

There are many reasons why people choose not to come to church. The numbers in New England are quite alarming. Roughly 2.5-3% of the population attends an evangelical church on any given Sunday. Though there are many reasons why “unchurched” people would give for this (I’m too busy, Christians are hypocritical, judgmental, restrictive, etc.), another prominent reason is the perception that Christianity is little more than an institutional power grab. In other words, people think a major part of Christianity is about structures that seek to control people rather than love people. In fact, roughly 80% of unchurched people surveyed across the U.S. and Canada in 2008, said they “think Christianity is more about organized religion than loving God and loving people.”

Now, I hope those of you who have been around Redemption Hill would say that could not be farther from the truth, because Christianity is clearly about following Jesus, and following Jesus means loving God and loving people. Period. The church does not define Christianity. Jesus does. So, don’t go looking for a better Jesus, because you’ll never find one. Find a better church that actually tells people about the true way of Jesus.

BUT what is so wrong with this? What is so sad about this? One of the most appealing and staggering realities about Christianity is that the eternal Son of God, the one who forever received glory, forever exercised infinite authority, rather than seeking power, actually humbled himself and became like us. More than that, when he arrived on the scene, and ate our food, and walked our streets, and shed our tears, he did not demand to be served but came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

And what was his greatest act of service? His death! All of this service was motivated by love. I hope you have not only found this to be true of Jesus in a general sense, but I hope and pray you have received his gift of love and salvation through this amazing act of service by embracing him as the Lord, Savior, and Supreme Treasure of your life.

It is not surprising then, that this servant leader calls people to follow him, into service. This is the amazing truth of Christianity. Jesus not only calls us to live like him, but he takes what is his and gives it to all who believe. He says, because I am depositing my Spirit in you, I will produce the same things in you have seen in me. Wow!

That’s why it should not surprise us to discover that the early church was a serving people. They served people God’s Word, and they served those in need among them by sharing their goods and resources. We continue to see this in Acts 6 where the church recognizes a special group of servants, who seem to set the stage for what would become the office of deacon in local churches.

“Deacons: Servants in God’s Church”
Acts 6:1-7 & 1 Tim. 3:8-13.

The NT tells us the church is to have two distinct leadership positions: elders (also known as pastors) and deacons as cited in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3.

One of our goals this year as a church is to move toward adding deacons who will serve a variety of needs within our church. That is why I have chosen to preach from this particular passage this morning. We are going to see how . . .

The Point: God provides deacon servants to meet needs and distribute his love in his church.

Context: After Jesus rose from the dead, he gave his disciples some final instructions. Acts chapter 1 records how he told them to wait in Jerusalem where they would receive the promised Holy Spirit who would empower them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Chapters 2-5 record the early weeks of the Jesus movement as Peter and John led the way in proclaiming the salvation that is found in Christ, even in the midst of persecution.

The church was growing by leaps and bounds. 3,000 were added on the day of Pentecost and continued growing day by day. It is not surprising that we read in *verses 1-2* of chapter 6 ...

I. Growing churches need a growing number of servants to meet specific needs (6:1-2).

A specific need arose in the church. Widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. This, we can safely assume, was not deliberate, but probably created by weak administrative execution. It seems the leadership capacity of the apostles' time was simply being stretched too thin and their primary task of preaching the gospel was being crunched.

- Due to the growth of the church, administrative needs and serve opportunities significantly increased.
- Unfortunately, God's blessing can often prove to be an avenue for Satan's work. In this case, the temptation was toward complaining and disunity. "Hey, our widows are not being care for. What's going on here?"
- These complaints were leveled by the Hellenists, Grecian Jews who spoke Greek and were influenced by Greek culture. They were upset because the Hebrews who spoke Aramaic and were influenced by Hebrew culture seemed to be well taken care of.

This situation gives rise to what seems to serve as an early prototype for the ministry of deacons in the NT church. Though we do not find the word "deacons" in this passage, we clearly see a group of servants being called out to lovingly serve and meet needs in the church.

