

ACTS 6:1-6

DEACONS? WHO NEEDS THEM?

“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.’ 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.”¹

Understanding how the concept of deacons first arose provides the rationale for appointment to the office among the people of God. Had we not lost sight of who these servants are and the role they are to fulfil, perhaps the churches of this day would never have stumbled into the catastrophes that masquerade as communities of the Faith in this day. As it is, we have arrived at a day that is topsy-turvy, a day when figuratively slaves sit astride horses, and princes walk on the ground like slaves [see **ECCLESIASTES 10:7**]. Those whom God has appointed as overseers too often are compelled to approach boards composed of unqualified and unspiritual people to receive instruction for what should be preached.

The churches of our Lord are meant to be communities of the Faith operating under the leadership of the sovereign Head of the churches; they are not little fiefdoms ruled by political elites. Elders and churches are not to be in constant competition; nor are the churches to protect themselves from insinuation by ecclesiastical wolves through appointing a board that maintains control by a stranglehold on the congregation. God has given elders, charged to serve as overseers ensuring that the flock is protected and that spiritual nourishment, rest and refreshment are provided from the Word of the True and Living God. Likewise, He has given deacons to ensure that the benevolence of the churches is administered in a wise and equitable manner.

I invite you to join me in a review of the need for these gifted individuals who have been given the title “deacons.” Seeing the need, we will realise the wisdom of the apostolic response in the charge given to the congregation in Jerusalem. The account is found in **ACTS 6:1-6**.

THE CRISIS — “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.” It is important to establish that the crisis arose at a time of blessing. Doctor Luke begins the account, “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number.” What days? Pentecost had witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit of God and a mighty influx of new believers. “Those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” [**ACTS 2:41**]. The following verses indicate enviable harmony in that early congregation; the nascent believers were learning of the Faith and growing in grace and knowledge of Christ the Lord [see **ACTS 2:42-47**].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

It was shortly after this that Peter and John came upon a crippled man begging at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. Listen to the account. “Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us.’ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, ‘I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!’ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” [ACTS 3:3-10].

Those witnessing this event were astonished. Peter, seizing the opportunity, testified that the Risen Son of God had given healing to the man and preached a salvation message. Even as he was declaring the mercies of the True and Living God, some of the priests, the temple captain and some Sadducees, came on the scene. These men were annoyed that Peter and John were “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” [ACTS 4:2]. Seizing them, they threw them into prison where they were held overnight. The next day, they were compelled to stand before the assembled Sanhedrin, where they again testified to the grace and mercy of Jesus the Messiah.

The Apostles were threatened and released, whereupon they returned to their own people to relate all that had occurred. Praising God and pleading for courage and spiritual strength, the disciples grew still bolder in the Spirit. The divine account simply states, “With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” [ACTS 4:33-35]. Hold that final thought in your mind; it will become essential for understanding what is about to happen.

Two disciples attempted to bamboozle the Apostles, lying to the Holy Spirit in the process. God, however, would not tolerate lying. Both Ananias and his wife Sapphira were struck dead by Holy God, causing all who heard of this to stand in awe, fearing the Lord God. Fearing the Lord, people sought Him and those who worshipped Him. Therefore, we read, “None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed” [ACTS 5:13-16]. Did you read that fourteenth verse? “More than ever believers were added to the Lord.”

The Apostles were arrested and imprisoned. However, God was not ready for them to be removed; so, during the night, an angel released them, commanding the Apostles, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” [ACTS 5:20]. Haled before an enraged Council the next day, Peter, serving as spokesman for the Apostles, replied to the charges, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” [ACTS 5:28-32]. The sentence for their audacity was that they were beaten and warned not to speak in Jesus’ Name ever again. Fat chance that these men would be deterred from their mission by such puerile punishment.

