

Introduction

Fourteen years have passed since I arrived here at Grace Community Church. It is amazing how time flies! But in those years, today marks the first time that we are ordaining a new deacon. We have ordained two elders, but this is the first deacon ordination in at least 14 years. So I thought it appropriate to spend our time in God's word this morning in the book of Acts where the office of deacon in the local church got off the ground.

Please stand as we read from God's holy, inerrant, and life-giving word.
[Read text and Pray]

Children sometimes experience an inexplicable throbbing pain in the legs whether in the knees, the thighs or the calves. Often these pains awaken them in the middle of the night. There is not evidence that growing causes pain, but we call them growing pains. If you are growing, then you might just experience them. Well, growing pains gripped the early church. As the number of disciples multiplied, the ministry of the church became more and more complex. A new community was born, and as it grew, it was having a transformative impact on the world, but it was also dealing with internal matters that would not resolve on their own. The office of elder was already well-established through the role of the apostles. But circumstances demanded another office, one that would compliment and work hand-in-hand with that of elder. The 6th chapter of Acts details how this office came about.

As we turn to the key issues of the text this morning, we will start with ...

I. Challenge.

As the disciples were increasing in number, a challenge arose. It came in the form of a complaint. Now a complaint indicates that not all was well in the life of the newly blossoming body of believers. Complaints come when someone is not happy. We complain for various kinds of reasons. Sometimes our complaints arise simply because we are discontent. And sometimes complaints are legitimate concerns that need to be registered. The complaint that arose in the early church signifies a legitimate concern.

The problem was that in its ministry of mercy to widows, those of Greek background and language, the Hellenists, were being neglected. "The Hebrews" refers to native Palestinian Jews whose main language was Aramaic. At some point there was a breakdown in the distribution of food, and the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being left out.

This kind of thing happens in churches. Right? It just does. On occasion and from time to time, someone gets left out; someone gets overlooked. It is not what we aim for, but it is almost unavoidable. What happened in Acts is what we need to do in our day. When there is a challenge, when someone is overlooked, somebody needs to know. We always need to be patient and humble about it, but we can't be okay with it. In that day the word went to the apostles, the functioning elders of the early church, and they addressed the situation.

The response of the apostles can be summed up in the word ...

II. Commitment.

The apostolic response was to communicate to the full number of disciples that to which they were absolutely committed. The communication set forth what is the top priority of the elders in the

church. The apostles made it abundantly clear that they were absolutely committed to the preaching of the word. This priority could not be compromised. It is a first concern in the church. The preaching of the word of God is a fundamental task of the elders in the local church. Nothing can be allowed to get in the way. If you ever wonder why we are so dead set on preaching the Bible in this church, here is your explanation. We do not exist to entertain. We do not exist to cure social ills. We exist, above all, to point people to Christ through the proclamation of the word of God.

At the same time, however, there are other tasks to which we should be committed without their taking over the top spot in the list of priorities. The apostles recognized the importance for looking out for those in need in the church. So while they were committed to the preaching of the word of God, they were also committed to seeing that the challenge they were facing be overcome. So they set forth a solution.

The solution was ...

III. Consignment.

The apostles would appoint the seven men selected by the disciples to the duty of serving tables. They would oversee the task of distributing fairly the food provided for the widows. This was to be a task entrusted to specific men chosen and set aside for the purpose. It was a hands-on task. It was a roll-up your sleeves and be involved type of work. It was a serving role.

In our English translations, the word deacon does not appear in these verses, but the word serve does. And yet in the original Greek, the word for serve looks a lot like the word for deacon. And that is because both words derive from the same root. The task of the men who were chosen to be in charge of tables was fundamentally to serve. It is the same root word Jesus used when he said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life for many." If you just imported the word as a transliteration, the statement would be this: "For the Son of Man did not come to 'BE DEACONED' but TO 'DEACON' and to give his life for the many."

