

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, March 7, 2010 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

Choosing Deacons - Acts 6:1-7

Introduction: This morning, I am going to talk about our deacons. Now I know that deacons are not always referred to in a favorable light. In fact, there are many jokes about deacons, and most all of them deal with deacons in some sort of negative way.

There are many jokes to choose from, but I just picked out this one because it's really not all that bad.

It seems that a certain pastor's wife decided to invite the deacons and their wives over for dinner. Her husband questioned her about it because he had some concerns about her sanity, but she assured him that it was the right thing to do especially since there had been some tension recently.

Well, the night of the dinner arrived and all the deacons and their wives came. When everyone was seated, the pastor asked his four year old daughter if she would say grace.

The girl looked up at her mother and said "*I don't know what to say.*"

Her mom whispered in her ear, "*Just say what I say honey.*"

Well, everyone bows their head and the little girl says, "*O dear Lord, why am I having all these people over for dinner? Amen!*"

Who are these people we call "*Deacons*" and why are we choosing more of them today? Maybe you're asking those questions today, or maybe you're not. But the fact is, this morning; we will be selecting 2 deacons who will serve alongside our current active deacons during our next church year. We do this every year at this time, so I wanted to take this opportunity to speak to the church about the role of deacons and some things we need to consider as we think about choosing deacons.

Deacons provide a vital ministry to the church, so we want to be careful and not treat this process lightly, but prayerfully consider who we should choose for this ministry position.

Let me begin by stating that there are a lot of beliefs and opinions out there about the role of deacons in the church. Much of it comes from church tradition which over the years has given a measure of authority to the office of deacon that is not found or substantiated anywhere in Scripture. So, let me begin by briefly going telling you what the deacons are not:

Deacons are NOT the Church Rulers: Some church traditions have the deacons in the position of ruling over the pastor and the church and the church finances, but there is no Scripture that support any of those views.

In New Testament churches, the terms used for those who provided the spiritual leadership were *pastors*, *elders*, and *overseers*. These terms all describe basically the same person who answered to only to Christ and to the congregation. (**Acts 20:17, 28**). The Pastor provided the shepherding or feeding of the flock; the overseer assumed the authoritative leadership role, and the elders were the spiritually mature. All these terms could describe the same person, but the nature of God's design for church leadership was to have a plurality of leaders – a shared responsibility of ministry, rather than a one-man rule.

The deacon's role was to serve and minister to the needs of the pastor and the congregation. The only possible Scripture reference to deacons and money would be their responsibility to see after the benevolent needs of the widows, for which there would have been some sort of benevolent fund at their disposal.

Deacons are NOT the Defenders of Church Tradition: In some churches, the deacons take it upon themselves to guard and preserve certain past traditions. A common expression heard in these churches is "*We've never done it that way before.*" Or "*If it was good enough for granddaddy, it's good enough for me!*"

Granted, there are some good biblical traditions that need to be preserved, but guarding traditions for traditions sake can be a hindrance to the progress of the church's mission and purpose.

Deacons are NOT the Decision-Making Board: The truth is that every New Testament church is autonomous under Christ. That means that there is no governing hierarchy or ruling board over the church. No one, including the deacons, has any more authority or power than any other person as far as the decision-making process was concerned.

Next, let's look at what deacons are or at least what they should be.

Deacons ARE Servants: Servanthood is the primary role of deacons because of the meaning of the word

“*deacon*.” The English word “*deacon*.” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which originally referred to an attendant, or one who ran errands. The early church used this concept to describe a special servant commissioned by God to serve the church. Although the word “*deacon*” does not appear in our text, the verb form *diakoneo* is found in the phrase “*wait on tables*” in vs. 2.

In the purest sense of the word, a “*deacon*” is a special, God-called servant of servants, because every believer has been called by God to serve the Lord.

By virtue of this primary role of servant: Deacons also function as **Advisors** to the pastor and the congregation; as **Examples** and role models of spiritual wisdom; and as **Leaders** in that they take the lead in equipping the church for fulfilling its purpose and mission. So, deacons hold an important position in the life of the church. In fact, they are essential to the life, unity, and future of the church.

Let’s read Acts 6:1-7 and see how this ministry of deacons came into existence, and as we do, let’s think about what our deacons mean to us today.

1 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.

2 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.

