

Offices of the Church: Deacons

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[0 : 00] We've been a little topsy-turvy this morning. They probably have caught on that the printer went kaput. There's a whole story there. Yeah, thank you to the band for being willing to pivot.

I typically try to pay attention to the song just before preaching so I know when it's ending. We clearly caught that I wasn't sure what we were about to do there. We're going to begin this morning in Acts chapter 6, verses 1 through 7.

There's one other text we'll go to before we read it together. I'd like to say a few introductory comments. Last week in this, we're taking a break from our normal verse-by-verse exposition of a Bible text because from time to time and for a specific purpose, it can be helpful to summarize what the Bible teaches on a given topic.

There's a topic before us. What does the Bible say about this? Now, this is the second of two weeks taken to think together about the offices of the church.

As Gary mentioned earlier in his prayer, church polity or governance is what we're thinking about, particularly because we need to think as a church about the office of deacon.

[1 : 14] As stated last week, this office has been neglected in the life of our church, and I want you to hear, this is exactly what I said last week, that I will be the first to admit that this is to my shame.

There's much that I could say about that. I'll spare you all of my thoughts there. To get there, to get to talking about deacons, last week we considered the office of elder and how that office works with the congregation.

How we together are led by elders to do congregational work. The church of Jesus Christ is precious because it is purchased by his blood.

His universal church finds its expression in local churches. We exist, this gathering here this morning, because of his redeeming life, death, and resurrection.

He loves us so much that he lived and died, was raised and ascended for us. He loves us so much that he has not left us alone.

[2 : 25] He sends his helper, the Holy Spirit. He has given us his word and he has given us the church. He loves local churches.

I hope you love the local church in just a small measure of the way he loves local churches. And he loves local churches so much that he's given us instruction for how we are to govern the local church.

Polity, not boring at all. And it matters for every single one of us. Every church has a polity.

All are functioning in some way, some better than others. We want to be as biblical as we can be in our polity because we think that Jesus loves the church and he's given us instructions for how we are to be effective at the mission that he's given to us.

We most regularly call our polity elder-led congregationalism. And I added last week for our thinking, elder-led, deacon-assisted congregationalism.

[3 : 41] Now, I'm not sure that deacon-assisted is the best phrase. I think it could be misunderstood what I mean by that. It's probably not going to make its way into our normative vernacular concerning our polity, but I want to be clear today what I mean by that and help us think about the role this office serves in the church.

I hope that I showed you sufficiently last week from Ephesians 4 that the congregation of a local church, the whole congregation, is to teach one another the truth and apply that truth in our lives.

So the congregation is responsible for holding to sound doctrine. The truth we're supposed to speak to each other in love, we find in Ephesians 4.

Then again, I hope sufficiently, I showed you from Matthew 16 and then Matthew 18, that the congregation is meant to correct sin in one another's lives.

We're supposed to point out to one another when we're sinning against each other and against the Lord for the sake of repentance. And in some process and sad cases, to see somebody outside of the church because they can't possibly be a Christian if they're living in unrepentant.

[4 : 59] Sin. So the congregation is responsible for discipling. Perhaps nowhere more clearly states the purpose of the church than Matthew chapter 28, verses 18 through 20.

There Jesus says, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

This is the mission that we call the Great Commission given to the church. And of course, that works itself out in local congregations.

So the congregation is doing the holding sound doctrine work and the discipling work. Congregation as a whole.

Mission of the church in total. And greater certainly includes the lesser. So it's the mission of our church.

[6 : 06] This congregational process is meant to be led by elders and assisted by deacons. Now, here is where that phrase, right, could be so clearly misunderstood.

Perhaps supported by deacons? Rather than me going through a litany of other possible verbs, allow me just a quick analogy to kind of explain what I mean.

There's a really wonderful, I would argue, seminal work by a man named Colin Marshall and another named Tony Payne called *The Trellis and the Vine*. And in that book, which is really a plea for congregationalism, for the whole church to be doing the work of ministry, they start with an analogy.

And one of the two men, I can't remember which, talks about a jasmine vine that he has growing on his fence. And it's a flourishing, beautiful vine.

And behind that vine, attached to the fence, is a trellis. And so what he sets up is that there are some works that need to be going on in the life of a church that are to support the most important work that should be going on in the life of the church.

[7 : 24] So vine work in a church is the work of ministering the gospel to one another, right? This holding sound doctrine and this discipling work that we talked about last week.