Note the final statement before we read the words of the text: “Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” [ACTS 5:42]. The Apostles, and the entire congregation, were acting in concert, teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. The impact of that blessed activity was the salvation of multitudes. About three thousand added at Pentecost [see ACTS 2:41]. Next, “The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” [ACTS 2:47]. Then, the number saved after the first confrontation with the Sanhedrin was about five thousand men [see ACTS 4:4]. The congregation had grown to perhaps 20,000 people! The statement given in ACTS 5:14 becomes significant. “More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” Some estimates suggest a congregation at that time of as many as 100,000!

Imagine! A congregation growing to 100,000 people without any particular planning. These early disciples were dependent on the Spirit of God to unite them in divine love. Assuredly, such a thing could not happen today. We must have committees, an organisational chart defining responsibilities, a mission statement for the congregation—I fear that we’ve about organised the Holy Spirit out of the churches today. Organisation is not a bad thing; after all, God is not a god of confusion, but of peace [see 1 CORINTHIANS 14:33]. However, when we depend on organisation rather than looking to Him who calls us to life, our organising can impede or even halt all advance by the assembly.

This does not mean that problems were absent within this primitive congregation! Trouble arose then, just as it will arise in this day, because they were, as we are, fallen creatures. The conflict that day resulted because the congregation determined to be proactive in caring for those in need among them. Grumbling was heard among the saints; whenever grumbling begins it will destroy the work of God if it is not addressed immediately. As is often the case, the grumbling arose from a perception rather than a reality. “A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”

The believers referred to as “Hellenists” were Greek-speaking Jews. However, the distinctive trait for them was that these believers not only spoke Greek rather than Aramaic, but they had adopted Greek dress and embraced Greek culture; they were Grecian in every way save for their religion. The believers identified as “Hebrews” were the Aramaic speaking; they lived according to Hebrew culture. Either group was distinct; individuals were easily categorised. The conditions were ripe for an “us versus them” situation in the congregation.

Our language betrays our heart, which is not surprising in light of Jesus’ words. “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.” What comes out of the mouth is nothing less than the expression of what is in the heart. “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” [MATTHEW 15:18, 19]. The thought precedes the word, just as the attitude precedes the action. If we think divisively, we will be divisive. If we endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit, we will be unified.

Some years ago, a Dallas church experienced a disastrous split; each faction filed a lawsuit claiming the church property. A judge referred the matter to higher authorities in the denomination. Accordingly, a church court heard both sides of the case and made a determination to award the church property. The losers withdrew and formed another congregation in the Dallas area. The conflict began at a church dinner when an elder received a smaller piece of ham than a child seated next to him. Tragically, the entire case was reported in the newspapers.² How that must have grieved the Master. Tiny events can cause great problems; James observes, “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire” [JAMES 3:5b]!

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1973) 55

Perhaps the best way for us to avoid reducing other saints to the underclass known as “them” is to train ourselves to speak of Him. Whenever a church ceases to speak of “they” and “them” and begins to speak of “He” and “Him,” it is well on the way to being an apostolic church—a God-honouring congregation. I suggest that the world desperately longs to see at least one church which has adopted the language of Zion and seeks to unite the people of God. Rather than exalting our differences, we who name the Name of Christ are obligated to exalt Him. Rather than focusing on how we differ, we must train ourselves to focus on what God has done in our lives to make us like Himself.

The early church was being segregated into Hellenists and Hebrews. They were not putting into practise the will of the Father. Paul would later address this particular issue when he wrote. “You . . . are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” [ROMANS 8:9-11].

There was no welfare system in that day. Many people lived in poverty, especially the aged. Widows and orphans, in particular, were vulnerable. Many Jews immigrated to Jerusalem to spend their final years in the holy city and to die there. There is some evidence that widows even travelled there from locations in the Diaspora.³ To meet the burden of providing for these needy individuals, leaders in Jerusalem created an organised system of relief for the destitute. The daily distribution (known as *tamhûy*) consisted of food (bread, beans and fruit). The weekly distribution (*quppāh*) consisted of food and clothing. The daily distribution was universal, being distributed to both non-residents and transients; it was delivered house-to-house wherever needy individuals were known to reside. The weekly distribution was reserved for resident members.⁴ It is apparent that the Apostles had adapted this system to care for the needy within the assembly. Christians who were in need received daily distribution of food.

