

July 16, 2006

## “Deacons: The Calling” Acts 6:1-7

FCF: The tendency to downplay the necessity of the ministry of deeds

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because of the nature of the gospel ministry,  
(magnet) local churches must pursue both the ministry of the Word and of deeds.

### **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Years ago, the great Puritan, John Owen, wrote (**READ quote**):

*...if all churches, and all the members of them, would wisely consider how eminent is this grace, how excellent is this duty, of making provision for the poor, - how much the glory of Christ and honour of the gospel are concerned herein; for whereas, for the most part, it is looked on as an ordinary work, to be performed transiently and cursorily, scarce deserving of the time which is allotted unto the church's public service and duties, it is indeed one of the most eminent duties of Christian societies.*

Words worth heeding today. We're pulling out of our study on the Ten Commandments for a couple of weeks to talk about the need and the call for the ministry of deacons.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Acts 6:1-7

### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Variety is the spice of life. But it's also the fuel for fire. Differences in language, background, or culture bring friction. And that's what you see in Acts 6. Two groups of people – of Jewish backgrounds, both Christian, indwelt by the same Spirit. But there were differences too. One group were “Hellenists” – Greek speaking and thinking Christians who tried to build bridges to the Greek world around them. The other group were “Hebrews” – Aramaic speaking and Jewish thinking Christians who wanted not to build bridges but barriers to keep that Greek world out. You can imagine the tensions.

Now understand that by this point in the development of the early Church, the number of Christians in Jerusalem numbered in the thousands and their meetings were taking place in private homes – likely Hellenists and Hebrews clustering in their own separate groups. In such a setting, it's not too difficult to see how one group's needs might come to be overlooked – even if unintentionally. The situation became serious enough that the apostles realized something had to change (**READ Acts 6:1-2**).

Here's the question. Why was it “*not right*” for the apostles to “*give up preaching the word of God to serve tables?*” Was such work beneath them? No. They had walked with Jesus. It wasn't that they saw the needs before them as unimportant but that they knew both the ministry of the Word and the ministry of deeds to be of such great importance that for the sake of calling and focus something had to change.

We have a problem. Tim Keller, a PCA brother in Manhattan, describes it as suffering from areas of “alienation.” With the Fall, sin and misery have come into this world damaging every aspect of our existence. Imagine four concentric circles (like a stone being dropped into a pool). In the center is our alienation from God – the spiritual needs – our core problem. Rippling out from there is our alienation from ourselves – the emotional, the psychological. From there, our alienation from one another – the social, the relational. On the outer edge is our alienation from nature – the physical.

Each of these circles is an opportunity for ministry. And all are of such importance that deacons are needed. The ministry of the Word and the ministry of deeds are so important that deacons are needed such that the full work would be done as it should. Which is why our church is moving in the direction of appointing such men.

## **I. THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

We see two ministries here, both so important that the diaconate was needed. This is where we see its origins. The first ministry we see is of the Word. The message of the gospel needs to be declared. All of us are charged in this, but some are called.

#### A) *The Resistance*

In fact, it's so important, it faces resistance. There's a principle worth considering here. Sometimes you can gauge the importance of a thing by the resistance it receives.

##### 1. From within

Resistance from within. Though these be the words of life and freedom we treat them like they were the words of death and slavery. Christian maturity is a struggle. It doesn't come all at once. You see that in the uncharitable assumptions made by the Hellenists.

##### 2. From without

Resistance from within. And without. Satan had tried to stop this fledgling movement through persecution and corruption. Those failing, he tried distraction – time and energy given to the doing of many good things. But not the things the apostles were called to do.

#### B) *The Requirements*

The ministry of the Word is so important it faces resistance. And it has certain requirements. Which brings us to another principle. Sometimes you can gauge the importance of a thing by the requirements it demands. After all, what do we see here?

##### 1. Full devotion

Full devotion (**READ Acts 6:3-4**). The devotion spoken of here is *a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a course of action*. Why? Why such devotion to the Word? For the sake of that growing maturity. And to protect against the infection of false teaching.

##### 2. Full dependence

Full devotion to the Word and in full dependence upon the Lord through His Spirit – prayer. Without the watering of prayer the seed of the Word bears no fruit.

That's what the apostles recognized they were called to do and what they were determined to be faithful in carrying out. So much so that the office of deacon was born. The ministry of the Word in our lives is that vital, that important.

#### *Application:*

This is why it wasn't "*right*" for the apostles to "*give up preaching the word of God to serve tables*" – not that the needs before them were unimportant but because the ministry of the Word is itself so important a new office was needed. This is good compass-calibrating stuff here for me. And a matter of prayer for us all. Because pastors can be so easily distracted from what the main thing needs to be in their work. J. I. Packer writes of this (**READ Packer quote**), "*I constantly maintain that if today's quest for renewal is not, along with its other concerns, a quest for true preaching, it will prove shallow and barren.*" Along those same lines, John Stott writes (**READ Stott quote**):

*If today's pastors were to take seriously the New Testament emphasis on the priority of preaching and teaching, not only would they find it extremely fulfilling themselves, but also it would undoubtedly have a very wholesome effect on the Church. Instead, tragic to relate, many are essentially administrators, whose symbols of ministry are the office rather than the study, and the telephone rather than the Bible.*

Now that's strong stuff. But they're right. The ministry of the Word is so vital it needs to be pursued and protected. So much so we see the creation of the office of deacon.

## II. THE MINISTRY OF DEEDS

But in the creation of this office we also see the importance of yet another ministry – the ministry of deeds – which, again, is so vital that the diaconate becomes

necessary. The message of the gospel does need to be declared. But it needs to be demonstrated as well. And here, again, all of us are charged but only a few are called.