The trellis work is that work which holds up the vine. So the trellis is not unnecessary, but it's necessary for the vine work to flourish.

And so that's what I mean when I say deacon-assisted or perhaps supported, right? Holding up, making possible this very important work of congregationalism.

So I hope that gets our brains moving in the right direction. In Acts chapter 6, verses 1 through 7.

Let me pray before I read it. Father God, we do thank you for your great love for the church.

We recognize that Jesus shed his very blood for the people that gather together on Sunday mornings and sing and pray, open your word, that we might worship Christ rightly.

[8 : 38] What a thing it is that today we are gathered, that people are gathered all over the place. What a wonderful picture of your grace. Even just those in this room are immeasurable reason to praise you.

We thank you that you've given us your word and you've shown us how we're to be ordered under your good, loving, kind authority. We humbly recognize that we need your help to rightly understand it and give it application.

We pray to this end that you would help us for the glory of Jesus. Amen. All right. Acts chapter 6, beginning in verse 1. 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.

That would have been Greek-speaking Jews. 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.

[9 : 56] 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 Procurus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and

Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

I read those so confidently, you think that's how those are pronounced. I don't have a clue. 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.

All right, so we can make some profitable observations about the office of deacon from this text.

This is understood, this text, to be the origin of the diaconal ministry.

These seven, the very first deacons. So that's the first observation. Here it is. We think in the history of the church, these are the first deacons. So we begin with a problem, right?

[11:03] In these days, the disciples were increasing in number. There's a great number of people professing faith in Christ. The church in Jerusalem is growing in droves, and this complaint arises between two ethnic groups of people, right?

There's a distribution problem going on, right? The growth is a good problem, but with that growth comes some complexity. Some challenges have arisen in the process.

This division along these cultural lines, and it's coming out in a very practical issue, right? Widows are being denied daily distribution.

They're not getting the food that they need. It's not merely a logistical failure. It's a threat to the very unity of the church.

Notice how it is that the apostles respond. It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. I don't believe that this is a statement of superiority.

[12:07] I don't think they're saying, well, it's below us that we would spend any of our time in service this way. That word serve is where we get our word for deacon from.

I don't think they're saying that at all. What I think they're saying is that it's a statement of priority. The apostles understand that Christ has entrusted them with the ministry of the word and prayer, verse 4.

If they neglect that, the entire church is going to suffer for it. So what do they do? There's a real need going on, but there's a priority at play.

So they call together the congregation to appoint qualified men. Pick out from among yourselves seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit, and of wisdom.

Men who have professed faith in Christ and given evidence of that, and men who are wise. They take men and they set them apart to handle the practical needs of the church, ensuring fairness, care, unity.

[13:23] And then note the result in verse 7. And the word of God continued to increase. You see the connection there?

Remember, when the churches rightly ordered, the word set themselves to this work of prayer and ministry of the word. And so the word of God continued to increase.

I think we would all say yes and amen to that, right? That the word of God would go forth, take root in people's lives, show the evidence of repentance and faith.

So that's the first thing we notice. This is the initial. This is the situation when we see this diaconal ministry arise. Second, we can note some things about the nature and then the specific purposes of the office of deacon.

Now, the church has historically recognized this passage as the prototype of what this type of ministry should look like. Deacons are servants.

[14:24] Servants. That's what the word means. Intentional, recognized, qualified servants who are tasked with meeting the tangible needs in the body.

You could separate spiritual and physical needs in this way. Physical needs are being met by these individuals. They are not elders. They are not spiritual overseers, but they are servants of Christ for the good of his church.

So this is the nature of who these people are to be. From Acts 6, we can draw out four purposes, specific purposes of the diaconal office.

Why should we call people to serve in this way? The first purpose is to care for the physical needs of the church.

It's fairly on the nose. Here in Acts 6, they appointed men who will do the work of caring for these neglected widows. We're not given details. We don't know exactly how this took out, but it is probable that as the growing number of this early church was large, that these men were not

themselves doing all of the work.

[15:43] It's just my guess. It's my years of serving and leading. I just don't feel like seven is quite enough to get the task done, although I don't know the total number. But I would be willing to bet that they were organizing people to accomplish the task.

They are serving by helping others serve this need. And this ensured that, number one, there was physical well-being amongst this group of widows, so that their spiritual well-being could be addressed.

They just eliminated the issue of being taken care of now, and now their spiritual well-being can be the focus. And that thirdly, it served as a witness to the onlooking world.

