

The Need for Deacons

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[0:00] Indeed, we do have a really tremendous opportunity to worship tonight.

! I am going to preach a little bit, take this as kind of a teachable moment on the issue of deacon. And so ultimately our point of worship is going to be around the ordination of a young man to this very important office in the church.

What we want to consider tonight is just how all that got started. Not with Kylie. That started long before he knew it. But I mean all this thing about deacons in the church.

And, you know, deacons have maybe a little less than pastors, but deacons have kind of been the brunt of jokes over the years. And I've heard a lot of preacher jokes.

And I've heard a few deacon jokes. For example, it seems there was a new pastor that had come on the church field and very gung-ho as new pastors are.

[1:17] And a few Sundays on into his ministry he had been asked to teach a boys' Sunday school class in the absence of their regular teacher.

And so he agreed to that and looked forward to that and really was very interested in discovering maybe the spiritual maturity of some of the children in his church. And so he had these boys in the class and he decided he would see just how much of the Bible they knew.

And so he asked this question of them. He said, boys, who knocked down the walls of Jericho?

Simple question, right? Well, all the boys were silent for a moment.

And then immediately, one by one and sometimes in unison, they all said, we didn't do it. We didn't do it. Well, of course, the preacher was appalled by their biblical ignorance.

And so much so that the next time the deacons met, he kind of expressed his concern about that, you know. That the children of the church didn't know more than that about the Bible.

[2:26] That they couldn't even answer a simple question like that. You know, like who knocked down the walls of Jericho? And he lamented about that to his deacons. He said, brethren, not one of those boys knew the answer to that question.

Not one of them knew who knocked down the walls of Jericho. Well, the group sat there in silence until finally one seasoned deacon, the chairman of the deacon.

He'd been a deacon for years upon years. In fact, he was a charter member of the church. And he stood very slowly and solemnly spoke, you know.

He'd been an experienced deacon. And he also knew how to, you know, kind of smooth the little problems over. And so he stood up and he finally spoke with this dignified voice.

And he said, brother pastor, this appears to be something very important to you. And it seems to be bothering you quite a lot.

[3:36] He said, but pastor, I have known those boys since they were born. And I can assure you they're good boys. And I can tell you they didn't do it.

They didn't do it. They answered correctly, pastor. They did not do it. So let's just take some funds out of the budget and fix Mr. Jericho, whoever he is, fix his walls and be done with it.

All right, that's for all the deacons in here, okay? What was that? Second to most. And some of you are thinking, who's this Mr. Jericho?

I don't know who he is. Well, that was payback time for all the preacher jokes that I've had to endure over the years, all right? But now, seriously, I have a great deal of respect for deacons, the office of deacons.

Now, I have had some problems with particular deacons over the years, all right? None here. I can say that. I'm not just saying that to put you at ease.

[4:49] We've got a great bunch of deacons in our church. Those that are serving now and those who have rotated off. And we just have... This church just has a wonderful body of deacons. Very

committed.

And Kylie is about to be added to that number. And I know that he will serve with everything he's got. But I have a great deal of respect for the office and the function of deacons in the church.

A function that maybe some of you don't see and should see. A function that maybe some of you don't know anything about. And maybe you know very little about what a deacon is.

You know, it does vary, by the way, from church to church. The importance of the deacon body and the role of the deacon. All the way from being absolute rulers of the church.

To simply committed servants of the church. Which is the case with our deacons here. But I want to take the opportunity, since we're going to be ordaining a new deacon tonight.

[5:53] To again use this as a kind of teachable moment. Now, for many of you, maybe even most of you. I don't think all of you necessarily. But maybe most of you, what I'm going to say tonight will be a refresher.

You'll know. You already know these things. About why we have deacons. And how all that got started. And what is the character of a deacon?

What the nature of a deacon? Who should that man be? I mean, what should he be like? And so forth. And maybe some of these, some other questions we may get to tonight.

Or may answer tonight. Now, where would I go to talk about that? Acts chapter 6. So take your Bibles and open them to Acts chapter 6.

And I'm going to read verses 1 through 7. Here's what the Bible says.

[6:54] Now, in those days, the days of the early church. The early days of the early church. 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.

Then the twelve summoned. That's the apostles. The apostles summoned the multitude of the disciples. That is, they got together the church membership. And said, it is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

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.

But we will serve or give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith in the Holy Spirit.

[8:01] And Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Teman, Parmenas, and Nicholas. You try that someday.