3 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

4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 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. Acts 6:1-7 (NIV)

From our text, I want to call your attention to three aspects of the ministry of deacons. As you hear these, I pray you’ll allow the Holy Spirit to guide you to whom to select as our deacons. First, let’s look at:

1. The Need for Deacons

A. The Church was Growing.

Following Pentecost, when the church was ushered into existence, the early church experienced rapid growth. In fact, **Acts 2:47 (NIV)** says that after the initial 3,000 folks were saved as a result of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, “*the Lord added to their number daily...*”

Then, we fast forward to Acts 6, and by this time, the growth of the church was increasing at a phenomenal rate. One commentator I read said that there could have been upwards of 20,000 people in the church at this time. All we read in Acts 6:1 is that those first deacons were needed because, “*the number of disciples was increasing...*” (1).

Now as the church was growing rapidly, so were the problems. There were more people to be taught and disciplined, more people to be helped, more people to be fed, and so on. The rapid influx of people meant more demands of time, energy, and resources on the apostles. Something had to change in order to keep up.

As our church and community grows, we too have more people to reach out to and more people to minister to. Currently, we have 15 deacons who are ministering to 10-12 families each. If each family averages 3.5 per family, that’s 35-42 people for one deacon! That is a lot when you consider all an effective deacon ministry entails. That is why we need more servant-leaders to help meet those needs and facilitate more growth. Second, Deacons were needed in the early church because:

B. The Church was Dividing.

Another reason the early church needed deacons was the fact that people had started to complain about a growing problem. Imagine that! It’s hard to believe that people would complain in church, isn’t it?

But what was happening in the first church was a growing problem that was born out of the fact that the congregation was made up of both Jewish converts and Gentile converts. Trying to blend two different cultures together is almost like mixing oil and water. There is bound to be some degree of separation,

Anyway, the Gentile believers registered a complaint against the Jewish believers that “*their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*” (1). In other words, they felt that there was a growing

prejudice against them, and they didn't like it. If it hadn't been for the wisdom of the apostles, this could have led to a major problem and an ugly confrontation. Nothing would have hindered the delicate reputation of this early Christian movement any more than having their first church splitting up over something such as this. Deacons helped solve this problem.

Now, I know that our church has gone through more than its share of problems. And believe me, it's not my intention to bring up the past. But I want to let you know that I commend you for the way you have handled the past problems. I have heard very little from you about it, and I appreciate it. In fact, the few comments I have heard have been made in a very positive and conciliatory tone.

What I'm saying is that, as far as I know, our church is unified. There's a special love here you can see and feel. I believe our church can be described the way that little band of 120 disciples were described as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. **Acts 2:1 (NIV)** says "*they were all together in one place.*" That means they were "*together, together!*" I like the sound of that, don't you?

Well, one way to keep us "*together, together*" is to find ways to help prevent hurt feelings and misunderstandings, which causes division. And adding more deacons is one way to do that. Adding more deacons will take some of the load off our current deacons who are doing an outstanding job keeping the peace. Third, Deacons were needed in the early church because:

C. The Pastors Understood Their Priorities.

The pastors of the early church were "*the Twelve.*" (2) - Jesus former disciples, or the Apostles. They said in vs. 2, "*It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.*" They said in vs. 4, "*(We) will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*"

These pastors knew their place. They knew that they had been called, gifted and commissioned by God for the ministry of "*prayer and the ministry of the word*" or the study and preaching of the Bible. If they had to spend all their time caring for the widows, which was a good thing, they would be unfaithful to their calling which was the best thing. They knew their priorities.

Now, before you think that this is minimizing the ministry of taking care of widows or any other ministry, let me clarify something - Any work that God calls you to do is your priority. If God has called you and gifted you to preach, you better make that your number one passion and pursuit. But if He's called you and gifted you to help take care of the needy or practice hospitality, or teach, then that's what you need to focus on. Your spiritual gift determines your priority in ministry. In this case, the widows needed help, so the church set aside men who were called to that ministry to serve them.

