

Up to the Task, Part 2: A Deacon is a Partner
Acts 6:1-7

During WWII, England needed to increase its production of coal, and so Winston Churchill spoke to the labor leaders and requested their help. He asked them to imagine a great victory parade at the end of the war. In the parade, first would come the soldiers who had fought on land. Then the sailors who had fought on the sea. Then the pilots who had fought in the air.

And then would come this group of sweaty coal miners covered in black soot. Someone would shout to the miners, *“Where were you during the critical days of our struggle?”* And they all would reply, *“We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.”*

Some jobs weren’t so prominent or dazzling, but they were just as important. It’s typical to overlook those serving in the not-so-glamorous roles, just as it’s typical to overlook the not-so-glamorous people. The church can be like this as well.

But God sees and values every role, every job, and every person in His church. So we should value what God values. God cares about the whole person – spiritual needs and physical needs. And the establishment of the office of deacon is evidence of this.

It is an office of sympathy and service. Deacons care for mercy, money, and material needs on Jesus’ behalf. And in doing so, they are partners with the elders of the church. This passage in Acts 6 shows us the NT origin of the office and gives us biblical insight into how deacons are partners. You can see the outline on page 6 of your WG. There are three aspects to the deacons’ partnership with elders: the care of, authority over, and growth of God’s flock.

Our members should be contemplating who among the men of our church they will nominate as potential deacons. But just as with the office of elder, the office of deacon helps us know Jesus Christ better, so that we may walk by faith. So let’s look at these together.

Now look again at verse [1]. More and more people were coming to faith in Christ, but then, *“A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews.”* Acts 2 says that many Jewish people had been living abroad but came to Jerusalem to settle. They heard Peter preach about Jesus and they became Christians. This included many elderly people, and because they had lived in other places, they spoke the Greek language rather than Aramaic or Hebrew (the classic Jewish languages). The Greek-speaking Jews were called “Hellenists,” the Aramaic-speaking Jews, “Hebrews.”

At that time in the first century, Jewish widows were cared for by the Jewish synagogues, but the Jewish synagogues were no longer helping those who had become Christians. Acts 4 says believers were giving from their own possessions, and the proceeds were distributed to other believers in need. Widows were especially needy at that time. But somehow the Greek-speaking *“widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”*

Scholars aren't sure why they were being neglected. The meaning here is "overlooked." There were less of them – a minority – and widows were a minority within the minority. It doesn't appear to be intentional, although it could have been discrimination, because they were seen as outsiders. But most likely, it was because there was not yet a system in place. An organizational plan was needed. They could be easily forgotten. But God saw and He valued them.

In the Dr. Seuss classic 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, so Horton vows to protect the Whos and he places the speck on a clover, but he's constantly ridiculed by the other animals in the jungle because they can't hear what he hears.

They think he's crazy and foolish. They want him to destroy the speck, and they go back and forth with Horton, until finally, Horton stands up to the animals and says, "*...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.*" God sees these widows' needs, as He sees all of His people and all their needs.

Now as I said last week, the apostles were the first elders, the shepherds of the church, leading God's flock under the guidance of Christ Jesus. And so everyone looks to them to do something about this – to advocate for those in need. Notice verse [2] *And the twelve* (that's the apostles) *summoned the full number of the disciples* (that's the whole congregation) *and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.'*"

Now, the apostles most certainly cared. But they realized they weren't going to be able to adequately care for God's flock by preaching God's Word and adequately care for these dear widows. "Serve tables" is an interesting choice of words. You could translate it as "minister food." These hungry people needed to be ministered to according to their need. They needed someone to "serve" them. The word "deacon" is our English-version of their Greek word which simply meant "servant."

But not just anyone would do. Look at verse 3. Jointly, the apostles announced to the disciples, [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.*" These special servants needed to be men of good reputation. This is an initial list of the qualifications for the office of deacon – a list that the apostle Paul expands in 1 Timothy 3. They must be "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

You might read verse 2 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 job. However, something else about this passage helps us see the importance of the work. Even though you only see the word "serving" one time in English, it's actually there three times in the Greek manuscripts. "Daily distribution" could be translated as "daily serving." And "the ministry of the Word" could be translated as, "the serving of the Word."

