

Deacons - Servants of the Flock

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[0 : 00] Amen. Let's turn together now for a short time to Acts chapter 6. The passage read, Acts chapter 6, and we're looking tonight at verses 1 to 7.

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 their spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty, but we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word, and so on.

Church growth is a wonderful thing to experience. There are many places tonight, even throughout our own denomination, where people are discouraged because they're seeing little or no growth in their own locality in their congregation, and perhaps even numbers diminishing and the cause becoming weak.

And when we experience growth, such as we ourselves have experienced growth, particularly so in the young families and young children and young people that are coming to the various activities as well as to services, that's such a wonderful thing to experience, and it's thrilling, and it's encouraging, and it causes us to give thanks to God.

But growth brings its own problems, even problems of accommodation. And just interestingly, of course, when we're thinking of problems of accommodation and where to have the classes for the Sunday school and so on as they keep expanding along with tweenies and other groups, well, of course, tonight we're talking about deacons. So that's a matter really, firstly, for deacons to try and work solutions for these things. Well, here was church growth on a great scale. In these early days of the church in the time of the apostles, from the time of Pentecost, the day of Pentecost onwards, in chapter 2, you read of the way in which by this time the church had grown hugely. Many, many disciples had been added to the church, and so there came this problem when you reach chapter 6, a problem to do with the daily distribution. That was a daily distribution of food and of possibly money as well, but certainly the emphasis was on the widows. Widows in the New Testament, you can see in some of the epistles as well, were given a specific place of prominence because they were very often in need, especially if a widow didn't have a family to look after her and was of an age where she could no longer work. Well, the church at that time were instructed that they had to very, very closely and carefully look after them and provide for them because, of course, there were no social welfare provisions like you have in our modern world. People depended really upon the church, and if they didn't have it there, then on their families, and if they didn't have it there, well, the church was the only option, and you don't need to go too far back in history for that really to have been the case. Well, here was the problem. As the number of disciples increased, a complaint came to the apostles from the Hellenists. Now, the Hellenists were also Jews, but they were Greek-speaking

[3 : 51] Jews, which is why they were known as Hellenists or Greeks. They were Greek-speaking, but they were Jews, in contrast to the other lot of Jews who were called here Hebrews. They spoke Hebrew dialect or Aramaic, whereas the Hellenists spoke Greek. And there was a discrimination of a sort against, at least that's the complaint that was brought to the apostles, that the widows of the Hellenists were actually being neglected in that daily distribution. That prominence and first choice and first place was given to the widows of the Hebrews, of the Aramaic-speaking Jews. This is what they brought to the apostles. And the solution of the apostles was to appoint these men who would specifically look after the needs of these needy widows, and who would therefore look after the distribution, the practical distribution by the church of daily ministrations or daily food and other commodities to those who are in need. And that's really where we have the roots of what we now

