



**"The Ministry of Deacons"**  
**Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"**  
*Acts 6:1-15*  
**By: Peter Haas**  
*October 24, 2010*

**Acts 6:1-15**

*(New International Version)*

***The Choosing of the Seven***

<sup>1</sup>In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup>So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup>Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

<sup>5</sup>This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup>They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup>So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

***Stephen Seized***

<sup>8</sup>Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. <sup>9</sup>Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, <sup>10</sup>but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

<sup>11</sup>Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."

<sup>12</sup>So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. <sup>13</sup>They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. <sup>14</sup>For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

<sup>15</sup>All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

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Elder Jay Picket reads Acts 6:1-15.

Let us pray.

*Lord it is good to be together in your house with your people. We wish to be edified by your Word and we have been as we've been singing and praying. Now as we open the scriptures and look to them for guidance and understanding we pray for the maximum blessing upon each of our lives for the needs that are known and those that are unknown. Through Christ our Lord, I pray. Amen.*

We've been studying the Book of Acts, the sermon series has been entitled "The Way of the Spirit" and we are coming to the end of Chapter 2 and I don't know if you recognize this, but we skipped forward to Chapter 6 today and that was a gracious gift that Peter Barnes gave to me, because I wish to articulate a little bit about the ministry of deacons. I've been involved in helping the deacons this past year through a transition process and I wanted to give a bit of report on how that is going and what has happened with the deacons and allow them to



give you a little bit of feedback and we'll be watching a video in a little bit of some interviews of them. Also I want to turn our attention to the scripture to go kind of behind the scenes and understand a little bit about what happens in a church, unlike those shows where they take you behind the scenes and you figure out how they make a surfboard or build a pipe organ. This is little bit behind the scenes of what a church is comprised of. In this case we are looking at the particular officer or the ministry of the Board of Deacons. Now, ever Presbyterian Church usually will have a Board of Elders (Session) and then a Board of Deacons. We are going to understand a little bit better, I hope today, as we study this passage where the difference came from.

If you noticed here in the passage, now during those days when the disciples were increasing in number, as Jay mentioned that God was doing a great thing here in the congregation in expanding the number of people that were coming to Christ. This gift of growth became a little bit of a problem. It was a good problem for the church, but that in the context we are dealing with during those days. What was happening during those days? Well, the Apostle Peter had stood up and he had just preached and many people were coming into the faith. These were probably Jews and some of them were probably Greeks and then some other nationalities as well. However, this was an interreligious conversion, in other words people were converting to Judaism over to becoming followers of Jesus. This was an interethnic movement. People from all around the world were listening to these messages that Peter was giving and turning their hearts and giving their hearts over to this most mysterious and beautiful message about God's love and the person of Jesus Christ.

The church was dealing with the problem of growth. What to do now with the issue of growth? This was a wonderful problem. In fact, a problem that we see here in Chapter 6 is actually the second problem or decision that the church had to deal with. The first one we studied was when they had to decide who was going to replace Judas as the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle. You remember that story how we talked about they drew different lots to choose who would be Judas' replacement and they chose Matthias.

Well this is the second decision and problem that the early church had to deal with and it was a result of their exponential growth. Now what was the problem in particular? If you notice because of this growth, some people, in particular one ethnic group, the Greeks, were complaining. Now, complaining goes all the way back to the early church, it happened then, it happens today. They were complaining because their needs were not being met, in particular their widows were not getting their daily food distribution. Now, you have to remember a little bit about the context.

As Bruce just mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, this wonderful communist passage right in the middle of the New Testament of the distribution of wealth and making sure that no needs were unmet – everyone's needs were met. Now, that was an extraordinary environment to be in, it must have been to see the church distribute its personal wealth in such a way that there was no particular need. Now, we don't know exactly what those needs were. Maybe they were food needs, they certainly didn't have automobiles to take someone to the hospital, but maybe there were bills to be paid to a doctor – these kinds of things. The church was rallying around each other and they were providing for each other's needs. An extraordinary aspiration for any community. I think this is the ideal of what we all would strive for, but obviously how that is done, the mechanism by which that is done, changes from church to church.

For example, we have pastoral benevolence fund, which by the way is very low. This fund allows that when 2 of the 3 pastors agree of a particular need that we know of, say someone needs to buy some clothes – a new suit for a job interview, they had no money. We discerned together that this was a good use of the benevolence funds. That is one way in which this church distributes the wealth. People tithe, they give to the church and then the church sends it out to various ministries and mission around the world.



How do we take care of each other? This becomes a little trickier and the iCare Net ministry is one way in which we are trying to address that, so that certain needs are met, such as taking someone to a doctor or providing food. However, this idea that there wasn't a need that was unmet is really extraordinary, because I know I'm looking at folks who have very significant needs. Some of you have very significant needs that are financial, physical of a health nature. We don't want to be magical about this, but we do want to be authentic and vulnerable which allows us to then say, "I have a need. How can it be met?"

