

Text

Reading Isaiah 53 and Acts 6

Acts 6:1-7

¹*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists^[a] arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.*

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.*

³*Therefore, brothers,^[b] 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."*

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.*

⁷*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.*

Main Point

The Silent Servants of the Church

Introduction (300)

Hook

We are in an exciting time in the life of the church. The church is growing, not only in spiritual maturity, but also in number.

Soon we may need to open the back doors and bring out some more chairs, and get more communion cups. These are good problems to have. And we praise God for this season of growth.

And so as our numbers grows so does the work **of** the church, the work **in** the church, but also the possibility of disunity. The possibility of quarrels and factions.

This is nothing new in the church, and God, in his wisdom has instituted the Office of Deacon to serve his church.

And by God's grace, as our church grows, so does our diaconate. Today our team of Deacons goes from two men to four.

Today we formally appoint two men, Samuel Kempf and Simon Harrison to the office of Deacon.

This is an exciting time, and as we formally appoint these men, it is good for us to be reminded what scripture teaches about Deacons. What is their role and responsibility? How are they different from Elders? How are they different from regular members?

In short, as we will see, Deacons, are a great gift to the church. They are the undercover task force who sacrificially serve the Bride of Christ.

Outline

To help us grasp the glorious office of a Deacon we are going to dig into the account of Acts 6:1- 7 and divide our study into three parts:

1. The Telling Past
2. The Lasting Principles
3. The Eternal Perspective

Part 1 – The Telling Past

Exposition

Context of Acts 6

So let us begin with the Telling Past. We turn our minds back to the beginning of the Church.

At the end of chapter 2 of Acts there is much optimism:

The people are devoted to the Apostles teaching, and there is great unity among the believers.

And similarly at the end of chapter 4, there is still much growth and optimism.

The people believe in the risen Jesus. The church grows. The saints are of one mind and heart, even selling up some of their land to help those in need.

What a beautiful picture of the saints living out a changed life In Christ, getting along, and loving one another.

Then we get to chapter 6, there is another update, but this time, trouble is brewing...

The Issue at hand

Look at verse 1

¹Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists^[a] arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

A conflict is brewing.

On one side you have the Hellenists. These are jews who have integrated with the Greek culture and language.

On the other side, you have the local jews.

The Hellenists would have been marginalized by the Hebrews.

The complaint is over the daily distribution of food for widows. This was crucial work, because a Jewish widow who became a Christian would have been kicked out of the synagogue. The physical aid from the Synagogue was suddenly cut off. To leave them unattended was to leave them to the mercy of the cold and hunger. To leave them unattended would have devastating consequences.

So we understand why these Greek-speaking jews brought up this issue. They were concerned for the vulnerable in their midst and they wanted to see something done about it.

The Apostles Response

And how do the apostles respond?

Look at verse 2

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."

First notice what they did not do. They did not dismiss this complaint as a petty quarrel. But secondly, they did not try to solve it themselves.

The apostles know they have limited time, they have limited energy. They know they are human. And they know they need to focus on preaching the word. This is what Jesus has tasked them with. To be sidetracked would be to disobey Christ.

So when they say *"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables."*

It is not a calloused disregard for these widows. It is not a lack of compassion. On the contrary. They need to stay focused for the sake of the whole church, which includes the Widows.

Imagine if the captain of a ship went to care for all the passengers who was seasick, and left his post at the tiller. Would anyone accuse the captain of a lack of compassion or care for his passengers for staying at the tiller, despite the cries for help? No way. If he left the tiller, he would compromise the ship and lose all his people.

And so likewise, caring for the practical needs of these widows is important, but not the focus of the Apostles.

The focus of the Apostles is reiterated in verse 4

⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Tyranny of the urgent application

Now, just as quick aside about what the apostles face in that moment. They are faced with what we can call the tyranny of the urgent.

This pull of urgent problems distracting us from important things is something we all face.

Even Jesus faced it, and his “Urgent” but not important distraction was healing the lame, bringing sight to the blind, casting out demons and so on.

Yet he was willing to disappoint those people, because he knew what his focus was. He knew what he was responsible for.

In Mark 2:36-38 we read

³⁶ And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, ³⁷ and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.”

[Everyone, implies all who had gathered to be healed by him, just like the previous night...]

³⁸ And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.”

Every single one of us can succumb to the tyranny of the urgent and neglect what is truly important.

Are we prepared to disappoint some people and say “no, that is not my responsibility.”

