

Servant-Leaders and Faithful Recognized Servants – Acts 6:1-7

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on June 22, 2008

As we've been studying Titus 1, there is much in that chapter about the overseers of the church, and the way they are to lead by example in their character. But I was struck again this week at the way Titus 1 begins, that the biblical emphasis is on being a *servant* more than a leader. Paul as an Apostle was undeniably a leader of the early church, but he begins Titus 1 by identifying himself **first** as "Paul a **bonds**servant of God and an apostle" – our fundamental identity is a servant in bonds, even a slave who serves in lowliness and loving service. Some servants are called by the Master to be servant-leaders, but even there, the order of the phrase is important: servants first. *Loving* leadership is the pattern the Lord gave His own disciples, not lording it over them, not dominating or domineering or being a dictator, not putting the people under our feet, instead we are to wash their feet. The image of a leader is not an executive chair or clerical garments, it's the servant's towel.

This may have seemed new to converts to Christianity and it may seem new to any in this room whose thinking is still influenced more by worldly views of leadership and how to succeed in society. But this was not new in the Bible's New Testament. In fact, since the earliest book of the Bible, the greatest of God's men and even the famous leaders of God's people, saw themselves fundamentally as God's lowly servants at the feet of their Master:

- **Abraham** bows his face to the ground in low humility, and pleads "My Lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by" (Gen 18:4-5)
- **Isaac and Jacob** are also identified as servants of God (Deut 9:27)
- In Genesis you often have godly men expressing themselves as servants of others.
- **Moses** before the burning bush describes himself before the Lord as "your servant" (Exodus 4:10) and in his lowliness and inadequacy he says "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11)
- His successor **Joshua**, identifies himself as "servant" (Josh 5:14)
- Listen to how the great King **David** identifies himself before God in prayer after receiving one of the greatest promises ever given to any human (the Davidic Covenant – notice his humility and the God-centeredness that goes along with his servant mindset):

2 Samuel 7:18-29 (NASB95) ¹⁸ Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far? ¹⁹ "And yet this was insignificant in Your eyes, O Lord GOD, for You have spoken also of the house of Your servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD. ²⁰ "Again what more can David say to You? For You know Your servant, O Lord GOD! ²¹ "For the sake of Your word, and according to Your own heart, You have done all this greatness to let Your servant know. ²² "For this reason You are great, O Lord GOD; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. ²³ "And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, *from* nations and their gods? ²⁴ "For You have established for Yourself Your people Israel as Your own people forever, and You, O LORD, have become their God. ²⁵ "Now therefore, O LORD God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and his house, confirm *it* forever, and do as You have spoken, ²⁶ that Your name may be magnified forever, by saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel'; and may the house of Your servant David be established before You. ²⁷ "For You, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made a revelation to Your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore Your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to You. ²⁸ "Now, O Lord GOD, You are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing to Your servant. ²⁹ "Now therefore, may it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You. For You, O Lord GOD, have spoken; and with Your blessing may the house of Your servant be blessed forever."

This prayer illustrates the direct relationship between a high view of God and a low view of self. The bigger God is in your thinking, the smaller we must be. Notice that the only time David even uses the word “me” or “I” in the whole prayer was at the beginning in v. 18, and it’s only to ask “Who am I?” (i.e., “why me, I’m nothing, I’m unworthy, I don’t deserve this, I’m just a lowly servant”)

From then on, David can only refer to Himself as God’s servant, which he does 10x in 10 verses. This is *David*, the name mentioned more in the Bible than any other man, a name mentioned more even in the New Testament than just about any other name. This is David, the greatest King God’s people ever had, the man after God’s own heart, utterly self-emptied and utterly GOD-centered.

There’s not much “me” in this prayer – in fact, the word “me” only appears 1x in the prayer and the word “You” or “Your” referring to God appears 46x in just a few verses! And that doesn’t even count the word “Lord” which appears 11x in these verses, or “God” 15x, all in all, there are over 70 words or pronouns referring to God in this brief prayer! And even when David does refer to himself, it is always as “Your servant” – this is a great passage I commend us to study further for our prayer life.

It is here that the man after the Lord’s own heart is at his finest, and it is here that the coming Son of David, the Lord Himself would give an even more perfect image of a servant.

Isaiah’s prophecy refers to the coming Messiah as “the servant” and even a suffering servant. But the Jews didn’t get this part well.

