



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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To Be a Deacon . . .
Acts 6:1-7

Our lives are filled with special days that mark significant events—birthdays, anniversaries, and celebrations of other milestones.

The same is true in the life of a church. Every Lord's Day is a "little Easter," a celebration of Christ's resurrection and victory over death and sin. Throughout the Christian year we mark and remember the events of Jesus' life and ministry. Perhaps too infrequently, we celebrate our fellowship with Christ and with one another around the Lord's Table. From time to time we welcome new believers through the sign of baptism. And on occasion, we have the opportunity to set persons apart for special service in the work of God's kingdom. Today is one of those significant days in the life of our church. For the first time in three years, we will ordain a new deacon.

But have you ever wondered just what is the significance of ordaining someone as a deacon? Just what do deacons do? What are their responsibilities? *What does it mean to be a deacon?* This text from Acts 6 that we read a moment ago can help us with this question.

The first deacons

Now it may strike you, as biblical scholars often point out, that the term "deacon" (*diákonos* in the Greek) does not appear in this text. However, the verbal form of the word (*diakoneîn*) does. At least from the time of Irenaeus,¹ a prominent bishop or pastor in the late second century, the early church virtually universally regarded these seven men as the first deacons. Based on my own studies of the ministry in the early church, I am confident that even though the term isn't used here, these seven men were at least the forerunners if not the prototype of what we know as deacons. So I think it's proper for us to look to this text for some guidance on this matter. But just what kind of guidance does it give us?

Look at the situation. The church in Jerusalem was experiencing significant growth. But as so often happens when growth is taking place, a potential division arose.

The congregation was made up of two very distinct groups of Jews who had become Christians. One group was native to Palestine, spoke primarily the Aramaic language, and observed the traditional Jewish way of life. Luke calls them the Hebrews or Hebraic Jews. The other group he calls the Hellenists or Hellenistic Jews. They were from the Jews of the Diaspora or Dispersion, Jews who lived outside of Palestine, who spoke primarily Greek like most others in the ancient Greco-Roman world, and had adapted their Jewishness to the thoroughly Greek culture they had been living in until now. (Apparently a significant number of them had stayed in

¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 74.

Jerusalem after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and their conversion at that first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection.)

The Hellenists began to murmur, complaining that the Hebrews were overlooking the Hellenist widows in the daily distribution of food. Remember that they were all *Jewish Christians*, and still took very seriously Judaism's emphasis on caring for the poor, *especially* widows. The church in Jerusalem was careful to observe this responsibility, but the Hellenists felt that their widows were being slighted.

So the Apostles put forward a solution that pleased the whole congregation. They were to choose seven men of high character and spiritual depth for the task. The needs of the widows would be cared for and the unity and fellowship of the church would be preserved.

But why didn't the Apostles simply oversee this task themselves? Wouldn't that be the best way to handle it?

No, and for this reason. The Apostles were the primary ministers of the word, and as they prefaced their proposal, it would not be *right* for them to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables! *That was not their role*, but there were others in the congregation whom God had ably gifted to fulfill that important role.

The congregation approved of the solution, and selected the Seven, all of whom, interestingly, appear to have been Hellenists, judging by their names. They presented them to the Apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them, setting them apart for this special service in the church. And the result? The word of God kept on spreading and the church kept on growing.

So why did the Jerusalem church choose these seven men? Was it simply because the Apostles told them to, or was it something even more? Could it be that they saw the godly wisdom in this solution, that it would allow the Apostles to devote themselves more fully to prayer and the ministry of the word, while also providing *set apart persons* to care for the welfare of the church?

The role of deacons in the church

If that's the case, then can we see in this story something of the role deacons are to fulfill, something of the awesome responsibility that they bear, something of what it means to be a deacon? What is it?

Simply this: *Deacons are responsible for caring for the welfare of Christ's church and its members.* But *how* are they to do it? I think we can see at least three ways here.

First, *deacons care for the welfare of the church by protecting and preserving its unity and fellowship.* When the unity and fellowship of the Jerusalem church was threatened, deacons were chosen to deal with the problem. The Apostles understood how vital this was, because they simply couldn't handle everything by themselves. So just as Moses had done with the appointment of the seventy elders in the wilderness, they instituted a division of labor with godly leaders.²

The evening before He died, Christ prayed for the unity of His church that would reflect His own unity with the Father. This unity and fellowship are vital to the welfare of Christ's church, and must be nurtured, protected, and preserved. While all believers, as Paul put it in Ephesians 4, are "to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,"³ this is the *special concern* of faithful deacons—to nurture that unity, to protect it, to preserve it.

² Talbert, *Reading Acts*, 73.

³ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

How? Through prayer, through being sensitive to potentially divisive situations and dealing with them according to the Spirit's wisdom and leading, and maybe most of all by their own godly example.

Deacons also care for the welfare of the church by caring for the needs of its members. In the Jerusalem church, the Seven were appointed especially for the purpose of making sure that the Hellenistic widows weren't neglected in the daily distribution of food to widows in the church. They were caring for the needs of the neediest.

