

The Church Needs Deacons

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Today is a little bit different for us. Ordinarily, we are walking through books of the Bible together.

We just finished a long series through the book of John. As I mentioned earlier, Lord willing, next week we'll begin a new series in the book of Daniel. But here in between, we have an opportunity this morning, as we install two deacons in the life of this church, to explain from the Bible what in the world that word even means, deacon.

Now I know when I even say that, many of us have different images that come to mind, different experiences that come to mind, some good, some bad, some biblical, some unbiblical.

And so what I want to do this morning, with the help of God through His Word, is to open up to Acts chapter 6 and explain biblically what we are getting ourselves into with this gift of deacons this morning.

So open it up to Acts chapter 6. And I want you to keep a finger there. We're also going to go to 1 Timothy chapter 3. If you're using the Pew Bibles there in front of you, you can find Acts chapter 6 at page 859, I believe.

[1 : 1 6] But when you found it, let's stand in honor of the reading of God's Word, Acts chapter 6. I'll be reading this morning from verse 1 through verse 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 the 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 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 Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 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.

[2 : 4 5] And the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our Lord endures forever. Would you pray with me? Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your wisdom and for Your design and plans for Your church.

And we thank You that in Your grace and Your kindness, we are becoming obedient to what You've written. And we pray that that would continue here, and that You would work in us what You worked in the early church, that disciples would multiply greatly from this place.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. And you may be seated. Pastor Matt Smithhurst, in his very short, very helpful book, simply titled Deacons, he says, Show me a church with distracted leaders or a derailed mission, and I will show you a church without effective deacons.

It may be that you've been a part of a church like this, and if you have, whether you realize it or not, if you've experienced a church with distracted leaders or a derailed mission, whether or not you realize it, you have had a little taste of what life was like in the early church in this period in Acts chapter 6.

There's an issue here in the early days of the church. Issues are not anything new in the church, by the way. It's not a new phenomenon. Good things are happening in the early church.

[4 : 06] The Spirit has come. The Word is spreading. Men and women from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth are beginning to believe.

The gospel churches are forming. But verse 1 tells us that there's an issue. Look there with me. When the disciples were increasing in number, that's a good thing, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews.

That's a bad thing. Why were they complaining? He says, Because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. Here we go. This is church war.

We've all maybe tasted a bit of this. You have the Hellenists in one corner. These Greek-speaking Jews. They're hungry. Literally hungry. Their widows have been neglected.

There's an injustice being done. And in the other corner over here are the Hebrews. We don't know exactly why this neglect was happening. It may be that there was some sort of underlying prejudice behind this neglect.

[5 : 07] Maybe this was intentional. It may be just an innocent oversight. We're not told exactly why this is happening. But it's happening. And everybody is looking to the apostles to try and figure out, well, what in the world are they going to do to solve this problem?

If this were an American church, they probably just would have planted a Hellenist church over here. And a Hebrew church right around the corner over here. They would separate, go their own separate ways.

Everybody would be happy. But that's not what they did. The solution here, for the sake of unity of the church, and for the sake of the mission of the church, for the sake of the advance of the gospel, was to establish a deacon-like ministry that served the needs of these widows, that advanced the mission of the gospel, that preserved the ministry of the word and prayer.

There is a deacon-like ministry. And I can't exactly say that this is the establishment of the deacon ministry. Deacons have not yet formally been established at this point in the life of the early church.

But I can say with certainty that this, at the very least, lays out the blueprint for what the deacon ministry would become in the church. And so here's what I want you to understand this morning.

[6 : 27] That this type of deacon ministry, what we see in Acts chapter 6, is absolutely vital for the health of the church. Deacon ministry, when it functions according to the word of God for the good of his people, is absolutely vital for the health of the church.

The church needs deacons. Sea Wee Bay needs deacons. And so what I want to do this morning is give you four reasons why this morning.

Four reasons why we need deacons. And really, these are four descriptions of a deacon. So if you're following along, if you're a note taker, we try to make it easy for you to take notes.

This will help you follow me this morning. Four reasons why we need deacons. Number one, deacons are mature believers.

Deacons are mature believers. Verse 2, if you look there with me, verse 2 says that the 12 summoned the full number of the disciples.

[7 : 33] At this point, that number was in the thousands. According to Acts chapter 2, some estimates are likely over 20,000 members of this church. This was the first mega church here in Jerusalem.