Matthew 20:17-28 (NASB95)

¹⁷ As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve *disciples* aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, ¹⁸ “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify *Him*, and on the third day He will be raised up.” ²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. ²¹ And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left.” ²² But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.” ²³ He said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.” ²⁴ And hearing *this*, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. ²⁶ “It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

This is a familiar passage we’ve read before, and you even heard this account in Mark’s gospel today already, and *tonight* we will look at this teaching in more detail. I hope many of you will be here tonight unless you’re doing something else incredibly important tonight, because it’s one of the most incredibly important truths Jesus ever taught which we’ll look at in more detail tonight. Pastor Dale also referenced this passage last Sunday night in a message I would encourage you download or get the CD to listen to God’s ways not being man’s ways.

Verse 25 talks about man's ways of leadership (ruling or lording over people) and man's definition of great men (measured by the authority you exercise or wield over others). Jesus is teaching His disciples in this chapter that God's ways are not just a *little different* than man's ways, they are the *exact opposite!* Verse 26 makes clear this is not the way for you who follow Christ. Verse 16 says the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. He turns the world's ways not in a slightly different direction, God turns them upside-down, and really right-side-up.

The one who is first in God's eyes, according to verse 27 is the one who serves others like a lowly slave (*doulos*) – that's the exact opposite of how the entire world of the time thought. That was the *last* thing any respectable Jew or Greek would want to be – assuming the posture of a servant, much less a slave, to others.

But that's exactly the first and final image of Christ that was left to the disciples at the Last Supper before His betrayal and crucifixion when Jesus did the work of a slave in washing the dirty feet of the disciples, a task so low none of them did for each other or even for Jesus. He tells them to do likewise in humble service.

Before Jesus commissions His apostles to lead and feed His sheep, He first teaches them to be servants before they are leaders. This order of humility before responsibility is still important today.

Look back at verse 26 where Jesus turns upside-down the world's definition of greatness. In the world's eyes, your greatness was measured by how many servants you have, how many people serve you. But Jesus redefines greatness and here teaches us what is truly great in God's eyes – being a servant of OTHERS. How many people *you serve* is the measure of true greatness, not who serves you. Notice in both verses Jesus does not say “servant” or “slave of me” – He's talking about a disciple *among you* who is *your* servant / slave. It was one thing for Paul to refer to himself as *God's* bondservant or slave in Titus 1:1, at least there is some dignity in serving God, but God also calls us by those same terms to be lowly servants to other disciples, fellow sinners with stinky feet like us!

The word for “servant” in v. 26 is the Greek word *diakonos*. It has a related noun and verb translated as “serve” or “serving” or “service” (or “ministering” or its equivalents). In the parallel of Titus 1, 1 Timothy 3 also lists out requirements for servant-leaders called shepherds or overseers or elders, and then it also mentions another group of officers who are servants in the church, using the same word *diakonos*, which is transliterated as “deacon” there, and it's the standard Greek word for “servant.” Titus 1 is the shorter letter that only deals with requirements for the servant-leaders called elders, probably because in the young church in Crete, the first priority was getting elders in place, and deacons could be established later as there was need.

But to be faithful to the full counsel of God regarding recognized servants who care for the church, I don't want to overlook deacons, or what we might call *recognized servants*. So before we conclude our study in Titus 1 next time Lord-willing, I want to broaden our study today to include what Paul included in his longer instructions to the church in 1 Timothy 3, where he wrote: “if any man aspires to the office of overseer” (v. 1) then in v. 8 “*Deacons*, likewise ...”

The word translated “deacons” there and only one other place (Philippians 1:1) is the same Greek word *diakonos* / “servant” that Jesus used in that text we read earlier. The concept of servant is not limited to those who have the office of deacon, a *recognized servant* of the church, but the elders who shepherd the church also must be servants, and all the people in the church must be servants.

All followers of Christ are servants or slaves – that’s their fundamental identity. And among those servants there are some that the Master calls to specific roles and different roles, but for all, even leaders, the principle of servanthood never changes. Jesus did choose His disciples to be shepherds who would love and lead and feed His flock at the end of the gospels, but this is only after He has already made clear to them they must be servants of others.

In verses 12-14 of John 21, the resurrected Christ reappears and serves the disciples breakfast.

