

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

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Sermon Title: Divine Calling & the Congregational Vote

Sermon Text: Acts 6:1-7

Acts 6:1 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.

Acts 6:2 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.

Acts 6:3 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.

Acts 6:4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Acts 6:5 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.

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

Acts 6:7 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.

Main Point: Christ governs and strengthens His church by calling qualified leaders, confirming them through the free consent of the congregation, and equipping them through the grace of ordination.

Outline:

1. The Needs of the Church (6:1-3a)
2. The Congregation's Vote (6:3b-5 & Acts 14:23)
3. The Ordination (6:6-7)

Introduction

Last week we looked directly at what Paul tells us about elders and deacons. And what we saw was that a church needs elders, because the church needs leaders who are focused on the ministry of the word and of prayer, and of shepherding the congregation.

But the church needs deacons because without deacons the elders have to divide their time between shepherding and the ministry of the word and prayer, and then they also have to give their time to service, to organizing the benevolence of the church, the church facilities, and other practical concerns. Those concerns are important, but they do mean that the elders won't be able to give their full focus to shepherding the church.

But something that isn't spoken of very often is the role of the congregation in all of this. In the early church, congregations would vote for their elders, deacons, and pastors. This was the story of local churches for the first 500 years or so. No elder or pastor would be placed over a church without the congregation voting freely to have the man serve.

This disappeared in the middle ages as kings and church hierarchies became more and more entrenched. Under the medieval Roman Catholic and later Anglican systems, bishops, monarchs, or wealthy secular patrons simply appointed and imposed ministers upon local congregations without their input or consent. Bishops would just appoint a man over a local church, and they had no say in the matter.

Yet this was not the practice of the New Testament, nor was it the practice of the early church, nor was it the practice of the church up to the early middle ages. And so because of this, our presbyterian forefathers fought to gain back those rights for local churches. In the 17th century, Scottish Presbyterians defended this right,

and even bled and died for this privilege, all in an effort to return the church to its original practices that we see in the New Testament.

But I have to admit something: as important as this topic is, I'm not sure I have ever heard a *sermon* on this topic: the topic of congregational consent. It's hard to say why it's uncommon for someone to preach on this, but I can think of a few reasons. One of those reasons is that it's already unusual to hear sermons on church government to begin with. It just doesn't get fannies in the pews to talk about church government for the most part.

But I wish it did. Many of the pains and agonies that so many modern non-denominational churches experience comes from a disinterest in polity and a lack of connection between churches. So for the most part modern churches are run like consumer businesses: if people don't like it, they leave.

But what if God has a plan for his church that allows the church to be corrected, and for error to be confronted, instead of for people just to leave and go somewhere else?

Because God cares how his church is run, I want us to focus today on the way that God appoints elders and deacons specifically for his church, and I want to do it in one of the plainest and clearest passages in the Bible that narrates for us how God gave the early church deacons.

So three predominant things we see here that will give us our structure are first, the needs of the church. Then second, the congregation's vote. And then third and finally, the ordination of the new church officers.

I would love for us to have a church where we are actually passionate about the work of God, and of the government of His church. And we should be passionate about this in particular because God is passionate about it.

1. The Needs of the Church (6:1-3a)

So first, we see in the text the needs of the church. The church needs officers. It needs elders and deacons. As we saw last week, elders and deacons fill a very important set of roles in the church.

In this case, we're told that while the Apostles are ministering to the spiritual needs of the church, there are some challenges brewing. Verse 1 tells us that the disciples were increasing in number. More people in the church is awesome. It's an incredible blessing. But it does mean that the church has to rise to the new challenges that come with church growth.

Going further, something comes up that threatens to become very consuming for the elders of the church: there is a complaint from the Greek speaking church members who say, "Hey look, why are the Hebrew speaking Christians getting more than we are in the daily distribution." This might seem like a petty or minor squabble, but actually it's something that could suck the elders in and become all that they think about. It's very easy for administrative things to become all that you do as an elder. Those administrative things are good, they're often necessary, but they can also be like a black hole that is hard to escape from as a church leader.

What a wise thing the apostles do when they appoint these deacons. There are a few things that make the decision wise. One of them is, all of the men they choose have Greek names. This seems to tell us that when an accusation of favoritism came up, the church's solution was to over-correct by putting the ones who felt they were being neglected into the position of power. This is sacrificial love: "we love our Greek brothers and sisters. Let's show them our love by putting Greek speaking men in the diaconate."

But besides this need, they are told to choose *men specifically*. I won't belabor this, because I have preached on this in the past, I talked about it last week... but when the church needed deacons, the Apostles were crystal clear that they needed to choose men.