Twelve apostles, thousands of members. And here's what they said. They said it's not right that we should give up preaching of the word of God in order to serve tables.

We'll get back to that comment in a moment. But here's the solution. They said, 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.

The solution here to this issue was seven men of good repute. You hear that qualification? They had a reputation that preceded them.

Seven men who were full of the spirit. They're not primarily just good businessmen. These are mature Christians. That's the qualification. These are individuals who gave evidence of regeneration.

[8 : 34] Seven men who are full of wisdom. They knew their Bibles. They can apply God's truth to issues in their lives as well as in the life of the church, problems that the church would face.

They were mature believers. Now, I want you to flip over to 1 Timothy 3 for a moment. And keep your fingers there in Acts 6, because we will come back.

But in 1 Timothy 3, all of 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to a young pastor who's trying to figure things out in the church. And he's giving godly wisdom, God-directed insight into how the church ought to function.

So by the time he gets to chapter 3, the Apostle Paul, he's listing out qualifications for the two offices of the local church, elder and deacon. Pastor, overseer, elder, elder, and deacon.

So we have the qualifications for the office of pastor in verses 1 through 7, and then the office of deacon in verses 8 through 13. And what I want you to notice is that in this description of deacons, this is simply describing Christian maturity.

[9 : 45] Look there with me to verse 8. It says, Deacons likewise, in the same manner as the pastors, deacons likewise must be dignified.

This is the banner qualification that hangs over the rest of these character qualifications here in the rest of the passage. They must be dignified. And then it tells us what they must not be.

Verse 8, they must not be double-tongued. Deacons might be placed in vulnerable situations where they might know sensitive information about church members.

They're caring for the needy and the weak and the vulnerable. Deacons don't say one thing and do another. They don't say one thing behind your back that they wouldn't say to your face.

They are not double-tongued. They can be trusted with the words that come out of their mouth. They're not addicted to much wine. Deacons in this context, again, they probably, possibly, would have been bringing wine to the sick, administering wine to those who are needy and sick.

[10 : 49] And they should not be given over to addiction to much wine. They're not drunkards. You don't want an alcoholic deacon, right? And in the same way, likely, they would have had access to distribute some of the church's funds for these tangible, immediate, practical needs.

They would be money holders for issues of benevolence and member care. And so, he says, they must not be greedy for dishonest gain. You don't want a greedy deacon having his hand in the finances of the church.

All of these are issues of self-control, aren't they? All of these are issues of Christian maturity. But it's not only what they must not be and do.

Verse 9 says, what they must do, they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Don't you love that description? Don't you wish that would be said of you?

They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They're not primarily teachers. That's not their role. But they're mature believers. They know their Bible.

[11 : 54] They're not in conflict with the church's statement of faith. These are men and women, as we'll see in just a moment, who believe the word of God. Verse 10 says, they must be tested first.

This isn't a quick appointment. It's too important for that. They're proven over time to be competent and faithful. You see the standard here. This is a standard of Christian maturity that's observed and affirmed by the church over time.

Now, verse 11. Here's where we get into some controversy. Although I don't want to get all the way into the weeds this morning in it, I do just want to point out that there in the ESV, the translation that we use, where it says, their wives likewise must be dignified, that can just as easily be translated, women likewise must be dignified, which would change things a little bit, wouldn't it?

Rather than Paul giving an additional qualification for deacons' wives, which the elders have no such qualification for their wives, instead, Paul, if this is what he's doing, would be speaking to females, women, who would serve in the office of deacon.

And so, if that's what he's doing, then the structure of this passage would look like this. Verses 8 through 10 address all deacons as sort of a header for the list. Verse 11 speaks to women deacons.

[13 : 24] Verse 12 speaks to male deacons. And then verse 13 concludes, again, by speaking to all deacons. Women likewise must be dignified. They likewise must not be slanderers, must be sober-minded, must be faithful in all things.

Verse 12, back to male deacons. They must be the husband of one wife, a one-woman man, managing their children and their own households well. And then finally, in verse 13, all who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

I guess we did sort of get into the weeds, didn't we? Not too deep. Here's the point. Whoever serves as a deacon must be dignified. That's the banner qualification here.

It's Christian maturity. And why do we need deacons that would serve like this? Well, because I pray that this list would describe every member of our church.