Pronouncing these. A proselyte from Antioch. He says it about Nicholas. Whom they set before the apostles. And when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

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. Alright? Now, let's begin with the why concerning deacons.

Why we have them today. This text answers that, obviously. You don't need any commentary for me to know that. You know that. And then when we get the why, we'll kind of move into some other areas concerning the ministry of the deacon.

It begins with a problem. Alright? There was a problem in the church. Alright? That's pretty clear. Alright? So, number one. The problem the church faced.

[9:13] The problem they faced. Now, Luke is the author of the book of Acts. Nearly all agree to that. But when Luke wrote here in verse 1, he said, Now, in these days, those days, the early days of the church, what was happening?

The number of the disciples was multiplying. Now, don't confuse the word disciples with apostles. There weren't more apostles added to the church.

Disciples were speaking here. Luke is speaking here of members of the church. Born again believers added to the church. And he's saying that the number of these members of the church was multiplying.

Multiplying. And so, in those days when this was taking place, there arose a complaint. A complaint. A complaint. About what? Well, first of all, from whom?

Well, Paul mentions the Hebrews. Alright, so here's one part of the church, identified here as Hebrews. And we'll talk about that here in just a minute. And they were being complained against.

[10:26] That is, there was murmuring against them. On the part of another group within the church. Identified here as the Hellenists. Alright, so you have Hebrews and you have Hellenists.

Now, they're all Jews. But two kind of separate groups of people. Hebrews and Hellenists. The Hellenists were complaining against the Hebrews about something. And what was that something? Well, he goes on to say, because there the Hellenists' widows were neglected in the daily distribution. A food, we're probably to assume a food distribution. Maybe even clothing, maybe other needs and so forth. A part of the ministry of the church. Alright, so there is the problem. That has come up in the church. A problem. And it's a problem the church faced and must face and must deal with. And it was gradually, I think we're to assume, that it was, well, maybe not gradually, but very rapidly, becoming a big problem in the church.

[11 : 34] Now, the problem is really threefold. So let's understand this problem as threefold. In the first place, it had to do with this problem of multiplication.

Multiplication. This multiplication of membership. Alright, now that's not a bad thing. It's very difficult to call that a problem. But I guess we could call it a good problem. But it was a problem. Something that caused some difficulty in the church. And it was the problem of multiplication. Now, you know, I might just mention this is interesting. Because back in Acts chapter 2 and verse 47.

We're not going to turn back to that. But the Bible says there, this is right on the day of Pentecost, remember? The Bible says that the Lord, what? Added to the church daily, every day, those who were being saved.

He added to the church. Praise God. Wonderful. Church was growing. Then when you get here to Acts chapter 6 and verse 1, the Bible says the number of the disciples, or converts to Christ, was multiplying.

[12 : 39] Now, that may be a small distinction. But I think, actually, the reality of it, the blessing of it, is not small at all.

Because the Holy Spirit went from adding to multiplying. And that's the way it is. And should be in the church. God adds to the church. But then as church members become faithful, new believers become faithful and grow in their faith.

They share their faith. And others are saved. And so we go from addition to multiplication. And that was certainly the case here in the early church. The church in Jerusalem.

Which, by the way, was the first church in the world. The church grew, according to Acts chapter 2 and verse 41, it grew to 3,000 people.

Just almost immediately. And then, 5,000 men. It grew to 5,000 men, the Bible says, in Acts chapter 4, verse 4.

[13 : 37] And there only the men are mentioned. So you assume that most of them have wives and maybe older children that were saved. And so it could have been as many as 15,000 to 20,000.

There by Acts chapter 4, verse 4.

And then we get to Acts chapter 6 and the numbers were apparently multiplying very rapidly. Thousands were being saved. And so by Acts 6, the church in Jerusalem may have numbered upwards to 50,000 or more.

Now that's a mega church, isn't it? By today's standards. That is a huge church. All right, now with that many members, 50,000, even if, you know, maybe exaggerating, maybe we can cut that in half, even 25,000.

It is an amazing thing, an incredible thing that they did not have more problems than they did. Can you imagine? Having that many members in the church. Now they had already had one bump in the road.

Pardon that expression. That's not become very popular of late. But one bump in the road in Acts chapter 5, remember, with Ananias and Sapphira and the Holy Spirit dealt with that pretty severely.

[14 : 50] And now here we have another problem. Another problem and the Holy Spirit has a remedy for that too. Thankfully not a severe remedy. A very practical remedy.

