

What's a Deacon?

Acts 6:1-7

What's a deacon? Well the most direct way to answer that question is just to look at the word. It comes from the Greek word *διάκονος* which simply means a servant. Deacons are first and foremost servants, working under the authority of the session. That's why the session examines and approves those who serve in this office.

But at the same time, deacons are leaders. We as a congregation have also promised to respect the decisions of our deacons and to follow as they guide us in the service of Jesus Christ. By electing deacons and by installing them into office, we are acknowledging them as leaders of this congregation.

But what is it that deacons are supposed to do for the session? How are they supposed to lead the congregation? If we take a close look at today's passage, we will find the answers to both of those questions.

Like all congregations, First Church Jerusalem had a lot of people around them in need. Back in those days, the church took direct responsibility for helping the poor, because there were no government programs to help people who could not work. Widows were especially vulnerable as they had no husbands to provide for them and because women didn't have the same job opportunities that they have today. Widows were truly needy, and so the church took care of them.

But that doesn't mean everything always worked out smoothly. Even in those days, there were ethnic divisions that caused problems in the church. First Jerusalem had Hebrew members, who were locally born and raised, and their widows got taken care of. But there were also some Grecian members of the church, people from other places in the Roman Empire who were more Greek in culture. Their widows, it seems, were somehow being left out.

Now, it's not necessary to read malice into this situation, although these two groups had certainly had their clashes within the Jewish community even before the coming of Christ. It's very likely that people back then were just like people today – because birds of a feather flock together, the Hebrew Christians tended to take care of their own, and just assumed that those other widows would be taken care of by – someone else. And so the Grecian widows, from other places, from a different culture, just got neglected. They got left out. They fell through the cracks.

What's the answer to such a problem? Unfortunately, the Grecian members of First Jerusalem first tried to solve it the wrong way – by grumbling and complaining, just as the people of Israel did against Moses in the wilderness. Now, such grumbling can be a very effective tactic if your goal is to stir up trouble and cause a lot of hard feelings. It rarely, however, gets anything substantive accomplished.

This time, though, the murmuring at least brought the problem to the attention of the session of First Jerusalem, the apostles. Of course, they were responsible for the oversight of everything involving the church. But settling this particular problem was going to take a lot of time and effort.

What to do? To start, you would need to make a list of all the needy widows of the church, including names and addresses. But the congregation already included several thousand members, scattered all over the city. And to make matters more difficult, the ones you would need to put on the list probably didn't get out much, and so you couldn't just pass a list around at church.

And then once you made the list you would have to keep updating it, because the church kept growing day by day. And even if you had an accurate list, who's going to coordinate buying the food and making sure that it's distributed to everyone fairly? To put it mildly, this is a logistical nightmare.

In all their divine wisdom, the apostles knew this. They also knew they had way too much else to do. They were smack in the middle of a great revival – a huge outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They had daily preaching to do, for the conversion of the multitudes who were joining the church every day. Then they had to teach all these new members, opening up the Scriptures and explaining them in a Christ-centered way. There's just no way they could do all that and take care of the widows too.

So what did they do? Well, they didn't do what most big churches or organizations do today – they didn't hire staff. Instead, they did things the Presbyterian way – they asked the membership to elect deacons to get the job done.

And the congregation chose those who were best suited to the task. They chose men who were of good reputation, so they wouldn't be accused of taking money out of the till. They chose men who were filled with the Holy Spirit and thus spiritually qualified for a difficult task. They chose men who were filled with wisdom, who were resourceful and creative, who were able to figure out how to get the job done.

And if you look at the list of names of those they chose, they were all Greeks. In other words, it's likely that they chose men who would be in the best position to find out about the Hellenistic widows and make sure that they got what they needed.

So, what's a deacon's job today? The same thing, really. Deacons are still in charge of the benevolences of the church. They are to bring to the attention of the church the needs of the community, of the Presbytery, and of the wider world around us. And then, under the direction of the session, they are to do the ministry of organization, providing the membership with concrete

ways to help meet those needs, whether by giving funds or by giving service. In other words, deacons are to lead the church in serving the church and the community.

Okay, so what does this look like when we put it into practice? How might the deacons lead us in meeting the needs of the people around us? Of course we are very generous with our funds, especially where it comes to overseas missions and church planting projects throughout our presbytery. But are we as a congregation just as committed to meeting the needs of our own members – not just their spiritual needs, but their emotional needs and even their financial needs? As our national economy continues to deteriorate, are we committed to meeting those needs as they increase? Are we really willing to allow our deacons to bring such needs to our attention, and to encourage us to meet those needs by giving sacrificially of our time, our talents, and our treasure?

And is there room for us to be even more generous than we are? In Old Testament times, God's people were expected to give 10%, a tithe of their income toward the work of the Lord. Jesus affirmed that expectation, but the early Church went much farther than just giving a tithe. Instead, they considered that everything they had belonged to God. They considered themselves not as property owners, but as merely stewards, using all that they had for the glory of God and the good of others. If we had that sort of attitude toward our things, how many more people could we help? How much more clearly could we show the love of Christ?

Many times people lament the fact that the average age of Presbyterians is increasing, and that we don't have enough young people. Perhaps that's true, but that also means we have lots of retired folks who have time to give. Are we willing to consider ourselves simply as stewards of our time, planning how we can use the days we have to glorify God and meet human needs? If we had that sort of attitude toward our time, how many more people could we help? How much more clearly could we show the love of Christ?

Yes, all that might sound threatening. It might sound extreme. We might wonder if giving of ourselves in such a way might allow people to take advantage of us. Given how few we are and how little we have, we might wonder how we could commit ourselves to such self-denying outreach.

But what would happen if we did? What would happen if Port Gibson Presbyterians became known as those who really try to meet people's real needs in a loving way? What if we let our deacons lead us in all sorts of projects that would communicate the love of Jesus Christ to the people all around us?

Well, what happened when the church did that in Jerusalem? As the apostles continued to teach the people and lead the people in prayer, and as the deacons organized the people to meet

each other's needs, the Word of God increased. And as people heard the gospel and saw it lived out in the lives of the believers, the number of disciples increased greatly.

But perhaps the last part of verse 7 holds the greatest surprise. Even a great many of the priests, those who in the previous chapters had been most opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, a great many of those who were most financially interested in the maintenance of temple worship, were willing to give all that up in order to follow Jesus Christ.

Why was that? Why would the enemies of Christ be so attracted to the Church? Could it be because they saw Christians not just speaking words of love, but living those words out among themselves, meeting each other's needs in a self-sacrificial way? Could it be that those men who had the most to lose from abandoning temple worship became willing to do that when they saw Christians who were so willing to give what they had to meet the needs of others?

For in what better way can the Church show Jesus to the world? For as Jesus came to accomplish His mission on Earth, He held nothing back. He gave up all the glory and splendor and comfort of Heaven to become a man, and to live in this sinful world. He gave of His time and energy, teaching and healing and feeding those who were in need. And of course He gave His life to save us from our sins. And He calls us to trust Him, not only to save us but to guide us. He calls us to live as He lived, to continue His mission to the world. He calls us to follow Him in giving of ourselves to others. Will we do that? Will we follow Him?