

THE FIRST ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEM: THE FIRST DEACONS ACTS 06:01–07

Introduction

This passage is about the birth of the deacons, a whole new level of ministry in the church. Note the office of the deacons was set up to meet a need in the church for day to day ministry. The head ministers had to have help in order to fulfil their preaching mission.

- I. A problem arose – some widows were being neglected (v. 1).
- II. The democratic recommendation (v. 2).
- III. The required qualifications (v. 3).
- IV. The basic purpose: to relieve ministers (v. 4).
- V. The chosen deacons (v. 5).
- VI. The official ordination (v. 6).
- VII. The glorious results (v. 7).

I. *Acts 06:01 Division, Grumbling and Criticism*

A problem arose in the church. Some widows were being neglected. Two groups or cliques were seen in the church, and one was complaining and grumbling about the actions of the other. One group felt its needs were not being met; it was not getting a due share of the attention and care it deserved. There were five reasons for the division.

1. The church had grown rapidly. When any organization grows rapidly, all kinds of problems arise, and most of the problems centre around how to handle the growth. The church needed to minister to the new members, but it was having difficulty handling and reaching out to everyone. The head ministers, that is, the apostles, could not get to everyone.
 2. There were different groups or cliques coming into the church.
 - => There were the Hebrews, the Jews who were born and reared in Palestine. They spoke Aramaic, the language that had come down from their ancient Hebrew language. They rejected all Gentile and Greek culture completely, and used only the Hebrew Bible in its original Hebrew language. The significant point to note is this: the Hebrew or Palestinian Jews were so inclusive and closely-knit, they despised all Gentiles and Gentile culture. They actually despised and cursed the Gentiles, believing that the Gentiles were cursed eternally by God. This hatred even included the Grecian Jews who had been relocated to other lands by the Romans.
 - => There were the Grecian Jews who were known as the Hellenists. These were Jews who had been scattered, deported and dispersed all over the world by the Romans.
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Many of them would return for the great Feasts of Pentecost and the Passover. Apparently some had been converted on the day of Pentecost or thereafter, and had either delayed their return home or decided to move back to Jerusalem.

The Grecian or Hellenist Jews had adopted Greek culture, spoke the Greek language, and used and read the Greek Bible (the *Septuagint*). It is probably this that lay at the root of the problem mentioned here. The Hebrew Jews, having always been taught to reject and despise anything Grecian, were probably having difficulty getting rid of all their prejudice. No doubt, God had worked in their hearts to cleanse them of prejudice, but they apparently were still hanging on to some feelings against the Hellenists. Perhaps they felt that the Hellenists or Grecian Jews were not due as much attention or as many rights as they were.

Thought 1. People do and will form groups and cliques. But we must always be open and accepting, outgoing and friendly, giving and helping, humble and undeserving before each other, ministering and receiving ministry from all.

Thought 2. Cliques and groups are dangerous. There are sins common to cliques that must be guarded against, the sins of...

- being exclusive and shutting others out.
 - feeling superior and above others.
 - believing one has more rights than others.
 - thinking one is due more attention than others.
3. The leaders of the church did not have enough help to look after every member. Note two things that are essential when this problem arises.
 - a. The church must secure more help. It must seek out people who sense the hand of God upon them, calling them to minister and care for others.
 - b. The members must be willing to quit demanding so much of the head minister, to accept the ministry of other men who are called to minister to the flock of God.

Now note a critical point: there was division in the church — grumbling and complaining and griping. Why? The lack of enough leaders to meet *all the needs*. The lack of enough leadership, of enough workers will always cause division. Some will always feel they are neglected.

4. The church was not adequately organized to minister to all. The leadership centred only upon the apostles. There was the need for another whole level of ministers, ministers who could reach out to every single member.
5. There was apparently some favouritism being shown. Most if not all of the food being distributed to the needy was being handled by the Hebrew Jews. The Grecian Jews felt that their needy were being neglected and that favouritism was being shown to those who had need among the Hebrew or Palestinian Jews.

II. Acts 06:02 Recommendation of the Church Leaders

The democratic recommendation.