We have no way to know if the complaint from the Hellenists was justified or not. Whether the complaint was merited or whether it was unmerited, Hellenistic believers believed that their widows were neglected—they weren’t getting their fair share! This sense of exclusion fostered resentment; and the resentment led to grumbling. The discontent was growing, becoming so pronounced that the unity of the Body was threatened. Something would need to be done, and quickly. Whatever would be done, it would have to satisfy the sense of disenfranchisement felt by the Hellenists without alienating the Hebraists.

THE CONSULTATION — “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.’” When the Apostles became aware of the discontent, they called a general meeting of the congregation, referring the matter to the assembly as a whole with appropriate guidelines.

³ See Clinton E. Arnold, **Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: John, Acts, vol. 2** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2002) 262

⁴ John B. Polhill, **The New American Commentary: Acts, vol. 26** (Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN 1995) 179-80; Darrell L. Bock, **Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament** (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2007) 258

The problem confronting the congregation was two-fold—a diverse make-up for the congregation, as already noted, and the unspoken thought that the Apostles should resolve the matter. We've already noted the first problem, providing biblical references that should address the matter of diversity among the people of God. Apparently, this message of diversity required reinforcement among the first churches since the Apostle Paul spoke to the matter on other occasions. Here are a couple of instances worthy of noting. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" [GALATIANS 3:28, 29]. Again, to the Colossians, Paul wrote, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" [COLOSSIANS 3:11].

If we are doing what we are called to do as a congregation, we will always experience a degree of friction resulting from differences among those incorporated into the assembly; no congregation will be homogeneous in every respect, save for redemption by the Son of God. Except for our status as sons of God, we will differ in many ways. I've been excluded from congregations because of ministry among people of another race, a different culture and even because of the inclusion of people from differing social strata. Tragically, Christians are capable of acting in an ungodly manner, attempting to impose solutions suggested by this dying world.

The unspoken issue that faced the congregation was the expectation that the Apostles were responsible to correct the problem! Had they acquiesced to this silent expectation, they would have exhausted themselves and ceased being effective in fulfilling the ministry God had assigned. They demonstrated their spiritual perspicacity in addressing the unspoken complaint. "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" [ACTS 6:2]. The Twelve had prioritised their responsibilities, concluding that they were to give themselves first to the ministry of the Word! In this, they were but fulfilling the appointment they had received from the Master Himself. This understanding is inherent in the Great Commission: "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" [MARK 16:15].

This priority is witnessed in the exchange between the Risen Lord of Glory and Peter. "Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'" [JOHN 21:15-17].

Ever after, Peter's priority would be to feed God's lambs, to tend his sheep, to feed his flock. When Peter bore the Good News to the Gentiles, entering into the house of Cornelius, he testified, "[The Risen Saviour] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead" [ACTS 10:42].

When Jesus burst on the scene, Peter's remembrance, provided in the Gospel of Mark, informs us that "after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God" [MARK 1:14]. When Jesus appointed the Twelve, they were appointed "to preach" [see MARK 3:14]. Their message was not fanciful or specious sophistries; rather they were charged, "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" [MATTHEW 10:7]. Preaching and teaching is the divinely chosen means of declaring the Good News and of building up the saints. Preaching does not obviate witness; it potentiates witness.

In the same way the elder's work is the ministry of the Word. The divinely given ability to teach is a primary qualification for anyone appointed to eldership [see 1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. The elder is responsible to ensure that what he has heard from the Word is "entrust[ed] to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" [2 TIMOTHY 2:2]. The primary tool for correcting the wayward is through teaching the Word. Paul writes, "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil" [2 TIMOTHY 2:24].