know as the diaconate or deacons. And what we're going to look at tonight as we view the election of deacons as well as elders. We looked at this morning in chapter 20, a passage dealing with the eldership and something of the functions and the duties of elders and how they are set over a congregation, but also in the congregation. Tonight we're looking at the diaconate, which we come back to chapter 6 here of Acts, as we've said, to find the diaconate really is something which you see beginning here, but it obviously developed by the time you came to the later epistles of the New Testament, such as 1 Timothy, where Paul gives specific instructions in regard to both elders and also deacons. They had come by that stage, deacons, to have a more specific office and to carry out certain tasks and even to have certain characteristics there that needed to be found before they could be chosen as deacons. You can see the details there in 1 Timothy 3 and from verse 8 onwards. But I want to focus really tonight mainly on Acts chapter 6 and look at how this came about and why it came about and what the emphasis of the apostles was. And I hope from that we can see that deacons have a specific place and role in the church and in this congregation as part of the church. And now we ourselves have to look at the deacons and the specific role that they have and remember that that's really why they are actually there. Let's look at the election of these deacons, first of all, and then we'll look at, we're looking mainly at that, but we'll look at verse 7, which we'll call just the aftermath of that election and how there's an emphasis there on greater growth after the election, which also seems to be an important reference. Well, the election then of deacons, first of all. Now, first of all, they're not actually called deacons in this particular passage. The word deacon comes from the Greek word to serve or to be a servant. And it comes from really this particular need at the time for those who would have a specific practical service in the church to be chosen. And so the word deacon really arises out of that specific practical service of being of service to the church, to the people of God, and the technical name, if you like, or the office of deacon goes back to that word and its meaning here in chapter 6 of Acts. So here was the problem. Here was the matter that was brought to the apostles as we've heard. And notice how the apostles actually responded to it. They summoned the full number of the disciples. In other words, they summoned the whole of the disciples, not just the smaller group of disciples that were apostles. The whole of God's believing people were summoned together. And this is what the apostles said to them, 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. Now, although the word deacon doesn't appear there, you can see that the reference to this duty applies to the serving of tables. And you mustn't think from that that that really means just to act as a waiter, that you had all of these people sitting around tables, and there were waiters picked in order to serve the tables. That's not what the word means, the phrase means, although that's literally how it's put. Serving tables, they're meant doing this practical daily distribution to those who were in need, particularly to these widows. And that's why these men were chosen. That's why they were told by the apostles, the whole of the body of disciples told, you pick them out, you choose them, you elect them, bring them to us, and then they can look after this serving, this diaconal ministry that we need to have in the church. So, it's a practical ministry of care. Now, you mustn't think that the apostles were saying, well, this is really not the kind of thing we should be involved in because it's beneath us. We don't want to actually see ourselves as people who are going to lower ourselves to serve tables in the sense of practically distributing food and money and all the rest of it in a practical way. That's not what it is at all. And that's obvious from the words which follow. It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. We will devote ourselves, in verse 4, to prayer and to the ministry of the word. It wasn't because the apostles were too busy or couldn't actually see this as appropriate to them in the status of apostleship. This is just something they recognized as was increasingly detracting or distracting them from the ministry of prayer and of the preaching of the word. That's why they said you need to have some people set up so that they will sit alongside of us and that we will then be able to give our time full time to prayer and to the ministry, the preaching of the word. So, you go and choose these men who will actually do this. In other words, it's a distinction in the nature of the work that was given to the apostles, that work being prayer and preaching of the word. That's the nature of the work that God gave them to do. And they realized that they were being drawn away from that work. The more they were being drawn to the practical necessities of these people at the time, of the church at the time, so they said, this is what we have to do. We'll choose

men or you choose men as God's people, as disciples, and we'll set down over that work. And that will mean that we can devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Now, that, of course, is itself important when you ask the question, why do we need deacons? Deacons are required not just because we need people who will actually look after the practical necessities of whatever it is that we'll see in a minute comes now under the purpose and the duties of the diaconate, of the deaconship.

[11 : 57] Deacons are required so that those who be devoted to prayer and to the ministry of the word, and that's not just ministers, it's actually the eldership. We saw this morning that the eldership, as an eldership, are charged with overseeing the church of God, that it's the eldership that are charged with teaching the people of God. Even though there is a specific teaching ministry in the minister of the word, there is nevertheless a very important teaching role for the eldership.

And what this is saying to us is that if elders had taken away from that without giving as much time as they can to that, then obviously the oversight of the church is going to suffer. They're not going to be able to give time as they should, as much as they should, to prayer and to the preaching of the word. And that's why the deacons, that's why the diaconate are there. They're there to be in service of the church. They are servants of the church in the practical matters of the faith, but they're there to sit alongside the eldership so that they are freed from being distracted or taken away from the work that belongs specifically to them as a work of prayer and of the preaching of the word.

So what is the role of deacons today then? What can we say we draw from this passage and elsewhere in the scriptures where we find some evidence of what deacons should be doing and what the purpose of deacons and the function of deacons is? Well, you go to 1 Timothy, you're not told much about it, except that they actually have these qualifications or characteristics required. They must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith. That means the gospel with a clear conscience. They're to be tested first, then serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. They each have to be the husband of one wife, managing their old children, their households well, similar in some ways to the qualifications for the eldership as well. But we're not told there as to what exactly they should be doing. So we take out point of departure from Act 6 for that. It's a practical distribution.

Now, we think of deacons, perhaps, mainly in our thoughts that they're people who look after the fabric, the buildings, and the money of the church, the finances of the church. And of course, that's part of it, very much so. That is part of their function. That's part of their responsibility, to free up the eldership from not being taken up too much with those practical issues.

