

Deacons: Modeling the Servant-Life of Jesus
“The Calling of Shared Ministry”
Acts 6:1-7

Take a First Look.

I. YOU REMEMBER THAT BAPTIST PASTOR WHO WENT GOLFING WITH THE LOCAL CATHOLIC PRIEST? On the first green, the Catholic priest crossed himself and muttered a silent prayer and putted his ball into the hole in one stroke. Hole after hole, he did the same thing. He one-putted on every green for nine holes. Finally, when the Baptist pastor was walking to the clubhouse with the Catholic priest for a break before the back nine, he could contain himself no longer. He asked the priest, “If I said a prayer like you do every time before I putt, do you think it would help?” The priest said, “No, I don’t.” “Why not?” asked his Baptist friend. Answered the priest gently, “Because you don’t know how to putt.” Some issues are not theological.

II. THIS MESSAGE IS NOT ABOUT PUTTING NOR ABOUT GOLF. It is about realizing that no one of us knows how nor can do all that needs to be done to express the full presence of Jesus in the world. That is the full calling of the church, to express the visible presence of Jesus in the world. *And it will take all of us, individually and in complete harmony with each other, to accomplish it.*

III. THIS IS A CALL TO A SHARED MINISTRY. A story coming from the early years of Church life will make the point well. I must point out to you that this story predates the use of deacons as a recognized body of servants in the Church. However, it shows why we would consider them a strategic part of our life and service together for the Lord.

Take a closer look at Acts 6:1-7.

I. SHARED MINISTRY IS NEEDED BECAUSE OF THE CHALLENGE OF FELLOWSHIP.
Acts 6:1-3

1. *The growth of the church demanded much from church leaders.* The first sentence of this story shows this clearly. This happened “when the number of disciples was increasing.” There is no safe way to fulfill the Great Commission. When we reach people for Jesus Christ, they come with all of their past baggage. Our task in helping them grow as disciples is to show them where to dump the trash from the past, where to stow the baggage from the past, and how to walk with God into the future He has planned for us all.

A—We must not shrink from the problems that come with growth, but rather embrace them and come together to solve them.

2. *As the church grew, old and unresolved issues between people threatened to divide the fellowship.* The problem here was one of language, ethnic background, and probably a bit of religious snobbery. The Hellenists were those Jews who had a Greek background. They probably spoke Greek as their main language and had moved to Jerusalem from other places. The Hebrews were the Jews who had an Aramaic background, who had lived in Jerusalem and its close environs most of their lives. This was a classic case of the Old Members not seeing

“eye to eye” with the New Members. In fact, to make it more understandable for us, this is a conflict between the native population and the immigrant population. At that moment in time, they had all become followers of Christ, and they lived and served in the same church.

And right away, someone complained about how their shared ministry was being carried out. It is amazing how a strain of complaint can bring potential destruction to the Church! One person can begin to criticize how others are performing their service to God, and the whole church can become embroiled in a controversy that has nothing to do with the cause of Christ. Nothing is more paralyzing to the Church than a spirit of judgment and complaint and criticism. This is how the enemy of our souls often works to bring the work of the kingdom to a grinding halt. We must not give him the foothold!

The complaint came from the Grecian Jews (NIV, that is, those that spoke Greek) who felt that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. They thought that the Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jews were receiving preferential treatment as food was being shared among them. Hard times were everywhere, and the only source of livelihood for these older Christians was the church. This was a serious situation, requiring immediate and effective response.

3. *The apostles wisely charged the church with the task of selecting The Seven to solve the immediate problem.* Racial differences, ethnic backgrounds, long-standing habits of thought and relationship must not impede the growth and prosperity of the Church which bears the name of Jesus Christ. Never! The apostles called for spiritual maturity to show the way of reconciliation between these two diverse groups within the Church.

A—Shared ministry must be practiced to keep merely human distinctions from being divisive issues between Christians. Such actions bridge the gaps between races and other distinctions and bring the kingdom of God to bear.

I—Jim Barnett was the pastor of a rural Mississippi church several years ago. He has had many opportunities to help people with their farm work. In *Proclaim* magazine he described helping one of the church’s senior deacons who was extending the roof of his barn. Before he arrived to help, all the old barn posts had been removed except one. He knew that the post had to come down, so he took it on himself to remove it. He tugged and pushed and pulled at the post until it was loose and he was exhausted. No matter how hard he tried, however, he couldn’t lift it out of the four-foot-deep hole of Mississippi mud it was in. After the old deacon had watched his struggle for awhile, he suggested that they roll a nearby farm trailer over to the post and use it, a chain, and a strong pole to pull the post out of the hole. In a few minutes, the post popped right out of the hole.

