

## Chapter 1

# *The Shepherds’ Priorities: Word and Prayer*

**Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”**

**Acts 6:1-4**

In terms of church leadership, Acts 6 is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament and should be ranked alongside Paul’s message to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38) for its relevance to church pastors. Church shepherds should read Acts 6 every six months, for it is packed to overflowing with rich truths and dynamic lessons about church leadership and spiritual priorities. It emphasizes the centrality of the Word of God and the need to care for the poor. It addresses issues of conflict and problem solving,

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leadership character, finances, prayer, evangelism, love, humility, and community. It also directly addresses the subject of deacons.

In order to understand the role of the New Testament deacon, we must begin by understanding the shepherds' role in the church. In both places in Scripture where the title *deacon* appears, it is intimately associated with the shepherds of the church (see Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). Acts 6, which does not actually mention the word *deacon*, reveals why the office of deacon was created. It resulted from a two-fold need: to relieve the shepherds so that they can give priority time and attention to the Word and prayer, and to provide official, responsible care for the physical welfare of needy believers.

The apostles themselves eloquently state the need for shepherds to be relieved of the many practical care needs of the congregation (Acts 6:2,4). In Acts 6:2 the apostles state the need negatively: "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." Then, in Acts 6:4 the apostles state the need positively: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

Let's look carefully at these critically significant passages of Scripture. In this chapter we will expound the shepherds' priorities, for they are essential to understanding the role of the New Testament deacon.

In the following chapter we will explore the task given to the Seven, the forerunners to later deacons. We will conclude this section with a defense of Acts 6 as the origin of the New Testament diaconate.

## CONFLICT OVER THE POOR

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food (Acts 6:1).

The apostles constituted the first official leadership

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body of the first Christian congregation. The Twelve, as Luke calls them, were the church's body of overseers or shepherds.

They were responsible not only for the teaching and overall pastoral oversight of the congregation, but also for the collection and distribution of the church's funds for the poor (Acts 4:32-5:11). These responsibilities soon proved to be overwhelming.

The church in Jerusalem was growing quickly. Of course this growth was good. The Spirit of God was mightily at work in Jerusalem, and many people were being converted. The church was not only growing in size, but its social character was changing. A great number of Hellenistic Jews began to enter the company of disciples. Hellenistic Jews were Greek-speaking Jews who had immigrated to Jerusalem from foreign lands and who were often culturally and ideologically broader in outlook than the Aramaic-speaking, Palestinian Jews. Because of these differences, the Hellenistic Jews naturally formed a socially distinct group. This made them somewhat suspect by the more conservative, "native Hebrews," who were native-born, Aramaic-speaking Jews.

Despite the Christians' generous display of charity, a divisive problem arose among the Hellenistic and Hebrew believers. When it came to the distribution of funds or food, Hellenistic widows were repeatedly neglected. The Hebrew Christians, who were the more dominant group, controlled the funds, so the Hellenistic Jews started to grumble against them.

Here was the congregation's first big test of brotherly love. Could these Christians solve their cultural and attitudinal differences? Would their Christian love transcend age-old cultural and social prejudices, or would pride and fear cause division, as it so often does? Would the Holy Spirit of God be grieved by their fighting? Would their Christian witness be marred? Something had to be done or the church would split apart.

## THE APOSTLES TAKE ACTION

And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples

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and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2-4).

Good leaders always distinguish themselves by their ability to skillfully confront troublesome issues and to be decisive. In fact, confronting problems is a major part of leadership responsibility. Fearful leaders who refuse to confront problems have demoralized many churches and organizations. Running away from problems creates worse problems. In this trying situation facing the Jerusalem church, the apostles acted decisively and skillfully. Their actions avoided a potential disaster and led to the creation of a better situation.

Summoning the congregation, the apostles first declared their frustration with the situation. They began by saying, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." This does not mean the apostles disliked caring for widows, nor does it imply that they thought they were too important for such work. Not at all! They had truly learned from Jesus to be merciful and compassionate. For three years they had daily observed Jesus' burning compassion for the needy. From the first days after Pentecost, the apostles gladly served the poor and the sick (Acts 4:34-37; 5:16). However, caring for poor and sick people was not the apostles' first, God-given priority. Indeed, caring for needy people could divert them from their primary responsibility of proclaiming the cross of Christ.