¹⁵ So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend [**feed or keep**] My lambs.”
¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “**Shepherd [a word meaning lead or govern, the verb form of “pastor”]** My sheep.”
¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Tend [**includes feeding, not just leading**] My sheep.

Christ commissions His apostles and Peter in a special way to pastorally feed and lead the lambs and to shepherd the flock, implying protection and direction, and especially their service or ministry was to be focused on feeding them the Word of God.

And as you turn forward a few pages to the book of Acts, that’s exactly what they did. Acts 2 records Peter’s prominent role in serving or ministering God’s Word, but it was not him only. 2:42 says the early church was continually devoted to the teaching of all the apostles. These men were the original shepherds of the early church, teaching them truth, and overseeing the care of the flock. The end of chapter 4 tells us that they were receiving financial donations as well originally, as people were selling possessions to give to others and bringing it to the feet of the apostles.

The sacrificial servant-hearts of the early church resulted in a great unity and sense of community and closeness and caring.

Acts 4:32-35 (NASB95)

³² And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one *of them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. ³⁴ For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales ³⁵ and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

As we come to Acts 6, the church has grown into many thousands, and for the first time in this wonderful godly early church we see a problem that threatens the incredible unity they’ve shared till now.

This will be where we’ll spend most of the rest of our time. If you want to take notes, verse 1 gives us

#1 THE PROBLEM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

¹Now 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*.

When I was a teenager, my physical body grew very rapidly in spurts, and it was a challenge for my mom to serve enough food just for me to maintain my body weight. She saved hundreds of dollars a month when I went off to college. In my mid-HS years, I think I grew almost 4 inches in one summer, and this caused growing pains and some problems, like my bones and tendons and muscles in my knees and legs were out of sync. My body had pains while it was growing fast, not everything inside was communicating or in step, so there were pains that alerted doctors to a medical problem which I had to be careful about and take action to prevent further injury or problems (knee brace, etc.).

In a similar way, when the size of a *church* body grows rapidly, as this verse begins by mentioning, a rapidly growing body sometimes has growing pains, which is what we see in Acts 6. “Increasing” in v. 1 is present tense participle, continual ongoing.

For awhile the leaders were able to keep up with oversight of the financial caring of the body. Until now, all needs were being met by the generosity of giving and distributing of resources, but now some of the needy widows are being overlooked in the distribution. It was a sensitive situation, because at least some of the Hellenists (Jews that spoke mainly Greek and had assimilated more Hellenistic Greek culture) may suspect they’ve been overlooked intentionally by the native Hebrew Jews (those whose language was Hebrew or Aramaic and whose culture was not as Grecian).

There’s historical evidence these two groups had strains. In their old religion, Hellenistic Judaism was seen as adulterated, and the Maccabean Revolt evidenced intramural Jewish struggles, as some Jews still have today¹ (some who retain their culture and language vs. others more secularized). This is the first potential culture war in the church, and would require sensitive wisdom from God. The problems faced by the early church in Acts may be a little different than problems we face in our culture and day today, but the divine principle we see next transcends the centuries.

#2 – The Priority of the Shepherds / Teachers (v. 2, 4)

²So 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.”³“Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.”⁴“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

In v. 1, the word translated in my Bible for “serving” of food is the other noun (*diakonia*) related to the word translated “deacon” in 1 Timothy 3. And at the end of v. 2 when it says “serve tables” that’s the verb form of the same root Grk word, *diakoneo*. The 12 were doing diaconal work (what the church later called *deacon* work). It was not wrong to serve tables, but v. 2 says it was wrong to neglect the Word. At the end of verse 4 “ministry of the word” is also the same root word *diakonia* (“serving the word”). Since all shepherds or elders must be servants at heart, they will have a natural desire to serve as much as they can. That strength, however, can be a weakness if it takes them away from the main area God’s designed them to serve where others can’t serve as well: preaching the Word

The 12 shepherd-teachers originally were directly involved in these details. Here is a clear illustration of the danger or downside of why even the best of leaders cannot do it all and should not try to do it all or manage or control everything. It's not only the fact that there are other servants in the church God wants to use their gifts, but the problem is that the shepherds-teachers can be caused to neglect their gifts and service focus: feeding the flock spiritually.