And by the way: if the Apostles were fine with both men *and* women being deacons, this totally would have been the right place for the Apostles to say, "appoint men and women of good repute." After all, this controversy related to widows in the church. This involved ladies, and it would make sense to appoint ladies to serve these widows, but they didn't do that. Instead, they appointed men. And the reason for this is that the deacons are also leaders in the church, and they do carry important authority.

They lead the church in serving, they lead the church in giving, they lead the church in praying for the needs of the congregation, they lead the church in caring for its property. So some people will say, “I agree that only men should lead in the church. That’s why only men can be elders.” But then they will say that while they think only men can be elders, they think that women can be deacons.

Why? “Because,” they say, “the deaconate is just about service, not about leadership; so because of that, women can be deacons too because deacons don’t lead.” But I would respectfully say, not only have they not paid enough attention to what the Apostles say in this passage (when they specifically say the deacons should be men), but they haven’t thought deeply enough about just how much deacons actually do lead and instruct the church.

Now, I fully agree that deacons need help. Often there are things that elders and deacons do that require a woman’s wisdom or a woman’s touch. If a woman is in distress, often what she really needs is the presence of another woman. Sometimes a woman has an experience which may even make her fearful of being alone with men. In those instances it can be invaluable to have a elder or deacon’s wife present to help. This is why the deacons are able to appoint assistants as needed, but the Scripture doesn’t permit us to admit women to the office. It just has no biblical evidence in Scripture.

And again, if there was *any* moment when it would make sense to appoint women as deacons this moment in Acts 6 would have been it, and the Apostles did not do it.

We are finally told that these men needed to be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” You will notice here that God is the one who equips these men for their work. The church is not meant to be led by men who have their own power and wisdom. It is pretty common for churches to choose their leaders like this: “That guy is very connected. He’s very savvy. He’s very successful. He’s very intelligent. He would make a good officer.” Now, that is actually possible. It’s definitely not crazy. It’s possible to be successful and wise, and godly, and have the Spirit. But when someone is successful and wise, but not particularly godly, or not someone who lives by the gospel, and then you make them a church officer, then what you end

up getting is a church that may be well run from an organizational perspective, but that will not be led by God's Spirit.

What the church needs is men with God's Spirit living within them; godly men, holy men, men whose chief love is for the Lord Jesus and his glory. When you are thinking about who among us would make a good elder or deacon, please be on the lookout for men who are "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." That is the true need of God's church.

What does that look like? I have a recommendation, but this is not the only way to approach this: Memorize Galatians 5:22-23, and meditate on it over the months of September and October as you consider possible elders in the church, and meditate on the passage:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

Mediate on this question: who are the men in this church who exemplify these things? In other words, who are men in this church who are showing forth the fruits of the Spirit – not just on Sundays, but any time you see them? Not just "who has natural gifting," but "Who has God called and gifted with his Spirit?"

That is the great need of the church.

2. The Congregation's Vote (6:3b-5 & Acts 14:23)

Now second, we move to the congregation's vote.

I mentioned earlier, and I'll remind you, the medieval church, the Roman Catholic church, and the Anglican church had abandoned this practice over time, but the Apostles made the congregation central in confirming God's call on these church officers. In verse 3 we see the Apostles say this: "Pick out from among you seven men of good repute."

That phrase "pick out from among you" is important. And then in verse 5 they execute this plan, and Luke narrates for us that "they chose Stephen..." and then Luke names off the other six men that were nominated by the congregation. You

notice that the way God makes his will known in the church is through the congregation, and then through the Apostles.

We're told that the congregation "set them before the Apostles." The nomination process begins with the elders calling for the congregation to nominate men. Then the responsibility moves to the congregation to actually nominate them. Then it comes back to the Apostles, who concur with the congregation on the calling of these men. If the Apostles see something disqualifying in them, they do not have to ordain them (which we'll get to in the next point).

This whole process I just described is the ancient practice. And we see this continuing after the book of Acts, too. We see it in the writings of the early church. What we see there is that for the early church fathers, congregational approval was essential. We see this in the writings of Cyprian. We see it in Tertullian. We see this practice in the writings of Eusebius. Cyprian would refuse to place a minister in a church without the approval of the people. Listen to this from Cyprian: "In ordaining Clergymen, beloved brethren, we are accustomed first to consult you, and to consider with you the merits and deserts of each."¹

I want you to see how this works. It starts with divine initiative. God saves these men, gives them His Spirit, and equips them for the work he calls them to. There is observable fruit in their lives which the church sees and agrees with.

When I was first interested in the ministry, the church I was a member of gave me opportunities to demonstrate gifting. So they had me lead a Bible study on the ten commandments. They had me teach Sunday School classes. They had me seek out opportunities to use my gifts in the local church before they sent me off to seminary. The local church was very important in the process. It was one of the ways that God confirmed my own calling to the office of elder.