Just think, Jesus says in John 13 and verse 35, by this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

So there it is on display as this group of widows was being neglected, and now those needs are being met. There are people in place to make sure that there's some kind of mechanism that these women would be loved, and the onlooking world can marvel at that kind of service to them.

[17:05] So they're to care for the physical needs of the church. Secondly, we can see in Acts 6 that they're to protect the unity of the church. There's something going on here.

There's this division with the presenting issue. The deacons step into this sensitive situation and ensure that care is distributed fairly and wisely.

Deacons are a kind of shock absorber, Mark Deber likes to say, in the life of the church. They step into moments of tension, not to wield authority, but to preserve peace around things that are physical in nature.

How? With plans to meet those physical concerns. They catch the, hey, I noticed. A handrail would be really nice right here.

Those types of things. Keep me from falling down the concrete steps out front. That was a real issue that was really met in the life of our church.

[18:13] It was brought to our attention, and it needed to be. So they protect the unity of the church in that way. Thirdly, to support the ministry of the word.

It's been said in measure, but it deserves more of our attention. The apostles are clear. We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

We're going to set our attention on these two tasks. Deacons do not replace this ministry. They protect this ministry.

Again, shock absorbed. They buffer. So that ministry can be focused on. When deacons are faithful, elders are freed.

When elders are freed, the word of God is central in the life of the church. And when the word is central, the church is healthy.

[19:12] This is the downstream effect. Invariably, this is how it works. It's not a competition of roles. It's a cooperation of callings.

Now, I want to speak briefly to my own failure to work hard at promoting this office in our church at this point. There's a lot of reasons that I could explain to you. If you come to our members meeting tonight, I'll say a bit more.

But I do want to say it is in no way because I have a desire to be in control of anything. This has been levied at me from time to time.

Right? But please note, this has never been why I've neglected and neglected to be sure. This has been the impulse for me that largely has driven my neglect of this good.

And then I want to bring the corrective as well. Let me read to you a quote from *The Trellis and the Vine*, the book that I mentioned previously. So remember the imagery, right?

[20:15] We're working on vine work. The vine work is the thing that's so critical and important. It is the mission of the church. And then the trellis work is the thing that's coming up and supporting it, making it possible.

Okay? So, quote. That's the thing about trellis work. It tends to take over from vine work. Perhaps because trellis work is easier and less personally threatening.

Vine work is personal and requires much prayer. It requires us to depend on God and to open our mouths and speak God's word in sum to another person. By nature, we shy away from this.

Trellis work also often looks more impressive than vine work. It's more visible and structural. We can point to something tangible, a committee, an event, a program, a budget, an infrastructure, and

say that we have achieved something.

The concentration on trellis work that is so common in many churches derives from an institutional view of Christian ministry. It is very possible for churches, Christian organizations, and whole denominations to be given over totally to maintaining their institution.

[21 : 27] Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that in many churches, maintaining and improving the trellis constantly takes over from tending to the vine.

And this was early in our thinking about the church as we planted and wanted to see good and healthy relationships within the life of the church, as we wanted to see the church being congregational, doing this important work of defending sound doctrine and discipling one another. And so what I ended up doing was running around in circles around everybody to try to keep you free to do that. That's my main problem. I think at the core of it all, as I want to help you do the thing that you do so well, loving and serving one another with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps, in some measure, keeping tasks off your plate has helped you be a congregation that is well concerned with discipling.

I don't know. Maybe I left you a little bit bored and then you had to actually minister the gospel to one another. However, as we continue to grow, your elders need to maintain the bandwidth to focus all of our time and energy on prayer and ministry of the word.

[22 : 48] To be devoted to that. Because frankly, it's enough. It is a massive, massive work. To pray for you and to minister the word of God to you on all of the various ways that that can be done.

If our polity is going to keep working, you don't want one of your pastors putzing around with a copier trying to get the bulletins printed at 4 a.m. this morning.

It's not profitable for you ultimately. Right? That copier has not been working right since September. It's not the way I should be spending my time.

I recognize that fully and it's largely my fault that I'm doing it. So don't hear me accusing you at all of that. You want my prayers and my careful preparation if we are to hope that our good vine work will go on.

We together have to be concerned about that and think about how we together keep that health going. And it's going to mean that we have to build careful, careful strategic trellis to hold that vine up.

[24 : 04] I have too often misspent my time in ways I thought would best serve you but I believe may have been to your detriment. We can't run the experiment a different way so it's really hard to know if I'm right about that at all.