1. The leaders (apostles) called the whole church together. Note: they did not deny the problem, but they graciously acknowledged that the problem might (or did) exist. The leaders knew how easily people, in particular cliques when they feel neglected, can become suspicious and cause even more problems within the church. The point to see is that the whole church was involved in the decision. The leaders *wisely* sought everyone's...
 - thoughts
 - cooperation
 - advice
 - involvement
 - counsel
 - love
 - understanding
2. The leaders declared their primary call and mission. They had to concentrate on the Word of God, its study and proclamation. Note:
 - => their unmistakable sense of call and mission.
 - => their unwillingness to be distracted from their primary mission.
 - => the church's understanding and acceptance of their mission. (How desperately this understanding and acceptance is needed by churches today!)

The apostles could have been easily sidetracked, caught up in day to day ministry — the ministry of sitting and listening, serving and meeting the needs of the needy. Such needs must be met; it is the church's duty to minister and meet them. If the church had been smaller, the apostles could have met the needs themselves. But when the church became large, there were just too many people.

Thought 1. There is a breaking point at which ministers must put up a guard and protect their primary call to proclaim the Word of God. They *must* above all else have time to *prepare* and *preach* and *teach* the Word.

Mat 10:27 “What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.”

Eph 3:7-8 *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*

2 Tim 1:11-12 *And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.*

2 Tim 4:2 *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction.*

3. The leaders suggested others be appointed to minister to the needy. Note: this was a suggestion for a whole new level of ministers. Up to this point, the leaders of the

church were the apostles. Now a new office was being created to help in the work of the ministry.

Mat 9:37-38 *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

John 4:35-36 *"Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together."*

1 Cor 3:8-9 *The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*

ACTS 06:02 DEACONS

Note the words *wait on tables* (diakonein trapezais). The word *wait* (diakonein) means to minister, to serve, to wait upon. The men were being chosen to minister, to look after the needy (widows) of the church. They, of course, would not be running to those in need and spending just a few minutes and then turning right around and running out. They would be visiting and taking time to share and minister to those who had need.

The word *diakonein* is used of ministers throughout the New Testament, both preachers of the Word and deacons who serve as ministers in meeting the day to day needs of the flock (see Acts 6:4; 12:25; 21:19; Rom. 11:13). The deacons were being chosen to minister as much as the apostles, but in a different area of concentration.

This does not mean the apostles never met day-to-day needs of the flock, nor that the deacons never shared the Word. Both apostles and deacons served in both areas, however each *concentrated* upon his primary call and mission. (See *Deacon*, 1 Tim. 3:8-13.) □

III. Acts 06:03 *Qualifications Required for Deacons*

The required qualifications. (See notes *Deacon*, 1 Tim. 3:8-13.) Note: the apostles had a recommendation. Very wisely, they had met and discussed the division and complaint among themselves. The committee work among the leaders of the church had taken place. Now the recommendation was ready for the whole congregation to consider. Seven men needed to be appointed to handle this ministry. (As mentioned, a whole new level of ministry was being created in the church.)

The qualifications are listed. Note: they all centre upon spiritual qualities, upon the spiritual maturity of the men.

1. Men who are known (marturoumenous): well attested; well reported of; bearing a good witness; having a good reputation. The deacon's character was to be proven and

beyond reproach. They were to be men of integrity, faithful and trustworthy; moral and upright, men trusted by all.

2 Cor 8:18 *And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel.*

1 Tim 3:8-9 *Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.*

Eccl 7:1 *A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.*

2. Full of the Holy Spirit. The deacon was to be conscious of Christ dwelling within him, aware of being filled with the fruit of the Spirit.

Gal 5:22-23 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

Eph 3:19 *And to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Eph 5:18-19 *Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.*

3. Full of wisdom: able to discern, see through, make judgments. This was especially needed now in handling the division that had arisen in the church. Improper handling by unwise men could only add fuel to the fire, causing further friction and tension.

1 Cor 2:12-13 *We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.*

Col 1:9 *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*

James 3:17 *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*

1 John 2:20 *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.*

IV. Acts 06:04 Ministry of the Word and Prayer

The basic purpose of the deacon is to relieve the head minister(s) for prayer and the ministry of the Word. Note two significant points.

1. The great ministries of the church are twofold: prayer and the ministry of the Word. All else, as needful as some of them may be, must be secondary to these two great ministries. Therefore, the head minister must give his life to these two ministries and not be distracted or diverted from them.

=> It is in prayer that the believer reaches up and talks to God. Above all others the leader must live on his face before God, sharing with God and pleading with Him on behalf of the dear flock of God.

Mt.26:40-41 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

Luke 18:1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

1 Th 5:17 Pray continually.

Eph 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Col 1:9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

2 Th 1:11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. (see vv. 11-12)

=> It is in the Word that God speaks to the minister, to the flock, and to the world. The minister must spend hours and days seeking God, finding out what God wants to say to him, the church and the world.