- That is the job of deacons. Deacons are not some executive board who call the shots like some of the churches I grew up in.
- **The word deacon means "servant."** Verse 2 uses the verb form of the word *deacon* when it says: "the apostles should not **give up preaching the word of God to serve (diakonein) tables.**"
- So it seems that Acts 6 lays the foundation for the church's understanding of the ministry of deacons, even if that specific terminology was not in use in the days after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Roles & Responsibilities...

- That's why we believe: "**Deacons [are to] provide leadership over the service-oriented functions of the church.**" (Merkle) They meet practical needs like the one we find in Acts 6.
- It's not that the apostles viewed caring for widows as inferior work. It was simply not supposed to be their primary work. Something tells me the apostle John did a marvelous job daily taking care of a widow named Mary, the mother of Jesus.
- Servants in God's church should prioritize their service based on gifting, calling, and need. And don't miss this, whether it is a pastor's sermon or people stacking chairs after the service, all of our work for God matters to God.

- There is not a responsibility carried out in our church that should not be saturated in love for God and love for our neighbor.
- Deacon work is ultimately people work. In fact, if anything we do does not work to serve people, let's forget about it. Scianara. Adios. See ya lata. We all need to be reminded of this. Our staff. Our serve teams. Everyone.
- These drapes. Those Bibles under the chair. The time we spend on weekly newsletter. Labor Day BBQ planning (not tonight. Tomorrow night!) We do it all for people!

The goal of this division of responsibility was for the Word to go forth, while not neglecting physical needs in the church.

Implementing Deacons at RHC

In some respects, we would have loved to have already established our deacon ministry at Redemption Hill, but as I read this text, it encourages me, because I believe we are in a great position to add deacons. The time is right. The need is here. Could we have added them earlier and been well-served? Absolutely. My point is this: as a church grows, the need for deacon ministry rises in its importance.

T: That was their situation, and it is increasingly true of Redemption Hill as well, but how did they meet the need? *Check vv. 3-6.* The second truth we learn about deacons is this:

II. Growing churches choose godly people for the important work of deacons (6:3-6)

Who chose?

- Was it the apostles? No. They brought this idea before the congregation and everyone saw the wisdom in the plan. Verse 5: "And what they said pleased the whole gathering. . ."
- Furthermore, they delegated the responsibility for choosing deacons to the congregation. Look at verse 3: "Brothers, pick out from among you seven men..."
- As we look to implement deacons in the life of our church, the elders will welcome and invite input from our members on who might be well suited and qualified to serve as a deacon and all of our prospective deacons will first be affirmed by members.

T: Now, who should we choose? Glad you asked.

Who were chosen? Deacon Qualifications: Acts 6

- Verse 3 says, we should pick those **1) of good reputation, 2) full of the Spirit, 3) full of wisdom, and 4) full of faith.** Deacon ministry requires spiritual character and practical wisdom.
 - The Apostle Paul expounds on this in **1 Timothy 3:8-13.** After describing the qualifications for pastors, he begins in verse 8 saying . . . "**Deacons likewise must be**
1. **Dignified:** worthy of respect.
 2. **Not double-tongued:** there is sincerity and integrity in what they say.
 3. **Not addicted to much wine:** above reproach in the use of alcohol.
 4. **Not greedy for dishonest gain:** Practices wisdom and self-control in the area of finances, stewarding God's resources well.
 5. **Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience:** They consistently practice their faith and possess a clear conscience. Verse 10. . .

6. **(Tested first):** A prospective deacon should experience a time of examination to ensure they are fit for the role and are found . . .
7. **Blameless** (above reproach; no charge can be brought against them; good repute; full of the Spirit). We will come back to verse 11. Look at v 12. "Let deacons each be . . ."
8. **Husband of one wife:** True to one woman. His married life points others to the faithfulness of God. Finally . . .
9. **Manage their children and household well.** They have a well-ordered and cared for home.