But what I am confident of if the Bible instructs us to do something we should do it and trust that it's ultimately good. Whether or not our experience affirms it if God's commanded it we should do it and trust that it's going to work out for good.

This problem needs fixing. Deacons are at least a significant part of the solution. So that was the third one. The most primary one I think to support the ministry of the word.

Fourthly it's worth mentioning deacons exist to model Christ-like service. Practical Christ-like service.

This I think is implicit in this text the character of these men but we need to step out of it a little bit at this point to see it most clearly.

[25 : 13] Deacons dignify unseen work. They elevate humble service. They show the church that greatness in the kingdom is measured not by platform but by sacrifice.

Turn with me if you will to 1 Timothy chapter 3. Let's look at some of the qualifications that are outlined there for us for deacons. Now we can't derive clearly from Acts chapter 6 that there's an office being established here but this is where these two things come together for us.

So just after Paul has talked about qualifications for elders he goes on in verse 8 to say deacons likewise. So this is the word that could be translated servant servants likewise but he's clearly talking about an office in this case because he's putting qualifications on it just like he did for the office of elder.

So deacons likewise must be dignified not double tongued not addicted to much wine not greedy for dishonest gain.

Notice there what Paul is emphasizing the character of these people dignified worthy of respect serious about holy things not double tongued consistent in speech trustworthy self controlled not mastered by their appetites financially honest driven by gain and more verse 9 they must hold the

mystery of the faith with a clear conscience deacons must be theologically sound they are not teachers in the same way that elders are but they must love and live the truth the reason for service in the church must be coming out of the truth of the gospel verse 10 says and let them also be tested first there's no need to rush into this certainly 17 years is not rushing the church observes discerns and confirms the whole congregation does this

[27 : 41] Paul even includes the household verse 12 let deacons each be the husband of one wife managing their children and their own households well similarly to elders right how can you give any leadership in the church if your household itself is not ordered right the home is the proving ground of ministry a man who cannot shepherd his home cannot be trusted to serve Christ's church and then comes a promise verse 13 for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith faithful service deepens assurance and strengthens witness so so these people serve to model Christ like service it's not limited to them we should all be serving one another but they're to give us leadership in this regard so the new testament presents two distinct offices elders and deacons elders lead through prayer and ministry of the word deacons serve through tangible ministry and practical care help the congregation do the work that the congregation is meant to do hold that sound doctrine and disciple one another in the truth both of those offices are essential they're essential because they're biblical whether or not we fully comprehend how it all works out a church with elders but no deacons here this church a church with elders but no deacons will be strained a church with deacons but no elders will be unanchored

Christ in his wisdom and his great love for the local church has given us both Charles Spurgeon once said this would have been on your bulletin today if you had it quote deprive the church of her deacons and their loss would be the shaking of the pillars of our spiritual house and would cause a desolation on every side end quote isn't that great man Spurgeon said if we lose the deacons of the church the church will be in shambles so let's think about a little bit of application and then I'll close number one honor the office we put myself at the front of the line have not done well if we had we'd have more deacons deacons are set apart by the church recognized for their godliness entrusted with real responsibility as we work to establish more deacons pray for your elders in their nominating efforts and pray for the whole church in their affirming efforts your elders want to bring to you people we think are qualified to do this you have to help us to be sure that this is right once we have pray for them be encouraging to them jump in and help as they give us direction in this physical service secondly it's worth mentioning that we ought to aspire to the character even if you're never to hold the office you're called to the same

Christ-like maturity presented in first timothy these qualifications in chapter three are not extraordinary they are exemplary but we should all be striving to be godly in this way they show us what normal Christianity looks like when it's taken seriously pursue godliness show up serve whether or not you hold the office third consider the call the church needs faithful deacons we may be coming and speaking to you at some point or you may find that you have particular gifting and you may want to offer it to us hey I think there's a place I could jump in and I'm willing to receive some scrutiny and I want to see if maybe I could serve the church in higher order and fourthly and extraordinarily practically if you're a member of our church come to tonight's members meeting now we will not be nominating anyone to the role this evening but we're going to propose a structure for nominations and talk a bit about the present needs and how we all have a part to play in meeting those specific needs how we can do this better together so in conclusion beloved the office of deacon is not merely about logistics it is about the gospel when deacons serve well the needy are cared for the church is unified the elders are freed and the word of God advances and in all of it the supremacy of Jesus Christ is experienced proclaimed and displayed to the very ends of the earth let's pray together