

LEAD *MY* SHEEP

A Guide for *Training*
Elders and Deacons

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PART 1: FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER 1

THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN THE CHURCH

We must first understand the basic structure of church government. At the most fundamental level, all work in the church can be divided into Word and deed ministry. Jesus exemplified both during His ministry on earth, masterfully caring for both the physical and spiritual needs of those He came into contact with. Jesus was *the* chief elder and deacon. But since none of us are Jesus, it takes multiple people in the church to provide this kind of holistic care. As a church grows, any pastor will quickly discover his inadequacies to care for even a small percentage of the needs of the people. This is the exact problem the early church ran into in Acts 6:1-4.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Whenever a church increases in size, growing pains inevitably come with it. Some people will miss the “good old days” when everyone knew everyone else. You may begin getting people from different cultural backgrounds or with different expectations, and the situation can cause confusion and miscommunication. This was the issue facing the early church in Acts 6. While it was still predominantly Jewish, we can’t miss how culturally different the Hellenistic (Greek) and Hebraic Jews were from one another.

For various reasons, many Jews lived outside of Israel. Many had lived away from their homeland for several generations and picked up the cultures and customs of their adopted countries. In particular, with the influence of Alexander the Great and his love of spreading Greek culture, many of these Jews were ethnically Jewish but culturally Greek. This loss of Jewish culture led some Jews to double down on their Jewishness—they wanted to preserve their own culture. Over the centuries there emerged two primary streams of Judaism: those who had fought to preserve their Jewish culture and those who had assimilated into the cultures of the surrounding nations.

As a result of this assimilation, difficulties arose. For example, following the Old Testament custom, the Jewish widows who had no family to care for them were cared for by the community. Darrell L. Bock points out that the Jewish practice at this time was to distribute food once a week but also to have a daily meeting for more urgent needs.³ Perhaps it was the result of outright discrimination, but more likely it was due to the natural difficulties that can arise when trying to arrange a joint event with people from different cultures. The

3 Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2007), 257.

Hebraic Jews were probably more numerous, and they lived together and spoke the same language, so word passed quickly when food was served. By the time the Greek Jews heard about it, only a few scraps were left. The program was poorly administered.

The apostles' response shows remarkable wisdom. To put this into focus, consider the last time someone came up to you after a church service—not to thank you for the sermon but to let you know about something that was wrong. “Pastor, this new couple in the congregation just had a baby. It’s been super rough; they aren’t getting sleep. Why didn’t we do a meal sign-up for them?”

Perhaps while reading this hypothetical exchange, your blood pressure shot up because you’ve often been on the receiving end of that comment. How did you respond? For many of us, our immediate response is to offer to handle the problem ourselves. Most pastors go into ministry because we care about people, we want to please people, and we want them to feel better. So, we are quick to say, “I’ll take care of it,” even though in the back of our minds we’re thinking, “Here’s another thing I don’t have time for.”

But what is the problem with that response? The time you spend organizing meals for people—or the apostles spent fixing their food program—takes away from the very thing that is fueling the growth of the church: the ministry of the Word.

And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:40-41).

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).

[The priests and Sadducees were] greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand (Acts 4:2-4).

The apostles had witnessed a supernatural growth of the church in Jerusalem; certainly, this informed their response. It's much harder when you haven't seen your church grow, or when its growth is more on par with a Japanese maple tree—taking years for visible progress. It can be tempting to pull back a bit from the ministry of the Word and prayer in order to take care of other “more pressing” needs. Yet, as we'll see, this would be a mistake. The apostles recognized that taking on this additional responsibility might result in full bellies, but people would be feeding on spiritual crumbs.

As we look again at Acts 6, I'm reminded of Jesus's last words to Peter in John 21. Some of the disciples had returned to their day jobs but weren't having any luck catching fish. Suddenly, a man called out from the shore telling them to cast their net on the other side of the boat, which resulted in a haul so large they couldn't pull the net back in. Recognizing the man on the shore as Jesus, Peter and the disciples returned to shore. They discovered Jesus had already prepared a fresh breakfast of fish and bread for them.

After eating, Jesus turned to Peter and asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” Peter responded, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love You.” Then Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” This question was repeated two more times, and two more times Jesus commanded Peter to take care of His sheep.

Jesus called Peter to ministry by asking him to feed His sheep. But what did Jesus do before He issued this call? He served Peter (and the other disciples) a robust meal after their discouraging night of fruitless fishing. He ministered to their bodies and then He ministered to their

souls. With revived spirits, they were able to receive the Word. Jesus, in one Man, is the consummate elder and deacon.