Are we prepared to make those tough calls and prioritise our time regardless of what people may think?

Do not let your pride let you believe you can do it all. Jesus did not try to, the apostles did not try to, don't think you can do it all either.

Issue still addressed – Whole congregation involved

But back to our account.

The issue at hand still needed to be addressed. Not only will the widows suffer, but it could also compromise the unity of the church. The apostles do take action, but they do not rush in and get involved in the detail of the immediate problem.

They help setup a long-term solution for this and future issues without compromising the preaching of the word.

So they call a church meeting. The first members' meeting as it were.

Look at verse 2 and 3

*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.*

*³ Therefore, brothers,^[b] **pick out from among you seven men** of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.*

The apostles don't pick out the seven men. The congregation does.

Here we see a good example of the dynamics of leaders leading and members taking responsibility.

Character

And notice that the Apostles don't say, find the most prosperous business owners, or find the chap who

manages large teams, or find some men who can use an Excel spreadsheet.

No no no, the apostles instruct the congregation to find seven men who are

1. of good repute
2. full of the spirit
3. full of wisdom

Of “good repute” can be thought as an overarching term. In 1 Timothy 3, the word “Dignified” is used and further elaborated on:

- Are they in control of their speech?
- Are they given to addiction or excess?
- Is greed an issue for them?
- Do they know, hold, and live out the truths of God’s word?
- Are they faithful in their family life?

Are they are off good repute?

Next are they full of the Spirit? Are they known for submitting to the leading of the spirit? Is their lives structured and organised such that they use the means the Spirit employs to lead humans.

Full of wisdom flows from being full of the Spirit. Are these men able to see a situation and apply their knowledge to it? Are they wise in their interaction with others, or do they have a one-size fit all approach?

Character, not ability or skill, are the primary things to consider when choosing Deacons.

Strategic division of labour

And so, under the leadership of the Apostles, the congregation set to work.

Seven men are chosen and appointed.

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.

These men then set to work to properly administer the care of the widows. Scholars estimate that the congregation could have been up to eight thousand at this point. We cannot imagine these seven men alone did all the work. They would have organised the people in the congregation to see that all the widows got their daily distribution.

The immediate threat of division is removed, the church is strengthened and the work of the church continues.

As verse 7 joyfully proclaims.

⁷ 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.

Link

This account gives us some principles and guidelines for the work and function of a Deacon.

Now it is true that the formal office of Deacon was only developed later, but these seven men have long been understood to be the pattern for the diaconal office.

And so, where the original seven were assisting the Apostles, Deacons now assist the elders in their focus of preaching and prayer.

So what principles can we glean from this account for Deacons today?

This brings us to the second section of our study:

Part 2 – The Lasting Principles

Overview

Broadly, we can speak of three principles, three areas of responsibilities Deacons are tasked with. Matt Smethurst is helpful here.

1. Spotting and meeting tangible needs
2. Protecting and Promoting Church Unity
3. Serving and supporting the ministry of the Elders

Let us think a little bit about each one of these, and see how each is implemented at CGBC.

Spotting and meeting tangible needs

So first we have spotting and meeting practical needs. The “serving tables” of Acts is seen as a specific example of a lasting principle.

This does include looking after the poor and needy, caring for the vulnerable and those who need practical help in the church, but it includes more than that. Much more than that as Graham and Jesse will tell you.

It includes finances, building maintenance, general administration, web site development, communications, sound gear and the like.

And Deacons are not just reactive. They also anticipate possible issues. Looking forward and looking around. They seek to be proactive in spotting and meeting these needs.

And in that way, they keep Elders from an onslaught of “Urgent practical things needs”.

A great example of this in action was when there was a fire in the Sunday school room. The responsibility of sorting that out could easily have fallen on one of the Elders, but one of the deacons stepped in and sorted it out. The urgent issue was dealt with and the Elders were able to stay focused.

So that is one area of responsibility: Spotting and meeting tangible needs.

Protecting and Promoting church unity

But we also see Deacons protecting and promoting church unity. As Christians we have been united to one another In Christ. We have unity because we have a common Lord and Savior.

But in the natural sense, there are many things which would not naturally unite us. Personality difference, education differences, ethnic differences, age difference, and the list could go on.

And sometimes, not always, but sometimes, in the midst of our sanctification, we let our differences outweigh our unity.

Now it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to hold that in check and seek to maintain unity, but Deacons have a special role in this.

