

By the Strength That God Supplies
Acts 6:1–7

During WWII, England needed to increase its production of coal, so Winston Churchill spoke to the labor leaders to seek their help and to inspire them. He asked them to imagine a great parade at the end of the war, where in the procession, first would come soldiers who had fought on land, then sailors who fought on the seas, then pilots who had fought in the air; but after the soldiers and sailors and pilots would come this group of sweaty coal miners covered in black soot.

He asked them to imagine someone shouting to the miners, *“Where were you during the critical days of our struggle?”* Churchill then said that the miners could proudly reply, *“We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.”*

For England’s mission to be successful, the country desperately needed those coal miners. Though their role would be underestimated, though they would be laboring out of sight, literally beneath the surface of the earth, they were essential to the mission.

God’s mission to build His church is carried out in a similar way. Some roles are more visible or seem more important than others. But servants of different kinds are needed who will use the abilities given to them by God.

However, because of our sinful nature, we naturally have a warped view of serving. Serving, and therefore servants, can be unappreciated or seen as “lesser,” which is ironic because serving was necessary for us to be saved from our sins.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, but to do so, He had to serve us. Jesus said that he came not to be served but to serve, and Philippians 2 in the NT tells us that though Jesus was God, He took the form of a “slave.” Not the type of slavery where a person is kidnapped and made a slave, but rather, Jesus became like what was known as a “bond servant.” He willingly submitted himself to serving others in a certain way for a certain period of time.

And by doing so, He freed His people from our slavery to sin and death. So because God has determined that serving is key to His mission, we should put a high premium on the contribution that serving makes.

But how does serving contribute? Notice the outline on page 6 in your WG. I use the phrase “God-ordained serving.” All serving in the church is ordained by God in the sense that He decrees or commands it. But there must be qualified men who are appointed to authority in serving. They lead the serving. We call this appointment “ordination.”

Acts 6 describes not just serving in general, but the establishment of the office of deacon. Deacon is a word we see later in the NT which basically means “servant. When we understand the God-ordained service of deacons we can understand serving in the church. And

God-ordained serving contributes to the mission of God in three ways that we see here: it fulfills the deed ministry, assists the Word ministry, and completes the total ministry God uses to build His church.

Look again at verse 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.”* The NT book of Acts records the growth of the church after Jesus returned to heaven. More and more people were repenting and trusting in Christ.

Acts 2 tells us that many Jewish people who once lived abroad moved to the city of Jerusalem. They spoke Greek rather than the classic Jewish languages of Hebrew and Aramaic. When Peter preached about Jesus many Jews became Christians, and so there were two groups in the church: Greek-speaking Jews who were called “Hellenists,” and Hebrew/Aramaic speakers who were called “Hebrews.”

This included many elderly people and widows. Now, the Jewish synagogues fed and cared for Jewish widows. But the Jewish synagogues were not helping the widows who were now Christians. This responsibility fell to the Christian church. And the Greek-speaking widows who had become Christians were being overlooked.

Scholars are not sure exactly why. It could have been discrimination, because they were seen as outsiders, or it could have been that there simply wasn't a good system in place to help this growing number of people. Also, there were less of the Greek-speaking Christians, so they were a minority, and then the widows were a minority within the minority. They might be easy to forget about. But the needs of these dear Christian widows was important.

In the classic Dr. Seuss book Horton Hears a Who, which was also made into a movie, Horton the Elephant hears a speck of dust talking to him. He learns that the speck is a tiny planet with a city called Whoville, where the Whos live. They could be easily overlooked and destroyed, and so Horton vows to protect the Whos, and he places the speck on a clover. But he's ridiculed by the other animals in the jungle because they can't hear what he hears. They think he's crazy and foolish.

Finally, Horton stands up to the animals and says, *“Go ahead. Rope me. Cage me! Do whatever you want, but there are people on this speck... And even though you can't hear or see them at all, a person's a person, no matter how small.”*

Both the OT and NT are clear that the people of God must care for their own who are in need. In Galatians 6, Paul writes, *“As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”* This includes widows, aging parents, the poor. The physical needs of God's people matter to Him, and so they must matter to His church.

These things are part of the deed ministry of the church. God uses our deeds of sympathy and service to build His church, and these things are so vital and important as He builds His church that God ordains men to lead in it.

Do you see how your own concerns in life might be so great that you overlook those around you who are in need? If so, you are beginning to recognize the essential nature of deed ministry. The response of the apostles here confirms the importance of this work. Notice verse 2:

“And the twelve [that is, the apostles] summoned the full number of the disciples [that is, the church] 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 to the ministry of the word.”

