Called to Serve, Commissioned to Unite

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[0:00] All rows, there should be Bibles underneath. If there's not one, ask one. Ask for one, okay? Please help yourself to these Bibles.! Take them home if you want.

They are yours for taking. In fact, I'd actively encourage you to take one. There is loads. I've just got a new stock. Okay? So if you need a Bible, just ask for it.
They're just at the end of the pews. Chairs. We don't have pews. Sorry. Okay. Acts. Acts 6.
The choosing of the seven. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked, in the daily distribution of food.
So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.
[1:15] Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give them our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.
They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.
Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the synagogue, of the freedmen, as it was called, Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as the provinces of Sicilia and Asia.
These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.
[2:51] So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified, This fellow never stopped speaking against his holy place and against the law.

For we have heard him say that this is Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.
Amen. And thank you to the Lord for giving his word. Let's stand and sing together before Craig brings God's word.
Let's sing together. The servant king will stand to sing. Thank you. Thank you.
Thank you guys. Thank you Paul for your prayers. Thank you all. So. What an incredible little chapter to delve into, eh?
[4:08] And as we think about that, think about this. At the very beginning of time, when mankind chose to leave the garden and bring an unlimited amount of problems into the world.

God promised a rescuer. When Israel find itself enslaved to Egypt and riddled with problems, God sent help.
He sent a rescuer. Moses. And right across the story, when rulers ruled with fear, and dictatorship, bringing problems to everyone, troubles to everyone, God sent people, people like Daniel, Samson, Esther, David, and many, many others to take a stand for God, for justice, for righteousness.
and he never, ever stops. Many, many centuries later, when the slave trade was oppressing millions, God sent a rescuer, Wilberforce.

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when aid, and help, and feeding was needed, is needed, all over the world, God was sending Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, William Carey, to help build, feed, preach.
[6:08] when Hitler, was brutalizing the world, God was sending people like Bonhoeffer, and Corrie ten Boom, as rescuers, to deal with the situation.

when race, mass race crowds, were divided, and dominating the south, God was sending Martin Luther King. When communist countries, during the Cold War, were blocking all access, God sent Brother Andrew, to start open doors.
When the 20th century, began to destroy itself, and lose faith, God sent Billy Graham, to teach, and to preach, and many, many, many, many, many more.
Those, who have seen, problems, problems that will distort, problems that could leave people, unhelped, problems that could get in the way, of the word being preached, when people have seen problems, all across the centuries, they, in the name of Jesus, have started, orphanages, hospitals, hospices, AA, mercy ships, and the list goes on and on.
Our God, God, our amazing, good God, has always been, in the business, in the business, of helping people, of sending rescuers, to rescue people, and help people, from the very, very, very small, individual, local problems, to the big, worldwide, problems, God, truly is, the same yesterday, today, and forever.
[8:14] And so, it's no surprise, that here, in Acts chapter 6, it's no surprise, that God, is sending people, to handle problems, to sort some issues out.

it's what he's always done, and what he always does. And on that note, with the use of the word, problem, shocking, isn't it?
Shocking, that the first century church, was having a problem. Haven't you been reading, the first five, chapters?
This is the greatest, smoothest, most joy-filled, church, that has ever been. No problems.
They all share, with one another, look after one another, there's no problems. It can be, a little tempting, to sometimes, idolize, the early church, as if they were, truly perfect.
[9:25] As if they were, sort of, a little superhuman. are maybe, even less, sin-filled than us. Much more, holier. But we know, we know, that's not true.

We know, that's not true. We need to read, the idyllic, picture, in Acts chapter 2, alongside, Acts chapter 6, to get reality.
And of course, not forgetting, all the troubles, and the debates, and the fallouts, that are all yet to come. That are all yet to come, across the New Testament.
We need to read, the early church chapters, with the future chapters, in mind. As it looks so glorious, and great, and successful, we know, what's ahead, for the early church.
And so here, at this very specific point, in the history, of the church, a problem, has occurred.
[10:36] And it's a problem, that has the potential, to affect, the welfare of people. It's a problem, that have left untouched, could hunger, people, could starve, people, could end families, could destroy, lives.

