

“IN SERVICE OF THE WORD”

I. Introduction

- A. Cultural observers have often pointed out that we are living in culture of distraction and that this makes it increasingly difficult for us to keep our attention focused on one thing.
1. There have always been many ways in which the church can be distracted from keeping its focus upon the mission that it has been given.
 2. This passage from the book of Acts shows us how the the New Testament church dealt with a potential distraction that emerged in its early days.
 3. Acts 6 is typically understood as the passage in which the office of deacon is instituted, and rightly so.
 4. While the title “deacon” does not appear in these verses, the verbal form of the word (“to serve”) is used in verse 2.
 5. More importantly, the duty to which these men were appointed was clearly diaconal in nature.
 6. For this reason, it is fitting for us to study this text as Jeff Fontaine is ordained and installed to the office of deacon today in our church.
- B. Before we delve into this text, I want to point out that this passage introduces the section in the book of Acts where the gospel begins to go out beyond ethnic Israelites to the Gentiles.
1. The reason why this is worth noting is because it shows us how vital the office of deacon is to the success of the church’s ministry.
 2. The gospel did not begin to spread to the Gentiles until the church had deacons.

3. As we study this passage today, we will see that the fruitfulness of the church's ministry is greatly enhanced when it has faithful deacons.
4. In addition, we will consider how this passage has a general application for all Christians.

II. A Problem and a Solution

- A. Earlier in Acts, Luke tells us about the extraordinary generosity that the first Christians displayed in ministering to one another's physical needs.
 1. The wealthier members of the community were selling their property in order to have funds to care for their brothers and sisters who were in need.
 2. Here in Acts 6, Luke tells us about a problem that arose in relation to the distribution of those funds.
 3. A dispute arose between two groups within the church, the Hellenists and the Hebrews.
 4. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews who were from the wider Mediterranean region, while the Hebrews were Palestinian Jews who spoke Aramaic.
 5. The Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of the church's benevolence funds.
 6. Luke does not tell us why this was happening, but it would appear that it was an unintentional oversight due perhaps in part to the language differences between the two groups.
 7. Whatever the reason, the Hellenists felt that their poor were not receiving the same kind of care that the poor among the Hebrews were receiving.

- B. The bulk of this passage relates how the apostles responded to this situation.
1. One of the first things to point out about their response is that they did not make an autocratic decision about this.
 2. The apostles did not take it upon themselves to appoint men to take care of this problem.
 3. That is what we would expect them to do if the episcopalian form of church government was biblical.
 4. Episcopalianism is the hierarchical form of government that is practiced in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches.
 5. But instead of appointing deacons themselves, the apostles called a congregational meeting, instructed the believers about the qualifications they should be looking for in potential deacons, and told them to elect men to serve in this office.
 6. Then, once the congregation elected their deacons, the apostles ordained them to this special office of ministry.
 7. This is how we ordain men to office in our presbyterian form of church government.
- C. Another thing to note is what the apostles have to say about the qualifications for the office of deacon.
1. Those who fill this office need to have a good reputation and they need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom.
 2. In other words, deacons need to be men who exhibit mature Christian character and who are well-grounded in sound doctrine.

3. Even though deacons focus on the church's physical needs, the key qualifications for their office are spiritual in nature.
4. Potential deacons not only need to have the desire to serve, but they also need to be evaluated in order to determine whether or not they meet the biblical qualifications for office.
5. In other words, a person's internal sense of call needs to be confirmed by an external call to office by the church, and the New Testament tells us that this should involve a period of testing. (see 1 Tim. 3:10)
6. The reason why this is so important is because it underscores the fact that God is the one who calls men to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons.
7. When a church elects men to these offices, it is recognizing the Lord's call in those men's lives.

III. The Primacy of the Word

- A. Having looked at what this passage tells us about the context in which the first deacons were elected, I want us to take a moment now to consider what this passage tells us about the primacy of the ministry of the Word.
 1. The apostles acknowledged that the problem that was raised by the Hellenists needed to be addressed.
 2. They didn't ignore the problem.
 3. At the same time, they realized that it would be wrong to let themselves to be distracted from preaching God's Word and leading in worship.
 4. In the same way, the church today must not allow the urgency of material concerns to cause it to neglect its calling to minister to people's spiritual needs.

5. This is an assertion that has become quite controversial in evangelical circles in recent years.
 6. People will argue that the church should follow Jesus in caring for the sick, the poor and the oppressed.
 7. The problem with that argument is that Jesus himself said at the beginning of his ministry that the reason why he came into the world was not to heal and cast out demons but to preach the gospel. (see Mk. 1:38)
 8. The ministry to which Jesus commissioned the apostles was one of making disciples and bearing witness to his gospel. (see Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)
 9. The apostles' actions here in Acts 6 make it clear that they believed the ministry of the Word needs to have the priority.
 10. We need to understand that while there are many good things that the church can set itself to do, these things can easily distract the church from the ministry of the Word.
- B. The apostles did not say that the church should not be concerned about ministering to the material needs of its members.
1. On the contrary, their actions show us that our Lord cares about every aspect of the lives of his children.
 2. The office of deacon stands as a tangible assurance of that fact.
 3. God is indeed concerned about the physical needs of his people, but it is not his will for the church to allow those needs to eclipse the spiritual problem that is at the heart of all of the problems that we face in this world.
- C. Think for a moment about the urgency of the need in this passage.