The church elected the officers and the apostles set them apart for the work. Now maybe you wonder, “What is an apostle?” The apostles were unique in the church in that they were chosen and called by Jesus Himself. They had a special role in the history of redemption. Incidentally, that office has now ceased.

There are no more apostles, and it is wrong for someone to claim that title. Paul says in Ephesians 2 that the church is *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”* The foundation of the church is complete. God now builds on top of that.

Have you ever seen the building of a house? Once a foundation is laid, they don't lay an additional on. So, there are no more prophets and apostles. However, there is an aspect of the apostles' office that does still exist and that is their role as the elders or shepherds of the church.

They were the first elders. In 1 Peter 5, the apostle Peter says to the churches, *“I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder.”* All apostles were elders, but not all elders are apostles. In the early days of the church, the apostles were doing some deacon-type things, but as the church grew in number and in need, this became increasingly difficult.

The apostles aren't too busy to deal with it, though; however, they are too busy to do it alone.

You might read verses 2-4 and think that the apostles don't highly value this role because they call it “serving tables.” But the fact that they ordain these men shows how highly they value the role. They don't just throw some people at the problem. The congregation chooses seven qualified men. Verse 3 touches on the qualifications. They must be *“of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”* The apostle Paul expands on the qualifications of the deacon in 1 Timothy 3.

And notice that it specifies “men.” Some folks do not want to accept this today, but God's Word commands that men fill these roles of authority in His church. As the husband is the head

of the wife and of the home, so men fill the role of headship in the church under the authority of Christ.

And verse [6] *“These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”* This is the way elders are set apart. Laying hands on them, they ordain them to service. This signifies their authority and our recognition that God has called these men.

And embedded in these verses is something critical to understanding the deacon’s role: their fulfillment of the deed ministry assists the Word ministry. “Ministry of the word” in verse 4 connects the role of preaching to the work of the kingdom.

But I want to point something out here: even though you only see the word “serving” in English one time, it’s actually present three times in the Greek manuscripts. Back in verse 1, *“daily distribution”* could be literally translated *“daily serving.”*

And in verse 4, *“we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word”* could be literally translated *“to prayer and the serving of the Word.”* The repetition of this basic word for “serving” makes it clear that it’s all serving.

God’s people are gifted and led by God to serve in different ways. God uses it all to build His church.

We have seen these principles on display first hand as Good Shepherd has grown. As the number of people grows, the number of needs grows. And as the needs grow, folks must be activated and incorporated into serving.

A system is needed; there must be organization. I understand some people are critical of “organized religion.” But God organized His NT people just as He did His OT people. Jesus appointed the first elders, who then appointed the first deacons, and the apostles affirmed that this pattern of leadership was to continue. And we see that all the church members are to be involved in assisting the elders and deacons.

This is our goal at GS: for every man, woman, and child to serve according to their gifts. The apostle Peter speaks to this in 1 Peter 4. He tells the churches, *[10] As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: [11] whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”*

Peter is referring first of all to the God-ordained offices of elder and deacon, but remember, these men are not to do all the serving, nor are they able to do it all; but they lead the serving and are accountable to God for it. We must all serve by the strength that God supplies through Christ for the glory of God.

The GS officers and staff are working on a Ministry Team plan that divides up serving in our church. Please pray for us in this. It takes discernment and wisdom to involve every member.

But something fascinating happens when God's people serve according to His plans.

Once these deacons were appointed and began to lead in this way, look at verse [7], "*the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.*" This doesn't refer to the New Testament Scriptures being added to; it means that the effect of the gospel was increasingly visible.

More people were coming to faith in Jesus and their lives reflected a change within. It's the change that should be increasing in someone who is born again. The Bible says there will ups and downs, but overall, when believers look back on their lives, they will see growth, even if at times it's very minor growth.

The church was growing. And notice the last part of verse 7, "*a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*" The Jewish priests carried out the religious sacrifices for the people. They were the ordained servants of the Old Covenant community.

Luke implies that the value placed on serving by the apostles and the NT church had an effect on these priests. It appears that many Jewish priests began to be drawn by the servant heart of Jesus and were born again. All the serving was bearing fruit and completing the total ministry used by God to build His church His way.

Jesus made a statement in John 13 that gets to the heart of this serving in the church. He told his disciples, "*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" Serving is love. The apostle John later wrote, "*God is love.*"

And it makes sense, because God served us. Jesus came to earth and He perfectly fulfilled the deacon's ministry of service and sympathy, while also perfectly fulfilling the elder's ministry of shepherding, ruling, and teaching. Only Jesus is that total package.

And as we all serve By the Strength That God Supplies, we give to each other and to the world the whole Christ. Have you surrendered your life to Jesus Christ? Have you surrendered your abilities, your gifts, to Him? He will use them to build His church.

Let's pray.