As challenging days loom before us, the charge to the elder of the congregation is clear. "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5].

If elders forsake this ministry of the Word, they are in rebellion to the revealed mind of the Lord God. Forsaking the preaching of the Word, regardless of how worthy or noble or urgent the alternative task may appear to be, ensures that the assembly is weakened and it must deprive the people of God of divine nourishment, heavenly rest and blessed refreshment. Failure to focus on the appointed task assures that wicked individuals will be able to work unchecked—the elder will have failed his charge to rebuke them in their mad rush to perdition.

Whilst the charge to elders is indisputable, howbeit frequently neglected, the charge to deacons appears to be less certain to many in this day. Nevertheless, the Apostles were unambiguous: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" [ACTS 6:2]. "It is not right," or "It is not desirable," are, in my estimate, rather insipid translations of their response. One translation, attempting to capture the urgency of the Apostles' statement, renders their response as, follows: "It would be a grave mistake for us to neglect the Word of God."⁵ The Apostles were fully aware of their appointment; to ignore that divine appointment would be a serious affront to Him who appoints to divine service. Likewise, elders neglecting the own appointment to perform secondary works present an affront to Him who appointed them.

The reference to "serv[ing] tables" is not intended to be derogatory. The word translated into English by the phrase "serve tables" (*diakoneîn*) is one of the great words of the Bible. That same word (*diakonia*) is used when referring to "the ministry of the word" in verse four. The Greek verb is the root of our noun, "deacon." Though the text does not explicitly say that these men who were to be appointed would bear the title "deacon," it is generally accepted that growing out of this conflict in the early church would be the appointment of the first deacons—spiritually mature individuals who would be assigned the task of caring for the inward, physical needs of the congregation.

It is crucial for us to recognise that the Apostles were admitting that there was a vital ministry to outsiders rendered by preaching the Word and an equally important service to insiders rendered by distributing assistance to those in need. The two tasks must never be in competition or conflict. Neither the congregation nor its leaders should be forced to choose between evangelism and ethics, between growing and giving, between Word and welfare. However, once the congregation has begun to divide into factions—"we" and "them"—none of the vital functions of the church will be fulfilled because an attitude of "self" will prevail. It is impossible to serve Christ or one another so long when we are divided.

⁵ **The New English Bible** (Oxford University Press, New York, NY 1970)

The steps taken by the Apostles to resolve the crisis are valuable in providing a model for appointment to this vital service among the churches of our Lord. Those who are appointed would be required to be recognised as mature individuals. The apostolic criteria mandated that those chosen must be drawn from the membership of the assembly, they would be individuals “of good repute,” “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”

The disciples set four criteria as qualifications for the diaconate. Don't overlook the requirement for membership in the assembly. Appointment to any church office cannot be compared to hiring a worker to perform tasks that are unpleasant or objectionable. Too many churches in this day have forgotten that from a human point of view the assembly of the Lord is built on the idea of freedom of association. Because that is true, it means that the labours required to fulfil the mission given by the Head of the Church are assigned by Him and they are to be conducted voluntarily. We must not permit ourselves to drift into the attitude expressed by the Laodicean congregation which was rebuked because they said, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” [REVELATION 3:17]. Within the diaconate, there must be commitment to the assembly as well as commitment to the Master; commitment to Christ will be reflected in commitment to His people.

Again, those appointed to serve the congregation are to be reputable. Appointment as a deacon is not a popularity contest. Neither is one qualified to be a deacon because they are successful in business. However, one who has a poor reputation in the community is unsuited to this duty; the lost denizens of this world expect those who enjoy the respect of the congregation likewise to be honourable people. Elders “must be above reproach” [1 TIMOTHY 3:2], and in similar fashion, deacons are to be proven “blameless” [1 TIMOTHY 3:10]. Our conduct before the world reflects on Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. It must be the aspiration of all, and assuredly the mark of those appointed as deacons, to “adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour” [TITUS 2:10].

