

## “A Servant Leader” (Acts 6:1-7)

1. Occasions for Ministry (1)
  - a. Multiplying converts and an overlooked minority. “Normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day, **baptism** meant saying goodbye to an existing family as well as being welcomed into a new one.”<sup>1</sup> See **Further Consideration** for context of Hellenist Jewish widows.
  - b. Obstacles become opportunities: Satan had already attacked the church with persecution and deception; now he tries at dissention.
  - c. The Twelve, however, use the occasion to order ministry with appointments.
2. Organization in Ministry (2-4)
  - a. They were busy studying/praying and could not do it all.
  - b. Pastors can get trapped by attempting to control or being bombarded with duties.
  - c. The Twelve acted wisely. They reminded the community that they were focused on study, prayer and dissemination of the Word, and thus could not function where others would have opportunity.
  - d. The whole community is called upon to recognize qualified men to serve as leaders for such service. “That all seven bore Greek names suggests all were Hellenists. If true, it was a demonstration of the loving unity of the church. Since the Hellenists felt slighted, the church decided to appoint seven from among them to rectify the situation. A split was thus avoided, and again Satan’s attack was thwarted.”<sup>2</sup>
  - e. There is much emphasis on the description of “serving tables.” The “word for tables, *trapeza*, can mean ‘a table or counter of a money changer,’ or ‘money matters,’ as well as an eating table (cf. such use in Matt. 21:12; Luke 19:23)”<sup>3</sup> “It could refer to “money,” in which case the “table” means a “banker’s bench” (Luke 19:23; cf. Matt 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15; Plutarch, *Caesar* 28.4; 67.1). Both food and money are very important to Luke”<sup>4</sup>
  - f. V. 3. The qualified chosen are:
    - i. Men. See **Further Consideration** regarding women’s essential values and functions.
    - ii. Integrity
    - iii. Full of the Spirit
    - iv. Wise
  - g. V. 4. The Twelve would continue their focus on the necessary study/prayer/equipping. E.g. ‘we’ll continue to serve the Word while you serve the tables.’
3. Organism of Ministry (5-6)
  - a. Deacon “server” is not submitter. “For one thing, it is the job of the *head* of the household to distribute the food (thus Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing; Lk. 22:19; cf. 9:16 and 24:30).”<sup>5</sup>
  - b. “Authority over material possessions represents spiritual authority (see Acts 4:32–5:11; see also below). They are certainly not glorified “bus boys” or bank tellers!”<sup>6</sup>
  - c. Furthermore, Jesus served by washing feet but He gave them no say in it!

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). *Acts* (Vol. 1, p. 183). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). *Acts* (Vol. 1, p. 179). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>4</sup> Parsons, M. C. (2008). *Acts* (p. 83). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>5</sup> Gempf, C. (1994). *Acts*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1077). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>6</sup> Parsons, M. C. (2008). *Acts* (p. 83). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

“A Servant Leader” (Acts 6:1-7)

- d. Nevertheless, we would do well to not make too much of church offices and put more emphasis on functions. Why?
    - i. Firstly, deacon is not an office here but the word “server” translated. See **Further Consideration** below where John MacArthur offers exegesis on such.
    - ii. Secondly, Stephen and Philip go on to be more of evangelists than servers or distributors of food and money. See **Further Consideration** on Stephen and Philip.
    - iii. Thirdly, certain designations of gender, marriage status, and education ought not limit one’s giftedness and function in the church. Titles are not needed to serve.
    - iv. Fourthly, “the church is neither a highly contrived corporation nor a loose commune, but an organism”<sup>7</sup>
    - v. Finally, offices of pastor, deacon, elders, evangelist, teachers, prophets, etc. can be designated but the danger is hyper structure and thus exclusion. Consider this: J R is not ‘entering’ ministry upon his ordination. Rather, he is being ordained (recognized) by our church (deacons) because he does minister and has the qualifications.
  - e. In the organism that is the Body of Christ, we each have our function and each are ordained (anointed) with God’s Spirit. God indeed has instituted offices and hierarchies, but He is more concerned with obedience and cooperative functioning. It’s not about titles of office!
  - f. Each member is vitally valuable in the body and thus hierarchy is not indicative of certain offices being more important, but rather identify recognized/affirmed leaders.
4. Outreach of Ministry (7)
- a. Due to the wisdom, organization, priority, and unity of the Church; outsiders noticed the cooperation, love, provision, and inclusion and were incorporated into the faith.
  - b. Wright wrote, “A cosmopolitan mixture of Jews from all over the world, it is not surprising that people would be eyeing one another to see if this or that group appeared to be taking advantage.”<sup>8</sup> He later stated, “Whenever even a small number of people try to live together, let alone to share resources, sometimes even tiny distinctions of background and culture can loom very large and have serious consequences.”<sup>9</sup>
  - c. Those outside Christ need to see unity w/in Christ in order to attract them. The church isn’t about tribalism but inclusion.
  - d. Luke actually notes that the priests had noticed such and became obedient.
  - e. The result is obedience to God. J R is not seeking higher office in the church. He is seeking obedient Christian life. In fact, Tabby is a great part in such! They have, are, and will serve the LORD and seek to be more and more obedient as they follow Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). *Acts* (Vol. 1, p. 176). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 99). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