Deacons still have that responsibility to care for the needy—both *physical* needs and *spiritual* needs, especially when the two overlap. This is vitally linked to deacons' responsibility to care for the church's unity and fellowship, since it's often through the neglect of members' needs (physical or spiritual, real or perceived) that members become upset and the church's unity and fellowship are threatened.

Experts who have studied church member dropout say that the dropout process often begins when a member feels that some need is not being met.⁴ Needs vary widely. Deacons need to be sensitive to people's needs. If it's something the deacon can't deal with, he or she needs to let others who can help with the need know about it!

But that's not all. *Deacons care for the welfare of the church by freeing the minister of the word for prayer, study, and preaching and teaching.* If the Apostles had tried to take care of this ministry problem by themselves, they would have had little or no time to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. This responsibility of the ministry of the word was passed on by the Apostles to the bishops and elders of the ancient church, who correspond to the pastors and ministers of the church today. Biblically speaking, a pastor's *primary* responsibility is the ministry of the word, particularly in the context of the church's worship. If the pastor is the only one caring for needs, there's no time for the prayer and preparation that are necessary to minister the word faithfully.

Pastors are the shepherds of the congregation, so their focus should be primarily on the ministry of the word as it addresses the spiritual needs of the people. Deacons share the load by assisting with spiritual needs and leading the congregation in caring for other needs as well. This division of labor ensures a well-rounded ministry to and through the congregation and to the surrounding community. When this shared ministry of pastors, deacons, and congregation truly takes place, it results in continued growth in the church's mission, ministry, and fellowship.

So the Jerusalem church has shown us the way here when it chose the Seven to care for the welfare of the church. In this model, *deacons are responsible for caring for the welfare of Christ's church and its members.* That can only be accomplished as they are full of the Spirit, depending on His power and wisdom, and are willing to be true servants.

Think now for a moment about the best, most faithful deacon you have ever known . . . Chances are, he or she lived out what this text tells us it means to be a deacon.

Deacon Ordination Service

We come now to set apart our brother James Mitchell for the ministry of deacon in our church. In doing so, we testify as a congregation that we have seen in James' life spiritual gifts that suit him for such a ministry, and a character and faith that qualify him for this task. We have prayerfully sought God's will in this matter, and we now affirm that within his call to be a

⁴ This was pointed out to me by Rev. Wayne Oakes of the Baptist State Convention of NC Congregational Services staff (now retired).

disciple of Jesus Christ, God has now called him through the voice of our congregation to serve as a deacon among us.

Baptist history teaches us that our early Baptist forebears in the 17th and 18th centuries saw the role of deacons in the name itself, *diákonos*, which literally means *one who serves* (originally, *one who serves tables*). Thus deacons were to serve tables—first, the Table of the Lord in Communion; then the table of the pastor and his family, to be sure their needs were cared for; and the table of the poor and needy, in ministering to them. This description captures the very essence of being a deacon—service. Some of these responsibilities have shifted through the centuries, but deacons are still to be servants of the Lord and His church, ministering to needs and helping the pastors lead the church in its mission and ministry.

So now we come to set James apart for this ministry. This ordination confers no special status or power. Rather, it is a confirmation and a blessing. It is our church's public acknowledgement and affirmation that God has gifted and called James for this service at this time in his life and in the life of this church. In this ordination we bestow on him our blessing in the Lord as he enters this sacred work. So now, let us make sacred covenant promises to God and to one another.

The Ordination Charge

James, please rise. In accordance with God's leading our church has chosen you for this service, and you have indicated your willingness to serve in this office. I charge you therefore to employ the gifts that the Holy Spirit has entrusted to you for this ministry for the common good of this church. You are to minister to those in need and seek to lead this church in its purpose and mission as we seek to embody Christ's presence to Sanford and the world through our worship, our witness, and our way of life. You are to be blameless in your walk, generous in your heart, and faithful in your service, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. If you do these things, you will indeed serve well as a deacon. Do you now pledge in covenant with God and this body of believers that by God's grace, you will be faithful in doing these things?

Reply: "With the Lord as my helper, I do."

The Charge to the Diaconate

Will all ordained deacons please rise? Our brother James Mitchell is about to enter this ministry of service as a deacon. As he begins his ministry of helping, I charge you all to help him by your prayers, counsel, guidance, and encouragement. You are to be examples for him, friends to him, and fellow-servants with him. You are to love and accept him as your brother, respect him as your colleague in this ministry, and share with him your mutual sorrows and joys. Do you each now pledge in covenant with God and with this new deacon that by God's grace, you will be faithful in doing these things?

Reply: "With the Lord as my helper, I do."

The Charge to the Church

Will all members of this church please rise?

We are the local expression of the body of Christ known as the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church. As we now set apart our brother James Mitchell for service as a deacon among us, I lay on us this charge. As individual members and as a congregation, we are to support James and his

family with our prayers and encouragement. We are to strengthen him for ministry through our fellowship together and our partnership in the gospel. And we are to grant him the freedom to fulfill his ministry as a deacon by using our spiritual gifts faithfully for the common good of this church as we join Christ on His mission in the world. Do you each now join me in pledging in covenant with God, with this new deacon and with one another that by God's grace, we will be faithful in doing these things?

Reply: "With the Lord as my helper, I do."

Ordination Prayer and Laying on of Hands

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