The obvious need of shared ministry is right here. We often come to the end of our own strength and wisdom and need the strategic insight, experience and strength of our brothers and sisters in Christ. As your pastor, I know this is true. We can’t always pull the posts out alone! And some of those posts are imbedded in the very fabric of the culture.

II. SHARED MINISTRY IS NEEDED TO UTILIZE THE SPIRITUAL MATURITY OF OTHER CHRISTIANS. Acts 6:3-6

1. *To maintain fellowship in the distribution of food, men “full of the Spirit and wisdom” were needed.* The issue was essentially one of maintaining the fellowship, not simply distributing food. There was much at stake here. The integrity of the infant church was on the line. *Integrity* is the proper word, as it describes the state of being integrated, together and not separated. This is the challenge of growth for every church. We must be open to the gifts, needs

and ideas of new people that God will add to the church. We must never allow our hearts to develop some kind of “us” and “them” perspective between older and newer members. We are one body in Christ, and we must give mature, spiritual leadership by example to this ultimate truth.

A—Though these men were not deacons as we now think about it, the spiritual nature of their character and mission was primary. For deacons in this church, we need men who match this description, who are wise and Spirit-filled.

I—We are entrusting five men with practical ministry tasks that call for wisdom, hard work, and the ability to keep confidences. Just as these Christians entrusted ministry to new leaders, so must we. We are called not only to see past actions and service, but also to see potential for ministry to our people and families.

2. *The Seven were representatives of the people involved in the dispute, as well as of the church as a whole.* Each of these men had a Greek name, indicating that they were probably from the Grecian Jewish part of the community, the part that complained about being overlooked. What wisdom and Christian acceptance and trust this showed in the church and in the apostles!

3. *The men were set apart for their task.* The Church selected and the Apostles affirmed the men for this special task. They weren’t called deacons, but they were called servants, *diakono*i, from which our word deacon is derived.

A—We must not hesitate to entrust spiritually maturing people with the burden of practical ministry, no matter how different they are from us in age, background, or appearance.

I—The five men before us today to be ordained as deacons have different backgrounds, different personalities, different spiritual gifts, but a shared calling to serve others in love.

III. SHARED MINISTRY IS NEEDED TO GIVE GOD THE GREATEST ADVANTAGE IN BUILDING HIS KINGDOM. Acts 6:7

1. *Luke tells us that “the word of God spread” at this time.*

2. *What could have produced the halting of kingdom building was turned into an opportunity for growth.* Ethnic background and differences of language have brought division to the body of Christ throughout the centuries. At least at this early season in Church life, the Christians rose above such division, and God blessed with even greater impact on their world.

A—Shared ministry, across any divisions of age, background, social standing in the community, race, and educational degree, will allow God the full use of His body, working together, to accomplish His purposes.

Take It Home (applications).

I. Where does such shared ministry begin?

1. It begins with men and women, boys and girls, being made new by Jesus Christ one by one.

2. This brings each of us to a point of spiritual life by faith in Jesus.

II. It continues as we find our own place of service to God and affirm the place of every other Christian, no matter how different each one may seem to us. This means we develop a servant-spirit, not telling everyone else what to do, but trusting God to work through His whole Body, the Church, to accomplish His mission in the world.

III. Let's offer ourselves to Christ anew today, that together we may be ready and able to allow God to work powerfully through us for His kingdom purposes.

IV. Also, let's remember what we are asking our deacons to do: basically, they extend the *pastoral care* ministry of the church, serving the pastors directly in partnership and serving the members beyond what the pastors are able to do.

1. *We ask our deacons to give practical ministry to the members of the church.* Each man has a few families assigned to him. When a need arises, the deacon is called upon to seek to help meet that need.

2. *We ask our deacons to assist with the observance of the Church's two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper.* Though the pastors lead in these, the deacons assist by setting up everything needed to make them happen.

3. *We ask our deacons to secure our physical facilities before and after meetings.* They go about the building turning off lights, closing doors and windows, and locking doors, so our pastors can engage with people more directly at these important moments.

4. *We ask our deacons to lead our Prayer Group on Wednesday evenings.* Again, this frees the pastors to participate as members and to reduce the number of preparations they must make each week.