Given this background, I suspect it would have been tempting for the apostles, and Peter specifically, to want to emulate Jesus in how they handled the situation presented in Acts 6. Peter was one to confront any problem head-on. Likely, Peter would have been very tempted to say, “Let me take care of it,” and then proceed to roll up his sleeves, knock a few heads, dish out some choice words, and through the force of his will get everything running smoothly.

Thus, it’s all the more striking that Peter and all the other apostles didn’t try to mimic the Jesus of John 6 by attempting their own feeding of the 5,000. Instead, the apostles recognized their limitations and made a very different decision.

If we try to simply replicate the ministry of Jesus, it will inevitably lead to some type of burnout. We cannot do all that Jesus did on our own. For this reason, we need a plurality of elders. When we try to single-handedly perform the duties of ministry of Word and deed, there is a temptation for people to fall more in love with us than they are with Jesus. Our sinful hearts bend towards idolizing people, particularly gifted people who meet our needs, whatever shape those needs take. Because a pastor’s response can feel more concrete and immediate than the wait for an answer to prayer, it makes it all the easier for Jesus to fade into the background. Your talented pastor is only a text away! We ought to guard against such idolatry. Embracing our pastoral limits is not just good for our own self-stewardship, it also actually protects the spiritual well-being of the flock.

Another reasonable response of the apostles could have been, “It’s not my problem.” The longer you are in ministry, the more likely it is that you have felt this way. You’ve been around the block, you’re secure in your job, and you realize you’ll never please everyone. While this response would have protected the primacy of the ministry of the Word, it would still have harmed the health of the early Church.

How would this harm have occurred? What began as only murmurings quickly would have escalated into arguments and public grievances. Suddenly, no one would have been paying attention to the ministry of the Word because they would have been too busy fighting with each other.

A similar dynamic is at play in our churches today. I pastor in the Salt Lake Valley where there is a good chance we will wake up to a fresh blanket of snow on a December morning. We have people who walk to church and elderly people for whom a slip on the ice likely means more than just a few bruises. I may have prepared an excellent sermon that morning, but if people can't even get into the church because our parking lot hasn't been plowed, or they fall while walking on slippery sidewalks, the ministry of the Word will be hindered.

This isn't to say that God can't work in extraordinary ways to accomplish His purposes despite a massive snowfall, but we should recognize that God often works in ordinary ways. Whether removing snow on a blustery winter Sunday morning or providing sustenance to the elderly and shut-ins, the work of the deacons is crucial to providing a clear path for the ministry of the Word to do its work. This is the exact problem the early church faced in Acts 6: the issue surrounding food distribution threatened to become such a distraction that the spread of the gospel could be hindered.

A third reaction by the apostles could have been, "Let's start a church just for the Hellenists." This would have solved the immediate problem—Greek Jews could care for their own people with ease. But while solving the presenting problem, it would have set a bad precedent of splitting the church when the going gets tough. While it can make a lot of sense for a church to be built around specific groups of people, particularly those who speak the same language, we see in these early days how much the apostles fought for unity in the early church. If they had taken the easier road and allowed people to group together in a more comfortable way, the early church would not have been such a compelling community. Instead, through hard work

and the application of the gospel message, it became a place where people from various cultural backgrounds learned to care for each other. Particularly since Jesus had told His apostles that they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the *end of the earth* (Acts 1:8), how could the church do that if they couldn't even get local Jews from various backgrounds to work together?

If the apostles did not go beyond their duties as ministers of the Word, if they did not turn calloused ears to the needs of the people, and if they did not take an easy way out of church conflict, what did they do? They developed a new role in the church, a role that is the prototype for the Diaconate. If you've studied Acts 6, you are familiar with the debate as to whether these seven men were deacons or not. But given how early on in Church history this occurred, it seems reasonable that the deacons Paul writes about in 1 Timothy 3 emerged from the precedent set here by the apostles in Acts 6.

We should note the Greek word used for “wait on tables,” διακονέω, comes from the same root as the Greek word for deacon. Later, when we look at the role of deacons, we'll unpack this word in greater detail, but for the moment it's sufficient to see that while these seven are never called “deacons,” the concept of “deacon” is present. The early church needed people who could serve the congregation's physical needs.

