

Deacons in the New Testament and Lutheran Confessions

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Many people believe that Stephen, Philip and the Seven of Acts 6 were appointed to serve the poor and were not permitted to do the more significant spiritual ministry of apostles such as preaching and baptizing. This view completely misses the important, pivotal and foundational ministry of the seven and their descendants down to today.

Let's start with the broad view. What does the Acts of the Apostles tell us about the 12 apostles? After chapter one in which Matthias is chosen, the Acts of the Apostles tells us almost nothing about 11 of the 12 apostles. Luke devotes just 14 (Greek) words to James the brother of John, "he killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews..." (Acts 12:2). Luke mentions John only in passing, writing that he was with Peter when in the temple and Samaria. By contrast, Luke devotes three entire chapters, six, seven and eight, to the Seven. This makes little sense if they had only a narrow, minor task to look after the poor.

Appointing the Seven

Let's study the appointing of the Seven. Acts 6:1-6, ESV reads,

"...a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. The twelve summoned the whole 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 wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. What they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them."

Those who think they were tasked to do social ministry seem to mentally trim the account to just a few words, namely, "neglect widows in the distribution." making it only a story of uneven food service.

But the thrust of the story is the conflict, the fight festering beneath the surface. A few paragraphs before, Luke says "they were all in one accord" (5:12). Now the Rolls Royce of unity whistling down harmony highway hammers headlong into a dam of discord. There are two sides and everyone knows

which side they're on. The "Greeks" and "*their* widows" are one faction, marked by language and culture, even though most are Jews. The Greek word *Hellenist* normally refers to language, regardless of ethnicity.

The other faction is the Hebrews and *their* widows who speak Hebrew or Aramaic. The Hebrews hold the power, distributing to Greeks and Hebrews as they wish.

The Greeks feel oppressed, grumbling and complaining that their widows are neglected. The Greek word for complain, *gongizo* is used in noun and verb forms eight times in the New Testament. It can be very serious, as when unbelieving Jews grumbled about Jesus' claim that he is the bread from heaven, rejected and killed him, John 6:41,43,61.

While many translations use the word "because," the better translation is "grumbling **that** their widows were overlooked." The Greek word *hoti* here introduces indirect speech. Greeks grumbled *that* widows were overlooked, leaving open the possibility that widows were not overlooked, only that they thought so. Other examples of *hoti* indicating indirect speech include Acts 2:13, John 18:14,37, 20:9,18, 21:23

If this was just a problem of unequal distribution, the apostles needed only to send the soup kitchen a measuring cup and an order to use the same measure for everyone. But they knew that the real problem was disunity, not food.

Just before I arrived at my first pastorate, the church had had a quarrel and a block of people left the church. One faction wanted to use Aid Association for Lutherans napkins and the other insisted on Lutheran Brotherhood napkins. I am not making this up. Every church leader has heard stories about conflicts over trivial issues. If the church switched to blank napkins, would harmony have returned? Not likely. The apostles knew as well as we do that factions find reasons to fight, whether real or imagined.

If the Seven were appointed just to feed the poor, it would be overkill to pick the seven best leaders and restrict them to running the soup kitchen. The apostles assigned the seven a hard problem- to settle the conflict, pacify grumblers, and integrate Greeks into the Hebrew church. This is why they needed to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

The apostles addressed the problem in a shocking way which certainly caused grumbling among the Hebrews and their widows. The apostles publically transferred power to Greeks, in the center of the Hebrew church in the most Hebrew city of the world.

The 12 apostles couldn't expand to 24, but they did the next best thing. They let the Greeks elect their own leaders who became junior partners to the apostles. The 12 apostles have Hebrew names, while all seven deacons have Greek names. The 12 apostles fulfill the covenant to the 12 tribes of Israel. There are seven deacons, the number of completion, because the Hebrew church is completed by addition of Gentiles. The apostles delegate the whole duty, or office (*xreias*) to the Greeks, giving them control. The deacons are established as an office of the church just as Christ established the apostles. The apostles publically affirmed the deacons' ministry by laying on hands, just as the eleven did the new apostle Matthias. The phrase "serve tables" echoes Paul's phrase, the "Lord's table," suggesting unity in the Lord's Supper.

The Hebrews were shocked that the apostles let the largely Greek assembly pick their leaders. In their eyes, it would have been like today's United States Senate allowing illegal immigrants to choose the president. The apostles could not have been more emphatic about transferring ministry and authority to Greeks.