What's exceptional about this list is that these qualifications are so ordinary, isn't it? This is what all Christians must aspire to be and do.

[14 : 34] It's what deacons must be if we're going to recognize them and install them to serve in our church as deacons. But this is what all Christians ought to aspire to be by the grace of God.

God. So when we install qualified, mature deacons to serve in this church, what we're doing is we're providing servants who you can look to and say, go look like this.

Go live like this. You want to know what it means to serve in a God-honoring way? Go spend some time with Bill. Go spend some time with Randy. Serve with them.

Serve like them. Pursue Christ like them. They're examples of Christian maturity. Second, second, deacons are pastor supporters.

Let's look back to Acts chapter 6. Deacons are pastor supporters. Look there again to verse 2. And notice again how the apostles responded to this issue.

[15 : 34] They said, the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it's 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.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Do you notice the division of labor here? Developing in the early church.

The apostles here, they are to devote themselves to the ministry of prayer and the word. And then these seven men are appointed to this need meeting, ministry, practical, tangible, need meeting task.

And again, this lays out the blueprint, the pattern for how these two offices of the local church ought to operate. Elders, pastors, our shepherds, their spiritual overseers, their leaders, their primary task of elders and pastors is to be about the ministry of word and prayer.

And the primary task of deacons, like these seven men here, is to be about this practical, tangible, need meeting ministry of the body, but not as an end in itself.

[16 : 56] In essence, they look to the many practical needs of the body so as to guard and protect the ministry of the word. They're like offensive linemen.

As the elders run the play, drive the ball down the field, the linemen block and keep them from getting hit with every possible need or complaint along the way.

That's the general division of labor here. Now, notice what the apostles did not say. They did not say this need isn't important.

It could be easy to misunderstand the apostles' words here, to take it almost as being dismissive of the significance of this need.

Like, I'm not waiting tables so somebody else can do it. We're doing the important stuff over here so get somebody else to do it. Well, that's not what they said, is it? Quite the opposite, in fact. They saw that this need is so important that they gathered the whole church, appointed seven individuals to the task, set them about the work to make certain that this need was met so that they could continue to devote themselves to the word and prayer.

[18 : 13] It's interesting that the root word for deacon there in Acts 6, diakonos, it appears twice. Once, in verse 2, it's not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to deacon tables.

And again, in verse 4, but we will devote ourselves to prayer in the deaconing of the word. They recognized this division of labor with a common goal that was needed for the health of the church.

What they also didn't say was this need is important so we will do it all ourselves. That's not what they said. The apostles were not meeting every need that they saw in the early church.

And wisely so. They weren't doing everything that could be done. They were focused explicitly on what must be done. Namely, the ministry of the word and prayer.

Some churches have a messed up vision of what a pastor is supposed to do. That if there's needs in the church, well then the pastor is the one who must be the one to have to meet the needs in the church.

[19 : 27] That's wrong. But at the same time, some pastors wrongly take that upon themselves. They try to do too much. And instead of actually helping the church and ministering to the church, the church winds up with distracted leaders and a derailed mission.

The Associated Press published an article on January 11th titled, U.S. Pastors Struggle with Post-Pandemic Burnout.

Survey shows half considered quitting since 2020. It said that more than four in ten of clergy surveyed in fall 2023 had seriously considered leaving their congregations at least once since 2020.

And more than half had thought seriously of leaving the ministry according to the survey released by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research on Thursday. And it went on to say those thinking of quitting the ministry entirely were more likely to be pastors of smaller churches and those who work solo compared with those on larger staffs and at larger churches.

Now why do you think that is? It is not because large church ministry is easier than small church ministry. I can guarantee you that. But it is because small churches are often understaffed and under resourced which leaves the pastor overwhelmed and overextended as they seek to meet the needs of the body.

[21 : 00] Unless unless he is able to delegate the needs of the ministry to qualified individuals who can help carry the load.

Church do you see the wisdom here? In God's gift of a plurality of elders and a plurality of godly deacons to help carry the load?

I am thankful for Treg Hallman who serves alongside me as an elder here. I am thankful that God has brought these two men Bill and Randy to serve alongside us as deacons.

We need deacons church. The church needs deacons. There is wisdom here for us to follow. But it is not just for my good.

Third, deacons are unity defenders. They are mature believers. They are pastor supporters. Third, they are unity defenders.

