



Acts 6:1-7
The Office of Deacon

NKJ Acts 6:1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

3 "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

4 "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

To often in the history of the church generally, and churches in particular the office of deacon is misunderstood, and its importance underappreciated. In some cases deacon has become merely a stepping stone to the office of Elder or Overseer, a sort of Presbyter in training, in other cases deacons are understood to be trustees and administrators of the church, while in other cases the deacon has become an ordained office of church Janitor.

Well in these verses were we see the election and ordination of the first deacons in the church of Jesus Christ, we see that none of the aforementioned ideas actually fit the biblical office of deacon.

While the office of elder has its roots in the Old Testament, the office of deacon is a uniquely New Testament office that arose out of the needs of the growing church. In this case the needs of the poor and destitute within the church. As Jesus had said, John 12:8 "For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

When these verses open, we see the church was growing as new believers were daily being added to the community, we remember that in Acts chapter 2 alone as a result of Peter's preaching at Pentecost about three thousand new converts were added to the church. At this point, the church is still based in Jerusalem, the great geographic expansion of the church that was at first stimulated by persecution and then later by deliberate missionary activity has not yet taken place. Also the great expansion into the gentile nations has not yet occurred, these converts are Jewish.

But that didn't mean there wasn't already considerable cultural diversity in the church. The majority of disciples would still have been Jews from Israel, but now Jews dispersed amongst the surrounding nations whose culture was primarily Greek (or Hellenic, hence Hellenists) was growing.

There was considerable mistrust between these two groups of Jews, while all Jews spoke Greek, the Hellenists by and large spoke Greek as their mother tongue, and most did not know Aramaic or Hebrew. It was because of the large numbers of Jews in the Greek nations that the OT had started to be translated into Greek over two hundred years before and the result was the Septuagint.

The idea that Israel is the Jewish homeland has long been part of the Jewish psyche and the desire to return it was strong, especially to die in the land of one's fathers. Now it was common that after their husbands died, no longer having any economic or familial incentives to stay in the dispersion, many Hellenistic Jewish widows returned to Jerusalem. Those that became Christians, would immediately become dependent on the church and its charitable distributions.

It wasn't long before a dispute arose within the church regarding how this money was being parceled out, an obvious prejudice was being shown against the Hellenistic widows. And this threatened to divide the new church, therefore the Apostles were anxious to resolve the problem. So they called for a congregational meeting and pointed out the obvious, that they had been called primarily to evangelism and prayer. They are not saying that the care of the Poor was a lesser task, and we'll discuss that at length in the applications, but was too great for them in addition to their regular duties of preaching, teaching, and prayer. This has always been the case, I have served in a church as an elder with no deacons, and inevitably the addition of mercy ministries and upkeep of physical needs was an overload and so it was regrettably neglected.

They pose a solution to select 7 men to fulfill a new office in the church, one that would later be called in the Letters of Paul, *deacon*, from the Greek diakonos meaning servant or helper. The name there helps us to understand the office. Deacon is not office of rule, or oversight, or primarily of teaching, but rather of service to God's people.

Now notice the qualifications they say these deacons must have, they do not say, select from amongst yourselves Seven of the most popular guys with the best sense of humour. Or select seven of your best business men and civic leaders.

They call the people to select not *social giants* but men of spiritual maturity. Men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit, and wisdom. They need to be genuine Christians, not novices, and wise men who can be trusted implicitly with the goods of the church. And while they will not be called upon primarily to teach, they must know and understand the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

The church selects seven godly men, and notice that they were all men, had this office been open to women now would have been the ideal time to select some, they were after all being appointed specifically to minister to the needs of women, but here and in 1 Tim 3. the office is specifically spoken of as being open to males. It used to be joked that a woman could fill the office as long as she was capable of being the husband of one wife per 1 Tim. 3:12, but given the state of the church today, that's no longer much of a safe joke to tell.

Also notice that it was the church that knew these men that selected, or *elected*, them to the office. The Apostles did not "pick" the deacons, and here we see the importance and wisdom of the congregation being allowed to select its own officers.

All of those men happened to be Hellenistic Jews themselves, so at least there was no prejudice when it came to office holders, we can tell because their names were Greek in origin. One of those men went on to be the first Martyr of the church, Stephen.

They are then ordained, in the same manner we will be ordaining our own deacons, setting them aside for the officer, with prayer and the laying on of hands.

Note the result, the division is ended, and the word of God spreads, and once again the disciples multiply, even amongst the Priests who served at the temple!

Applications:

1) The primary focus of this ministry is not buildings, or money, it is the needs and burdens of the poor, whom the church will always have with you. It is therefore a *mercy ministry, and an instensive one at that: a* “Roll Up Your Sleeves, hands-on ministry, requiring spiritual maturity” as one commentator put it.

2) It is a ministry that manifests and indeed requires LOVE to the poor and needy. Willhelmus A’Brakel identifies FOUR particular qualities that deacons must have:

*(1) They must manifest **compassion**: “Having compassion” (1 Pet. 3:8). The burden of the poor must so weigh upon them, as if they themselves were afflicted with it. They may neither be rude nor proud, nor may they snarl at them as if they had dogs or enemies before them.*

*(2) They must be **merciful**, which is a kindness causing one to be inclined to help another. “Blessed are the merciful” (Matt. 5:7); “Be ye therefore merciful” (Luke 6:36); “Be pitiful” (1 Pet. 3:8). The opposite behavior would be to shut one’s heart, to harden oneself toward the poor, not giving them anything, or if, out of a sense of shame or for any other reason one must give, he then gives it in such a manner as if he were casting a piece of bread to a dog.*

*(3) As a father cares for his children, they must be **careful and concerned** as to how the poor can manage their affairs, have enough to live, and thus be able to thank the Lord. “I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor” (Job 29:15–16).*

*(4) They must be **cheerful and friendly**. “...he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:8); “Be pitiful, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8). They must be of a friendly disposition. A kind word and a friendly countenance are most refreshing for the poor, who due to their poverty are dejected. A grim countenance and a harsh word, however, cut through their soul.*

3) It is a NECESSARY office. Its institution resulted in the spread of the word of God and the growth of the church

“A Church that cares for its own members is the only kind of church that is capable of caring for new people.” – Gordon Keddie

“The mercy ministry of the deacons, as a necessary adjunct to the preaching and pastoral ministries of the elders, is vital to the evangelistic witness of the church, and reflects the fact that our Lord himself ‘went around doing good’ and teaches us to do the same.” – Gordon Keddie