Now, what is the mechanism by letting the church know you have a need? Well this is where the role of leadership came into play. The apostles in this case in Chapter 6 were twelve in number. You have to think of leadership in concentric circles. Remember that Jesus had three particular relationships He was intimate with and that He conveyed a little more information to, I think. Do you know who these were? He went up on the Mount of Transfiguration with them: Peter, James and John.

Now, Peter, James and John were Jesus' kind of right hand men. That is the first concentric circle. I guess at the center would be Jesus relationship with Abba, because he was always in prayer. The next concentric circle out would be Jesus' relationship with Peter, James & John. Some people might even add, maybe Jesus' mother or Mary Magdalene, because He was close with certain people. Then the next concentric circle out is the 12 disciples. Then the next concentric circle out from that would have been the crowds and this could have varied from time to time – a 1,000 people that were following or 200 people. These would have been His disciples – people who traveled around listening to Him. Well in this case obviously Jesus has ascended and his no longer physically present, but the apostles now function as the center of the concentric circles.

The apostles are the leadership of the early church and in particular, Peter plays a very specific roll in leading that group of twelve. Outside of that circle there are the disciples and notice here in verse 2 that the twelve called together the whole community. Now, we don't know how many that was – it could have been a large number, because they were having a significant number of conversions to the Christian faith. It doesn't really matter how large it was, the point is that probably this group was the same people that were in the upper room when Jesus appeared to them. I view this group as the local congregation. This is the congregation that had been with Jesus. The twelve gathered their local congregation and they make a decision. They do what all good Presbyterians do when there is a problem – they have a meeting.

Now, the most important thing here is again, we're talking about how the need is met. This is the mechanism for how the need is met. The elders of the church, or the apostles in this case, come to find out that there is complaint and they respond by gathering together, I assume, and discerning what the next step is and they gather the congregation and they have a meeting. They then come to the congregation with a proposal. They don't just let anything happen and here is what they say: "It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables; therefore, friends select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the spirit and wisdom and then we will appoint them to do this work." A couple of things here to draw your attention to. Firstly, the apostles here are called to a particular line of work. This is the distribution of labor if you will. It is not that one is better or more exalted than the other, it is just that their calling is so intense that they cannot divert from it. What is this calling that these twelve apostles have?

They have been charged by the Lord Jesus Christ to do something. Remember Matthew 28, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News." Those twelve were charged. Now, we like to apply it to ourselves, but Jesus was speaking to twelve individuals and they were given that charge and it kind of spills over to us in perpetuity. Their charge was to articulate the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that is the message that Jesus was teaching about what God was doing now through this relationship that Jesus made available. I'd love to talk more about the details of what that relationship looked like. Their task, they were set aside to preach by the Word of God. By the Word of God



means the gospel or to articulate the Hebrew Scriptures in light of what Jesus had done. So, they wanted to commit their time to prayer and preaching. In a sense, this is where we get the model for the preaching elder. The pastors of this church and Presbyterian churches are essentially elders, just like the other elders who are active right now on the Session. We rule, govern and oversee the church together as equals. The pastor doesn't have more power. It is just that the pastors have been given this special charge or vow to preach the scriptures, to be under the authority of scriptures and have the gift of teaching. We dedicate ourselves to that.

Whereas other elders dedicate themselves to others things. For example, like Bruce and Rocky, not current elders, but elders in the past, gifted men at finance. We asked them to handle the finances of the church. Now the elders say we need to focus on preaching the scriptures. We need to focus on overseeing the church. We need to come up with a plan, a method, to making sure that the needs of this church are met. In particular, the Greek widows are not being feed. That is normal because there were more Jews at that time who were becoming Christians than there were Greeks. That changed later on, but at first there were lots of Jews who were becoming Christians and they were taking care of their own. Well, that is very normal – you tend to take care of your own or the people you know and your family. But these particular widows were so vulnerable in that culture because in a patriarchal society they had no access to making money, they had no money, and they had in many cases no family. So, they here left out to beg or in some cases to the charity of others or religious community. These widows needs were not being met – they weren't be given their food. In today's culture, you might think of these people as the homeless. These are the homeless in our community – their needs go unmet or we avoid some and we give to others. There is always a risk in a large Christian community that someone is overlooked or there is degree of favoritism.

When this issue came to the attention of the elders they wished to address it and they did so by doing something that is extraordinary and that continues to this day. They held this meeting and they established the Board of Deacons. Now the Board of Deacons doesn't actually show up here in this text. But the words table servers literally means servant or deacons. The word deacon literally means servants. So, deacons were meant to serve in this very tangible way the physical needs of the community, in this case related to food. This was the second major decision that the early church addressed through a meeting deciding how to deal with the issue of complaining and very real issue of widows going without food. That was the mechanism that they put into place. They selected seven men. Now, in this case it was just limited to men, but later one in the New Testament you see Paul particularly in Timothy and Titus talking about the qualifications for the office of deacon and that there are certain women that were ordained to become deacons. It opened up to not just men, but to include women. This office of deacon became the primary means by which the church took care of the physical, tangible needs of its community.