Personally speaking, this is one of the most difficult areas I have ever encountered in ministry - sticking to priorities. There are so many things that would demand my attention; it is easy for me to get off course. Also, there are some parts of ministry I just naturally enjoy more than others, so I have to watch that as well. But I have to say that since I have been here, these outstanding men you have chosen as your deacons have helped me stay on task, and I appreciate it. Now let's turn our attention to:

2. The Selection of Deacons

A. The Qualifications for Deacons (3).

There are five words that are implied in our text that helped the early church in their selection of men who would take care of this problem. The first word is:

Believers. The most basic qualification for the office of deacon is having a genuine relationship with Christ. Once there was this little boy who had only been saved for a week or so. He went to church the next Sunday, and sat on a bench next to an elderly gentleman who looked upset. The little boy said to the man, "*Sir, do you need to get saved?*"

The man scowled at the little boy and said, "*Young man, I'll have you know I've been a Deacon in this church for over 30 years and Chairman of Deacons for the last 15 years.*"

The little boy said, "*Sir, it don't matter what you done, Jesus loves you and He'll still save you!*"

People who aspire to the office of deacon must first and foremost be believers in Christ before they can be deacons. That's why the apostles told the church to "*choose...from among you...*" Obviously they were not to look for deacons outside the church, but inside the church. The second word is:

Reputable. They were men "*who are known to be*" (3). Here, the NIV doesn't quite convey the depth of meaning here in its translation. The Greek word used here is *martureo* which means "*to bear record or be well*

reported of.” Other translations say, “good reputation” (HCSB & NASB) “honest report” (KJV), and “well respected (NLT). So, the meaning here is that the apostles instructed the church to look for men who were known both inside and outside the church as highly esteemed men, trustworthy men, and men who were full of integrity. This is a qualification everyone should aspire to. The third word is:

Spirit-filled. In vs. 3, the apostles instructed the church to look for men who were “full of the Spirit.” That means that they were looking for men who were yielded to the Holy Spirit.

Like the early church, we need deacons who are sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and not driven by their own agendas. We have those types of men, and we’re looking for more. The fourth word is:

Wise. Not only were these men to be “full of the Spirit,” but also “full of... wisdom.” Wisdom is not only having good judgment, but as it applies to the church, wisdom is the ability to see a situation from God's point of view. We need deacons who will not act impulsively, but will use godly wisdom in ministry and decision-making. The last word is:

Capable. Vs. 3 says that the apostles would “turn this responsibility over to them.” In other words, the responsibility of taking care of the widows would be given over to men who could handle it. There was no question in their minds that these were trusted and responsible men who were more than capable. Next, we see:

B. The Church's Approval of Deacons (5).

Vs. 5 says, “This proposal pleased the whole group.” Everyone was in agreement because it just made sense. They unanimously and autonomously selected the first deacons, and as a result, the problem was dealt with and the church thrived.

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. (Acts 6:7 NIV).

Finally, I want to talk about:

3. The Ordination of Deacons (6).

Vs. 6 says, “They presented these men to the apostles...” It seems likely that this was some sort of public ceremony which would confirm not only the approval of the church but also of the church leadership.

When we select our new deacons they too will be “presented” before you. They will first be presented privately before an ordination council of deacons, and then publically before you, the church family in an ordination service.

They will be examined closely to see if they hold to the biblical qualifications. They will be prayed for and nurtured for a period of time until the ordination service, where you, the church will affirm them and pray with them again. In that service, as the early apostles did, our ordained men will lay their hands on the newly elected deacons, signifying a blessing and a confirmation of God’s calling upon their lives.

But in the mean time, I want to ask you to already begin to pray for them. Pray not only our future deacons, but also our current deacons. Pray that they will continue in their faithful service to God. Pray that they will continue to grow in their relationship with Christ and that they’ll have an effective ministry.

And while you’re at it, pray for me that God will give me wisdom to see the big picture from His point of view. Pray that I will seek His council and guidance and protection from the temptations and fiery darts of the devil.

And don’t forget to pray for yourselves. Pray that revival will begin right where you are and will spread throughout these pews and spill over into the community.

Conclusion: As you have heard, whenever a church is called to choose Deacons it is no small or insignificant task. It is a fulfilling of a call that God Himself places upon an individual, and that alone would make it of the utmost importance. But it is also a vital process in the future growth of the church. As we select two deacons today, not only will we be setting aside men who will answer the call of God, but we will also be enhancing the opportunity for “the word of God spread,” (7). And as we do, we’ll be contributing to the future growth of Sonoraville Baptist Church as we seek to fulfill God’s purpose in our community, in our state, and in our world.