

Acts 6:1-7 - Deacons - Part 1 - Their Origin and Vital Importance

Introduction: In continuing our series on our church's mission statement - speaking of the strengthening of individuals and covenant families, we now move to the office of deacon. We have looked at how the ministry of Teaching and Ruling Elders is to strengthen individuals through the ministry of the Word and prayer. We looked at the specific duties of elders from Titus chapters 1 and 2 - that they are to be defenders and teachers of sound doctrine, biblical righteousness, as well as the protectors of Christian Liberty of conscience in their churches. **This morning** - we look at the rationale for the diaconate and its vital importance to church life. And when we consider the occasion that gave rise to its formation, it ought to encourage us. Why was the diaconate created? Because the apostles ***had dropped the ball on something very important*** - *the proper care of widows.*

Before we begin - let's think of the question: *How important are widows to our God?*

⇒ **Isaiah** - In the opening words of Isaiah's prophecy against Judah, he says:

Isaiah 1:2, 17, 23 "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: " I have nourished and brought up children, And they have rebelled against Me;.... Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the **widow**. ... Your princes are rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, **Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.** ...

Isaiah 10:1-2 "Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, Who write misfortune, Which they have prescribed [2] To rob the needy of justice, And to take what is right from the poor of My people, **That widows may be their prey,** And that they may rob the fatherless."

Hear the promise God makes to Israel through Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 7:5-7 For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, [6] if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, **and the widow**, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, [7] then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

God rebuked the exiled Jews through Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 22:6-8 "Look, the princes of Israel: each one has used his power to shed blood in you. [7] In you they have made light of father and mother; in your midst they have oppressed the stranger; in you **they have mistreated the fatherless and the widow.** [8] You have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths.

Why such strong rebukes for this? The law contains commands about widows and those in need that the Israelites had neglected:

Deut. 14:28-29 "At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. [29] And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and **the stranger and the fatherless and the widow** who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

Why are widows and needy people - orphans, the fatherless, and downtrodden - and people in general so important to God?

⇒ It is because life itself is the special creation of God and human beings, all human beings - strong and weak, large and small, wanted and unwanted, young and old, sick and well ***are created in His image*** and as such are to be seen as special and worthy of respect, help, love, and *in the case of Acts 6 here before us: mercy.*

⇒ The comprehensive nature of being "pro-life" - is to value, love, and be concerned for *all human life - not just unborn human life.* Christians have a long history of remarkable works of

charity, self-giving, and care given to all human life *in need*. George Grant, in his book: *The Third Time Around* documents century by century the incredible acts of mercy that have been done by the Christian people from the cross down to the present day. He gives the following wonderful quotation:

Life is God's gift. It is His gracious endowment upon the created order. It flows forth in generative fruitfulness. The earth is literally *teeming* with life (see Genesis 1:20; Leviticus 11:10; 22:5; Deuteronomy 14:9). And the crowning glory of this sacred teeming is man himself (see Genesis 1:26-30; Psalm 8:1-9). To violate the sanctity of this magnificent endowment **[which is, sadly, what the apostles themselves were doing by neglecting widows in the daily distribution of food in Acts 6]** is to fly in the face of all that is holy, just, and true (see Jeremiah 8:1-17; Romans 8:6).

To violate the sanctity of life is to invite judgment, retribution, and anathema (see Deuteronomy 30:19-20). It is to solicit devastation, imprecation, and destruction (Jeremiah 21:8-10). The Apostle Paul tells us, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, whatsoever a man sows, that he shall also reap."

But the Lord God, who is the giver of life, the fountain of life, the defender of life, the prince of life, and the restorer of life, did not leave men to languish hopelessly in the clutches of sin and death. He not only sent us the message of life and the words of life, He sent us the light of life as well. He sent us His only begotten Son - the life of the world - to break the bonds of death. Jesus "tasted death...", actually abolishing death for our sakes and offering us new life...

The implication is clear: the pro-life movement and the Christian faith are synonymous. Where there is one, there will be the other - for one cannot be had without the other. Further, the primary conflict in temporal history always has been and always will be the struggle for life by the church against the natural inclinations of all men everywhere.

To be a Christian is to turn your back on death and to embrace and love human life - all human life. We live not just in a country that devalues life, but the entire thrust of unbelief is to embrace death and discard the sanctity of human life:

Wisdom speaking in Proverbs 8:36 says: "But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; All those who hate me love death."

The New York Times published an article awhile back called "Granny Dumping by the Thousands." In it, we read:

It was a sad and troubling story. John Kingery, 82, suffering from Alzheimer's disease and wearing a sweatshirt inscribed "Proud To Be An American," was abandoned outside the men's room at a dog racing track in Post Falls, Idaho. His wheelchair had been stripped of identification and his clothing labels ripped out; he couldn't remember his own name. Pictures of him clutching his teddy bear as attendants prepared to send him home to Oregon provoked a national wince. But what turns a wince into an ache is the sudden awareness that John Kingery is no isolated case. The American College of Emergency Physicians estimates that 70,000 elderly Americans were abandoned last year by family members unable or unwilling to care for them or pay for their care.

We are to be the exact opposite of this - The Christian church must always and has always led the way in *mercy ministries*.

A problem of our day: So much of what used to be done by Christians and other charitable

individuals has been taken over by the state. The first line of defense for people in need is always their *family*. **1 Tim. 5:3-5** Honor widows who are really widows. [4] But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. [5] Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.

