

Sunday, August 10, 2025 | Filled

Week 19 | Acts 6:3-7 | “Growing Pains, Pt. 2”

READ: Acts 6:1-7 (ESV)

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

⁵ 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. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ 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.

In the *Book of Common Prayer*, a 16th-century reference book for the church, August 10th is the Feast of St. Lawrence. Lawrence was one of seven deacons in the church at Rome, specifically serving the financial needs of the church and administering care for the poor. The feast commemorates his martyrdom during the reign of Emperor Valerian in the third century.

At that time, the church was under *severe* persecution, and Lawrence was given three days to hand over the church's funds to the Roman government. But when the time came, Lawrence refused in a rather spectacular way. Rather than relinquish the church's money, he gathered some of the poor, widowed, and orphaned in the church and brought them to the courthouse. When asked by a judge to explain his actions, Lawrence said, “Sir, I have brought you what you asked for...these are the treasures of the church.”¹ Unsurprisingly, this stunt condemned Lawrence, and he was likely beheaded soon after.

However, there is a different, well-circulated, and possibly historical account of Lawrence's demise. Rather than die by the sword, the story goes that he was roasted to death on a

¹ Smethurst, Matt, *Deacons*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), p. 26.

gridiron. And before succumbing to the flames, he's reported to have told his torturers, "I am cooked on that side; turn me over and eat."²

Needless to say, Lawrence took the role of a deacon so seriously that he was willing to burn for the calling. In today's passage, we'll see how much the early church valued this role. Far from being mere figureheads, those who serve under the leadership of the pastors for the benefit of the church are champions of the faith. Though their duties are distinct from those of elders, deacons are nevertheless exemplary figures in the body of Christ.

Growing pains are a part of life.

There are **five** takeaways in this passage:

Takeaway #1 – Christ is the **foundation** upon which we build our **identity** and the **framework** by which we build our **community**.

Takeaway #2 – A church's health is not measured by its **capacity**—i.e., size, theological depth, or programs—but by its **care**—i.e., the poor, orphaned, and widowed.

Takeaway #3 – **Praying** to God and **preaching** for God are the tentpoles of a perfect **pulpit**.

By saying, "It is not right that we should give up **preaching the word of God** to serve tables," the apostles made a distinction between serving the word and serving the table, and, consequently, a need arose. The apostles would minister the word, but the church still needed people who would minister the table. Someone needed to take care of the "**daily distribution**" for the widows.

Although the term "deacon" is **not** used in this passage, the manner in which these men were selected for this role is the precursor to and provides a fitting model for the office of deacon. But make no mistake. We mustn't think that this passage **only** applies to the office of a deacon. It more broadly relates to the selection of **anyone** who serves in **any** church capacity.

You see, "deacon" is a transliteration of the Greek word **διάκονος** (*diakonos*), which means "servant." To be a "deacon" was to "function as an intermediary, act as go-between/agent, [or] be at one's service."³ In fact, as Matt Smethurst points out in his book, *Deacons*, "The Greek noun *diakonos* appears twenty-nine times in the New Testament and is almost always translated "servant(s)" or "minister(s)" (cf. Matt. 23:11-12; Mar. 9:35; 10:45; Jn. 12:26)."⁴

² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Saint Lawrence," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 1, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Lawrence>, [accessed August 7, 2025].

³ DBAG (2000), p. 229.

⁴ Smethurst (2021), p. 16.

Thus, while the church can have individuals who hold the title of deacon (cf. Phil. 1:1), and in fact there are specific qualification for such individuals (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8-13), in reality, everyone who serves a particular function within the church body is, in some sense, a deacon, whether they hold an official title or not. Just as there were capital “A” Apostles (cf. Ac. 1:26; 1 Cor. 15:8-9) and lower case “a” apostles (cf. Ac. 14:14; Rom. 16:7; Gal. 1:19; Phil. 2:25; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6), so there can be capital “D” Deacons—i.e., those who serve in a specific elected position (cf. Rom. 16:1—and lower case “d” deacons—i.e., those who are serve a general function (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6; 1 Cor. 3:5; Col. 1:23).

