

In our study of the book of Acts so far, we have covered a number of passages that described how the members of the early church were very generous helping those in need. The passage that we are going to look at this evening, Acts 6:1-7, describes a problem that developed and how that problem was addressed. This passage describes the origin of the office of deacon in the church so going to consider some of what the bible teaches this evening about the role of deacons in the church.

Now it has often been pointed out that these seven men who are mentioned in this passage are not called deacons. It is also true that two of them are involved in ministries that went beyond what we tend to think of as diaconal ministry. Stephen and Philip are later described as being involved in ministries that are similar to those of the apostles. So probably these seven that we set aside here were not exactly the same as office of deacon that is mentioned later on in the NT. But there can be little doubt that this incident was part of the process that led the apostles to institute the office of deacon. The event recorded in Acts 6 took place shortly after Pentecost. It took some time for the Lord to lead the apostles to understand how he wanted his church to be led. This was part of that process with respect to the office of deacon. And as such it gives us important insights as to how the Lord intends for deacons to function in the life of the church.

Now there are three subjects that we are going to consider from this passage. First, we will consider the importance of mercy ministry in the church. Second, we will consider how mercy ministry should happen in the church and thirdly we will consider how the church went about setting these men aside to the work.

First the importance of mercy ministry. That is the underlying assumption of these verses. A problem had arisen in the way in which the mercy ministry in the church was being done. That assumes of course that it was being done. The church was looking after its widows. There was a daily distribution for the needy widows who were members of the church. To be a widow in that time was a difficult existence for many. This was before the days of old age pensions and other supports for the poor. The Bible has a lot to say about the need for the people of God to look after widows as well as others in need. So, the church no sooner got going after Pentecost that it began looking after the widows in its midst.

It is interesting to notice how soon what we would call mercy ministry arose in the NT church. Jesus ascends into heaven. He sends the Holy Spirit to empower and guide the church. The apostles begin preaching. People are being saved and added to the church. And the next things you know the believers are selling their possessions and giving to the poor among them. Acts 2:44-45, ⁴⁴"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵"And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."

What we see in these early chapters of Acts and consistently through out the Bible is that the people of God are to give generously to those who are in need – especially to other Christians. There is a very close connection between salvation and the showing of mercy to others. It is accurate to say that this is a massive emphasis in the Bible.

The ultimate example of this is our Lord Jesus himself. One of the things that characterized the Lord Jesus was and is compassion. We read for instance in Matthew 14:14, ¹⁴"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick." There are many instances of this in the gospels. Jesus felt compassion. Jesus was moved by the suffering of others. Jesus did something about it. That, of course, is why he came to save us. God is a God of compassion. The Father showed that supremely by sending the Son and Jesus showed it by being willing to come to the earth to bring salvation to us at the cost of the greatest suffering that has ever been experienced. And we are called to be like Jesus. We are called to imitate Jesus. Ephesians 5:1–2, ¹"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²"And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Paul also uses the example of Jesus as a motivation for generous giving for the needy in 2 Corinthians 8:9. The context is Paul's encouragement to give generously to a collection in Corinth for the poor in Jerusalem. And he writes 2 Corinthians 8:9, ⁹"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

So mercy ministry is huge in the Bible. It is a fundamental part of what it means to be a Christian. It is a key way that we imitate our Lord Jesus Christ. And so John writes in 1 John 3:16–18, ¹⁶"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

This is the biblical context in which the office of deacon must be understood. This office has to do with this central part of the church's mission.

Now getting back to Acts 6, we see the church busily engaged in the ministry to the poor widows as part of its mercy ministry to the needy. But there were problems. The church immediately after Pentecost was made up largely of Jews who spoke Aramaic who were known as Hebrews. But there were also those known as Hellenists who became believers as well and joined the church. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews. These two groups were separated by language barriers and therefore would have tended to associate with those of their own kind. The Hebrews were the larger group, while the Hellenists were in the minority.

And the widows who belonged to the Hellenists were being neglected. And so the Hellenists began to complain. "A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."

Now I must say that I find this to be encouraging. That might strike you as strange that I find it encouraging that there was this problem in the church so soon after Pentecost, but let me explain. We as office bearers in the church sometimes make decisions that don't turn out so well. Sometimes we do not notice certain issues that should be addressed. Sometimes we overlook people that we should be paying attention to. And it can

be difficult to live with that. It can be difficult to live with the fact that we sometimes fail as office bearers. It is a burden that we bear as office bearers in the church.