But now before we get to that, let me have you notice a second part of the problem they faced. There was the problem of multiplication and then secondly there was the problem of murmuring. Now we're getting to the heart of the problem.

Murmuring. Now in the New King James Version that I just read a moment ago and I'll read it to you again. The Bible says, or it's translated this way, there arose a complaint.

I really think that's a bad translation. This was more than a complaint. In fact, the King James probably is the best translation here.

And the King James uses the word murmuring. You say, well, I don't know that that is real clear to me. But I'm telling you that that's the best literal translation.

[15 : 54] That there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. A murmuring. It's more accurate because of the word that it translates.

In the Greek language, and I'll not pronounce it because I know I'll botch it. It's a hard one. And it's a hard word for a reason because it is an onomatopoeia.

Anybody know what that is? And murmuring also is an onomatopoeia. That means you pronounce it like the sound that it defines.

You know, like the ring of a phone. That's what it sounds like. So it's an onomatopoeia. So the word in the Greek, gagusamai.

Gagusamai. There's the word. And murmuring, they're both onomatopoeias. It sounds like that. And it's not really a complaint because that suggests that here you have a group, maybe a committee of several who have been formed among the Hellenists and they've come to the apostles to issue a formal complaint.

[17 : 08] It was nothing of the kind. It was a murmuring in the congregation. And the word gagusamas means a silent debate.

That's what the word means. That's why murmuring is a better word. A silent debate about something or literally a whispering that was going on.

It was a, one dictionary defined it this way, a secret displeasure, not openly avowed. It wasn't spoken openly.

And that makes sense because just a chapter before, we saw how the Holy Spirit dealt with the sin in the church then. And I imagine if you had a complaint, you'd be real careful about voicing it, you know.

It might end up like Ananias and Sapphira. And so it was just this murmuring, this kind of whispering, kind of an undercurrent, a point of displeasure, you know, that was going on out there.

[18 : 11] Now, it wasn't secret because the apostles knew about it. And they knew they needed to deal with it. All right, so what was the reason for the murmuring?

Well, in the first church of Jerusalem, again, I think obviously the first church in the entire world, there were two classes of people, as I've already said.

They had the Hebrews and the Hellenists. The Hebrews, the Hebrew-speaking Jews, is literally what the point is. They were Hebrew-speaking Jews.

They were native of Israel. All right, that's that group. And then there were the Greek-speaking, what it means by the Hellenists. They were Greek-speaking or Hellenistic Jews.

And this was a group of Jews that had come back from other countries, other lands around, Greek-speaking and, well, Greek-speaking countries.

[19 : 12] And so they had returned to Israel. And so they were Greek-speaking. But not only that, they had brought with them some of the Greek culture. And that didn't set well with some of the Hebrew-speaking Jews, the natives of Israel, ones who had not left, ones who had been there all along, the Orthodox Jews.

And so there was this kind of a tiff between them or a little difference between them. And, you know, this difference worked itself out in little factions within the church.

All right, now that's what was going on, apparently, in the church. But really, that's not what the murmuring was all about. We need to think about this a little deeper.

And that leads us to the problem of ministry. The real problem was not the multiplication.

That was a good thing. The real problem was not, per se, the murmuring. Now, that's a bad thing, but the problem was much deeper than that. The problem was just the natural problems of ministry itself that had to be solved.

[20 : 27] The Bible says here that there arose a complaint, a murmuring, a silent debate, against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. Why? Because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

The daily distribution was a ministry of the church. A very important, apparently a very important, very needed ministry of the church. Certainly, we would know that from the time period because there were a lot of poor people in the church.

Many of the first converts to Christianity were slaves. And many of them, because of their Christianity, if they were not poor before, they became poor because they were ostracized from their society.

All right, so there were a lot of poor people and it was a tough, tough time to be a Christian. And so, one of the major ministries of the church was to meet the needs of the people, right?

All right, so in those days, that was very important. Christians then, and we know this from Acts chapter 2, pooled their goods and their resources and they pooled them together in order to see that every member of the church was cared for in the proper way, especially those that were widows.

[21:41] And we learned that from Acts chapter 2 and verse 44. And there were also, apparently, some wealthy people in the church. God also placed some wealthy people there who, like, for example, Barnabas, apparently was a wealthy man.

And Barnabas, you know, sold houses and land and gave the money to the church for the needs of the poor and of the widows. And we read that in Acts chapter 4.