So God, being the same God, yesterday, today, and forever, responds, as he always does, as he's done, since Moses. And through, Holy Spirit, he now, sends help.
But just look, at how, at how exactly, he goes about it. For he sends, he sends problem fixers.
Or better put, he develops, he pioneers, he initiates, a fantastic model, of servanthood, that will fix, the problem, and is called, the deacon.
Just look, at what is going on here. The church is booming. Growth is great. People are getting saved.
[11:54] Lives are being transformed. So much so, that the problems, and the troubles, from the Sanhedrin, Sanhedrin, are only seen as a blessing.

They receive it, they receive it, with a blessing. Everyone, is sharing, and loving, and helping. And then, and then, the complaint.
Yes, the complaint. Again, here's a word, having read the last, five chapters, one would think, doesn't exist, in this church. But it does.
There is a problem, between Hebrew-speaking Christians, probably, we don't know for definite, probably, local Jews, who had come, to faith.
And the Greek-speaking Christians, probably, we don't know for definite, Jews, from other lands, converted, at Pentecost. The Greek-speaking Christians, were complaining, that their widows, were

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being overlooked, from the daily, distribution, of food.
[13:02] And, worth taking note here, that in line, with what we have already, been saying this morning, about God always, sends help, long before, our time, here is God, already operating, a food bank, looking after, hungry people.

He was rescuing people, from their problems. But, as for the complaint, this accusation, of possible favoritism, was probably, not intentional.
But, it was probably, more a language barrier. A language barrier problem. But, nevertheless, whatever was causing, the problem, it was leaving, withows and children, hungry.
It was leaving, withows and children, hungry. And so, God is on to it. And, it rightly starts, it rightly starts, with the leadership.
Good, leaders, pick their battles, very, very carefully. They do not, and they should not, get involved, in everything.
[14:22] They should not be involved, in everything. But, they should, and they do, take responsibility, for everything.

They take responsibility, for everything. And so, the apostles, Peter and co, faced, a very justified, complaint.
Our withers, are not being fed, our children, are going hungry. A very, justified, complaint. It's a complaint, that Peter, and co, know, Jesus, we take very seriously.
Hunger. Jesus, we take that, extremely seriously. If he was there, in the building, with them that day, he would have dealt, if it stood away. And he knows that, Peter knows that. Yes, the apostles, needed to concentrate, on their main task.
The word. Prayer. Shepherding the flock. And so, the solution. Lay, as it often does, an effective delegation.
[15:36] The solution. Lay, an effective delegation. The apostles, don't need to get involved, but they do need to take responsibility. So, they delegate, effectively.

The apostles, promptly, responded, to the complaint, by one, through prayer, and two, Holy Spirit seeking.
And they appointed people, who were full of the spirit, and wisdom, and wisdom, to be part, of an exciting, new, particular group, who would make it, their very, very business, to take responsibility, for this particular problem.
This particular, practical problem. And then, beyond this, first problem, they would be, a united group, who would work together, to take care, of all, and any other, practical, situations, that needed, addressed.
All so that, the elders, could do, the particular job, they were appointed to do. which, ultimately, meant, that God's message, could continue, to be lived out, across the lands.
[17:05] And it worked. It really, really, really, worked. Look at verse 7. Having, dedicated deacons, to their task, therefore, leaving Peter, and Co, to do their task, the word of God, spread, the number of disciples, in Jerusalem, increased, rapidly, and a large number, of priests, became obedient, to the faith.