The apostles have no doubt about their calling. They are quite emphatic in saying, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God." "Desirable" is the *New American Standard Bible's* rendering of the Greek word *arestos* that often means "pleasing" (cf. Acts 12:3). However, the word *pleasing* in this context probably is better translated as "right."

The apostles feel strongly about this matter. They know it is

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not right that they neglect preaching the Word in order to serve widows. Although caring for widows is important, the apostles know they must not allow even this honorable service to divert them from proclaiming and teaching the Word of the living God. That would be disastrous.

We all know we need food in order to live. That is why we expend so much energy to provide food for ourselves. Yet, most people don't know that they also need the Word of God in order to live. In the Old Testament, Moses told Israel, "... [God] let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know...that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3). Our Lord also said, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you" (John 6:27).

People cannot truly live without God's Word. They cannot experience life as God intended it without believing the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Nothing could be more important to the lost sons and daughters of Adam than God's message of salvation. That is why it is imperative that the shepherds of God's flock not neglect the Word.

Moreover, the local church cannot mature or be protected from its archenemy—the false teacher—without His Word, the bread of God. Therefore, it would be an incalculable loss for the apostles to neglect the preaching of God's Word. To neglect preaching the Word would destroy the church in Jerusalem and deny the world the most significant message it could ever hear. The *New English Bible* expresses the apostles' concern well: "It would be a grave mistake for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait at table."

The need to teach God's Word applies to shepherds of every age. John Owen (1616-1683), the distinguished Puritan commentator, recognized the relevance of this principle:

The same care is still incumbent on the ordinary pastors and elders of the churches, so far as the execution of [charity]

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doth not interfere with their principle work and duty; *from which those who understand it aright can spare but little of their time and strength* (italics added).<sup>1</sup>

The shepherds of God's blood-bought church must be willing to say with the same confidence as the apostles, "It is not [right]...to neglect the teaching of the Word of God to serve tables."

## A CLEAR FOCUS ON THE RIGHT PRIORITIES

After their emphatic pronouncement that it was not right to neglect the teaching of God's Word, the apostles declare to the whole church their divinely appointed priorities: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Richard N. Longenecker, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, says the word "devote" "connotes a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action."<sup>2</sup> The apostles were on the right track: they were to steadfastly and singlemindedly give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

I am convinced that Acts 6:4 is one of the most important verses in the New Testament for church shepherds. It enunciates the fundamental priorities of all church shepherds: prayer and the ministry of the Word. Church shepherds are so easily sidetracked. So many good things demand time and energy; there are always many people who need counsel, programs that need administering, and meetings to attend. Thus the shepherds' time for prayer, Bible study, and teaching the Word of God is slighted. A pastor of a small church told me it took him from Monday through Thursday to perform his administrative duties, which left only Friday and part of Saturday in which to prepare a message from the Word of God. My response was to encourage him to read Acts 6 and reorder his priorities.

We must remember that the true priorities of church leaders are always under attack. There will always be too much to do. "Overbusyness" is destroying the lives of many servants of

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God as well as many churches. Robert and Julia Banks, a leading Australian couple involved in the home church movement, write: “The cult of busyness and activism that infects Christians so much today is one of the greatest barriers to the church becoming what it should be.”<sup>3</sup> So church shepherds must radically insist on a schedule that affirms the spiritual priorities of prayer and the ministry of God’s Word. The deacons of the church, also, need to fix these priorities firmly in their minds. This is what the apostles were doing in their pronouncement to the congregation.

### *Prayer*

Acts 6:1-4 can be called a success story because the apostles demonstrated that they had learned their lessons from Jesus. What enabled them to so confidently state their priorities? They had been with Jesus. They had seen Him live and minister as a man of prayer and the Word (Mark 1:35-39). Like their Master, they were men of prayer. Prayer had become a major part of their work. They were not building ships for the fishing industry in Galilee; they were building people for God. They were involved in spiritual conflict over the souls of men and women. Therefore, prayer was one of their foremost duties.

The shepherds of God’s precious flock must understand that *prayer is the shepherds’ work*, and that it requires time and energy. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, once cautioned, “Do not be so busy with the work of Christ (or anything else) that you have no strength left for praying. True prayer requires strength.” William Carey, father of modern missions and missionary to India, has been quoted as saying, “Prayer is my real business! Cobbling shoes is a sideline; it just helps me pay expenses.” Prayer is clearly the shepherds’ real business. Shepherds would do well to keep the words of James before them in all their pastoral labors: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16).