Jesus showed us the ultimate expression of what the task of a deacon is when he laid down his life at the cross. He acted to serve his people by dying in our place and bearing our sin debt on his own shoulders. He gave his life for his church. He obtained the church for himself with his own blood. In this way he served us. Jesus is the ultimate deacon. You might say that in preaching the word the elder points to Jesus with words. And in serving, the deacon points to Jesus with actions. He administers care for the lowly. He employs physical strength to accomplish the tasks associated with the office. Whereas the work of the apostles which is carried forth through the elders and pastors is a lot of heart, mind, and tongue, the work of the deacons is heart and more practical and physical exertion to address physical needs and circumstances. Alexander Strauch, in his book on The New Testament Deacon, writes about what deacons specifically are to do. He says, "As long as the deacons enable the shepherds of the church to carry out their primary duties, and as long as the deacons minister to the congregation's welfare needs, they are doing their job."

Now in order to serve the church in this capacity and in the name of the Christ, officially recognized by the church, there is a fourth key issue, and that is ...

IV. Character.

The apostles instructed the disciples to pick out from among them seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. When it comes to leadership in the church, character counts. God looks at the heart. He is far more concerned with the holiness and godliness of leaders in the church than he is natural leadership abilities. These three main items were designated by the apostles.

When we turn to 1 Timothy 3, we discover a more specific list of deacon qualifications. Deacons must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They must be tested. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and manage his children well. Each of these aspects of character detail how the three character traits from Acts 6 are lived out. Let's focus on the three from Acts.

One who would serve as a deacon must be of good repute. That is, he is thought well of by others. He has a good reputation. It is not a mere surface reputation, but where there is godliness, one's reputation will demonstrate it. He may not be the most popular or the most well-known, but he is among those that folks think well of. Deacons will be of good repute.

They must also be full of the Spirit. One is full of the Spirit when the Holy Spirit has control of them. A cup is full when nothing more can be added. Liquid fills the entirety of the cup. Every cubic millimeter is occupied. Now we are filled with the Holy Spirit when we are yielding control to the Spirit of every part of our lives—our thoughts, emotions, bodies, and actions. It is when we are doing God's will. Pay attention to what Paul says to the Ephesians. In chapter 5:17-21, he writes, "Do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." If we walk by the Spirit we are not carrying out the desires of the flesh. If we are full of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit will overflow in our lives—love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This fruit should be evident and increasing in the life of every Christian. And so the suitable candidate for the office of deacon is one whose life is overflowing with godly character.

The third qualification set forth by the apostles for this specialized office in the church is that they are full of wisdom. They fear the Lord and operate wisely. They can apply the principles of God's word in a discerning way. Their life expresses the message of Proverbs. One of the key ways in which wisdom is manifest is in the godly and effective management of one's household. It is also evident in how a man deals with people and in his discernment.

The bottom line is that the disciples were not to look among themselves for who was popular, who was attractive, or who was the wealthiest. They were to value character first. Who stands out as godly, submitted to the will of God, and wise? This kind of man is the man who would be suitable for this important office. Such a man is actually the model toward which we should all strive. The installation of a deacon is a good opportunity for us all to step back and do a self-evaluation. Are we letting our light so shine before others that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven? Are we living full of the Spirit? Are we cultivating a heart and life of wisdom by increasing in our knowledge of God and his word? Let's value these things in such a way that it is obvious that our first and only allegiance is to the Lord our God, that we seek first his kingdom and righteousness.

We should also thank God for placing such men in this body who meet these qualifications to serve him well.

I close with a final key issue in this text:

V. Commission.

When the disciples had made their choice, they set the men before the apostles, and the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. This was a visible way of commissioning these new deacons to their task. The laying on of hands demonstrates the importance of the task and the authority being invested in them. It also represents a plea for the power of the Spirit to be upon them for the fulfilling of the task. Think of it. When Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water and the Spirit of God descended upon him as a dove. He was the anointed Son of God set apart unto the task of redeeming sinners. In ordaining a man, we are publicly setting him apart praying for God's Spirit to empower him mightily for service in his kingdom. He is being publicly commissioned and authorized to the task. It is a solemn though joyful and gratifying moment in time. It is a blessing that the Lord has placed such men in our midst. It is always serious when we are pledging ourselves to serve well in roles set forth by God.

Conclusion

So this is what we are doing today. God has confirmed through the church his choice of a man to be placed in the role of deacon, and we are following through on this appointment. May the Lord bless Grace Community Church as he did the first church in Jerusalem. We noted at the outset this morning that the growth of the church brought about the challenge which was resolved by the institution of the office of deacon. At the end of the passage, we see that the effective work of those in the office of deacon contributed to the ongoing increase of the church. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.