It worked. The apostles, the elders, not getting involved, not getting involved, but taking responsibility, and delegating, finding, finding, spirit-filled folk, to deal with it, meant, the kingdom grew.
People became Christians. People got close to God. It worked. The office of deacon, was created, so that all the practical work, of running a church, could be fulfilled, by spirit-filled folk.
Leaving the elders free, to focus on the word, on prayer, on shepherding. So that by both teams, doing their work properly, the church, as a whole, would grow, expand, develop, and be.
Both teams, having been developed, by God, both teams, are empowered, by Holy Spirit, and both are called, to, in full collaboration, work fully together, lead the church, together.
[18:58] One, obviously, taking care of the practical, the other, the spiritual, but together, that covers, the runnings, of a church. It's a fantastic model, and it's proven to work, and it limits, and it controls, problems.

Which again, was the initial reason, for it starting. The, Wester Hills Baptist Church, deacons and I, have been going through, a little study, to this effect.
Learning, and recognising, together, the office of deacon. And we've learnt, a few things. Firstly, we've learnt, that the fundamental, calling, and raising, to one, becoming a deacon, is having, a

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steadfast, scripturally, correct, relationship, with Jesus.
As, is clear here, in Acts, the chosen people, were full, of the Holy Spirit. They were full, of wisdom.
And so, one, can be great, at, DIY, finance, rotas, distributing, arranging, and everything else.
[20:25] You can be great, at that. The best, in the country, at that. But if that person, is not, in a good place, with God, God, their daily, quiet times, reading scripture, prayer, then they are not, qualified, to be a deacon.

They can be the best, at their practical work. But if they are not, daily in touch, with God, they're not qualified, to be a deacon, scripture is very clear, about that.
1 Timothy, 3, 8-9, says, in the same way, deacons are to be, worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging, in much wine, and not pursuing, dishonest gain.
They must keep, hold of the deep, truths of the faith, with a clear, conscience. The second verse there, being the prime, they must keep, hold, of the deep, truths, of the faith, with a clear, conscience.
I say it again, they can be the best, the best skilled, in whatever task they do. But if they are not, in a good place with God, if they are not, keeping hold, of the deep, truths of scripture, with a clear, conscience, then they're not, qualified to be a deacon.
[22:01] Because you see, that there is no reason, for starting, the deacon role, to deal with a problem. Well if, if those original, seven deacons, were not spirit filled, were not devoted, devoted Christians, they would have approached, that problem, with a very different attitude.

Accusations, scolding people, taking back, making money, angry, and all such other ways. They would have approached, it like that, if they were not, spirit filled, devoted Christians, having quadrions, of Jesus every day.
But instead, they approached it, peacefully, patiently, patient, forgiving, kind, compassionate, and willing, to take the flack. They were willing, to take the flack for it.
And above all, they were prayer warriors. They would have prayed, about it all. Prayed, for all the people, involved in the problem. Prayed, about how to respond.
Looked, for the appropriate scriptures, that were needed, that would talk, directly into their problem.
And they waited, waited patiently, for Holy Spirit to guide, to get them this problem, sorted out, one step at a time.
[23:22] All stemming from the fact, that they all, firstly, had a good place, of God themselves.
Which is why, they could respond, to the problem, like that.

And so must all deacons, be today. In fact, Paul says, doesn't he, a deacon, must first be tested.
And if there is, nothing against them, then let them serve as deacons.
That's quite serious. That's very, very, very, very serious. God wants people, tested, before they're invited, to serve as deacons.
God wants, godly focused folk, on deacons, and elders for that matter. People in deep, deep, rooted relationships, with him.
before they do anything. And then the, particular jobs, that deacons do, will depend, on where each one is, individually.
[24:23] Where their, particular gifted, interest, and skills, from the Lord, are. Numbers, admin, practical, and so on. But the main job, they will be doing, is protecting, and promoting, church unity.