This was needed because the apostles had the grandest goal in mind- to welcome Greeks into the Hebrew church and unify the two into one new man. They may not have realized the lengths to which the seven would carry out this mandate, and how successful they would be, because the second generation Church was mostly Greek.

Now that we've examined the creation of deacons, let's look at what they actually *did*.

If the seven were tasked to serve the poor, we'd expect to find stories like Jesus feeding the 5,000, Dorcas making blankets, Judas giving to the poor and Paul collecting money for famine relief. Yet, in three full chapters there is not a single story of them helping the poor.

Instead, the Seven are doing the challenging work of integrating Greeks into the Hebrew church. Taking initiative to go beyond the initial mandate of assimilating existing Greek disciples into the church, they evangelize and baptize many more Greeks.

Stories of Stephen and Philip

Every story of Stephen and Philip focuses on reaching Greeks.

Stephen quickly leaves the soup kitchen behind to preach to Greeks in the synagogue of the Freedmen. We know this was a Greek synagogue because of the Theodotus inscription, written in Greek by a Greek so its members could read it. Part of the reason the Sanhedrin was angry at Stephen may have been that

they were afraid that Jesus' disciples would convert many in the Greek synagogues, as they had at Pentecost. Disciples who left Jerusalem because of Stephen's martyrdom evangelized Greek areas including Cyprus and Antioch. They did nothing new- just what their Spirit-filled hero Stephen did.

Before you know it, Philip left the food line, too and went out preaching and baptizing Greeks. He baptized an Ethiopian official, then was in another Greek area baptizing Samaritans. He preached through Azotus and settled in the most Greek of all cities in Israel, Caesarea.

Do you see the pattern? If you visited a Lutheran congregation and saw men preaching and baptizing, would you conclude they were trustees and charity workers?

People who think the Seven were tasked to help the poor struggle to explain why stories of them baptizing Greeks don't fit the theory. But if we see that the Seven were tasked to assist the apostles in converting and integrating Greeks into the church, everything makes sense. Luke offers the Seven as a model for how to assimilate Greeks because this problem plagued the Church for generations, from the Jerusalem council to Corinthians eating food sacrificed to idols.

The First Deacons

Were the Seven actually the first deacons? Some people don't think so because the title deacon does not appear in Acts 6, and because it is often used in a generic sense. Another reason seems to be they start with the assumption drawn from later church tradition that deacons are restricted to social ministry, and the stories don't fit.

There are seven good reasons to believe that the Seven were the first deacons. First, the title deacon does not need to be there. The noun pastor never appears in the book of Acts, yet we accept that the elders and bishops Paul ordained are the equivalent of pastors. The nouns for deacon, bishop, elder, pastor and baptism are all used in secular or generic senses, yet we do not conclude that they never indicate church offices.

Most important, the book of Acts established patterns, or templates for the church, such as baptizing in the name of Jesus and ordaining elders. Paul need not explain what deacons are when he addresses them in Philippians 1:1 and lists qualifications for them in 1 Timothy 3, because Acts 6 set the precedent. Paul learned about deacons from coworkers in Antioch who personally knew Stephen. The Seven assisted apostles in ministry just as deacons assist overseers in ministry. Biblical intuition

leads most people to think that the Seven were the first deacons and that ministers who assist pastors follow their pattern. Biblical intuition is a sense people get when they unconsciously synthesize the New Testament as a whole and ministry experience.ⁱⁱ

When the apostles said that their task was to teach, did they mean, as some people think, that deacons were *not* permitted to preach? If so, then deacons were not allowed to pray either, because apostles said that they did not want to be distracted from the ministry of the word and *prayer*. If the apostles would have prohibited the Seven from preaching, it would have fostered the Greeks' feeling of being excluded. The apostles described the *focus* of their ministry, not their *exclusive* ministry.

Were the Seven Clergy?

Some people agree that the Seven were not appointed just to serve the poor. But they conclude that they were pastors, not deacons, because they preached and baptized. The apostles used the terms *serve* and *servant* (the English meaning of "deacon") for themselves.

However the most accurate conclusion is that the Seven were not bishops or elders (the titles Acts uses for pastors) but were indeed a kind of "clergy," namely deacons who preach. Several aspects of the story point to this.

First, the idea that the Seven were elders is usually driven by the assumption that the New Testament prohibits deacons from preaching and that they are a kind of laity rather than a kind of clergy and church office. If you don't start with this unproven assumption, then there is no "need" to assert that the Seven were elders rather than deacons.