#### A) Resistance

The importance of this aspect of the ministry is also gauged by the resistance it receives. And, again, this resistance comes from two directions.

##### 1. From within

First, from within. There were, no doubt, difficult individuals among these Hellenists. Which made the situation all the more difficult to diffuse. Difficult decisions as well, calling forth a solution that demanded a plurality with the Seven and a familiarity as well.

##### 2. From without

Resistance from within. And resistance from without. The irony in all this was that the very collection intended to unify the church and show forth the reality of the gospel was threatening to destroy the church and its witness. A Satanic smear campaign was on. But the Lord would not allow it (**READ Acts 6:7**). Clearly we see both the Lord blessing their faithfulness and the hunger of the people to see something real in this message.

Then and now. Francis Schaeffer said in The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century that unless the next generation sees the church demonstrating community, compassion, love, and mercy, they will not listen to our message. Nor should they!

#### B) Requirements

All this is to say that the ministry of deeds is so important that it faces resistance. And makes requirements as well – requirements that come out clearly in our text.

##### 1. Men of spiritual maturity

(**READ Acts 6:3-5**) While all are called to exercise mercy, this is not a volunteer organization formed here. The role of the deacon is a calling of the Lord with demanding qualifications – qualifications that reflect their level of responsibility and the sensitivity of the situations they will have to address. And that speaks to their importance.

##### 2. Ordination by the leadership

So too does the ordination by the leadership (**READ Acts 6:6**). In the Old Testament, the laying on of hands implied a conveyance, a transferal. And so too here – a visual expression of the apostles' blessing, of the commissioning of the Seven to a special task, and transferal of the authority to do the job. Again, this speaks to its importance.

##### 3. Authorized agents

They were to be men of spiritual maturity, ordained by the leadership of the church, serving as authorized agents of the leadership that they might be freed to carry out their own tasks. Deacons are not executives. Nor are they property caretakers. They are authorized agents – assisting the leadership with authority delegated by the leadership – with the clear call to place special emphasis on the ministry of mercy, of deeds.

That's how serious the ministry of deeds is that it demands this sort of delegation. Let me read you some more quotes. Jonathan Edwards (**READ quote**): *"I know of scarce any duty which is so much insisted on, so pressed and urged upon us, both in the Old Testament and New, as this duty of charity to the poor."*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher Robert Murray McCheyne once said (**READ quote**):

*I fear there are some Christians among you to whom Christ cannot say ("Well done, good and faithful servant"). Your haughty dwelling raises amidst of thousands who have scarce a fire to warm themselves at, and have but little clothing to keep out the biting frost; and yet you never darkened their door. You heave a sigh, perhaps, at a distance; but you do not visit them. Ah! My dear friends! I am concerned for the poor, but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to*

*you in the great day. You seem to be Christians, and yet you care not for his poor. Oh, what a change will pass upon you as you enter the gates of heaven! You will be saved, but that will be all. There will be no abundant entrance for you: "He that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly."*

No small things, the ministry of the Word and the ministry of deeds.

*Application:*

This is why it wasn't "right" for the apostles to "give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" – not that the needs before them were unimportant but because the ministries of both the Word and deeds are so important that a new office was needed. What then does this mean for us? Pray for the church as we strive to take these things more seriously – that we would hear and heed our Lord's clear call in these areas.

We need to pray for the church as a whole. But for ourselves as individuals as well and the care we would each take in our responses to the next news report, the next person we see stumbling on the sidewalk, the next stranger in our midst. You won't hear me say this often, but when it comes to this area, "question everything" in terms of your immediate response. Frankly, some of us are too soft. Do we not believe in the depravity of man, the responsibility and accountability each must bear? And frankly, some of us are too hard. Do we not understand that "but for the grace of God, there go I?" Question your response. And then ask yet another. What is the gospel answer here? What is the true nature of ministry to the whole person? And what is it in me that is resisting that?

**CONCLUSION:**

Again, the critical question: *Why was it "not right" for the apostles to "give up preaching the word of God to serve tables"?* Not because it was unimportant but because both the ministry of the Word and of deeds were so important. Then and now. Yes, it's difficult. Hence the diligence. It's difficult to discern certain situations, the cause of the poverty. Yes, it could be their sin (laziness, irresponsibility, foolishness). But it could also be oppression (they've been sinned against). It could be calamity (injury, disease, disaster). It could be a combination of the three. It could be messy.

Gordon MacDonald tells of an experience on a flight. As the plane loaded, a woman with two small children came down the aisle to take the seat in front of him. And behind her, another woman. He had hoped for quiet. He wasn't going to get it. There was turbulence. The children cried. He watched as the women tried to comfort the children – especially the woman closest to himself. Oh, she tried to make things better for the little girl beside her. But things got worse. The little girl got sick. She was losing everything from every part of her body. The diaper wasn't on tight, and before long a stench began to rise through the cabin. Indescribable stuff was everywhere – the woman's clothes, the seat, the floor. Still, the woman tried to comfort the child. Finally, the plane landed, and as the passengers were preparing to leave, the flight attendant came with paper towels and handed them to this woman and said, "*Here, Ma'am, these are for your little girl.*" The woman said, "*This isn't my little girl.*" "*Aren't you traveling together?*" "*No, I've never met this woman and these children before in my life.*"

Now, I ask you, "*Who looked most like Jesus as they got off that plane?*" Who looked most like the One who took on the filth and stain of our sin, the One who has shown such mercy to us as helpless babes, and who calls us to go and do likewise – individually and as a body? Who looked most like Him? The folks in first class? The others in coach? You know who it was. May He guide us in these steps ahead.

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(magnet) local churches must pursue both the ministry of the Word and of deeds.