

# Set Apart with Work to Do

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
June 12, 2016—Ordination & Installation Sunday

- Acts 6:1-7 And so the word of God continued to spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem grew larger and larger... (v. 7a)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: All of us—deacons, elders, members—are responsible for the work of sharing the gospel message of Jesus as Savior and Master of our lives.

I'd like us to try to imagine those earliest days of the Christian church, if we can even call it a church. That collection of believers was quite different from the organized and defined religious institutions that we are familiar with today. They were trying to figure out what it meant to their lives that they believed in Jesus.

- For instance, if they had been Jewish, were they still Jewish?
- And if they *were* still Jewish, how would they be viewed by fellow Jews who *didn't* agree with their belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah long-awaited by the Jewish people?
- And what about believers who were not Jewish (Jews called non-Jews "gentiles"). What about those gentile Jesus-followers.... Did they have to *become* Jewish in order to embrace belief in Jesus as Master and Savior... in order to be what would come to be known as a "Christian"?

In those early days there was considerable uncertainty about matters of background and status and belonging and getting along.

One specific problem that reared its head early on had to do with taking care of widows. Caring for widows and orphans was a well-established practice in the Jewish community. Deuteronomy 26 directed that an offering should be taken to support them,<sup>1</sup> and Exodus 22 cautioned "Do not mistreat any widow or orphan...."<sup>2</sup> But within this fledgling Christian community, some complaints arose that some of the widows weren't being cared for as well as others.

Let me pause for a moment to explain a term: the term is "Greek-speaking Jews." The New Testament often refers to "Jews" and also to "Greek-speaking Jews." That doesn't simply refer to bilingual Jews who could speak both Hebrew and Greek. "Greek-speaking Jews" refers to Jews who weren't born into Judaism but rather had converted, had adopted Judaism. If certain people were referred to as a "Greek-speaking Jews," it meant that while they had embraced the religion of Judaism, their family's roots were in the social, cultural, and philosophical tradition of the Roman Empire rather than Jewish culture. Since the Greek language was the most widely-spoken language in the Roman Empire, Greek-speaking Jews stood out compared to their Hebrew-speaking brethren. So "Greek-speaking Jews" were Jewish... but the natural-born Jews looked at them as *just a little different*, not quite fully authentic Jews.

How to explain this idea of the Greek-speaking Jews trying to be authentic but not quite fitting in.... Picture the Clampett family of the TV show "The Beverly Hillbillies." While their

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 26:12-13

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 22:23 Good News translation

wealth facilitated their engagement with their elite neighbors in Beverly Hills, their background still influenced much of their thought and behavior. In a similar vein, perhaps we can imagine those Greek-speaking Jews as sincerely *trying* to embrace all things Jewish... but there was still something about them that made it clear that they weren't ethnically, culturally Jewish.

It was because of this distinction between the Christians who were native Jews and the Christians who were converts to Judaism that some tension arose within this new Christian community. It seems that the Greek-speaking Jews believed that their widows weren't being cared for as well as the widows of the native Jewish people. The dispute came to the attention of the apostles. The apostles thought the issue was too important to ignore, but they also felt that it would be better to select people from the community to work out the problem. So the apostles asked the community of believers to select seven people from their midst to be servants with responsibility for the needs of the community. The New Testament describes these appointed servants by using the Greek word for servants: *διακονος* (*diakonos*). They were the first deacons.

In Acts Chapter 6 we meet them. These men were all believers in Jesus. They were Christians even before the term Christian had been coined.

**Stephen** was quickly chosen to be one of these first *diakonos* or deacons. He had the gift of being able to explain the faith clearly and persuasively. That was good for the church but bad for Stephen. Not only was he the first deacon, but he is even more renowned for being the first Christian martyr – the first person who died for the sake of the fledgling Christian faith.

**Philip** is often confused with the apostle of Jesus bearing the same name, but this Philip who became one of the first seven deacons was a different bloke. He was a force who pushed Christianity to reach out beyond the Jewish community. This Philip probably is best known for baptizing an official of the Ethiopian royal court's treasury, a story from Acts Chapter 8 that I preached on two summers ago. (You may be acquainted with that character by the term used for him in older Bibles: the "Ethiopian eunuch.") Philip had overheard the treasurer reading to himself from a scroll of the writing of the prophet Isaiah. When Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading, the Ethiopian admitted he didn't. Philip told him the story of Jesus and how he was the fulfillment of what Isaiah had envisioned. The man accepted Jesus as his Savior and was baptized by Philip the deacon.

**Prochorus** and **Parnenas** were Greek-speaking Jews, so this shows an attempt by the apostles to have all parts of the Christian community represented by this first group of deacons. Tradition claims that Prochorus became a bishop of Nicomedia, a town a little east of ancient Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul). We know nothing else about Parnenas, nor about the deacons **Nicanor** or **Timon**.

Finally, there's an unsubstantiated tradition that the deacon **Nicolaus** later began to promote an immoral and heretical version of Christianity, but biblical scholarship has never found any evidence to support or refute that claim. That's what little we know about the very first group of Christian deacons.

So maybe you've wondered, "Why does the Presbyterian Church have people serving in the role of deacons... or elders, for that matter?" And now you know the answer. The apostles of Jesus were occupied by the work of spreading the message about Jesus and helping to develop the faith of believers. People who fill the role of ruling elders today carry similar responsibility: elders look after our congregation's life of worship and education, evangelism and outreach. Most Presbyterian congregations then appoint other people to fill the role of deacons – servants who care for the needs of the body of believers. And of course, while the patriarchal society of ancient times expected leadership to be offered by men, today we recognize that men *and women* possess qualities of leadership and servanthood. [Incidentally, you may not know that before I

became a minister I was an elder and served on the Session of two different congregations. Although I've never been a deacon, my wife recently discovered that my seventh great-grandfather, also named John (*sic*) Fancher was a deacon, apparently in a Congregational church in Connecticut.]

In recent months the Holy Spirit guided our Congregational Nominating Committee to identify and invite folks in this congregation to serve us as deacons and elders, and those individuals were prompted by the Holy Spirit to accept the undertaking. Several weeks ago you elected them to serve our congregation in these ways. After their orientation and personal preparation, today you ordained them, setting them apart for special work in our midst and on our behalf.

So their work has begun. Sometimes the work of a deacon or an elder is routine, sometimes it's a grind, sometimes it's hard: making difficult choices, taking risks in order to try new things, leading by example (which, by the way, is the meaning behind the term "*ruling elder*" – a guide or rule who others should try to measure up to). Deacons and elders serve not for their own benefit, not to receive accolades. Always the service they offer is done for the sake of Jesus Christ. Their service is offered in the spirit the apostle Paul described in Philippians Chapter 2 where he wrote:

The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had:

<sup>6</sup>He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. <sup>7</sup>Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant.<sup>3</sup>

So now their work has begun, but so has yours.

- Your work is to encourage them in the work they do on your behalf.
- Your work is to give them feedback on what happens at your church.
- Your work is to share with them your thoughts and opinions, your ideas and suggestions.

We join them in devoting our energy, our commitment, our resources to the life and work of this church. We dedicate ourselves to this church not simply because we want to enjoy each other's company. We devote ourselves to this church not because we expect God to reward us with an economic benefit. We give ourselves to this church so we can be part of bringing to the people of our community the saving news of faith in Jesus Christ. That is the work Jesus has given us all to do.

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:5-7 Good News translation