Vs. 3 – Okay, so the church needed individuals other than the apostles to help meet the needs of the church. How should they select someone for this position? What sort of qualifications should there be for this position?

Three general principles can be drawn from this passage:

- 1.) Congregational - First, the apostles said, “Brothers, pick out from among [emphasis added] you.”

This means two things:

First, candidates were supplied by the congregation. The needs of the church weren’t met by those outside the church. Servants of the church aren’t supposed to be contractors but congregants. The early church looked for help from within the local church body.⁵

Second, candidates were selected by the congregation. This is not to say that the apostles had no say in the matter. After all, they too were a part of the church, and if they were known to appoint elders (cf. Num. 11:16-17; Ac. 14:23; Ti. 1:5), then surely their input carried weight. And as we’ll see in a few moments, the apostles will be the ones who literally appoint the deacons. Nevertheless, it is vital to notice that these officers weren’t handpicked by the apostles.

A church is in trouble when it ignores its pastor's input in the selection of its officers. However, it is just as troublesome when the pastors have sole authority to appoint whomever they want. Proverbs 15:22 says, “Without counsel, plans fail, but with many advisers, they succeed.” Wise is the congregation that trusts a godly pastor to oversee

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This is not to say that a church can never source outside help for specialized tasks (e.g., major construction, third-party investigations) or for a specific period (e.g., church planting). However, when it comes to meeting the daily/weekly/yearly needs of a local church, such things should ideally be met by someone from within the local church.

the appointment of godly servants, and **wise** is the pastor who trusts a **godly congregation** to nominate godly servants.

2.) **Reputational** - Second, the potential deacons had to be “men of good **repute**.”

Admittedly, the Greek term used for “men” is **ἀνὴρ** (*anēr*), which universally refers to a male. However, given how the terminology for the office of deacon is used elsewhere, it is better to view this requirement as specific to the needs and context of Acts 6.⁶

After all, far more important than the gender of these diaconal candidates is their standing in the community of faith. In other words, servants of the church must have a **virtuous reputation**. This is not to say their abilities did not have some bearing on their reputation. To serve these widows, a candidate would’ve had to exhibit at least some measure of competency (i.e., physical, mental, etc.). But such considerations would’ve been a given. What needed to be emphasized was a candidate’s reputation. You see, **character** is the preeminent characteristic, surpassing both **competency** and **charisma**.

Proverbs 31:30 says, “**Charm** is deceitful, and **beauty** is vain, but a woman who **fears the LORD** is to be praised.” Such a principle also applies to men. The Lord told the prophet Samuel when he was looking for Israel’s next king: “**For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart**” (1 Sam. 16:7).

Thus, the apostles define a person with “good **repute**” as someone who is “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”

To be “full of the Spirit” means demonstrating the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Gal. 5:22-23). It means that those who are Spirit-filled do not waste time, avoid debauchery such as drunkenness, encourage the church with psalms and songs, give thanks for all things and at all times, and have no issue with submitting to their fellow brothers and sisters (cf. Eph. 5:15-20).

⁶ Paul calls a woman named “Phoebe, a servant [**διάκονον**] of the church at Cenchreae” in Rom. 16:1 (ESV). But Phoebe wasn’t a mere servant; she was an *official officer of the Cenchreae church*. She was a “deacon” (notice the masculine form of the Greek word) in a church. Furthermore, in 1 Tim. 3:11, the term **γυνή** (*gynē*) can just as easily be translated as “woman” rather than “wife.” This explains the lack of requirements for an elder’s wife in that passage and provides a better understanding of the parallel virtues listed. Admittedly, it is impossible to be dogmatic about this topic. Good Christians with good intentions can disagree about this issue without fear of condemnation. Those who are against female deacons are not all chauvinists, and those who are in favor of female deacons are not all compromisers (Though, to be clear, it is not outside the realm of possibility that fallen human beings have faulty rationale for the things they do or believe). Thus, due to the lack of clarity, it is better to view the apostles’ requirement of men-only servants in Acts 6 as specific to the needs and context of that passage.