The only way we can recognise spiritual maturity is through observation. No course of study is able to confer either spiritual maturity or wisdom. Modelling our lives after spiritually mature people will assist in growing toward maturity; but it is by walking with Him “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” that spiritual maturation is ensured. Thus, those who are appointed to the diaconate must be recognised as mature; their character must be indisputable, for this is not merely a position required by an organisational flowchart.

Deacons occupy a spiritual position in that they represent the assembly in ministration to one another. Therefore, deacons are to be “full of the Spirit.” What does it mean to be “full of the Spirit?” On one occasion, a neighbour had a flat tire early on a Sunday morning. Lynda informed me that our neighbour was struggling with changing the tire. I gladly assisted her. As I changed the tire, I asked about her relationship to the Master. “I'm saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost,” she exclaimed. She said “HolyGhost” as though it was one word. “Are you filled with the Holy Ghost?” she inquired of me.

“Yes,” I replied, “God has given me His Spirit and filled me with His love.”

“Did you get what I got? Did you speak in tongues?” she asked.

“No, Ma'am,” I responded, “I got what the Apostles got.”

The woman was seizing upon a fantasy that many hold, believing that being filled with the Spirit is an experience that results in ecstatic speech and feelings. Listen to the Word! The disciples were “all filled with the Holy Spirit” at Pentecost [ACTS 2:4]. To be certain, they spoke in other languages, but what they said is vital! Those listening heard them “tell in our own tongues the mighty works of God” [ACTS 2:11].

Before the Council, Peter, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” charged them with deicide, concluding with this testimony, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [ACTS 4:8-12].

Stephen, facing an enraged mob intent on killing him, was “full of the Holy Spirit.” Looking upward into Heaven, he testified, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” [ACTS 7:55, 56].

Saul was struck blind by the brilliance of the glory of the Risen Christ. God sent Ananias, a devout servant, to give him back his sight and appoint him to divine service. Ananias testified, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” [ACTS 9:17]. Filled with the Spirit, Saul immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, confounding those who set themselves in opposition to the Messiah [ACTS 9:20-22].

On his first missionary journey, Paul encountered a sorcerer named Elymas. This man opposed Paul’s message. Listen to the divine text. “Saul ... filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time’” [ACTS 13:9-11]. The bold, Spirit-filled act resulted in faith and salvation for the proconsul.

The Word teaches that those filled with the Spirit testify to Christ; there is not a hint of how one feels or whether one is ecstatic or whether one is making unintelligible sounds. What is evident in every instance is that those filled with the Spirit are bold witnesses of the Living God. After the first time they had been hauled before the Sanhedrin, Peter and John returned to their friends and joined in prayer. What a prayer it was! After praying, all were filled with the Spirit. This is Luke’s statement concerning what happened after they had prayed. “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” [ACTS 4:31].

Those who are filled with the Spirit are bold in their witness. Note that I did not say they were brash, but rather those individuals filled with the Spirit are bold; Spirit-filled people are “always ... prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks ... for a reason for the hope that in in [them]” [see 1 PETER 3:15]. The Spirit-filled individual will be marked by speech that is “gracious, seasoned with salt,” and thus, they will “know how [they] ought to answer each person” [COLOSSIANS 4:6].

Deacons are to be filled with wisdom. That is, they are to be discrete, conscientious and always seeking the mind of the Lord. They will evince the wisdom of which James speaks. “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” [JAMES 3:13-18].

Note that the precise mechanism for seeking out servants is not given in our text. The assembly was to “carefully select”⁶ those who would meet the criteria required. The impression conveyed is that the congregation chose by consensus, by general agreement. Likely the names were suggested after discussion and opportunity was given to come to agreement.