Second, after the apostle Paul planted new churches, he ordained leaders to take his place when he left. The typical title for them is overseer (Greek: *bishop, episkopos*). The twelve apostles used this word, oversight, to describe their own ministry (Acts 1:25; *episkopei* is obscured by some translations). The word oversight is *not* applied to the Seven. When pastors are ordained or referred to they are called overseers or elders, but no such title appears in Acts 6. The word servant is used in many senses, so that in itself cannot be used to show that the Seven were pastors.

Paul ordained elders to replace him as church leader, not to assist and supplement his ministry while he was still there. In contrast, the apostles appointed the Seven to assist them, not to replace them, which indicates they were deacons not elders. As Paul's churches grew and diversified their ministry,

the elders would have ordained deacons to assist them, as they did in Philippi.

Third, the book of Acts provides patterns and foundations for church practices. Paul referred to deacons in Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3 offhandedly, as though everyone knew what they were. People did know what deacons were because Acts 6 explains their origin, and Paul learned about deacons from his coworkers in Antioch who knew Stephen.

Fourth, claiming they are pastors does not explain why they are so much more prominent than eleven of the twelve apostles they were meant to emulate, nor does it explain why they didn't stay in the congregation and do the kinds of things Paul told the overseers in Ephesus to do (Acts 20). The only "problem" calling the Seven pastors solves is why they were allowed to preach, which is only a problem if one starts with the premise that only pastors are allowed to preach, and that deacons need to be relegated to comparatively minor types of ministry. Instead it adds the problem of why deacons are well known in the epistles but unknown in Acts.

Elements of the Office of Deacon

Acts 6 lays out five elements of the deacon office which are the pattern for today:

1. *Deacons are a separate office* with a ministry similar to, but distinct from apostles, overseers and pastors; neither "layman" nor "pastor."
2. *The office of deacon and overseer overlap* because deacons assist and expand their ministry,
3. *Deacons are called by local congregations* and publically ordained.
4. *influential spiritual ministry of deacons requires spiritual and character qualifications* as in 1 Timothy 3
5. *Ministry portfolio is broad, and varies in response to needs* of congregations and overseers.

Paul begins his letter to Philippi, "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (1:1). This shows that deacon is a church office distinct from bishops and from "the saints," which Lutherans call "laymen." Deacons are associated with bishops in a way that other church ministries such as evangelists and teachers are not.

This ministry partnership and influence are echoed in the qualifications for bishops and deacons which are listed together in 1 Timothy 3. Both passages assume that deacons are common and ordinary.

What light does the Reformation cast on deacons?

Reformation *events* differ somewhat from Reformation *writings* on deacons. Reformation practice follows a tradition that deacons served the poor. The book *Deacons and Deaconesses Through the Centuries* has a chapter on the 16th century which would more accurately be titled "Government Programs to Help the Poor by Administrators Who Were Sometimes Called Deacons." This book covers the gambit of everything in the church that was ever called deacon or which helped the poor in some way. It doesn't limit itself to deacons according to the pattern set by the Seven.

Writings of the reformers offer a range of views on deacons. Like much of church history, you can find any kind of opinion on anything from some author in some century. This leads to "dueling quotes" in which leaders seem to side either with the view that deacons freely preached and baptized as Philip did, or with the view that deacons just ran the soup kitchen.

Lutheran ministers subscribe to the Confessions, not to writings of Reformers.

The Knowledge Gap

Where do the Lutheran Confessions talk about deacons? It's common for people to answer, "Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession." Has anyone noticed that Article does not actually mention deacons? Isn't it better to start with parts of the Confessions that actually mention deacons and use them to better understand other Articles that may relate in some way?

Seminary journal articles, task force reports, convention resolutions, books and presidents have written about deacons, but this author has not seen even one actually quote even one part of the Confessions that mention deacons or examine Biblical passages.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a *knowledge gap* in recent American Missouri Synod thinking on the topic of deacons. Deacons existed in the LCMS a century ago, but since most of us are less than a century old, our understanding of deacons is lacking.

One example of this knowledge gap is the index in Tappert's 1959 edition of the *Book of Concord* used by thousands of pastors, professors and presidents. It lists scores of obscure topics, such as Acidia, Aeschines, Apollonia, Apple-God, and Aragon. Yet it has *no* listing for Deacons. The Kolb – Engert edition of 2000 has no listing for deacons either.