Acts 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

1 Cor 4:1-2 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

2 Cor 4:1-2 Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

1 Tim 4:15-16 Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

2 Tim 2:15 *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

2 Tim 3:16 *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

Thought 1. Imagine what a difference there would be if ministers so lived in prayer and in the Word of God! May the lay believers of the world *allow* and *insist* that the ministers of God get on their faces before God in prayer and in His Word.

1 Tim 1:12 *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.*

2. Note the word *attention* (proskarteresomen). It means to continue steadfastly; to persevere; to continue on and on, sticking to it. The minister is to pray and pray and study and study and share and share, preaching and teaching the Word — *without letting up*. He is to be steadfast, persevering, continuing on and on in both prayer and in the Word.

1 Cor 15:58 *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

Col 1:28 *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.*

2 Tim 4:2 *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction.*

Heb 12:1 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

James 5:11 *As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

1 Pet 1:13 *Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

2 Pet 3:17 *Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.*

Rev 3:11 *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

Josh 23:8 *But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now.*

V. *Acts 06:05 Action in Unity, Love and Humility*

The chosen deacons. Note four significant points.

1. The church acted in love and humility. Neither the apostles nor anyone else had ruffled feelings. The apostles and Hebrew believers (thousands of them) responded in love and humility. Everyone of the seven men chosen were *Grecian Jews*. Their names were Greek, not Jewish. The *largest* segment of the church had humbled itself to the minority. What an example!
2. “The whole *group*” of believers was pleased. The body had been reunited as one in spirit and purpose, worship and ministry.
3. The fact that they were all Grecian believers points toward God moving the church out into the whole world. Christ had commissioned the first disciples to go into the whole world (Mt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). Now, He was providentially preparing the church for the day that was soon to come, the day of persecution that would scatter the believers all over the world (Acts 8:1-4). These seven men, being Grecian ministers, could touch the Gentile world wherever they went — by language, by training and by culture. God was preparing the church without their knowing it for the day when they were to be scattered all over the world.

Thought 1. Believers must be rooted in *love and humility* so that God may use them in His eternal plan to reach the world for His dear Son.

Rom 12:5 *So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

Gal 3:28 *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

2 Cor 13:11 *Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.*

Eph 4:1-3 *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

Phil 2:2-4 *Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

4. The men chosen were unknown except for Stephen and Philip (see notes, Acts 6:8-15; 8:5-25). The point to note is that they were men who had the qualities given in verse three.

Note the name Nicolas, a convert to Judaism. He was a Gentile who had been converted to Judaism and then to Christ. Some try to connect him with the Nicolaitians who went off on a doctrinal error and created a sect. There is no basis for this. In fact, the likelihood is that he was instrumental in starting the church at Antioch, one of the greatest churches of all time (see Acts 11:19-30).

VI. Acts 06:06 The official Ordination

The ordination was a definite service, a specific moment when the newly elected men were set apart for their ministry. Before this moment they were not serving in the capacity with which they were now being charged. Hereafter, after the ordaining service, they were to minister to the flock of God and meet the flock's day-to-day needs. Note three steps in the service.

1. The church "presented these men to the apostles."
2. The church went to prayer; the ministers (apostles) led all in prayer.
3. The ministers (apostles) laid their hands upon the newly appointed deacons. (See *Laying On Of Hands*, Acts 6:6.)

ACTS 06:06 LAYING ON OF HANDS

They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. Acts 06:06

This was a significant symbol for blessing (Mt. 19:13-15); for healing (Mk.5:23; 6:5); for imparting the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17-19; 9:6, 17); and for ordaining and commissioning men to the ministry.

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

Acts 13:2-3 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." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

1 Tim 4:14 Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

2 Tim 1:6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. □

VII. Acts 06:07 Ministers – Church

The glorious results were threefold.

1. The Word of God increased as never before. The apostles were freed to concentrate on prayer and the Word. There was a new power in their witnessing and teaching.
2. The church grew. Many more people were reached with the glorious gospel.
3. Some priests, a great number, were being reached for Christ. Note the words: they “became obedient to the faith.” They were obedient in both *receiving* Christ and in *following* Christ. They *embraced* the gospel and *lived* the gospel.

Rom 1:5 *Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.*

Col 2:6 *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.*

1 John 2:6 *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

Gal 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ■*