Now, in recent years the office of deacon has kind of languished in lots of churches. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the role of deacon is much more exalted. They serve like a mini-priest. However, in Presbyterian or Protestant churches the office or role of deacon is more related to service and compassion. What has happened in recent years is that the office of deacon is kind of become a stepchild to the office of elder. In many churches that I've come across and have read about, what ended up happening is that the office of deacon became the stepping stone for people who wanted to become elders, because that was really where the action was. The office of deacon in many cases was rather overlooked. In many cases, the Session or elders kind of gave the things they didn't want to do to the deacons. The deacon board became a catch all for everything and everyone's great idea.

In our particular church what ended up happening over a period of years, and this happens so often in churches, is that the office of deacon became an administrator and deacons were primarily administrating various programs. In our case it was the Neighborhood Care Groups. They were not feeling released to serve particular needs of our



congregation. Last year Sam Cangelosi and the deacons started a process of discernment of restructuring ourselves. We started in 2010 with a retreat where we turned ourselves away from a board that meet monthly around a conference table into a spiritual community of teams that rolled on once every three weeks. This new structure allowed everyone to carry the load – not all the time, but on a weekly basis. Today there are 21 WHPC deacons and a team of 7 is on one week at a time and they are off for 2 weeks. During the week, that they are on they will serve the very tangible needs of our congregation – at least this is the vision that we are aspiring to. They become the first responders along with pastors to situations that come up. For example, going to hospital or visiting with someone who is dying or providing a meal if you've been sick. They are the first people to respond. They are more involved in worship, such as helping to usher and help to pray with people after worship. They are around and we wish for the deacons to be the ministry of Christ's love – to be ministers of compassion in very tangible ways. We recognized that we needed to do some training to help empower the deacons to do this and we've been doing this all year.

It has really been very meaningful and fun to journey together with the deacons this year as we've tried to meet the needs of this congregation in more tangible ways. I think the fruit will be born in years to come of whether or not we're doing our job, because there's often time is complaining in a congregation, such as: my needs not being met, I didn't get cared for. We need to have a system in place to address that.

In a moment I'm going to share with you a video that Nancy Gray helped us put together. A kind of story brokering – letting the deacons tell you a little bit about their own personal experience.

I want to just close our message here. I know that this has not been the most inspiring sermon and that you don't come to church to hear about the office of deacons so much. However, every Christian needs to know about the inner workings of the church and especially every Presbyterian needs to know that we have a board of deacons and a Session comprised of elders. I think there is a more nuance lesson to be learned and if you will, I just close with this.

It is the issue of how do you make a decision? There is something to be learned here, just a very glimmer of an insight I think. In the past if you remember, decisions were made by usually one person. Take for example, Moses. The people are complaining that they don't have enough food and they are grumbling. Moses goes and prays with God and God gives Moses a solution – quail, manna is going to come in the morning. Take Samuel for example – people are complaining, they are jealous that their neighbors have a king in their garage and they Jews don't. So, they ask Samuel, who is a judge, "We want a king just as those guys do." So Samuel goes before the Lord and gets a decision, prays about it and announces what the decision is. Samuel says to them, "You'll get your king, but here is what is going to be required you. You are going to have to pay taxes and he is going to get your sons for military, etc. etc." Remember Jesus had major decisions to make. He would go away at night, up on the mountain all night long and pray. He made the decision of who His disciples were going to be – he chose the twelve - after praying all night.

All these are examples of how an individual made a decision with God alone in prayer. These people were the anointed ones. This was very hierarchical – it was God and the leader. The leaders were particularly anointed by God with the Spirit to lead the nation, for example in the case of David. Now something else changes with the gift and the release of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, now it is not just one person who is anointed with wisdom to lead. Now the Holy Spirit has been released to the whole community. What this means for our decision making is this I think – our decisions are much better when collaborative in community and relational then alone, isolationistic and self-focused, because when you are in community and in collaborative and listening to others, you learn something about them that you may not know. You also get input that is not self-focused and so you may learn about someone's need that you didn't know about. If you were just making your decision alone, you may choose



differently. The gift of the Holy Spirit allows us to gather into groups, small groups, fellowship groups, family groups, church community, Session meetings or whatever it may be and discern together what the best decision is.

Here is my encouragement to you. If you have a big decision to make or if there is a decision you are avoiding making or if there is a decision that you need encouragement to make or it is very challenging – get together with other wise, loving Christians and make the decision with them. Invite the counsel of the elders of this church. Go talk to someone, talk to a pastor. Invite someone else to help you make that decision because amazing things can come from it from when we trust one another.

Amen.

*You may view the Deacon Video Fall 2010 at the below WHPC webpage.*

[http://www.whpc.org/whpc/board\\_of\\_deacons](http://www.whpc.org/whpc/board_of_deacons)