Much more should be said about the indispensable role that prayer plays in the shepherds’ ministry, but space does not permit.

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So I will conclude with a stirring challenge and sound counsel from Paul E. Billheimer's inspiring book, *Destined for the Throne*:

A church without an intelligent, well-organized, and systematic prayer program is simply operating a religious treadmill.... Any church program, no matter how impressive, if it is not supported by an adequate prayer program, is little more than an ecclesiastical treadmill. It is doing little or no damage to Satan's kingdom....

Does anyone imagine that souls are delivered from Satan's bondage by means of human talent, the hypnotic power of human personality, the charm of human magnetism, eloquence, articulateness, or the magic of Madison Avenue techniques? All of these gifts God may use, but alone they are utterly powerless to deliver even one soul from the captivity of sin.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Word*

Alongside the shepherds' priority of prayer is the ministry of the Word—evangelism and teaching of believers. Prayer and the Word must always go together. Our Lord was a mighty man of prayer and the Word. E. M. Bounds, author of many books on prayer, warns of the spiritual weakness of prayerless preachers: “The pulpit of this day is weak in praying. The pride of learning is against the dependent humility of prayer.... Every preacher who does not make prayer a mighty factor in his own life and ministry is weak as a factor in God's work.”

Throughout the New Testament, we witness the priority that Christ and His followers place on proclaiming and teaching the Word of God. In Mark 3:14, we read, “And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach.” From the start of Christianity, on the day of Pentecost, we read about the principal role of teaching and proclaiming the Word. Peter preached the Word and three thousand people were converted. To a room full of eager listeners, Peter said that



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Christ had commanded him and his fellow apostles to preach the Word: “And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One...”(Acts 10:42). If the apostles spent too much time caring for the welfare of widows, their primary mission of spreading the Word to unbelievers and teaching the church would have been seriously hindered. The Word of God had to go forth.

Preaching the Word is no less important to church shepherds today. Note how the late D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, of Westminster Chapel in London, summarizes this passage:

Now there the priorities are laid down once and for ever. This is the primary task of the Church, the primary task of the leaders of the Church, the people who are set in this position of authority; and we must not allow anything to deflect us from this, however good the cause, however great the need.<sup>5</sup>

Lloyd-Jones emphasizes that powerful teaching of the Word of God has ignited all the great revivals of Christianity. Likewise, all the decadent eras of Christianity resulted from the loss of Scripture's centrality in the work of God. He writes:

Is it not clear, as you take a bird's-eye view of Church history, that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the Church have always been those periods when preaching had declined? What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed preaching.... A revival of true preaching has always heralded these great movements in the history of the Church.<sup>6</sup>

J. I. Packer, widely known author and professor at Regent College in Canada, also believes that church renewal will be futile if it is not founded on biblical preaching: “I constantly maintain that if today's quest for renewal is not, along with its other concerns, a quest for true preaching, it will prove shallow and barren.”<sup>7</sup>

*The major distinguishing characteristic of the New Testament church is the centrality of proclaiming and teaching the*

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*Word of God.* So when shepherds neglect the Word of God, they sabotage the work of God. Therefore, the lessons of Acts 6:1-4 must be repeatedly rehearsed, as John R. W. Stott, former Rector of All Souls' Church in London and an honorary chaplain to the queen of England, so aptly states:

The Church of every generation has to re-learn the lesson of Acts 6. There was nothing wrong with the apostles' zeal for God and his Church. They were busily engaged in a Christlike, compassionate ministry to needy widows. But it was not the ministry to which they, as apostles, had been called. Their vocation was "the ministry of the Word and prayer"; the social care of the widows was the responsibility of others.<sup>8</sup>

Stott goes on to encourage preachers by saying,

If today's pastors were to take seriously the New Testament emphasis on the priority of preaching and teaching, not only would they find it extremely fulfilling themselves, but also it would undoubtedly have a very wholesome effect on the Church. Instead, tragic to relate, many are essentially administrators, whose symbols of ministry are the office rather than the study, and the telephone rather than the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

The apostles had their priorities straight and were determined to keep them straight. The church prospered spiritually and numerically because of their unwavering commitment.

Let us heed the words of that godly judge of Israel, Samuel, that they might be burned permanently into our hearts and minds in order to guide our spiritual priorities:

"...far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way" (1 Samuel 12:23).