### Further Consideration:

The Bible mandated caring for widows, who had no other means of support if they had no family nearby. Judaism took this responsibility seriously, in contrast to Gentile cultures. But because it was considered virtuous to be buried in the land of Israel, many foreign Jews would come to spend their last days there, then die and leave widows. (Palestinian rabbis eventually provided further theological incentive to immigrants; according to one common tradition, the dead would be resurrected only in Israel, so the righteous dead of other lands would have to roll the whole way back to Israel underground, and this was thought to be a very unpleasant experience.)

Thus a disproportionate number of foreign Jewish widows lived in Jerusalem, which did not have enough foreign Jewish synagogues (6:9) for their distributors of charity to supply all the widows adequately. This urban social problem of Jerusalem spilled over into the church.<sup>10</sup>

Women certainly have vital roles to fill (cf. Titus 2:3–5). In the early church, such women as Dorcas, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Philip’s daughters were greatly used by God. Nevertheless, God’s design for the church is that men assume the leadership roles (1 Cor. 11:3, 8, 9; 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11–12).<sup>11</sup>

#### Office of Deacon:

The question arises as to whether these seven can be properly viewed as the first official deacons. They performed some functions of the later deacons, and forms of the Greek word *diakonos* (deacon) are used to describe their ministry (vv. 1–2). Yet to view them in terms of a formal office is anachronistic. Of the seven, only Stephen and Philip appear elsewhere in Scripture, but they are never called deacons. Indeed, Stephen’s later ministry was clearly that of an evangelist, as was Philip’s (Acts 21:8). While Acts later refers to elders (14:23; 20:17), there is no mention of deacons. That is strange, if the office of deacon began in Acts 6. Further, all seven had Greek names, implying that they may have been Hellenists. It seems unlikely, however, that a permanent order of deacons for the Jerusalem church would include no native Palestinian Jews.

There are important principles in this passage for the continuing life of the church. Here we see that the congregation is to nominate certain spiritually qualified men to serve, with the final appointment resting with those already in position as teachers and spiritual leaders. Still, it seems best to see the selection of these seven as the Jerusalem church’s response to a temporary crisis. It should be noted that the Greek word group from which our English word “deacon” derives denotes service in general. *Diakonos*, *diakoneō*, and *diakonia* are used throughout the New Testament in a general, nonspecific way (cf. Luke 4:39; 10:40; 17:8; 22:27; John 2:5, 9; 12:2; Rom. 13:3–4; 15:25; 2 Cor. 8:3–4). Thus their use in Acts 6 does not imply that the seven held the office of a deacon. Significantly, when the church at Antioch later sent famine relief to the Jerusalem church, no mention is made of deacons (Acts 11:29–30). Instead, the relief was sent to the elders. Stephen and Philip certainly did not continue long in this role, since both became evangelists. And persecution would shortly scatter the Jerusalem congregation (Acts 8:1), ending the ministry of the other five. God raised them for a brief period of ministry, to handle a crisis. The continuing unity of the church shows the effectiveness of their ministry.<sup>12</sup> → see also directly below

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<sup>10</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Ac 6:1). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>11</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). *Acts* (Vol. 1, pp. 181–182). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>12</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). *Acts* (Vol. 1, pp. 182–183). Chicago: Moody Press.