[22 : 00] Ask yourself, why was this need so important? Important enough to gather the whole church and important enough to address it here. Important enough for Luke as he is writing the book of Acts to say we need to record this and have us think about this.

I think there are three layers to this issue here. On the one hand, the issue is important simply because there is a need in the body. These widows are being neglected.

That is an issue. We are called to care for those who are weak and vulnerable. We are called to care for the orphan and the widow. That is layer number one. There is a real need here in the body that needs to be addressed.

There is another issue here, isn't there? We have already covered it. The ministry of the word was going to be hampered if the apostles were to be distracted from the ministry of the word and prayer to go serve tables.

Guess what? The ministry of the word and prayer would be hampered. The apostles can only divide their time and attention in so many ways. There is another issue here, another reason why this ministry was so necessary.

[23 : 08] It is a reason that underlies the work of a deacon. It is one of the main reasons why we and every other church needs qualified deacons. That reason is that the unity of the church is being threatened.

Do you see that? The unity of the church. Think about it. The problem here is much bigger than just the immediate practical need on the table. No pun intended.

The problem, this unmet need, was resulting in a bigger issue, the brewing threat of disunity in the early church. Now, we have talked about this so much.

You probably are wondering when in the world am I going to stop talking about unity so much? Well, don't hold your breath. Church, this is so important for us. We must guard the unity that's given to us by God in the gospel of Christ.

Christ. It's a defining feature of the local church is that Christ has united us individually, vertically to God by faith in Him, and He has united us horizontally to one another in a body.

[24 : 22] If we're not united together, we have no mission worth sharing about. Unity was important to Jesus, John 17. He prayed, I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that's us, that they may all be one just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Our unity, again, individually to God and corporately to one another, is an apologetic to the outside unbelieving world.

He said, Father, I pray that they may be one so that the world may believe that you sent me. Lack of oneness breeds lack of witness.

This is a need that must be addressed. How could they continue to go out and tell people of the unifying work of Jesus if they themselves are divided with one another? Unity was important to Jesus.

Unity was important to Paul. Ephesians chapter 4. He says, I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[25 : 53] Does that sound familiar to you? To our members, that ought to sound very familiar. That's a part of our church covenant. It's the first line of commitment that we make as we join together in this church family, that we will pursue unity, being eager to maintain it, what God has given to us.

The unity of the church was important to Paul, not only this, but the church's unity is important to Satan. Do you realize that? The church's unity is important to Satan, which is why he does whatever he can to disrupt it.

Our enemy does not want a united church. He hates a united church. I'm afraid that he works much harder to disrupt our unity than we tend to do to protect it.

Church, we share a sweet fellowship here in this family. I know we do, but hear me out. Our enemy would love to use something as small as setting tables to unravel the fellowship that we share at Seawee Bay.

Deacons, I'm speaking to you and church members to you as well. Don't let it happen here. Be on guard against it.

[27 : 13] Be eager to maintain the unity that we've been given. Don't let the enemy get one step into this church to disrupt the unity that we have. Our mission hinges on our unity as we work together to spread the gospel.

be watchful deacons. Be vigilant. Serve like watchmen in a tower. Serve like snipers in a tower who seek to put out any threat before they even come near the walls of this church.

You are unity defenders. One final description. Fourth, finally, deacons are servant leaders.

servant leaders. At the very heart of the deacon ministry is service. Serving tables is not glamorous work, is it?

I worked at a coffee shop while I was in seminary. Let me tell you something. There is no worse job than serving coffee to coffee addicted people before they have had their coffee.

[28 : 22] Everybody else gets them after they have been getting their fix of the caffeine. It is tough. It is messy work. You get fussed at.

People fuss at you. They don't like the way you serve them. You have to clean up other people's messes. It is hard work in the service industry. To be a deacon at its very core is to be about service.

The word deacon, you know this. The word deacon, it literally translates to mean servant. It is a dignified title for dirty work. You want to be a deacon?

That does not mean you are climbing up the ladder of a church to a position of authority. What it means is that you are committing to stoop down low to be in the position of a servant.

But lest you think that makes them insignificant, let me remind you how things work in the kingdom of God. Mark chapter 10, James and John wanted to climb the ladder of authority.

[29 : 28] And they made a request of the Lord Jesus, Lord let us sit at your right hand in glory. They wanted this position of authority and recognition. They wanted power and greatness. And Jesus responds to them and says really you don't know what you are asking for.