⁶ The NET Bible First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

Those chosen were to be presented to the Apostles, who would then appoint those selected to the task. The fact that the Apostles would appoint indicates the spiritual nature of the position. Deacons are not an adjunct to a congregation, chosen by popularity to run the church—they occupy a spiritual position that is vital to the health of the assembly. They are not precluded from performing other duties as required by the situation confronting them. Stephen was a powerful witness for Christ, becoming the first martyr. In this, he was doing precisely what one would expect of an individual filled with the Spirit—he was boldly witnessing to the grace of the Son of God! Philip would go down to Samaria, and there proclaim the Christ. So effective was he that he would be granted the titled of evangelist [see ACTS 21:8].

THE CONCLUSION — “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.”

Do not underestimate the abilities of a congregation acting under the leadership of the Spirit of God. Given appropriate guidelines, understanding the requirements of what needs to be done, a group seeking to do the will of God will act with discretion to the glory of God every time. It is only when a church begins to politicise congregational decisions that it resorts to votes and degenerates into argument. We witness this sanctified common sense displayed in the text. The grumbling began because one group within the membership felt they were marginalised.

Had the assembly applied modern conflict resolution methodology, the result might have been different. Perhaps they would have said, “Throw those grumblers out!” Of course, in that case, a problem that had not yet become serious would have suddenly become very serious. There would have been two churches singing, “We are one in the Spirit,” while anathematising one another. They would have resolved one problem, only to create an even greater problem.

They might have ignored those complaining—we frequently do such things. We don’t kick out the complainers, but we just avoid them. The attitude could be summed up as, “Just let them sit and soak for a while. Let’s see how they like it. That will teach them.”

Of course, being good Baptists, we could always outvote them. We can stage an electoral coup! We call a meeting. Then, we let people speak, make a motion, secure a second (always being careful to follow “Robert’s Rules of Order”) and we vote. The majority wins; everything is done democratically. Who can complain about that? Losers have to keep quiet; after all, we are registered with the CRA and under the Societies Act and we have to follow their rules.

The Apostles could have formed a committee. It would be truly politic had the Apostles ensured that the committee was representative—you know, appoint a few Hellenists so they could feel they had a voice. Why, they could even appoint a few widows, so long as the committee was large enough to ensure that nothing rash would be done. Committees really don’t have to do anything—just wait long enough until the problem resolves itself or it will be superseded by an even larger problem. Parliament has perfected this method of dealing with matters, and churches are pretty good at this particular method of conflict resolution.

We really don’t know whether the congregation deliberately picked seven Hellenists or whether they actually picked the seven best men. However, they did select seven Greek speaking men to be presented to the Apostles: “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” [ACTS 6:5]. This assembly didn’t appear to be much impressed by being politically correct or about doing what was convenient or even with clinging to power.

These were servants of the church, for that is what the word “deacon” means. These godly deacons would picture Jesus at work among His people, for Jesus was the servant of all. Do you remember these words that Jesus spoke to His disciples? “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” [MARK 10:42-45].

Jesus is a servant to mankind. I’m humbled whenever I think of the mercy of the Lord. The disciples would soon eat the Pascal Meal with the Master. The Meal would be a sobering occasion because He would introduce something new. Before they would eat, Jesus began to challenge the familiar. Recall the account that is provided from the pen of the Apostle of Love. “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him” [JOHN 13:3-5].

Despite protests, despite expressions of astonishment, despite their puzzlement, Jesus persisted. Then, as was always the case, He taught them. “When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” [JOHN 13:12-17].

While I never experienced Jesus washing my feet, I do “know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for [our] sake he became poor, so that [we] by his poverty might become rich” [2 CORINTHIANS 8:9]. Among the churches, I have observed the Master’s servant heart displayed by godly deacons as they served. Though many had the title and abused it by ruling or by contenting themselves to be a properties committee, some always served; and the grace of God was seen through those who served. May God raise up such godly people among us. May He do so even in the days before us. May He be pleased to give us what we lack. Amen.