That doesn't mean there's something wrong with your English translation, but anytime words are translated, the translator must interpret what the author means. *"Daily distribution"* gives you a better idea of what is going on. *"Ministry of the Word"* connects the apostles' role of preaching to the work of the kingdom. But the repetition of this basic word for *"serving"* clues us in to the main point here: All of it is serving the kingdom. It's all for the care of God's people. And men set apart as officers of the church oversee this care. Deacons and elders partnering with each other in the complete care of God's flock.

Do you recognize that all aspects of what we do in the church are for your care, to serve you – to minister to you – according to your many needs? You need the preaching of the Word. You need worship on the Lord's Day. You need the unified, caring body of Christ around you. Elders and deacons oversee this.

Now look at verse [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. [6] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them."* The apostles don't neglect the situation. They aren't too busy to deal with it, although they are too busy to do it alone. But they don't just throw some people at the problem. They appoint what we understand to be the first deacons of the church.

Back in verse 3, they said, *"pick out from among you."* The deacons were nominated by the church members, then approved and appointed by the elders. This is the basic process we take in our church, though we have a longer period of training and examination in our best attempt to ensure that the men are truly qualified.

This plan by the apostles promoted the unity and peace of the congregation, notice verse 5. It says, *"What they said pleased the whole gathering."* Now, Stephen had an exceptional reputation as a follower of Christ, but they were all qualified. And the approval, coupled with prayer and the laying on of hands, signifies their setting apart in an official manner for the work.

And look again at the names. Nicolaus was apparently a Gentile. This is a big step in the growth of the church – non-Jew becoming an officer. And all of these men have Greek names. They were very likely Hellenists, which also shows that men from every people and language were becoming church leaders.

You know the old saying goes, *"Necessity is the mother of invention."* It was necessity that precipitated the formal ordaining of the first NT deacons. However, there is OT precedent for deacons just as there is for elders.

In Exodus 18, Moses' father-in-law Jethro encourages him to appoint numerous men to serve as heads over the people and assist with oversight. These were called "elders." There is no plain OT reference to "deacon," but certain groups of the Levitical priests performed duties similar to NT deacons. They divided OT ministry duties much like they do here in Acts 6.

Deacons partner with elders in the authority over God's flock. Because it is a position of authority, the role should not be taken lightly. Neither should the nomination of a man for the office. The care of the flock is essential, and the authority carries with it great responsibility.

Now look at this final verse. It says, *"the word of God continued to increase."* This doesn't refer to the NT Scripture being added to – more of the Bible being written – but rather 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 be ups and downs, but overall, when believers look back on their lives, they should see growth, even if at times it's very minor growth.

And notice verse 7 says, *"a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."* Jewish priests carried out the religious sacrifices for the people. They were servants in that way. Luke implies that the value placed on serving by the apostles and the NT church had an effect on these priests.

Hebrews 4 in the NT points out that Jesus is our Great High Priest. WSC Q&A 25 says, *"How does Christ execute (or fulfill) the office of a priest? ...in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us"* That means that Jesus saved us from God's anger toward sin, and He made us right with God, and He prays for us (makes intercession). In all of these things, he served and continues to serve us. These Jewish priests were drawn by the servant heart of Jesus and they were born again. Deacons partnered with elders, resulting in the growth of God's flock.

The PCA Book of Church Order summarizes the office of deacon like this: *"It is the duty of the deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality (in other words, generosity) in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed. They shall have the care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation. And notice how this relates to what we just saw in Acts 6: "In the discharge of their duties the deacons are under the supervision and authority of the Session."*

Deacons partner with elders in the care of, authority over, and growth of God's flock. They will serve us, and also, they will demonstrate for us something about our Lord and Savior. In Philippians 4, the apostle Paul tells the church in Philippi, *[19] my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

The offices of elder and deacon remind us that our God cares for us and Jesus still serves us. He shepherds and ministers to us by His Spirit and through His Word, and also, by those whom

He gifts and calls to minister to us. Our Good Shepherd is not absent. On the contrary, he is ever-present.

Do you embrace the Lord Jesus daily in this way? Take time to look around and see how he has served you and still serves you. Pause to consider deeply how He was and is able to accomplish the task of your care. Jesus is as the One who can supply every need, who supplies righteousness for sinners, life for the spiritually dead, peace for rebels, a warm welcome for prodigals, and a gentle word for the self-righteous. Do you know Him in this way?

Turn to Him today in faith. You are a sinner in need. Cry out to Him! His is ever-available, and ever-listening, and ever-ready to receive you. Let's pray together.