

Why Does the Church Need Deacons?

Acts 6:1-7

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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. 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. 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.

- Acts 6:1-3, ESV

The opening verses of Acts 6 tell of the appointment of the first deacons in the history of the church. Now, Luke does not use the term "deacons" to describe these men, but most people agree that these seven men were the first deacons, based on what they were called to do. So, why did the church appoint deacons? How were they appointed? What kind of work did they do? What kind of men did they choose to do this work?

The church appointed deacons because the apostles were being torn away from their primary calling to handle practical concerns focused on physical needs. In this specific case, it was an accusation of unequal distribution of food to widows. Apparently, the food was being distributed by Aramaic-speaking Hebrews and the Greek-speaking Hellenists thought their widows were being neglected. It's not clear why this neglect was happening, but it was probably related to a language barrier or cultural miscommunication. At any rate, the issue needed to be handled well, but it didn't need to be directly handled by the apostles.

The apostles were very clear on their priorities: *"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. . . we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* The apostles took the ministry of the word and their call to be devoted to prayer for the church very seriously. They wanted to focus their undivided attention on the word and prayer and did not want to be weighed down by distracting concerns. Distraction is a constant battle for church leaders, and wise delegation is a proven way to combat it.

But notice that the apostles did not appoint these seven themselves. On the contrary, they gave the qualifications to the church and let the church select the men. This sets the precedent for the practice of the congregation calling its officers. Congregations need to be taught the Biblical qualifications for office, and then they need to be empowered to exercise discernment in calling their officers.

The office of deacon is one of practical service to meet physical needs within the church and the community. The distribution of food to widows was a massive undertaking for a church of several thousand people. While the priority focus of the apostles was on preaching and teaching the word, they knew the church was also called to care for the poor, to meet needs.

While the office itself is one of practical service, the qualifications for office were not focused on practical skills. The apostles might have valued organization, people skills, diplomacy, food expertise, etc. Instead, they focused on character and on spiritual qualifications: *"men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."* As we will see in the examples of Philip and Stephen, these men were capable evangelists and teachers, as well as being wise and diplomatic.

The church needs deacons just as surely today as she did in the first century. In our day, it is tempting to want pastors to be marketing experts, CEOs, visionary leaders, organizational managers, etc. The calling of a pastor and of elders today is the same as it always has been: the word and prayer. Faithful attention to the word and prayer brings the growth that God ordains. Yet the church is also called to serve and not just to preach. Wise and godly men need to be called and ordained to that ministry, too. Thankfully, God is still raising up deacons to do this work.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your church, the bride and body of Christ, your visible kingdom on earth. We thank You for the word and for prayer and for the power of Your Holy Spirit to use these means to build Your church. We thank You also for the gift of wise, Spirit-filled deacons, who serve and lead the church in meeting the needs of the poor. Give us faithful pastors and elders and give us wise and Spirit-filled deacons. In Jesus' name, Amen.