We see that in Acts 6 as they seek to maintain unity between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebrew Jews.

Deacons are shock absorbers. As conflict and tension rise, Deacons are on the lookout and are ready to mediate and dissipate the conflict instead of letting it reverberate through the whole church, leaving destruction in its wake.

It is not without reason that they need to be men of *good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom*

They will need all the wisdom they can get when faced with protecting the unity of the church.

Serving and Supporting the Ministry of the Elders

The third and final responsibility of Deacons we will look at, is to serve and support the ministry of the Elders. We see that in Acts 6, as the seven men set to work at the task given by the apostles.

Deacons fit in church structure in different ways in different denominations, but here at CGBC we can think of the general structure in this way:

- Elders lead the work
- Deacons facilitate the work
- The congregation does the work

As said before, we cannot think that the seven did all the work themselves to serve the widows from a congregation of eight thousand people. They would have delegated and organised others to help.

Let me give you a couple of examples to explain this structure.

Outreach example

Think of an evangelistic outreach for example.

The elders preach on evangelism, and after praying about it, consider it would be good for the church to do an outreach.

Next, the Elders chat with the Deacons. “It would be good to do an outreach. Could you please organise that?” The Deacons are now mobilised.

- They make a plan,
- they let people know what is happening,
- they get people to help with advertising,
- they ask people to help with setup,
- they organise a speaker for the even (who could easily be one of the elders),
- they source tracts and evangelistic materials,
- they delegate large areas of responsibility to various members.
- They let the people know how to be involved with the outreach on the day.

Then on the day, the people of the church are the ones doing the outreach.

And so the elders have led the outreach, the deacons have facilitated it and the people of the church have done the work.

Visitation example

Or think of a different example. Think of visiting the elderly in the hospital.

The elders know of these people who would benefit from regular visits, and they inform the Deacons.

The Deacons then research the visiting times and provide time slots for people to fill. They develop a roster.

They help people commit to times, keep them accountable, and make sure all the visits are not all happening on the same day.

And then the people of the church visit the elderly, blessing both the visited and the visitor.

The elders lead, the deacons facilitate, and the people do.

In practice a bit different, but idealistic ok

Now these are idealistic examples, but the framework is what we see in scripture as God does His work in and through the church.

In practice, there is much overlap and the lines are not quite so clear, but the general pattern is there and can be worked towards it.

Of course, the Elders and Deacons still get involved in the work, but the point is that the Elders and Deacons cannot do all the work of the Church.

So, with the appointment of these two Deacons, don't expect your work to diminish. On the contrary. Expect some more shoulder taping, some more opportunities to take part, some more mobilising, maybe even some voluntelling.

Deacons are a huge asset to the church as they serve and support the ministry of the elders.

Practical work Spiritual implications

I hope we can see that the work of Deacons is not second-rate. It is practical work, yes but with significant spiritual implications.

Jesus is the head of the Church, and he decided to establish two offices. In the same way that Elders are

the under shepherds of the Great Shepherd, Deacons are the under deacons of the great Deacon.

Which brings us to our third and final point of our study.

Part 3 – The Eternal perspective

Exposition

Glorious Work

Often Deacon work can be thankless, mundane, and frustrating, with little recognition or appreciation. Motivation can quickly run dry and discouragement can set in. This can be true for each and anyone of us as we seek to serve the church, but all the more so for Deacons who operate in the background and are “expected” to do these things.

But with an eternal perspective, Deacon work is Glorious.

Remember that the word Deacon simply means “servant”. “One who serves”.

Deacon work is glorious because of who is mirrors; because it mirrors the great servant.

Three passages

Please turn with me to Isaiah 42:1-4

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

²*He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;*

³ *a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

⁴ *He will not grow faint or be discouraged^[a]
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.*

Isiaha talks again and again of the suffering Servant.
The servant of the Lord. The promised messiah.

Now please turn with me to Mark 10:42-45 where
Jesus himself talks of himself as the Servant. As the
one who came to Deacon.

⁴² *And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You
know that those who are considered rulers of the
Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones
exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so
among you. But whoever would be great among you
must be your servant,^[d] ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first
among you must be slave^[e] of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of
Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give
his life as a ransom for many."*

The son of man did not come to be deconned, but to
Deacon. And the ultimate way he did that was to give
up his life.

Let us turn to Philippians 2:5-11 now.