⇒ the first line of defense is always family

⇒ if family either doesn't exist or is unwilling or unable to take care of widows, ***then the church must do it.***

⇒ the apostles *knew this and tried... but it was just too much for them to do alone without neglecting their other duties*

With all that in mind, let us now walk through this text:

1) The Great Crisis - v1-2; 2) The Solution - v3-4; 3) The Ordination of the First Deacons - v5-6; 4) Why Deacons are so Very Important - v7

1. The Great Crisis - v1-2

[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.

Point: The number of disciples was multiplying - and the apostles and elders were the ones who did everything related to both the spiritual and physical aspects of ministry to *all of these new disciples*.

Point 2: While all of this was happening, a complaint arose against the Hebrews by the Hellenists (i.e. the Christians of Greek descent).

⇒ **The complaint:** Their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

Application: read the next verse - their response.

[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.

Point: The apostles summon the "multitude of the disciples" to address the situation.

Illustration: There are many things Christian people might complain about - some of which are better ignored... but the neglect of widows was a major problem that demanded an answer. It could not be allowed to continue.

2. The Solution - v3-4

[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;

Point: The "multitude of the disciples" were to select their own men for this service. Notice the basic requirements the apostles lay down here:

⇒ **good reputation** - so very important - such men must be well-regarded *by others*.

Proverbs 20:6 Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, But who can find a faithful man?

Proverbs 27:2 Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips.

Proverbs 27:21b ... And a man is valued by what others say of him.

⇒ **full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom** - i.e. very godly Christian men who know the faith well and know the proper application of the faith. The diaconate is a powerful force for service, godliness, and evangelism in the church of Jesus Christ. Why? *Because they are "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom!"*

Point 2: They are “appointed over this business” - i.e. the ministry of mercy to widows.

[4] but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Point: The crisis was actually two-fold. Why were the widows being neglected? Well, it wasn't because the apostles were lazy or unconcerned. They were busy with other matters - namely: *the ministry of the Word and prayer.*

⇒ Knowing Scripture and what it teaches and becoming equipped to teach that to others is very time-consuming. Also, being faithful to the prayer needs of the church is likewise time consuming *if TEs and REs take that duty of prayer seriously.*

⇒ There is precedent for this distribution of labor in the OT as well - *Jethro's advice to Moses:*

Exodus 18:13-19 And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. [14] So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?" [15] And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. [16] When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws." [17] So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do is not good. [18] Both you and these people who are with you **will surely wear yourselves out**. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. [19] Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God.

⇒ He goes on to instruct Moses in v21:

Exodus 18:21 Moreover you shall select from all the people **able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness**; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

Application: The very same thing happened here. The “diaconate” - i.e. the “servants” of the church were appointed because they were spiritually qualified to take this ministry of physical mercy to widows upon themselves *so that the ministry of the Word and prayer would not be neglected either.*

Question: Does this mean that *all service* in the church of Christ is done *only* by deacons?

The elders minister the Word and pray, the deacons serve, and everyone *just goes here*, right?

The fact is - all true believers are “servants” of Christ and His body, the church!

Ephes. 4:11-12 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, [12] for the equipping of the saints for the work of **ministry** {noun: *diakonia* - “*service*”}, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

Application: Deacons then are the exemplars of service to the body of Christ.

However - we *all* serve. If an elder lives near someone who could use some help, they are allowed to ask that elder to pick up and run with that service.

Illustration: If there was a disabled church member or someone elderly who needed their grass cut because it was too difficult for them to do it, and I lived near them, the deacons could ask me to cut it. And I'd respond with: “My sons would love to do that.”

Application: We are all called to service, but the organization, carrying out, and at times delegating of service is to be organized and run by the deacons - with the session's direction and input as well. The idea is to keep the elders free to pursue the ministry of the Word and prayer with the disciples of Christ under their care. And so, the deacons are there to help create an environment where the needy are not neglected and the spiritual needs of the congregation are *likewise not neglected.*

3. The Ordination of the First Deacons - v5-6

[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.

Point: There are some who try to argue that this passage here in Acts 6 is not the beginning of the diaconate. However, I think verse 6 lays that idea to rest. These *men* had hands laid upon them to be set apart - i.e. *ordained* - to this special office of service to the church. If this is not ordaining deacons, then what is it? Do we lay hands on anyone and everyone that we appoint for *any special task in the church*? Certainly not.

Final argument: Surely the argument must go deeper than: "But the specific word, *diakonos*, is not used in the text." But does a word need to be used in a passage for the same concept to be there? Certainly not.

Notice also - all deacons were men. We will look carefully at the passage in 1 Timothy 3 on deacons next week and address questions that passage raises about who is allowed to be a deacon, but in this specific text, the instructions the apostles gave "the multitude of the disciples" were in v2: "**seek out from among you seven men of good reputation...**"

4. Why Deacons are so Very Important - v7

[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.

Point: Once the problem was solved by the setting apart of men via being selected by the multitude of disciples and then the laying on the hands of the apostles, notice the result: ⇒ "Then the word of God spread" - the taking care of the needy, the widow, the orphan, the destitute, is a powerful testimony to the *reality of the life changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ*. Life transformation, priority transformation, culture transformation brought about by the heart transformation of individuals through the power of the gospel of Christ - which bears the fruit of true *love for God and neighbor really does show the world that we are indeed Jesus' disciples*.

Illustration: When the moving van pulled in here with our stuff.... it amazed me how many people were here waiting for us. And within 1 hour and 20 minutes, all of our stuff was in the manse. I think I carried 2 or 3 things in.

Application: To the world watching, that is a powerful testimony to the reality of the love of Christ in your hearts.

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Next Sunday we will look at the qualification and work of deacons. And remember - all of this falls under the Great Commission and the strengthening of individuals and covenant families. There is still much, much more on deacons coming!

Jude 1:24-25 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, [25] To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen.