

The Seven of Acts 6:1-8

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During the discussion of the diaconate at Vatican II (1962-65) and in the documents of the Council no appeal is made to Acts 6:1-8, the story about choosing the seven men to assist in ministry. The main reason for not using this text concerns its meaning, and that is what we will look at now.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century it has been common to present the story of the Seven as a story about charity and concern for the poor, especially the poor widows. Applied to deacons in this way, the story was meant to convey the idea that deacons are primarily ministers of charity and social work. That view of deacons became dominant throughout the twentieth century, so much so that in some part of the Catholic Church and in protestant communities, deacons are viewed almost exclusively as ordained social workers.

It comes as a surprise to many that translations of Acts 6 before 1946 did not contain words like 'food' or 'funds' as the subject of the complaint about the neglect of the Greek speaking widows. Almost all modern translations now include those words. It is usually more of a surprise when people learn that no ancient Greek manuscript of the text has either of these words.

How did these words get there? Translators inserted them into the text because the commonly accepted view of the meaning of the story was about charity and so they put in something to make the complaint agree with that interpretation. That common understanding had also found its way into biblical dictionaries.

What does happen in Acts 6? The Greek speaking Christians complain that their widows are being neglected in the daily *diaconia*. *Diaconia* either by itself or together with *tou logou* (the word) is always used in Acts as ministry, specifically ministry of the word or the proclamation of the Gospel. There is no mention of food or funds as the cause of neglect, just the *diaconia*.

They are neglected in the daily ministry of the word because the apostles who conduct this ministry do so in Aramaic and in the Temple precinct. The Greek speaking widows cannot understand Aramaic or generally participate in the Temple ministry because as widows they were mostly confined to their homes. This presented the young church with a pastoral problem for evangelisation. How were they to ensure that these women could be as fully formed and informed as other members of the Christian community?

We know it is a ministry to people in homes because the apostles say they do not want to neglect their ministry to '*minister tables*'. Most modern translations say 'wait on' or 'serve at' tables but no Greek manuscript contains the words 'on' or 'at' between minister and tables. To a Greek speaker of that time they understood a private dwelling was meant.

A *diaconos* (deacon) was not someone who would wait on or serve at tables. They had an entirely different name for servants of tables. Frequently such servants were slaves. In their time someone who aspired to be a *diaconos* had to be free born and of sound reputation to be honoured with this title and role. Those who had been chosen as a *diaconos* in Greek society would have this fact noted on their grave stone.

The apostles said choose seven men from among your group i.e. Greek speakers, for this ministry. We can tell from the names of the Seven that all are Greek. They were to be men full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. They needed these gifts for the ministry (*diaconia*) of the word that they were about to undertake.

We only get to follow the careers of two of the Seven, Stephen and Philip. We see that they preach, catechise, baptise and generally enter on a mission of evangelisation. Later in Acts Philip is referred to as 'the evangelist.' The whole section describing their ministry concludes with a statement about its success, "and the word of the Lord continued to spread and many were added to their number.'

We never see the Seven or anyone who is called a *diaconos* or who has a *diaconia* in the New Testament acting as a minister of charity. If you read Acts 5 there is no mistake that material neglect of the widows is not the issue.

Acts 6 shows the Church responding to a new pastoral challenge for proclaiming the Gospel (evangelising). She has to find a way of extending the apostolic ministry. The apostles do this through the selection of the Seven and the laying on of hands.

In a recent homily Pope Francis said; 'The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only in the geographical sense but also to go to the existential peripheries: those of the mysteries of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and of religious indifference, of thought, of all misery.' This was the sort of thing the Council thought deacons would do.

This little story is a kind of paradigm for the new evangelisation. Acts 6 is now part of the tradition of the Church about deacons and it is used in the rite of ordination. The Council hoped that deacons would be ministers for what we now call new evangelisation. Like the first Christians we ask who has been neglected in the ministry of the word. Where are the new places of ministry beyond the Temple (parish) where we can send the deacons to be heralds of the Gospel? We all know people who are on the margins of the Church or who have drifted from her and others who have not yet heard the Gospel. The Holy Spirit has, in our own time, raised up new ministers for a new situation so that none should be neglected in the *diaconia tou logou*, the ministry of the word.

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