To be “full of wisdom” means correctly discerning a given situation. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, “Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong; it is knowing the difference between right and almost right.” How can someone achieve such a thing? A wise person is well-versed in the Scriptures. Though a deacon is not tasked with regularly teaching God’s word, they are nevertheless well-acquainted with their Bibles. They’ll have more in common with the wise man in the Book of Proverbs than the foolish man.

- 3.) **Hierarchical** - Though the congregation submitted diaconal candidates, it was ultimately the apostles who “appoint[ed] [them] to this duty.”

This tells us two things:

First, the deaconship is by nomination and appointment, not availability. Although candidates ought to serve *voluntarily*, the position should not be filled by whoever *volunteers*. Being appointed to a position means not only meeting the qualifications listed above, but also being approved by the church elders. While candidates for the office of deacons are chosen from the congregation, it is not a popularity contest. Thus, though the majority opinion is invaluable, it is not infallible. Sometimes, what the entire congregation wants is not what it needs. And the pastors must ensure that diaconal candidates are qualified and capable of performing the duties of a deacon.

Second, the deaconship is subordinate to the eldership. Those who are tasked with preaching the word of God are also tasked with leading the church of God. A deacon-run church is an unbiblical mode because a deacon is not a pastor. In fact, a deacon acting as a pastor is a contradiction in terms, as Matt Smethurst explains, “The *daikon*-[“deacon”] word group...express agency at the *behest* [emphasis added] of a superior.”⁷ In other words, deacons are the official assistants of the elders. The deaconship does not check the power of the eldership in the same manner as the judicial branch checks the executive branch. Pastors are first and foremost accountable to God and then to the congregation, and not to a select few within the church. Deacons serve the needs of the church at the pastor's behest.

Even in church structures where there’s a plurality of elders guiding the church (aka, elder-ruled as opposed to congregational), there is almost always a *primus inter pares*,

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Smethurst (2021), p. 81, quoting Strauch, says, “In many contexts, the idea is that of a subordinate carrying out an assignment on a superior's behalf and having full authority to execute the superior's delegated task.”

or someone that's first among equals—e.g., Peter in Ac. 2:14; James in Ac. 15:13; In 1 & 2 Timothy, Paul writes specifically to Timothy and not to the elders in Ephesus; Paul gives Titus, not a board, authority to appoint elders in Titus 1:5; the seven letters to the seven churches of Rev. 1 are all addressed to the seven “stars,” aka messengers/pastors.⁸

Admittedly, a pastor is a servant-leader, as Christ instructed (cf. Lu. 22:25-27; Jn. 13:12-16). Nevertheless, an overseer still holds authority over those they serve.

READ: Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Takeaway #4 – Thus, the primary distinction, at least in this specific passage, between elders and deacons is this: an elder meets the theological needs of a church via preaching, while a deacon meets the logistical needs of a church via serving (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

This is not to say that the elders can never meet the logistical needs of the church, nor that deacons can never meet the theological needs of the church. Proceeds were brought and placed at the feet of the apostles and then distributed to the poor. And Stephen will soon become the first martyr in church history not because of his work as a deacon but because of what he said while preaching. But the emphasis here is on the role's primary purpose; it is an issue of principal function.

What is the main task of an elder? Care of the spiritual through preaching.

What's the main task of a deacon? Care of the physical through serving.

Someone asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” And he said, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mar. 12:29-31). Similarly, James says a religion that is pure and undefiled keeps itself unstained from the world and supports the needy (cf. Ja. 1:27). The pastors help churches heed the first commandment, keeping them from becoming sinful, while the deacons help them follow the second, keeping them from becoming selfish.