And the encouragement that I get from this passage is that even the apostles made mistakes. Here they allowed a situation to develop that resulted in certain members of the church being neglected. The apostles were fallible men. What they taught was infallible. Especially that which got included in the Bible. But they were not without sin and weakness in their conduct. And we see that here in this passage. Under their watch this situation arose in which these Hellenist widows were being neglected. What that shows us is that God's uses fallible men in the leadership positions in his church. And it has been that way right from the beginning.

That does not mean that we should not try to do the best job we can. But it does mean that we will make mistakes. We will miss things that we should not miss. We will regularly be in need of forgiveness both from God and from the congregation.

Anyway ... there was this problem that arose in the post Pentecost church. The Hellenist widows were not receiving the care that they should have been receiving. Until this time the twelve apostles had been doing the work of administering the mercy ministry in the church and with the church growing and their responsibilities increasing, not everything could be done properly and the neglect of these Hellenist widows was the result.

Now there is another assumption here that I want to dwell on for a moment. This whole incident shows that some degree of organization is necessary for the fair and efficient administration of mercy ministry. We see this going on in the church right from the beginning. As soon as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church and people were being added to the church they began to sell stuff to help the poor. This is very striking about the description of the post Pentecostal church in these early chapters of Acts.

But notice that right from the beginning it was administered at least in part by the leadership of the church. Listen to how this is described in Acts 4:34–35, ³⁴"There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵"and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." So at first this was distributed by the apostles. When that became too much for them, it began to be distributed by the seven who are appointed in chapter 6. But the underlying idea is that this ministry needed to be organized and administered by someone in the church. It did not just happen.

Now I am sure that there was mercy ministry going on in the church that did just happen. Each Christian is called to be personally involved in helping others in need. There are lots of texts that command this throughout the Bible. And no doubt there was plenty of that going on in the earliest days of the church.

But that spontaneous individual service is not enough. There also needs to be organization. If it is left to individuals to discern the needs and to fill the needs ... some things will happen, but there will also be needs that will not be addressed. We see that right from the beginning, alongside of whatever spontaneous helping

one another may have been going on, there was also organization and administration by the apostles first and latter by the deacons.

When the Hellenist widows were being neglected, the apostles could have said ... “the people should just see the need and meet it.” They could have said ... “Christian people should just notice these things and pitch in where needed.” But they didn’t. The failure was a failure in organization and the solution was an organizational solution. In the light of all this, we draw the conclusion that it is the task of deacons to know about the needs that are there and to make sure that those needs are met. And sometimes what is needed is simply some organization. The need can be made known. Volunteers can be recruited and organized to do what needs to be done. This is a principle that we see going on in the mercy ministry of the early church.

Whatever spontaneous mercy ministry there was going on, a lot of the mercy ministry was being done in an organized manner through the officers of the church. Both are necessary for the needs in the church to be met. The spontaneous expressions of love that people do for one another ... those are necessary and we all need to be on the alert and to be ready to help when we see some act of service that needs to be done. Many of the needs of people in the church should be met in quiet ways by individuals and I know that this does happen. But this spontaneous ministry will not cover everything. Individuals may not know of a need or if they do they may not do what they should do. Sometimes people need a little nudge to help out. Sometimes people need to be asked to do something that needs to be done., This is where the organizational work of the deacons comes in. Both are necessary. That is what we see in this passage. There was an area where people were being missed. Certain needs were not being met. The solution was an organizational solution.

So we come to the way in which the twelve apostles dealt with the problem of the neglect of the Hellenist widows. Verses 2-4, Acts 6:2-4, ²“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. ³“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. ⁴“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.””

What we have here are two fundamental ministries of the church – the ministry of the Word of God and of prayer and the ministry of mercy. The ministry of mercy was coming under stress because of the growth of the church. The Hellenist widows were being neglected. The solution was not for the apostles to say ... “we need to fix this by giving less time to the word and prayer and more time to the ministry of mercy.” Nor was it to say, “we need to focus on the word and prayer and the mercy ministry will just have to do with the time we can give it.” The solution was to find a way that both ministries could be done well by having different leaders to look after each of them.

This is a very important principle. The apostles by saying, “It is not right that we should give up the preaching of the word of God to serve tables,” were not saying that serving tables is not important. By saying that they would devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, they were not in any way disparaging the

ministry of mercy. What they were saying was that we can't do both properly and they both must be done properly. They were affirming the importance of both the ministry of prayer and the Word and the ministry of mercy. The point is that mercy ministry is so important in the church that it needs more than the spare time of those entrusted with the ministry of the word and prayer. It needs men who whose calling it is to focus on this ministry.