But it would be very wrong to think of the diaconate as being exclusively appointed or chosen just to look after buildings and just to look after finances. In fact, we could go as far as to say that's not even their primary purpose. Their primary purpose is to be an organized way by which the church brings the love of Jesus Christ to the church itself and to the community in which the church is set, whichever community that is. An organized way of bringing the love of Christ practically to those in the church that need to have certain ministry of care given to them practically, but also to those around us. In other words, if you look back over history and if you look back to the earlier days of the free church itself, you'll find that the diaconate were really significant in looking to the needs of people. For example, people such as those who are in debt, those who couldn't get out, those who are housebound, those who are unemployed, those who are homeless, those who are in hospital, as well as to the mission of the church towards the world outside with the gospel, the diaconate helped alongside of the elders to facilitate that by actually handling the practical arrangements. In other words, being a deacon or being a diaconate, deacons together, and it's important, again, that we look at the diaconate as a group of people, just like the elders. We're not to think of just an elder as such on their own. They function together. They function as a body, as a group of people who share in the work of this practical ministry of care and compassion to those around, as well as to those in the church itself. And the model for that, as well as indeed for the eldership too, is Jesus himself. How often you find in the gospels, Jesus spoken of and revealed to us as one who fed the hungry, one who had compassion on the destitute, one who looked to the homeless in order to care for them, one who was concerned for the disadvantaged and the diseased.

[17 : 12] And the diaconate, in many ways, are the spearhead of the church's mission and ministry to those who are in need, whether it be outside of the church or inside of the church. The elders, as we saw this morning, are to do mostly with a spiritual oversight of the congregation or of the church.

They have the responsibility of pastoring the church of God. It doesn't mean that practical matters don't come into that, but it means very much that if there are practical matters in it as they go about their duties, they refer that to the diaconate. That's the ideal, that's the model.

And the diaconate are themselves then, or should then be able to do that themselves without reference back to the elders at all, because that's what they're qualified, and that's what they're given to do as God, is endow them with the practical wisdom that's required. We'll see in a minute some of those qualities mentioned. So that's really what you find in the practical sense. I'm going over this very quickly, of course, but that's in a summary form, just so that you don't think of deacons as being engaged only with the work of the church's finance, counting the money that you very diligently and conscientiously give to the support of the gospel, and to pay ministers, and all the other things the church does with the money that's given. Of course, they have that responsibility, as well as looking after the fabrics that we have for church meetings and keeping it in good order. But then there's the whole wider perspective of people who are in need wherever they're in need. That's a great opportunity, isn't it, for us as a congregation, and indeed for the diaconate, for the deacons themselves, to harness this energy in terms of reaching out to those who are disadvantaged, to those who are themselves fallen on hard times, who are in debt, who are unemployed, who are housebound, and all the other things we've mentioned. That wider ministry is a ministry that we have to try and be sure that the diaconate themselves are committed to, because I think that it's true to say that we have massive potential amongst the diaconate, even of this congregation, a massive potential for good and for the gospel alongside of the eldership in order to actually be really at the very forefront of practical ministry in the name of Christ to those around us, especially, and especially those in specific needs. So they were needed alongside of the eldership. They were needed so that they'd be freed up to keep their focus on prayer and on the preaching of the Word. They were needed because they had this practical role that would actually reach out to those in need, and that's enlarged, as I've said, in our own day to that which I've mentioned just briefly there. But what were the qualities required then for deacons?

Well, you can find in this passage itself some of those qualities or some of the main things that were emphasized, and there are three especially. Choose out from among you seven men of good repute, men full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Three things. They were to be good men, they were to be godly men, and they were to be gifted men, gifted especially with wisdom. Now, you can see as we go through that some of the features of 1 Timothy 3 actually coming to the fore there as well. They were to be good men, just like the eldership, not just having a reputation of being good people and reliable people by those who were in the church who belonged to the church already. You'll find in 1 Timothy 3, with the eldership it's very specific, they have to have a good reputation of those who are outside. That's significant when you look at the qualities of a man's life in order to bear office in the church, whether it's elder or deacon. You need people who are proved to be reliable, who have a good reputation in their place of work that they're reliable, who are spoken of by others who maybe don't share their view of life or their commitment to

Jesus Christ, and yet who would say quite readily of them, yes, I know that that person is trustworthy, trustworthy, is a good man. And that's what elders and deacons here actually need to be. Choose for yourselves men of good repute. These men are going to be in charge of finances and goods belonging to the church. They need to be trustworthy. They need to be reputable in that respect. But they also need to be men of the Holy Spirit. Men of the Holy Spirit. Men full of the Spirit, it says here, as well as of wisdom and good reputation. Perhaps we think of the diaconate as just practically, as just a group of people whose main quality is that they are practical men, that they are people who really have gifts in terms of practicalities and of being able to deal with things like finance or property or deal with people in need and so on that are good in that respect. Yes. But firstly, they need to be

Christians and men of the Spirit of God. You don't choose people. The church should never choose people, though sadly it is all too often chosen down through history. And even today, people are chosen because of something like their status in society. They're good businessmen or they've proved themselves to be successful in the world and the ways of the world. That doesn't mean that person will make a good deacon.