## “A Servant Leader” (Acts 6:1-7)

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Luke views this division as either absolute or hierarchical. It is not absolute, because in the next two episodes two of the Seven, Stephen and Philip, are depicted not as serving tables but rather fulfilling the “service of the word” (Acts 7 and 8). Nor is “serving tables” in any sense inferior to the “service of the word,” particularly in light of Jesus’ saying, “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table, but I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). The issue for Luke is that of spiritual authority, and for that reason, Luke is not interested in delineating the division of labor between serving tables and serving the word in the subsequent narrative.<sup>13</sup>

**Stephen** was to play a pivotal role in the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem. It was the persecution connected with his martyrdom that propelled the church out of Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). The commendation of him as **a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit** reveals his character.

**Philip** also plays a prominent role in Acts. He took the gospel to the Samaritans (8:4–25), and to the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40). Four of his daughters became prophetesses (21:8).<sup>14</sup>

The whole story is reminiscent of that of the choice of Matthias (1:15–26), but the closest parallel is the story of the appointment of Joshua as Moses’ successor in Numbers 27:15–23 by the laying on of hands. The rite indicated a conferring of authority, and the accompanying prayer was for the power of the Spirit to fill the recipients (cf. Deut. 34:9). A similar rite was used in the appointment of rabbis, but there is some uncertainty whether this goes back to the first century. See further 8:17; 9:17; 13:3; 19:6.<sup>15</sup>

To fulfill the first purpose, Luke employs a narrative pattern remarkably similar to the OT form for choosing auxiliary leadership (Exod 18 and Num 27): (1) statement of the problem (Acts 6:1–2; cf. Exod 18:14–18; Num 27:12–14); (2) the proposed solution and qualifications for leadership (Acts 6:3–4; cf. Exod 18:19–23; Num 27:15–21); (3) setting apart the new leadership (Acts 6:5–6; cf. Exod 18:25; Num 27:22–23; for a slightly different construal of this pattern, see Talbert 2005, 58). The unit also reflects a common rhetorical figure, *distributio*, to describe the division of labor.<sup>16</sup>

It is not clear whether the apostles only or the entire congregation prayed and laid on hands. The context (especially 6:3), however, suggests that the entire congregation selected, prayed for, and **laid their hands** (6:6) on the Seven and that the apostles confirmed this choice. The laying on of hands is similar to the commissioning of Saul and Barnabas (13:3). Of the seven men named only **Stephen** and **Philip** (6:5) are given any attention in the subsequent narrative, supporting the earlier contention that one purpose of this story is to introduce Stephen.<sup>17</sup>

PC: “A Servant Leader” (Acts 6:1-7)

A deacon in the Southern Baptist Church is an office of service. The term is used of “serving tables” (deacon tables) and is stated in Acts 6, and the Greek term for table is used for more than food. It also is used of money tables. We can deduce, therefore, that a deacon is one who can be entrusted with distribution which thus requires wisdom, maturity, and integrity. Today we acknowledge, ordain, and celebrate J R and his wife Tabitha (Tabby) entering into the recognized role of leadership. This office is

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<sup>13</sup> Parsons, M. C. (2008). *Acts* (p. 84). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). *Acts* (Vol. 1, p. 183). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, I. H. (1980). *Acts: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 5, p. 135). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>16</sup> Parsons, M. C. (2008). *Acts* (p. 82). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>17</sup> Parsons, M. C. (2008). *Acts* (p. 84). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

## “A Servant Leader” (Acts 6:1-7)

not lightly held and requires the said characteristics. Though pastors and deacons are “servers,” they are the called leaders. To whom much is given, much is expected (Lu. 12:48). And so we acknowledge and thank J R and Tabby for taking the sober responsibilities to serve in such a capacity with humility on an official basis because they have already done so on the basis of obedience and love.