refers to her as a *"patron"* meaning she was known for her financial assistance and hospitality, the kinds of "stuff" or activities you would find deacons doing and promoting within the church.

You should know that in the qualifications for deacons that when it refers to the wives of deacons, that word for "wife" is a debated word. It is a word that can also be translated as "women." It does seem odd to me that Paul would speak about the character of the wives of deacons and not mention the character of the wives of elders. Nothing is said of an elder's wife in the list of qualifications for elders. Furthermore, if the task of deacons is to ensure that the caring ministry of the church is addressing the needs of the full body of Christ, it would make sense to me that there would be women who were part of that group to help ensure that the full needs of the body were being met.

Also, drawing from the illustration of Acts 6 and the Hellenist Jews stepping into roles of leadership to meet the needs of the Hellenist widows, we need to do a better job to make sure that our leadership is ethnically diverse, representing the makeup of our church family. This is not just something that pertains to deacons. But it also pertains to elders. What better way to ensure that we are taking into consideration the needs that are unique to the varied cultures in our church than to make sure it is represented in our

leadership. This diversity in leadership was modeled for us in the early church as well. Representation of the church body in leadership is important.

Helping the Elders is Important

The final observation I want to make is that deacons are there to serve the elders. Let me explain what I mean. The elders oversee the church and the overall work of the church. Their five priorities are as follows:

- Dependence: Leading a ministry of prayer for the church
- Doctrine: Guarding the teaching of the church
- Direction: Discerning the vision of where God is taking the church
- Discipline: Bringing the strayed sinner to a point of restoration
- Deployment: Equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry¹

Inevitably the elders will be presented with any number of needs that are present within the church and not being met. But like the apostles said in Acts 6, *“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.”* Under the direction of the elders, deacons are there to support the work of the church to make sure that the church continues to do a good job at taking care of each other. So as each does their part, the testimony of Jesus goes forth and more will be added to those who are followers of Jesus. The role of the deacon is important and it frees up the elder to fulfill his role.

Conclusion

So what does a deacon do? Hopefully you have a better understanding of what a deacon does than what you did at the beginning of the sermon. Simply put, an elder cares for the spiritual needs of the church. The deacon cares for the physical needs of the church. Together, they help to serve the needs of the church to ensure that no one is neglected from experiencing the love and care of Jesus through his people. May this be our story as well.

¹Daniel Henderson *Old Paths , New Power* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2016) 261-262

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. How have you felt cared for by the church?
2. Have you ever felt neglected by the church? How so?
3. What did you learn about deacons through the sermon this week?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37. What do you learn about life in the early church from these passages? What kind of impact did they have? Why do you think their church was growing?
5. Read Acts 6:1. What are some of the things that contribute to people and their needs being neglected in the life of the church?
6. Read Acts 6:2-4. What is your reaction to the response of the apostles to the complaint? What do you learn about church leadership in this passage?
7. Read Acts 6:3-6 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Why do you think spiritual maturity and character are important for the role of deacon? What kind of wisdom is needed for this role?



Taking It Home

8. Read Galatians 6:10. What is one way you can extend care to others in the church this week?
9. How does this passage move you to pray for the church and for church leadership?