[23 : 28] And certainly, that person can be very skillful in terms of their business acumen and their knowledge, but they don't have the Spirit of God. You can't have them as a deacon handling the things of the Church of God. So, he's saying they have to be men of good repute, but also full of the

Spirit.

Men who are converted, men who are true to Christ, men who are faithful to Him and can be seen to be devoted to Jesus as their Savior, as their Lord. And then, thirdly, they are men of gifts, especially it's mentioned here, wisdom, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Well, those of you who are prospective deacons can say, well, that rules me out because I'm not anything like as wise as other people are.

I can see many other people better qualified than myself in terms of wisdom. But, you know, this wisdom is really wisdom, not in the sense of having high intellectual wisdom, if you like, that penetrates through problems quickly. This wisdom is a wisdom that is able practically to know what to do with people in their need, what sort of ministry you need to them, what sort of things are they in lack of, are they in need of, and people who have the wisdom to be able to discern what exactly these needs are in the community, and who to actually go to to try and get resources to actually help these people, even if the resources are outside of the church, as they often are these days. And it's people of wisdom, people who are astute enough, people who can see through to the essence of the problem, and actually are able tactfully and wisely to go about them, people who are conscientious, people who are also given to confidentiality, because that's such a hugely important thing for elders, but also for deacons. You don't go around houses and discover needs and then start telling others when you visit in their houses, or so-and-so, unless, of course, you feel that there's some help for them in other places you go to, but you don't spread that sort of thing around in order that that person feels very self-conscious, as they're spoken about in the community. People of wisdom don't do that. They deal carefully and conscientiously and confidentially with issues such as people's needs and people's personal problems. So they are to be good men, godly men, and gifted men. And I've repeated the word men there three times, but you may have a question. We've asked, well, why were they needed? Secondly, what is the role of deacons today? Thirdly, what were the qualities required? But let's ask a fourth question, what about women? What about women? Did you hear any of the elders taking a deep breath? Well, perhaps. But we're talking here about function and not about office itself. It's very clear from 1 Timothy chapter 3 and these verses we refer to, both for elders and deacons, that to be appointed to that office of deacon, it has to be a man. It has to be male. That's not misogynistic. That's not what the present world would call discrepancy. That's not what they would call the kind of words that you find.

[27 : 13] Well, that's just looking down on women. That's not just giving women their rightful place. That's not true to equality and to these sort of issues. Nothing to do with that. This is God's specification. But it doesn't mean that because a woman cannot be appointed the office of elder, or teaching elder, or deacon even, that they don't have a diaconal ministry, that they don't have a diaconal role in the church. This congregation is a perfect example of it already, but the potential for further input from women in this congregation is huge. Most of the things that I've mentioned already that belong to the deacons and their ministry, there is no reason why in their own place, even if they're not in office, women cannot engage in ministry to those who are in debt, to those who are housebound, those who are homeless, to those who are in hospital, and support mission, as is done already. This congregation already has many of those things happening, and particularly through the organized women's visitation, for example. But I know full well that many other women not involved in the organized visitation are also giving their time and their talents to some of these issues. And that, of course, is as it should be. You mustn't think that diaconal ministry is confined to deacons. Diaconal simply means, as we've said, service, serving the Lord, serving the Lord's people.

And whatever we're doing in serving the Lord's people, practically, male or female, whatever we are, we're engaged in a diaconal ministry, a ministry that has deacons in office overseeing that work, but nevertheless can engage females, women in that work as well.

Of course, there are other things, perhaps we have become so used to the way we do things, that we think it's simply out of order to say, for example, that there is nothing in Scripture that says a presenter cannot be female. That might sound radical. It sounded radical to me when I first heard it from one of the professors in college. But looking into it, there's nothing that I know of in the Bible that says women cannot actually fulfill the function of a presenter in a congregation.

I've already experienced myself previously of that in a certain district where a woman, because there were no presenters present in the usual sense, this woman regularly led the praise.

It doesn't mean she came out in front of the congregation and stood there like a male presenter would, but there was no reason why she didn't, why she couldn't. I'm just picking that as an example of, we've become so used perhaps to certain boxes, if you like, that are very neatly arranged, such as who can and can't and should and shouldn't be a presenter. Now, I'm not saying there's a threat to any of the presenters here. We're thankful that we have a large number, respectively, of very good presenters and leaders of praise. What I'm saying is there's no reason in Scripture why a woman should be prohibited from that sort of role and contribution practically in any congregation.