Listen to what he says in Mark chapter 10 verse 42. It says 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. That's how it works out there in the world. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.

And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. Do you hear the path of greatness in the kingdom of God? Unlike the way things work out there in the world where the path of greatness is climbing the ladder no matter who you got to trample on the way up the path to greatness in the kingdom of God and in the church is not up but down.

You're not climbing your way up the ladder. You're stooping low to become a servant. Whoever would be great among you must be your deacon.

[30 : 42] And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. Is that your vision of greatness? Is that your vision of what true greatness looks like?

Deaconing is messy work. It's often thankless work. Oftentimes people who you serve are mean to you. Sometimes they won't be happy with your service.

If you serve for their approval you'll probably be discouraged in your work at some point along the way. But if you want to be a deacon your call is to step into the messiness of the church for their good and for God's glory.

You are called to be a servant. Again, Matt Smethurst quoting his book, he says, deacons are not the church's spiritual council of directors, nor the executive board to whom the pastor CEO answers.

They are the calvary of servants, deputized to execute the elders' vision by coordinating various ministries. I love that description. And here at Seaweed Bay, what that's going to look like, what this means for us practically as we install these men today as deacons, is that these men will serve by leading and facilitating some key ministry areas for our church, the ministries of facilities and the ministry of stewardship.

[32 : 09] And church, they will need your help. They will need your support. They will need your prayers. We don't raise up deacons to do all the ministry themselves.

They lead and facilitate and organize, but the church is to be about this work of service. All of us are in a very general sense lowercase d deacons. If you want to support them, then join them.

Don't just observe their efforts, multiply their efforts. And it's my prayer and my expectation that as these men serve, the Lord will do in us and through us what he did for the church here in Acts chapter 6.

Look there again to verse 5. Verse 5 says that what they said pleased the whole gathering, and so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Taman, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles and they prayed and laid hands on them. Listen to this. And the word of God continued to increase. And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

[33 : 28] And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Don't you want to see that happen here? don't you want to see the word of God increase here?

Don't you want to see disciples multiplied here? I believe that deacons and their humble need, meeting, pastor, supporting, unity, defending ministry are a crucial part of that game.

The church needs great deacons. why? Ultimately because when they serve in this way as God has designed for the good of the church, they show the church and the world what Jesus is like.

Mark chapter 10, one more time. Verse 45. Jesus gives them the ultimate reason to serve like this. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Even the Son of Man, Jesus Christ himself, came not to be deaconed, but to deacon. The Lord Jesus himself, for the sake of others centered, church building, need, meeting, service, humbled himself to become a servant.

[34 : 58] covenant. How great is the Lord Jesus who stooped down to wash his disciples feet? How great is the Son of God who took on flesh to come and to ransom what's been lost?

How great is the King who laid down his life to bring sinners like us into his kingdom? Do you see Jesus' greatness? Jesus served us.

I know that this is primarily a message for the church about deacons, and if you're not a believer and you're here, you're hearing this message, you probably don't care a thing about deacons and why our church needs deacons and what does this have to do with you.

Listen to this. You may not care a thing about that, but you should care that the Son of God himself has stooped down to serve you.

That even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. You know, we often think the way to get right with God and to maintain a good standing with God is to serve him, right?

[36 : 11] If I can just serve him in the correct ways, he'll love me. If I can serve him better, maybe things will be right with me and him. Let me be as clear as I possibly can with you this morning. You cannot begin to serve him unless you have first allowed Christ Jesus to serve you.

Have you received the service of Jesus by faith? And church, for us, I hope you see we need deacons like this.

We need deacons like this who will show us the servant heart of Christ that we might see and experience from one another what it means to be served and loved and cared for by God himself.

Now, we might have an example to follow as we follow Christ. And that this church might grow in health and unity and that the word of God might go forth in power.

Amen? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your wisdom and your good design for your church. It's not our church.

[37 : 23] It's not our plans for our church and what we want to do and what we want to see happen. It's not our design. God, we want to submit to your word. What you have planned for your church.

So we praise you and we thank you for these two men, Bill and Randy, as you've raised them up, as this church has affirmed their qualifications as deacons. And we pray, God, that they would be a blessing to us as we look to Christ.

We love you, Lord, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.