⁵ *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in
Christ Jesus,^[a] ⁶ who, though he was in the form of
God, did not count equality with God a thing to be
grasped,^[b] ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking **the form
of a servant**,^[c] being born in the likeness of
men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled
himself by becoming obedient to the point of
death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God*

has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus' Incarnation, his humiliation to do his saving work on earth, is summarised by a simple idea: That He took "the form of a servant".

Christ the Great Deacon

So Christ, our saviour, is the Great Deacon.

Not only a servant, but a Suffering Servant. As the great deacon he was willing to endure much.

He was willing to suffer because through his work, through his service, through his suffering, God would be glorified.

- The Love of God would be magnified.
- The Justice of God would be upheld.
- The Grace and mercy of God would be proclaimed.

His service, his deconning, was to give his life for many, to humble himself even onto death. To die on a cross. And just as it is true for all Deacons, His physical service, here on earth, had immense spiritual significance.

Gospel

He died so that we may live. He gave up his life so that we could have life.

Have you ever considered what the greatest act of service in history is?

The greatest act of service in history is Jesus dying on a cross so that you might be saved from hell.

There is a work that serves desperately poor people. These people have been forced to go into debt to survive, to pay a doctor bill, or a midwife bill, some even inheriting debt from past crisis. Many of them live as functional slaves to those they are indebted to. Minute wages and corruption remove any hope of being free.

But, some serve these people by collecting funds and paying off their debt. Giving them a fresh start. Giving them freedom.

Now imagine how absurd it would be for one of these people refused to accept the payment of their debt. The gift of a clean slate. The gift of freedom.

In a similar way, we all have a debt before God. A debt we are unable to pay. We have broken his law and deserve punishment. But Jesus, in his great act of service pays that debt on our behalf.

To refuse that gift is absurd, but you have to accept it for your debt is to be cleared.

Do you trust that Jesus' work on the cross paid for your sins?

Do you accept his gift of life and freedom?

Or are you going to carry that debt yourself and pay for it in hell?

The choice is yours, but why would you decline that gift?

Application

Living Sacrifice

Christ is a great example for all of us as we seek to serve God and the church. But I want to specifically address our existing deacons and new deacons.

Your office is a high office. It is a high office because of who it reflects.

You are not called to die for the sins of others, but you are called to die to yourself. You are called to look to the interest of others, to do nothing from selfish ambition, to consider others better than yourself.

When you do so, you are imitating the great Deacon.

Let that be your motivation.

Recognition and appreciation may be few and far between. At best it will be disproportionate to your efforts, at worst you will be criticized for your efforts and only noticed when you do something wrong.

The work will long, repetitive, tedious, and additionally the people you serve may not be deserving.

But let the glorious Chief deacon be your chief motivation.

He gave up his life, what are you prepared to give up?

He endured the cross, what are you prepared to endure?

He washed the feet of the one who would betray him, how far will you go?

With your eyes fixed on Christ, he will sustain you when nothing else will.

Encourage the Deacons

So, Deacons, Graham, Jesse, Sam, and Simon, remember who you are serving and who you are representing . Let Him be your great motivation.

Know your responsibility. Don't fall prey of the tyranny of the urgent. Don't fall prey to the wrong expectations of others.

And on behalf of the church, at this time, let me say thank you for serving us.

- Thank you for doing so much in the background.
- Thank you for taking on this responsibility.
- Thank you for being Deacons.

We know it is not a life sentence, but while your season of life permits, we appreciate your service.

And people of Covenant Grace, let us be the exception, and let us encourage and appreciate our Deacons. Let us be generous with our praise and stingy with our criticism. Let us get behind them as they seek to serve the Church. As far as it is in our power, let us make their service a joy.

Conclusion

So as we bring our time to a close, let us pause and appreciate God's wisdom as He builds his church.

As followers of Christ, we all hope that the activity of our church would be described by verse 7 of Acts 6.

⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly

But how often is our church characterised by verse 1:
a complaintarose

In this account, the bridge which spanned the complaint to the fruitful work of the ministry was the faithful work of Deacons.

As they met tangible needs

As they protected the unity of the church

And as they serve the ministry of the elders, the work of the church flourished and grew.

God knows what we need to build the church, and Deacons are one of those things.

The great motivation of Deacons, in fact of all Christians, as they seek to serve Him and his church, is to imitate and please the Great Deacon. The suffering servant who gave up his life for his church.

It is not a blood sacrifice, but a living sacrifice, all to the glory and praise of God.

Let us pray.