[30 : 54] So, here are the deacons. Here is what they're appointed to do, this practical distribution. They were needed alongside of the apostles, and now they're needed with the eldership to enable the eldership to focus on the more spiritual aspect, spiritual in the sense of having oversight.

It doesn't mean that the deacons are not involved in a spiritual matter as well as practical, but that's their role. And there's so much that can be done by the diaconate in the service of the gospel, in mission, in evangelistic ways that help to present the gospel. And as I said at the beginning, it's an organized way of bringing the love of Jesus to the community around us as well as to the church itself. But look at the aftermath. 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. Now, this seems a very deliberate reference to what happened after these men were chosen. As if it's really saying, as I think it is, that the church continued to increase greatly, and even some of the priests became obedient. They were converted to the Christian faith.

In other words, it's saying to us that instead of having what was threatened there at the beginning of the chapter, a split and a division and dissension and falling out, you have this suggestion, this way in which the apostles dealt with it. In verse 5, what they said pleased the whole gathering.

There's no word of any split or any secession or any breakup of the fellowship, any dissension, any rivalry, any strife. And as united in their choice and in their commitment to the gospel, the word of God continued to increase. In other words, you can see, in fact, that all the way through from the beginning of the book of Acts, even if it's not specifically mentioned, it's pretty obvious, and all the way through after chapter 6 and on into chapter 10 and 12 as well, that there is a very concerted effort on the part of darkness, on the devil, and on opposition that he has set up to the gospel at various places to try and frustrate the apostles and to try and sow discord and division amongst the people of God. And this is one of them. This could very, very easily have led to all kinds of problems that would really hamper the gospel and mean that it was, in a sense, stifled, at least for a while, and that the growth slowed down and indeed maybe stopped altogether for a while.

[33 : 56] It didn't. And the reason it didn't was that unitedly, this fellowship of God's people dealt with the issue wisely and properly. And that means that today, an efficient diaconate contributes hugely to the increase of the church, to the increase of God's people, not just in number, but in the quality of their fellowship. They spearhead that practical ministry that enables the elders to do their own work, others in the congregation to do their work as well.

That's our prayer, friends, as we come to this impending election of office bearers. Satan will want to sow discord, be assured of it, and use whatever he can to his advantage over such issues as these. He'll want to sow seeds of doubt, of rivalry, of suspicion, jealousy, of all of these things. Don't let him do that. Close your life against that.

Help each other combat that. And we pray that as we choose, as you choose new elders, to sit along with those who have already functioned in that way, and new deacons as well to head up that practical ministry of the love of Christ, that it will be as it was in these days of the apostles for the fellowship to increase even beyond what it is at this time. May God bless these thoughts to us.

Lord our God, we pray that you would guide us as a congregation as we turn our minds to the election of those who would be newly set as elders and deacons in the congregation. We thank you for the prospect of having new contributions to both of these functions of office in the congregation.

We thank you for those who are available. We pray for your guidance, Lord, to the congregation and their choice. We pray that you protect us, keep us, Lord, we pray, united and committed to each other as well as to yourself. And in all of these things, grant, Lord, that we may see days of further gospel advancement and flourishing of your own word amongst us. To the glory of your name, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let's conclude our worship this evening singing Psalm 15. Psalm 15 and sing Psalms on page 16. And the tune is St. Paul. Lord, who may stay within your tent, your sacred dwelling place, and who

upon your holy hill may live before your face, whoever walks a blameless path, who acts in righteousness, and who will always from the heart sincerely truth express. And so on through to the end of the psalm. Psalm number 15, that's on page 16. That's on page 16. That's on page 16. That's on page 16. That's on page 16. God's praise.

[37 : 12] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, who may stay within your tent, your sacred dwelling place, and who upon your holy hill may live before your face, whoever walks a blameless path, who acts in righteousness, and who will always from the heart sincerely truth express. He casts no sloth on anyone, nor does his neighbor wrong. He has no spite within his heart, or slander on his tongue. He honors those who fear the Lord, the world's threat he'll despise. He keeps the oath which he has sworn, however high the prize. He lends his money at no charge, no burden on his heart. He lends his money at no charge, no burden on his life. He'll always stand secure. Those who behave in life like this will always stand secure.

I'll go to the main door after the benediction. And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now. Amen.