

Acts 6:1-7 | 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> 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 Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> 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.

## Acts 6:1-7 | Appointing of the Deacons

William Cowper penned his famous hymn “God Moves in Mysterious Ways” in England, 1773. I love this line.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

Today’s text is about the occasion in which the office of deacons were created. The church has two ordained offices, elders and deacons. Elders are responsible for government oversight and teaching within the church. Deacons are responsible for practical needs of the church body and fostering hospitality and generosity within the church. This is the God ordained structure for the care of the local church. You might expect that the structure of the local church would be given by immediate revelation to the apostles. If the office of Deacon is so necessary within the church why wouldn’t God have told the apostles this right away, like just after the great commission? Well, it’s better this way.

Beneath this story of the creation of the office of deacons, I’d like us also to see the ordinary way in which God works through problems. You’ve got problems. Some you know, some are just around the corner. Some feel like storms brewing on the horizon. Our ordinary disposition towards mounting problems or even the discovery of problems is fear or dread. But fear and dread have no place in the life of a Christian. You see the life of a Christian and the life of the church does not have as one of its features a lack of problems. We’ve got problems that are present and more to come. But with our problems we have a confidence of God’s hand and plan working through and in our problems for our joy and his glory.

Take courage, the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy.

# 1. The Problem

Acts 6:1 | 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.

We've heard stories of the growth of the church and of the unity that is experienced. The church is in deep communion with the Apostles and one another. It is a glorious season to imagine when the authors of the scripture are within earshot. But there is never a season or structure of the church which can be merely set on autopilot. There is no structure so complete which it doesn't need amending, and the great building of the church will not be constructed in a day. It still needs more added to it. Such is the case even with immediate apostolic rule, problems will arise.

The problem comes in the form of a complaint by the Hellenists, that is the Greek speaking Jewish Christians, against the Hebrew speaking Jewish Christians. The complaint was that the Greek speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. The word for *distribution* is *διάκονος*. So you can see where we were headed.

There are several things to note regarding the shape of this problem.

1. Growth is always attended by new difficulties. It becomes more difficult to prevent hypocrites from joining the ranks of the church, and more difficult to attend the needs of the church. All regular problems exist at scale. But this is one of the subtle temptations of Satan, to cause fixation on the difficulties of growth as a means of stalling the growth of the church. Growth is good, Jesus wants it, the church ought to pursue it.
2. The diversity of nations within the church requires practical working out that is not merely settled at Pentecost. This is one of the central dramas of the New Testament that shows itself here in the murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews. These two groups spoke different languages and had different synagogues they would have attended but now share this unity under Christ and a Christian community which had committed that there would not be a needy person among them. This drama will increase at the inclusion of gentiles.
3. These two issues are necessarily related. Growth of the gospel at the local church level poses its difficulties and this must spill over into the international level which also poses its difficulties. These must not be accepted as reasons to resist growth which is a subtle technique of Satan.

# 2. The Delegation of Deacons

Acts 6:2 | 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.

The apostles provide a masterclass in addressing a delicate situation ripe with opportunity to create division within the church. The whole situation is proof of the meekness and patience of the Apostles because the complaint is against them. They are the ones who had responsibility for the distribution, and within the complaint is at least potentially an accusation of partiality on behalf of the apostles.

They begin by acknowledging the particularity of their calling. This might read as arrogance. Beginning by saying, “not my problem.” But it is precisely the opposite. It is humility in acknowledging the calling they had received from the Lord and their own limitations they must account for in fulfilling that calling. This is a problem, and we cannot fulfill it without neglecting the essentials of our calling. The parallel is Moses judging all of Israel himself. His father-in-law Jethro explained to him he must delegate this responsibility otherwise he will be neglecting his responsibility.

Acts 6:3-4 | 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The apostles accomplish three things. First they address the problem by delegating the duty to men. Amidst this they describe the qualities and process necessary for the duty to be fulfilled. Then they describe clearly their role in relationship to the matter, lest their delegation be perceived as neglect.

The first deacons are seven men. And the qualities necessary for these men are that they would be full of The Spirit and of wisdom. These are necessary because the men will be in a leadership position within the church that requires love and generosity for the people supplied by the spirit to maintain unity. And has complicated problems which need to be solved which require wisdom. Likewise they understand that they are putting men in a position in which they will receive criticism and murmuring. They must be men of like caliber to the apostles who when murmured about do not respond to save their own face, but respond for the sake of caring for the body.

The process that they describe requires the participation of the church body in picking out the men. And then it requires the Apostles appointing of these men. They strike this balance within the church which we seek to hold to today, in which the body selects those who will be over them in authority and receives the guidance and final responsibility from the Apostles. This is the very method used in our church today. The body elects the ordained offices and the Session of elders confirms them in their office.

The Apostles themselves, will be devoted to the word and prayer. This is a ministry which requires the whole person. It does not mean that they never helped the poor but it means that the church will be fed. It is the responsibility of elders and teachers to addict themselves to the word and prayer. All of our fruitfulness depends upon these.

### 3. The Appointment and Blessing of Deacons

Acts 6:5 | 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 Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

The wisdom of the Apostles blesses the whole gathering who is able to share in unity of mind with the process introduced. They are able to discern these virtues from among their own ranks and propose the seven men who will be ordained to the office of deacon.

There are two men who have things said about them amongst these initial seven deacons. The first one is Stephen who we will get to know over the next several weeks. Stephen becomes the first martyr after the resurrection of Christ. He is full of faith and the Holy Spirit. This shows us that the office of Deacon being primarily to the end of physical needs does not mean to quench the personal ministry of any of its members.

The second is Nicolaus. Nicolaus is described as a proselyte of Antioch. This means he is Greek who converted to Judaism and then converted to Christianity. Many in the early church link this Nicolaus with being the leader of the Nicolaitans. Jesus, speaking to the church in Ephesus in Revelation says,

Revelation 2:6 | Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Picked by the united early church, and appointed by the wisdom of the apostles themselves. Yet from within the ranks of the first deacons comes an apostate who will take many others away from Christ with him. There is finally no process which eliminates all future problems. The Lord keeps us humble and dependent upon him always.

Acts 6:6 | These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

The laying on of hands is a rite of ordination. Of course with all rites the efficacy of it is in the Holy Spirit's attending in faith. This is the process for our Deacons as well and Elders. These two ordained offices of the church following the biblical model are burdens reserved to be born by men for the sake of the bride of Christ. The however their model of character and service ought to be taken up by all in the church, men and women, ordained and lay, only here does the body find the fulness of glory.

God gave the early church a problem. But in doing so he blessed the church forever with a necessary office. You should consider this pattern for the problems you face. Likewise you should be grateful for the deacons who serve your church. Tom, Allan, Jonathan, and Ryan fit these qualifications and accomplish great cares and generosity for the church body.