What Do the Confessions Say?

The Confessions mention deacons three times, describing **Deacons as 1 of 3 Major Orders**, or offices, of clergy. The *Major orders* are biblical and permanent, while the *Minor orders* such as acolyte and lector were rejected as traditional only. The word *Ordain* is used for all three *orders*

One reference is *The Augsburg Confession, Article 24, the Mass*: which states that deacon is an order, or office of clergy: "[37](#) it appears from the ancient Canons that someone celebrated the Mass from whom all the other presbyters and deacons received the body of the Lord; for thus [38](#) the words of the Nicene Canon say: Let the *deacons*, according to *their order*, receive the Holy Communion after the presbyters." The German word for order here is *ordentlich* which appears in Article 14.

Article 23, Marriage of Priests states that deacons are "clergymen" and their status demands that they follow marriage rules of clergy, not of laity: "... it was customary for priests and deacons to marry in the Church of former times.... (Pius II said that) while there may well have been some reasons for prohibiting the marriage of *clergymen*, there were now more important... reasons for permitting them to be married." (from German).

The *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* states that Catholic bishops are not needed to ordain ministers such as deacons, because congregations and pastors can do this:

"[62](#) The deacons, moreover, may elect from among themselves one whom they know to be active, and name him archdeacon. [65](#) it is manifest that *ordination* administered by a pastor in his own church is valid by divine law [if a pastor in his own church ordains certain suitable persons to the ministry, such ordination is, according to divine law, undoubtedly effective and right]... [67](#) For wherever the Church is, there is the authority [command] to administer the Gospel. Therefore it is necessary for the Church to retain the authority to *call, elect, and ordain ministers*." Oddly, the introduction in the Concordia Publishing House edition names only two orders, neglecting deacons.

How Does Article 14 Relate?

Article 14 reads: "Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called."

Many people equate "called" with "seminary educated pastor" and there is no shortage of exposition on that. But to get a clearer picture of what this actually means it is useful to study the words

themselves, how they are used elsewhere in the Confessions, why the reformers included them and how they can be applied today.

Article 14 does *not* identify *which* office men should be called *to*, nor explicitly include or exclude bishops, pastors or deacons. Since the Confessions speak of *ordaining* deacons, it assumes that they are regularly *called* to an office of deacon, though not called as pastors. The German words “regular” and “call” are used with other meanings in the Confessions, not just of pastors.

The German word for *regularly* is *ordentlichen*, the adverb form of the word used for the *regular order* of deacons in Article 24 cited above (*vocatus* is Latin).

The best general purpose translation of *ordentlichen* is “orderly.” The sun rises and sets in an orderly, *ordentlichen* way (*Formula of Concord*, VI, 2,6). The family is orderly, and children must honor and submit to their parents (*Large Catechism*, fourth commandment, 108). Disorder leads to trouble. Likewise, setting a man in a position, a church *beruf*, should be done in an orderly way.

Why did the reformers include this? The Roman church criticized protestants for leaving the church, because they lost the bishops' ability to properly appoint priests. No doubt anybody claimed the spot, worthy or not - reformed ecclesiastical hot dogs (Latin: *hottus doggus*). Ecclesiastical chaos.

No, said the reformers, we have an orderly way of placing men in *vocatus*. We examine them, congregations call them to confirm that they will follow, and we ordain them publicly to recognize their leadership. We don't need bishops (or even a synod) to have order in leadership, especially not the corrupt Roman kind.

AC Apology, Article 14 says the reformers want to retain the grades, or orders, of ministers, and that they have an orderly way of placing *ministers* into their vocations, or orders, including the grades of bishops, presbyters and deacons.

Rite, related to our word ritual, reinforces the notion that this is a regular, orderly, ritualized process finally expressed in the liturgical ritual of ordination.

The words *rite*, *vocatus*, *ordentlichen* and *Beruf* are also used in the Confessions with meanings other than church ministry. There are many kinds of *beruf* or *vocatus*. *Vocatus* is even used of the calling all Christians have from God (*Epitome*, Art XI).

According to Articles 14, 23 and 24 deacons are a class of minister. As such they have the *Beruf*, *vocatus*, position, calling, order or office of deacon in much the same way that other men have the *Beruf*, *vocatus*, position, calling, order or office of pastor. They are similar but not the same.