All right, so this was what was going on. This was major ministry in the church. Now, it seems relatively clear that the apostles were responsible for overseeing the distribution of these goods. It was their ministry. Not the only ministry they had. Not even the most important one. But it was their job, their duty to make sure that this was done.

And I'm sure, obviously, because the church started relatively small, well, 3,000 is pretty big, but I'm sure that it was something they could do and get done and do all the other things that were required.

[22:49] But as the church grew, and it grew very rapidly, and the numbers of poor people and widows grew exponentially, that the job soon became quite a burden.

And they were not able to do it. Now, as the church grew, the ministry grew with it, became too large, and as a consequence then, very naturally, some of the poor people, including, apparently, some of the widows, were missed in the daily distribution.

And because the Greek-speaking members of the church, the Hellenists, already felt like second-class citizens, I think that's implied from the text, they then assumed that their widows were singled out as somehow less deserving as other widows.

I think there was just an assumption on the part of the Hellenists to this degree, to this end. But in reality, the problem was simply this.

Too much to do, not enough time to do it. And that's the problem of ministry. I don't think we ought to assume for one minute that the apostles were singling out the Hellenistic widows.

[24:07] I don't think for one minute we would assume that the apostles favored the Hebrew widows over the Hellenistic widows.

Now, this was an assumption on the part of the Hellenists. But the real problem was they just could not get the job done. It was physically impossible. And listen, if the apostles, I believe the forerunners of the office of pastor in the church, if the apostles spent all their time handing out groceries, they would have no time for prayer and for the preparation of preaching the Word.

And so that leads to the second point in my sermon. We have the problems they faced and we have the priorities they faced, the church faced.

Verse 2, look at it. 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.

That is, to perform this ministry. Not desirable. It makes no sense that we would do that. Alright, now, from that verse, we see two priorities that every church faces.

[25:27] This church, this church in Jerusalem, two priorities. First of all, there's the priority of preaching. That is clearly in the text. The priority of preaching the Word of God.

He said, the apostles said, it does not make sense for us to put off the necessary preparation of preaching to do the ministry of distribution.

That's a paraphrase, but that's basically what they're saying. And so, they're saying, our primary responsibility, our primary priority, is the preparation for the ministry of the Word of God.

A little bit later in verse 4, Luke is going to, or the apostles, are going to identify two features of this ministry of preaching, and it's prayer and preaching.

The ministry of the Word is prayer and preaching. All right, so, if the apostles couldn't do it, and if they did try to do it, it would cut into the time they needed for the ministry of the Word, then who was

going to do it?

[26:40] Somebody needed to do it. Someone has put it this way, the apostles were spending their time doing a good thing when they should have been spending their time doing the best thing.

prayer and preaching of the Word. Now, I don't get the idea that the apostles thought that they were too important for this work, serving tables. That was not the idea.

It was just simply a matter of priority. What was more important? Passing out food supplies or preparing to preach and ministering the Word of God.

What was more important for the apostles? How much time, by the way, do you suppose it takes to prepare one sermon? Well, and most preachers preach at least three sermons every week.

It takes time. It takes time. The apostles knew that. They discovered that. And so something had to be done. And so that leads to another priority.

[27:52] There's the priority of preaching, but there's also the priority of people. And the apostles, by the way, are not discounting that. They're certainly not eliminating that. There is the priority of preaching, but there's the priority of people.

Prayers must be prayed. sermons must be preached, but also people must be ministered to in the church. The needs of people in the church is also a priority.

A priority that must be accomplished, must be taken care of. Now, the apostles could not do it all. They just physically could not. And yet, the priority still remains, doesn't it?

And so both the problem of ministry and the priority of ministry still exists today. I mean, there are people in need today. There are people sick that need to be visited today.

There are hurting people who need to be encouraged. There are confused people who need to be counseled. And on and on and on it goes. And the pastor can do those things and must do many of those things, but he can't do them all.

[28:58] Can't do them all. That's the point here that we need to get. And, you know, pastors need some help on that. And this is what the apostles were saying. And yet, the priority of people still remains.

That's not lessened at all. And so how will that get done? Who's going to do it? Well, that leads to the third and final thing here.

We have the problem. We have the priorities. And we have the proposal. The proposal the church faced. Here's what the apostles proposed. Verse 3, Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven good or men of good reputation.

And by the way, the word seven is really not all that significant. It's not saying that every church must have seven. All right. But pick out seven men of good reputation full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom whom we may appoint over this business, but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Now, here is the Holy Spirit's remedy to the problem. Deacons. That's the remedy. Deacons.