⁸ York, Hershael, “A Pastor-Led Church vs an Elder-Led Church,” December 2, 2022, *Southern Seminary*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Km2MZDdywmM>, [accessed August 7, 2025].

Vs. 5 – How the Apostles handled this situation “**pleased the whole gathering.**” Effective leadership brings comfort to those who follow. Luke gives us the names of the seven men who were elected as deacons: “**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.**”

Admittedly, all the names are Greek, which implies that since the need arose within Hellenistic circles, Hellenistic Christians were best suited to meet the need. However, it was common for Jews to have both a Jewish and a Greek name. So, it is impossible to say that these seven men were from a Grecian background. Had their ethnicity been of such importance, it would’ve been listed amongst the qualifications.

Of the seven, only Stephen and Phillip play a bigger role in the book of Acts. Interestingly, Luke calls “**Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.**” There were two types of Gentile converts to Judaism: “God-fearers” and “proselytes.”⁹ Admittedly, scholars note that the boundaries between these two categories were not always clear-cut, with various levels of Gentile adherence to Judaism existing.¹⁰ But generally speaking, what distinguished a proselyte and a God-fearer from each other was their differing levels of commitment to the Jewish faith.

Proselytes were complete converts to Judaism who underwent circumcision (for males), ritual bathing, and sacrifice, fully embracing the Mosaic law.¹¹ They were considered Jews in the fullest sense, with both the responsibilities and privileges that came with it.¹² God-fearers, on the other hand, were Gentiles who were drawn to Jewish monotheism and ethics but did not fully convert.¹³ They attended synagogues and participated in Jewish worship to varying degrees, but often continued to engage in some pagan practices. While proselytes were expected to follow all Jewish laws, God-fearers had a looser adherence to Judaism.¹⁴ This means that Nicolaus was a Gentile who converted to Judaism and then to Christianity. As such, technically speaking, he was **the first Gentile convert to Christianity**, not Cornelius (cf. Ac. 10).¹⁵

⁹ The information that follows was compiled using Logos AI.

¹⁰ Smith, Zachary G, “Proselyte,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, edited by John D. Barry, David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, Douglas Mangum, Carrie Sinclair Wolcott, Lazarus Wentz, Elliot Ritzema, and Wendy Widder, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

¹¹ Harris, Ralph W., *Acts*, The Complete Biblical Library: Study Bible, (World Library Press, 1991).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Barnett, Paul, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999).

¹⁴ Watson, Francis, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

¹⁵ Bock (2007), p. 261.

Vs. 6 – Luke tells us the apostles “prayed and laid their hands on” the new deacons, officially commissioning them for the work of the ministry. This highlights the importance of following proper procedure when electing church officers. Not just anyone could be a minister. They had to go through a vetting process and be officially recognized as ministers.

Vs. 7 – What's the result of this? Luke says, “And the word of God continued to increase.” When the church of God functions properly, the word of God spreads rapidly. In a world filled with dysfunctional organizations, a church that thrives despite significant differences is a powerful testimony to the efficacy and validity of the Scriptures. This is why Luke says that “the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” When people see the church organized properly and loving each other passionately, they, too, will want to become followers of Jesus.

One of the greatest evangelistic tools at the church's disposal is orderly polity (cf. 1 Cor. 14:33) and brotherly love (cf. Jn. 13:35). So powerful was this testimony that Luke tells us those least likely to believe in the gospel become believers. He said that “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” The priesthood comprised thousands.¹⁶ They were a powerful group within Judaism. That they were now followers of Jesus indicates that there was still a remnant in Israel that remained loyal to God. This will be a cause of great concern for the Sanhedrin.

Takeaway #5 – When the church functions properly, it grows exponentially.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 265.

Video Description:

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SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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