Much later, after my seminary training was complete, I was called by my first church to become their pastor. And after an extensive search process, they voted for me to be their pastor. Only once they had examined me and determined that they wanted me to be their pastor did the presbytery then come in (like the Apostles do here) and examine me for the ministry. Even when I came here, the

¹ As quoted in Vitringa, Campegius. *Ancient Roots for Reformed Polity: De Synagoga Vetere and the Ecclesiology of the Early Church – An Annotated Compendium* (pp. 177-178). Kindle Edition.

presbytery didn't just say, "Well Evergreen. Here's your new pastor." Instead, Evergreen went to the Presbytery and said, "We want this man to serve us as pastor," at which point the presbytery turned their attention to me, examined me, and placed me over this church.

I have thankfully never served in a church as pastor that did not ask me to serve as their pastor. And this church has never had an elder that it didn't vote for. The same is true of its deacons. And that is because of the divine pattern that's set for us in Scripture: leaders are not imposed on an unwilling church.

When you as a church member nominate or vote for someone to be your elder or deacon or pastor, you are being used by God. Because this is part of the ancient process of how the presbytery, the pastor, and the church can feel confident of God's call on a man's life to serve. I am emboldened in my service as your pastor (in part) by my own sense that God has called me here and made me your pastor. And sometimes when I am feeling weak or unworthy or wearied in my task, I am reminded that God led this church to vote for me and that He equipped and placed me here. It is something God uses to strengthen me for the work.

And I know the same is true of your elders and deacons here. God uses your vote, and he blesses the church through your vote. And this is just one of the ways that you are important as a member to the ministry of this church.

I hope that in the coming months you will embrace your own role in God's calling of men who minister to you: God really does use you as a congregation to confirm whether someone is or is not called to serve this particular church.

3. The Ordination (6:6-7)

Third and finally today, we witness the ordination of these men.

In Acts chapter 6, once the congregation has picked these men out, we're told that the elders of the church will "appoint [them] to this duty." And then after the congregation names the men and puts them before the Apostles, we read this:

"These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them."

The New Testament makes a number of references to ordination. Paul reminds Timothy of his own ordination a number of times and speaks of Timothy's ordination as something that Timothy can look to and draw upon for the work that he has been given. Paul is reminding him in his weakness that he has been ordained by God through the church.

What is ordination? It's the solemn setting apart of a man duly called to church office through prayer and the laying on of hands. It is not a magical ritual that grants spiritual superpower, but it's also not an empty formality. Rather, ordination is a God-appointed means of grace. It is the instrument through which Christ meets His servants and equips them for the burdens of their calling.

When the apostles lay hands on these men in verse 6, they are asking the Lord to pour out His Spirit to sustain what He has begun. To send a man into the spiritual frontline of diaconal or pastoral care without ordination is like sending a laborer into the harvest without tools, or a soldier into battle without armor. Ordination is Christ's gracious provision so that no officer has to serve in his own strength.

Consider the rich blessings God attaches to this moment:

First, Spiritual Empowerment for the Officer. As Paul reminded Timothy, ordination is an occasion where God answers prayer and grants a spiritual gift (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). The word Paul uses is "charisma." In ordination, God supplies fresh measures of grace, courage, gentleness, wisdom, and endurance specifically fitted to the weight of the office.

Second, Doctrinal Safety and Unity for the Church. Biblically ordained leaders provide an anchor of pastoral oversight and protection for the flock (Eph. 4:11–12; Titus 1:5).

Third, Corporate Assurance. Look at verse 7: right after these men are ordained, "the word of God continued to increase." When officers are properly set apart, the congregation can rest in peace, knowing their leaders are not running merely on their natural gifting or sheer willpower. Instead they are serving under the sovereign grace and authority of King Jesus.

Conclusion

All of this is given to us by God for our good.

Because look back at the end of today's passage. Look at what happened when the church did what we see here today. Verse 7 says:

“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.”

When the church respects the pattern of the Apostles here, the gospel runs unhindered. When the elders are freed to pray and minister the Word, when the deacons are equipped and ordained to care for the vulnerable, then the flock is sheltered, and unity is preserved, and the outside world notices: “Look at how they love one another!”

When you nominate a brother, or when you cast your vote for an elder or a deacon, you are *not* participating in a sterile business meeting. You are not rubber-stamping some committee report.

You are participating in an act of worship. You are listening for the voice of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ; you're looking around this room, and you're asking: “Who has the Spirit set apart to care for our souls and serve our needs?”

Christ doesn't govern His church from a detached distance. He governs through His Word, by His Spirit, working through you: His gathered and precious people.

So let's never view this privilege as some kind of administrative chore. What we have before us is a sacred trust given by the King Himself.

Let's pray.