And now, what do we mean, by that? Well, think about it. The problem, facing, the early church, at this point, was possible, brokenness, and possible, division.
These two groups, of new Christians, were at risk, of falling out, and dividing the church. These two groups, you're not feeding my withows, just we are.
No one, this, this, this, this was a big risk, of a big division, of a full-on feud, between these two, parts of the church. And so, by creating, a deaconry, to handle, the problem, it first, and foremostly, protected, and promoted, church unity.
With the problem, handled well, the church, remained united, and well.
[25:51] These two groups, had they been left, to fester, would have split, the church. But the deacons, came in, took care of business, and the church, remained united, and in good shape.

And so, all sorts of little problems, pop up every day, and everywhere. And just like, in any organization, in any business, left on, more people, will get involved, take sides, voice opinions, eventually, causing that problem, of just, are to be people, of a watchful eye.

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Looking out, for all such, practical issues, so that church wellness, and church unity, may remain. And that includes, balancing the book, taking care of the building, so that there, there is no room, for quarrel, there's no room, for petty accusations, there's no room left, for anyone, to fall out, and argue.
This of course, is a huge, massive, and this is where, we can expose, the one big difference, spiritual, overseeing.
The eldership, is by scripture, appointed, by God, to hold the local authority, within the fellowship, but it's not a dictating, authority ship, it can't be, because Jesus wasn't.
[27:19] But like Peter and co, in Acts chapter 6, it's an authority ship, of delegation, and servanthood. And as we see, in Acts chapter 6, when it happens smoothly, it leaves the eldership, fully free, to focus on shepherding, the flock.

So yes, when deacons, are doing their job, correctly, the elders, do their job, correctly. Ultimately, meaning, the whole church, runs well.
I'm getting back, to this chapter, Acts chapter 6, to the problems, the early church faced. Isn't it interesting? Isn't it interesting, that straight away, after the launch of deacons, and as soon as we are told, problem sorted, all is good, the church is growing, it's all fine.
Straight away, after that, we are told, about the problems, Stephen faced. Stephen, the first deacon, a man, full of the Holy Spirit, a man, full of wisdom, a deacon, because he was, in good contact, with God, a deacon, because he knew, Jesus inside out, a deacon, because like King David, he was after God's heart.
That's why, he was a good deacon, that's why he succeeded, because he was, after God's own heart. And it would perhaps, appear, that God is king, to remind us, that he does not, promise us, a life free, from the world, and its troubles.
[28:55] And so as we go further, into chapter six, as I say, straight away, we're once again, reminded, Stephen's facing problems. Stephen's facing problems. We once again, remember, Jesus promises, in the long run, we will conquer, over our problems, we will conquer, over our troubles, but until then, we must embrace them, by his strength.

It's easy, to trust God, when things are going, very well, isn't it? The challenge, is to keep trusting God, in the midst of troubles. And so take courage, in the example, of Stephen, and do not stop, trusting, the goodness of God, for his righteousness, reaches to the skies.
And keep hoping, because your troubles, will not last forever. The psalmist writes, don't give up, because from the depths, of the earth, your God, will bring us up again.
He will increase, our honour, and comfort, once again. God will use, your troubles for good. He will shape, your character, through them.
And as a result, you will increase, in honour. He will comfort you, through them, that you may comfort others, as Paul tells us. And while you're, going through trouble, don't give the enemy, a foothold.
[30:25] Keep worshipping. Keep on praising God. As the psalmist, in Psalm 71, tells us, I will praise, the Lord of the harp, for your faithfulness, O my God, I will sing praise to you.

O Holy One of Israel, I praise you. it is, factually, proved, by many Christians, that the presence, of God, and worship, brings us peace, as we face, difficult times.
Many, many of the greatest, hymns, and worship songs, are all written, by Christians, in desperation, such as, Mr. Hariato, writing, it is well, with my soul, as he passed, by the part, of the ocean, where his daughters drowned.
As we know, Stephen, would soon become, the first, Christian martyr. And he was, enduring this, troublesome torment.
And as he endured it, he was literally, seeing the presence, of Jesus. And in worship, praying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.
[31:46] He kept trusting. He remained hopeful. He worshipped. His problem, did not disappear, but he conquered, in Jesus.