Of course the principle here is important for both elders and deacons. Many of the books that discuss this passage make the comment that today many ministers and elders in the church today spend way too much time on administration and not enough on the ministry of prayer and the word. Here is a quote from Alexander Strauch in his book called *The New Testament Deacon*. "I am convinced that Acts 6:4 is one of the most important verses in the New Testament for church shepherds. It enunciates the fundamental priorities of all church shepherds; prayer and the ministry of the Word. Church shepherds are so easily sidetracked. So many good things demand time and energy; there are always people who need counsel, programs that need administrating, and meetings to attend. Thus the shepherds time for prayer, Bible study, and teaching the Word of God is slighted." p. 20

Now I can say that both our elders and our deacons understand this principle. I know that many in the congregation if not all of us, understand this. This is a great blessing. Prayer and the ministry of the Word are so important that great harm to the church is done if those called to those ministries are busy with all kinds of other matters. I get to spend almost all of my time in prayer and the word – that includes sermon preparation, general reading and the visits that I make and the prayer that goes with all that. The other elder's primary responsibility is the people in their shepherding groups and generally the spiritual oversight of the congregation. The deacons are committed to this principle and do all they can to take care of things that do not come under prayer and the ministry of the Word. This is a principle that must be maintained.

But as I have been saying, this principle works both ways. It also underscores the importance of mercy ministry because the apostles were not satisfied to do a poor job administering it by trying to do everything. It had to be done with great care because it is so important. A church cannot be a faithful church without a faithful mercy ministry. This is not a peripheral matter. Jesus tells us that we are to love one another as he has loved us. A big part of that is showing mercy. And the deacons are to administer and encourage that ministry in the church.

But there is clearly a relationship between the deacons and the rest of the church. If you look at the mercy ministry that was going on in the early church it was the ministry of the whole church, not just that of the officers. Even before the appointment of the seven in Acts, the apostles administered the gifts, but the church gave those gifts. The ministry of mercy that the apostles administered was the ministry of the whole church. And that is how it must be.

The deacon is to help make it happen. He is to encourage it and administer it and organize it so that it happens. But it is still the ministry of the congregation. We are all to be involved in this, whether spontaneously on our own when we see a need or at the urging of the deacons, or by giving money to be used to help others. This is not something that the deacons are to do for us. This is something that we are all to do together and the role of the deacons is to help facilitate it as necessary.

Let us look finally at the way in which these men were set apart. It is from this passage that we get most of the procedure for us setting men apart for the diaconate. The apostles come up with a plan. Verse 3 “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.” And then in verses 5 we read, “And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen and the rest of these 7 men. “Verse 6 “These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”

The apostles involved the congregation. They told the congregation to pick out the seven men who were recognized as being of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. And there must have been some kind of vote. That is why we vote as a congregation for all of our office bearers. There is a recognition in that that the congregation recognizes that the men who serve in the offices have been given the necessary gifts.

Verse 6 mentions prayer and the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands is mentioned a number of times in the NT as a ritual in connection with the setting apart of someone to an office in the church. When Paul and Silas were sent off on their first missionary journey we read of prayer and the laying on of hands. Acts 13:2-3, ²“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³“Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”

In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul says to Timothy, ¹⁴“Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.” We read something similar in 2 Timothy 1:6 “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of the God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.”

When someone is ordained to office in the church, the church has recognized the gifts that God has given that person and has sought the guidance of the Spirit in connection with choosing that person. We believe that God has thus guided the whole process and that he is the one who is ultimately setting that person apart to the work. We may also believe that he will equip the person to do that task. And the laying on of hands is a sign of all that. I H Marshall, in an article on the laying on of hand says ... “Such ordination, carried out under divine guidance was an outward sign that God gave to the person his gifts for some task of ministry and by it the church also acknowledged the divine commission and enabling and associated itself with the Spirit in commissioning and authorizing the minister for his task.” That would apply to all ministry, not just pastoral ministry.

So we have this passage that gives us a great deal of instruction concerning mercy ministry, the role of deacons and the role of ministers and elders. It helps us to see the importance of mercy ministry and the importance of doing it well. It helps us to see the need for organization alongside of spontaneous expressions of love and care. And driving it all is the love of Christ who “loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:2) Whom we are to imitate.