Now back to verse 11, interpreters are divided as to whether this speaks of a male deacon's wife or a female deacon. Redemption Hill takes the posture that this passage, as well as the nature of the role of deacons itself, points to the opportunity for women to serve in the role of deacon, or as it is sometimes referred to "deaconess." The most significant argument to me is that it would make no sense to place a stricter qualifications for deacons than he does elders by mentioning the character of their wives. Why would he raise the stakes for deacons when elders are the primary leaders and teachers in the church.

10. **Women Deacons: Dignified, Not slanderers** (Speaks words of truth to build others up not to tear others down), **sober-minded**, (exercises wise judgment and clear thinking), and **faithful in all things** (Reliable, Consistent).
 - All of these qualifications tell us deacons possess a clear pattern of godliness for all to see.
 - So, let me encourage everyone here: you should strive to be deacon-qualified, whether you ever serve as a deacon or not!
 - Q: Are these qualities increasingly true of your life? P

That's who deacons are, but what do they do? Deacon Responsibilities

- Some of the responsibilities of all deacons will be **general** in nature, assisting in caring for the **practical needs of mercy** among us.
- BUT... We also want our deacons to meet **specific** needs as we see in Acts 6. We believe local churches should be "free to define the tasks of deacons based on [their own] particular needs."
- Hypothetically speaking: We could add a **Deacon of Hospitality. Deacon of Finances. Deacon of Benevolence. Deacon of Child Care. Deacon of Corporate Worship. Deacon of the Ordinances. Deacon of Technology. Deacon of Facility Maintenance**

This was important work...

- The apostles prayed for these men. Serving ministry needs prayer not only because it requires God's strength, but it also requires God's heart. As Paul said, "through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13)
- The apostles also laid their hands on them conveying a sense of transfer and commissioning. When we lay hands on people and pray over them, there is nothing magical going on, we are solemnly setting people apart for their special God-given assignment.

T: What is the result of deacon ministry? These two passages tell us

III. Growing churches should enjoy the blessing that follows serving in God's way (6:7).

What is the result for deacons?

- 1 Timothy 3:13 "For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

- Be encouraged. Everyone who every serves well as a deacon in our church will not only show the veracity of their faith but they will grow more confident in the very faith they possess. That's a good deal.

But what was the result for the church as a whole? *Verse 7* tells us ...

- Doesn't this excite you? If you have a spiritual pulse, you should be screaming (even if in your heart right now), YES! Knowing Jesus is such an inestimable treasure that I want everyone on the planet to know of his salvation. So, how awesome is it to see that "the word of God *increased.*" It spread. It run forth... and "the number of disciples *multiplied greatly.*"
- Do you pray for this? Do you expect it? If not, why not?
- And it also says, "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." Even the religious leaders, once opposed to the gospel, came to believe.
- If you were a NT scholar, and I know many of you are ;), you would probably quickly point out that this is the first of six summary statements Luke sprinkles through his narrative. Each of them come at crucial points in the story, and they always tell of how the Word spreads and multiplies and the church grows.
- Now, let me be careful here: Does having a deacon ministry guarantees church growth in a numerical sense? Absolutely not! BUT I do believe it positions a church to not only exercise a more healthy ministry inside of the church in caring for one another, but also to actively proclaim the gospel outside of the church so that more and more people might be brought into the life of Christ.

Conclusion:

Do you see why we want to implement a deacon ministry? It is a mark of a well-ordered, healthy church.

We are all called to serve. Are you currently serving? You know when we look for deacons, & elders for that matter, our starting point is to look for people who are already doing the work of service.

We are all called to strive after godliness and be qualified when called upon. Are you striving after godliness?

Ultimately, we are called to emulate Jesus who completely followed the Father's will and lived a life of service. Let's ask God to fill us with the Spirit of Jesus to "through love serve one another."