And so, in an effort, to bring both, the launch of deacons, and Stephen's problems, to a conclusion together, let me finish, by looking briefly, at another, biblical character.
Joseph. Old Testament, Joseph. Because let's think, about his story, one moment. His problems, his attitude. God doesn't manufacture, problems or troubles, including all the issues, we've mentioned today.

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But he certainly, uses them for good. The enemy, is the troublemaker. And God uses, the enemy's troubles, for good. Because God, is the blessed, controller of all things, his ways, are higher than ours.
His judgments, are on search, principle. His paths, are beyond tracing out. We can't always see, how he is doing it, but we can be assured, he is.
[33:01] Joseph did. Joseph assumed, God was in the problem. And so, he faced the problems, in the prison cell, with his brothers, and all else.

He faced the problems, with God in the plan. Later, he actually tells, his brothers, God sent me, before you, to preserve life. He tells them, you meant me harm, God used it for good.
And so, Joseph, approached the problem, of global, wide, upcoming famine, with the same, heart, and mindset, of any good deacon.
Joseph, Joseph, was a spirit-filled, wise man. And he studied scripture, he prayed, he seeked God, and peacefully, and patiently, devised, an incredible, God-based, government, plan, that would stabilize nations.
Joseph, an incredible example, of deacon. his plan, wasn't overbearing, his plan, wasn't heavy, on the people, his plan, was simple, save for seven years, distribute for seven years, manage carefully.
[34:18] That was it, Stephen, Joseph's plan. And it worked, and it fed the nations. And the problem, the trouble, was overcome, and unity, was held.

And not only, for our deacons, but for us all, as we approach problems, and troubles, here in the church, and in our lives, do what Joseph did.
Here was the one, big difference, with our Joseph. It was God, famine, God. Well, we are often, the problem, of the building work, God, the problem, of the building work.
You see, the difference, Joseph was God, famine, God. Let deacons, in this church, elders in this church, all of us, be the very, very, very same. God, the problem, God.
But as I've already hinted, let me finish, by making this, about us all. Like Joseph, like Stephen, whatever troubles, you are facing, whatever troubles, you will face, bereavement, debt, addiction, unemployment, hardships, or whatever else, approach it like Joseph.
[35:39] God, the problem, God. And whilst you do, approach it like Stephen, and worship him, pray, have your quiet times, and you will conquer.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you, that deep rooted, here, in your story, is the wonderful account, of deaconry, and the day you pioneered it.
And Lord, thank you for teaching us, Lord, what came about, what it came about to do. And so, we pray a special blessing, for our deacons, here today. May they know, the encouragement, of you in their lives.
May they know, the blessings, of you upon them, this day. And may they go forth, encouraged, excited, to serve you, in the way, scripture tells them to.
And let us as a church, never lose focus, on the actual job, on what the actual role, is to do. So may we as elders, enable them, to do that job, give them that place, give them that role, give them that authority, to crack on, and do the job, Lord, and succeed in your name.
[36:57] All so that, the kingdom may grow, that we can continue, to shepherd the flock. All of us together, the priesthood of all believers, we're all priests, we're all pastors, here together, Lord.

So let's look after, one another together, and do this together, all for the kingdom, that we may be in line, with that verse, in Acts chapter 6. The kingdom is going, things were happening, people were getting to see it, good news was being shared.
In the name of Jesus, Amen. Amen. As a fellowship, we're going to, celebrate communion, if you know, and love, the Lord Jesus, the way I've described here, you're certainly welcome, to join us, if not, that's okay, for now.
Reflect, think, pray, try praying, and if you want to, come and have a chat, later. So as we prepare our hearts, to do the communion, we're going to begin, with this precious little song, take my life, and let it be.
Thank you. Thank you.

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