[30:18] Now, I know, you know, you've looked here at the text, you've heard me quote it, you've read it, and you don't see deacon anywhere in it. Well, not in the English text. In fact, the noun for deacon is not in the text, but the verb is.

The verb is, and it's very key we understand that. The verb is found in verse 2 when we have the word serving tables. Serving table.

The Greek for deacon is diakonos, and that word is diakono. It's the word for serving, and so this is what they are called to do. All right, so deacons, that's the Holy Spirit's answer.

All right, now, here is the proposal the church faced. It involved, first of all, commissioning of some men. They had to set aside some men.

The church was commissioned, was to commission seven men whom we may appoint, the apostle said, whom we may appoint over this business. And a lot of people have been hung up on that word business, and some have taken it to the point that the deacons do all the business in the church.

[31:23] But obviously, just really a simple reading of it, you understand that it's the business of serving. The business of serving tables.

So deacons are just what the word diakonos means. Servants. Servants of the church. And so, they're commissioned, the church is commissioned to set aside, choose seven men to do the business of serving the tables, to serving the church.

The proposal involved something else. It involved a challenge. There was a challenge here. The men of the church, or the men the church was to choose, rather, were to be servants, but they were

to be special.

How do you like that, Kylie? Special. Deacons, you're special. And you are. Because, you see, these men were to have three special characteristics.

Even before we get to 1 Timothy 2 and find the qualifications, here are some qualifications right here. They are very special qualifications, special characteristics for these men to be chosen as deacons.

[32 : 33] They were, first of all, to be good men of good reputation, the Bible says. Good reputation. That is not just a good reputation inside the church, but also outside the church.

Good reputation. That these men are godly men, honest men, men of integrity. That the faith they claim to have is a faith they live. They have a good reputation.

They were also to be godly men. He says, full of the Holy Spirit. That not only means they're to be saved people, that ought to go without saying, but to be full of the Holy Spirit means that these men are controlled by the Holy Spirit.

That Jesus is their Lord and they seek to obey Him and follow Him and live for Him. They are under the control of the Holy Spirit of God, yielded to His leadership in their lives and so forth.

These are very special characteristics. And then third, they were to be gifted men, gifted in a special way, full of wisdom, the Bible says here. It is able to make sound and sensible decisions in life and they have proven themselves in that way.

[33 : 51] Not influenced by personal ambitions and opinions or maybe even family concerns or even emotions. Certainly not influenced by these things, but able to make and apt to make decisions based upon God's Word as best they know it and as they seek God's will in God's Word and able to see clearly the needs of the church, the needs of the people of the church.

And so when the deacons meet, they must always seek what is best for the people of the church. That's their function to serve the church. That's what they are to do when they meet and that's what your deacons do.

They don't talk about what the church needs to do and make decisions for the church. They get together and talk about you, the people of your church and that's what deacons are to do when they meet.

The great G. Campbell Morgan once told a friend, he said, I would prefer to preach three sermons every day rather than spend half an hour in a deacons meeting to discuss who gets to hold the key to the church.

And then finally, the proposal they faced involved a choice. A choice. They had to choose. Some men. Some men that they were going to commission.

[35 : 12] And verse 5 says, and the saying pleased the whole multitude. By the way, this is the entire church involved in this process. Somebody wants to know where do we get the idea we Baptists that a congregation votes to decide these things.

Well, here's one place. And there are a number of others. It's the whole congregation that came together. It was the whole congregation that was pleased to do what the apostles were leading them to do.

And so they chose these men. And they're listed for us here. A couple of them we know pretty well because they're mentioned again in Acts.

Stephen and Philip, for example. And these other men. They're chosen by the congregation. And so they set them before they brought them to the apostles for their approval.

And when they had prayed, that is the entire body prayed, they laid hands on them. The apostles laid hands on them. And that's what we're going to do here tonight, by the way, for one of our men.

[36 : 16] But before we do that, let's not leave the text quite yet because verse 7 tells us what happened to the church as a result of having spirit-filled, servant-committed deacons.

What happened? Verse 7. Then, the Word of God spread. Spread beyond the church. And a number of disciples, the number of disciples multiplied greatly.

Not just multiplied, but multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And also, and then he adds this little kind of little footnote, and a great many of priests, Jewish priests, were obedient to the faith.

They were saved. Incredible. See how important it is to be a deacon? Thank you.