So, how did the apostles respond to this issue? They called all the disciples together and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). At first blush, it may seem as if they were saying, “That's below our pay grade,” or “We're too important for that.” The surrounding text, however, makes clear this isn't what they meant. Instead, they recognized they couldn't (and shouldn't) add this responsibility to their job description; it would have taken away from their primary responsibility: preaching the Word.

Perhaps a good analogy is a high school teacher being asked to go and clean up a spill in the lunchroom. While he *could* go do the task, it would leave the classroom without a teacher—an obvious error in judgment. Both situations require a wise delegation of tasks. The teacher

shouldn't abdicate his primary duty of teaching in order to tend to a spill someone else might be free to take care of (but could assign this type of task to a select person for all future spills). So, too, the apostles recognized the need to train more leaders for this specific job.⁴ Their plan continues in Acts 6:3, "Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." These men were given a particular authority to oversee the daily distribution of food. Then, the apostles were able to focus on what they were uniquely equipped for—to be witnesses to the resurrected Christ and minister to the flock through the Word and prayer.

Let's examine what happens next in the passage.

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:5-6).

Many commentators have noticed that all seven names are Greek. While I don't want to make too much of this, I think it is significant that the early church chose all Greek believers for this role. There are good reasons for church leadership to reflect the cultural makeup of the congregation. This shouldn't be done at the expense of qualifications (all these men were to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" [Acts 6:3]), and yet Hellenistic Jews were uniquely equipped to help solve this problem due to their intimate familiarity with the unique challenges of their own minority group. It shows a perhaps unexpected maturity in the early church that they would choose these men. (This decision could have worried the other Jewish believers: *Will we now*

4 In chapter 3, I will explain why I believe the office of deacon is a leadership position.

be neglected? Will they favor the Hellenistic Jews?) Instead, their decision to create a new leadership structure resulted in a more winsome community. Let's look at the result:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

Lest we overgeneralize the lessons learned from the early church, it's important to recognize the differences between the Church in these early chapters of Acts and in our time today. As the Book of Acts progresses, we see fewer and fewer mentions of large numbers of people coming to faith at once. That being said, there seems to be a correlation between increasing the number of leaders and seeing numerical growth in the church.

It wasn't just that the church grew in number. Note *who* was becoming "obedient to the faith." The priests! Some of the most difficult-to-reach people became believers (people whose livelihoods were directly tied to the Jewish religion). Why? I propose there are several reasons: 1) the ministry of the Word remained central to the church's ministry, 2) all the widows in the church were being cared for, so their needs were no longer causing a distraction, and 3) the church became an even more attractive witness to the community around it. They displayed the unifying power of God's Word and Spirit in bringing a diverse people together (even when it would have been easier to split). A church whose members care for each other well shows others that this is a community which will also care for them. Because of this strong testimony, a large number of priests came to faith. As they saw it, even if it meant giving up their livelihood, they were entering a community that wouldn't hang them out to dry. This is the power of the ministry of the Word and deed.

We will return several more times to Acts 6. For now, I want us to see that the overall health of a church will be determined by the

health of its elder and deacon ministry team. You can have a diligent Diaconate prudently caring for all the physical needs of the congregation, but if the ministry of the Word is not central to the culture of the church, much of the excellent diaconal ministry will go wasted. On the other hand, you can have the best preacher in your pulpit week after week, but if the sheep's needs and hurts are not being tended to, the impact of the gospel will be weakened.

To understand this point, think of a river dam. A concrete structure holds back the water—the taller the structure, the more water will be captured. Most dams also have a gate system which opens and closes to control the water flow. If the gate is leaking or stuck in the open position, the dam will never reach its full capacity. Alternatively, a water gate which isn't secured to a concrete dam can't hold back the water. It takes a strong dam *and* working water gates for the dam to reach its full capacity. These two things depend on each other to function as a unit and take in the desired amount of water. Similarly, with the church: a healthy ministry of the Word without an equally solid ministry of deed cannot attain full gospel impact. Both "structures" need to perform their own function well in order for the effectiveness of the gospel message to reach "full capacity."

A healthy church needs healthy Sessions and Diaconates. If elders must step away from the ministry of the Word to care for diaconal needs, or if the people become distracted by their neglected physical needs and resulting tension, the congregation will then struggle to receive the ministry of the Word in its fullness. A Diaconate that is not doing its jobs will always threaten to drain the life-giving water out of a church. Likewise, attention must be paid to the role the elders play.