Districts today are very careful to commission deacons using an orderly, *ordentlichen*, *rite* process. Men don't proclaim themselves deacons, circumventing process and failing to meet qualifications. The *ordentlichen* is like that of pastors - training, examination by and synodical officials to make sure they meet theological and character qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3, congregational call and public commissioning usually attended by synodical representatives and other churches.

The confessions speak of deacons as being ordained. In the modern Missouri synod “ordain” is a word restricted to pastors, but in the New Testament and Confessions it is a multipurpose word used of bishops and deacons also. Lutheran practice is that one must have a call before he can be ordained. Since the confessions consider deacons to be ordained, they also consider them to be called.

Overall, the Lutheran confessions teach that deacon is one of three orders, or offices, of minister, one type of called and ordained clergyman, neither pastor nor layman, with liturgical functions

Recent Missouri Synod Tradition

Recent American Missouri Synod tradition uses terms which exclude the office of deacon, while Confessional language promotes the order. For example, synod tradition generally overlooks the root word *ord* – men follow an *orderly* process to become *ordained* to the *order* of deacon (or to the *order* of *presbyteros*). This inconsistency of terms fosters the knowledge gap.

What does this mean in the present controversy? Part of synod views deacons as an administrative license, like secretary, which can be revoked. Others view deacon as a scriptural and confessional office with spiritual functions like the Seven. To them, the convention resolution to terminate deacon licenses is a grave biblical and confessional error as tragic as if the synod would revoke ordination of pastors and the ordained minister roster.^{iv} No convention resolution can terminate a Biblical, Confessional office.

The debate will not go away because the Confessions hold that deacon is a biblical office, some men are called to be deacon not pastor, and the need for deacons will never go away. Just as a rose needs rose, stem and leaf, so the church needs pastor, deacon and laity.

(Almost) Every Church Has Deacons

The office of pastor exists in every church body, under different titles, such as priest and elder. In church history there have been social workers mislabeled as deacons, and deacons like Phillip who

used different titles. We identify modern deacons by looking at their functions not their titles. A list of 18 Lutheran and nonLutheran bodies that have deacons, and their titles, is available. In general, liturgical churches give deacons pastoral functions while nonliturgical churches limit them to social ministry. The recent American Missouri Synod is an anomaly in that it has no nationally recognized office of deacon.

There are two gaps in synod's view of deacons. The *theological knowledge gap* is that recent American Missouri Synod tradition does not realize that the Confessions consider deacons a biblical office nor that there are three orders. The *administrative gap* is that there is no roster of deacons.

Deacons are neither layman nor pastor. so to criticize them as "laymen who preach" completely misses the point. Three task forces under Presidents Barry, Keischnick and Harrison did not understand that deacon is a confessional office, so they tried to solve the roster problem by squeezing some deacons into the ordained roster while terminating most. Synod can fill the knowledge gap by engaging the parts of the Confessions that recognize deacons and using Confessional terminology, and fill the administrative gap by rostering deacons in some way.

Summary

The wording of Acts 6 emphasizes that the Seven were tasked to assimilate Greeks into the Hebrew-dominated Church, not to serve the poor. The ministry of Stephen and Philip support the view that the Seven were the first deacons, commissioned to assist and expand the ministry of the apostolic overseers in crucial areas, which included preaching, evangelizing, baptizing, and leading. None of the stories support the view that their mission was to serve the poor. Acts and Paul's epistles established the Seven as the pattern for the permanent office of deacon. The Lutheran Confessions commend the order of deacon, which is practiced in nearly every Lutheran and nonLutheran church body. If the LCMS restores the office of deacon it would bring its practice more in line with the Bible and *Book of Concord*.

i Maximilian Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, pp. 368, xvii.

ii Biblical intuition led the Synod's 1989 Lay Worker Study Committee and districts which train workers to assist pastors to call them "deacons."

iii Examples of the gap: The 2013 Res. 4-06A Task Force Report to the Synod on licensed deacons devotes just four sentences to the biblical passages on deacons, and cites

none of the Confessions. "The Office of the Holy Ministry" and "Augsburg Confession XIV: Does it Answer Current Questions on the Holy Ministry?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 2006 were directed at the deacon debate, but cite none of the six passages in their 55 pages.

iv Deacon programs are widely misunderstood and negative stereotypes are common. The Northwest District offers a variety of articles and videos on deacons at <https://licensedlaydeacon.com>. This author's *A Biblical and Confessional Case for Deacons Today* offers more detail and documentation.

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