1. In the ancient world, widows were among the most vulnerable people in society.
 2. There was no such thing as social security or welfare programs in those days.
 3. And the situation of these particular widows was made even more serious by the fact that they were Jews who had converted to Christianity.
 4. In the first century, when a person left Judaism for the Christian faith they were typically ostracized from their family.
 5. These widows had nowhere else to go for help.
 6. They were in dire straits.
 7. The Lord certainly cared about their physical needs, and he demonstrated his compassion by providing deacons to help the church care for those needs.
 8. But the Lord did this in a way that made it clear that material needs are subordinate to spiritual needs.
 9. This is something that we always need to remember.
 10. Our Lord cares about every aspect of our lives, but he wants us to understand that there is never anything that we need more than his Word.
 11. Jesus really meant it when he said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)
- D. The apostle's response to the problem in this passage shows us that we are obligated to care for our fellow believers as whole persons.

1. It also shows us that we need deacons to help us do this.
2. Notice, however, that this passage does not say that churches are obligated to set up programs to meet the needs of the poor in their community.
3. The office of deacon has been given for the purpose of serving the needs of the saints, not the world at large.
4. When diaconal ministry becomes a social service for the community at-large, it gets distracted from its proper focus.
5. Of course it is true that individual Christians are obligated to show compassion to their neighbors in need regardless of whether or not those neighbors are Christians.
6. Yet even in this, the Scriptures make it clear that we have a greater obligation to care for the needs of our relatives and our fellow believers. (see Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 5:8)

IV. The Gift of the Diaconate

- A. Luke concludes this passage by telling us that the church's ministry continued to bear fruit in the wake of the ordination of her first deacons.
 1. In spite of opposition from the outside and conflict on the inside, the church continued to grow.
 2. Notice how Luke describes the church's growth.
 3. He says, "the word of God continued to increase."
 4. This makes it clear that the growth of the church is integrally connected to the preaching of God's Word.
 5. It also confirms that the apostles were correct in refusing to be distracted from their ministry.

- B. The diaconate plays a crucial role in causing the ministry of the Word to bear fruit.
 - 1. The work of the church's deacons may appear earthly and mundane, and there is a sense in which it is.
 - 2. Deacons do things like taking out the trash, taking care of the church property, helping those in the church family who have special needs, and paying the bills.
 - 3. Deacons do the kinds of things that we all do in our ordinary, day to day lives.
 - 4. But because their work is done in direct support of the gospel ministry, their work is spiritual in nature.

- C. We need to remember that not everything that a Christian does is ministry.
 - 1. Our work in the common sphere is important and legitimate.
 - 2. Our ordinary vocations are the outward means by which God cares for his world.
 - 3. But the gospel ministry is the means by which God is building his kingdom.
 - 4. This is why the work of the church's deacons is kingdom work.
 - 5. Even though their work is often mundane and ordinary, it is work that is done in direct support of the gospel ministry.

- D. There is a sense in which every Christian should have the heart of a deacon.
 - 1. This should become clear when we think about what the term 'deacon' means.

2. It is the Greek word for 'servant.'
3. The Christian faith has the notion of servanthood at its very core.
4. The Lord Jesus is the servant par excellence.
5. Jesus made himself nothing and took the form of a servant in order to secure our salvation.
6. Jesus also calls all of his followers to live lives of humble service.
7. One of the contexts in which this service is to be offered is in the life of a local congregation.
8. Your humble, mundane service offered in support of the work of the church is kingdom work.
9. Whether you serve in the nursery, or clean up after refreshments, or set up chairs, or take care of the property, or offer a word of encouragement, or prepare a meal for someone during a trying time, or see any kind of need in the body and make sure that it gets taken care of, you are doing work that is in direct support of the advance of the gospel.

V. Conclusion

- A. This passage helps us to see that a properly-functioning diaconate is crucial to a healthy ministry.
 1. Deacons are among the gifts that the ascended Christ pours out upon his church for its edification.
 2. Deacons are given to do all that does not belong to the church's teaching and governing ministry but still belongs to the essential management of the church's life and work.
 3. The office of deacon is an office of support.

4. It is a self-effacing office, an office that does not call attention to itself, an office that is out of the spotlight.
 5. In other words, it is an office that is modeled after the ministry of Christ himself.
- B. We should give thanks to the Lord for giving our church the gift of deacons.
1. Don't take deacons for granted.
 2. Not every church is blessed to have them.
 3. We should regularly pray for our deacons as they tend to their duties.
 4. And we should all strive to follow their example as they follow the example of the One who came into this world not to be served but to serve.