Satan had already tried to stop the church by persecution, but he failed in chapter 4. He tried to bring lying and hypocrisy into the church in chapter 5 to weaken the church, but God dealt with that and the church was stronger as a result of God's discipline and purifying. Now Satan tries a third strategy: division or dissension within the body by complaints and accusations. And this clever strategy was not only aimed at the people, he also wants to tempt the leaders to distraction from their focus on the Word of God and prayer, because Satan knows how powerful Scripture and prayer is.

He doesn't like it when we pray. I don't think he's happy that God's Word is going forth in this place, and that we've had some measure of growth and blessing and unity as we strive to reform our preaching and practice to the NT church. We are not to be ignorant of the schemes of our enemy, and if all else fails there's every reason to believe the Devil would like again to bring division or dissension within *this body* by complaints or pitting two groups or types of people against each other. And when it comes to the leadership, he doesn't even have to lead us astray in our *doctrine* – he only has to lead us astray by *distraction*. In other words, he doesn't have to get us to fall into heinous sin or doing wrong things, he just needs to distract us to take time away from doing the main thing we must prioritize: prayer and ministry of the Word.

You might be surprised to know that it's difficult sometimes to get 2 hours (or 1) of concentrated studying in a given day in the office. There's times with all the interruptions where it's hard to discern what's an opportunity for service from God or what's a distraction or diversion from Satan. Either way, I cannot neglect my priority.

Now "ministry of the Word" does not mean we should only teach and study and never have interruptions, but it does indicate that things pertaining to the service of God's Word should dominate the focus. Ministering God's Word broadly speaking of course can include applying God's Word when counseling people in person or over the phone with a biblical question, or trying to encourage a person with God's Word in the hospital or by letter (those things are part of shepherding God's flock and ministering God's Word).

But there's many things that can be done by other servants in the church besides those devoted to the feeding of God's Word to God's people. Prayer is mentioned first in v. 4, and it's so easy to neglect when incredibly busy with church-related things.

In Acts 6:2 the principle is clear – the shepherds who teach God's Word must not neglect the Word, or as v. 4 says, prayer and the ministry of the Word. If that was true in *their* day, before they had phones where people could get ahold of them at any time, much less cell phones, and instant messaging, and computers that supposedly speed up our life, but actually make our life more complicated and entangled with emails, and Internet rabbit trails that make us prone to wander off track, and all these electronic "improvements" that sometimes seems like curses – if the apostles had to fight to not neglect the Word then, how much more must we.

In that day they might be diverted to serve tables, but the principle applies to whatever it is that might distract from the main thing: office admin, building maintenance, financial minutiae, church programs, meetings, administrative piles, mail, sales calls, any number of a million things besides the main one

A. W. Tozer wrote: ‘Satan's distracting words often come from the most unexpected quarters. Martha would call Mary away from sitting at the feet of the Master. Sometimes, if we are not careful, our best friend may distract us. Or it might be some very legitimate activity. This day's bustle and hurly-burly would too often and too soon call us away from Jesus' feet. These distractions must be immediately dismissed, or we shall know only the "barrenness of busyness." ... Would that we might have such an overpowering sense of being about our Father's business and be so impressed with the grandeur of our task that we would reject every suggestion of the evil one that would bid us take up some lesser pursuit. Let us rout him with the [Nehemiah's] words which cannot be improved upon: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down."²

As another wrote: ‘The Word is central to the church’s growth—so central that Satan will use a congregation’s expectations and traditions (often innocent in themselves) to distract ministers from what is required for effective proclamation of the Word.’³

John Stott sums up: ‘If he could preoccupy the apostles with social administration, which though essential was not their calling, they would neglect their God-given responsibilities to pray and to preach, and so leave the church without any defence ... social work [was not inferior work] beneath their dignity. It was entirely a question of calling. They had no liberty to be distracted from their own priority task. So they made a proposal to the church.’⁴

#3 – The Process that God Blessed (v. 3, 5-7)

³“Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

‘They could have so easily brushed it aside and said, ‘Don’t fuss about the widows. Let’s get on with the preaching. That is what matters.’ If they had done that, God’s Spirit would have been grieved, the fellowship would have been ruined.’⁵

Both the Word and the work of service matter very much to God, not only because He is a God of order, but because He loves needy people. Caring for poor and widows and other practical or material matters in the church is not *unimportant*. In fact, it is so important that God’s Spirit led the early church to see the need to establish a second set of officers to support the shepherd-teachers because there is a biblical duty to care for the needy. And these recognized servants could be just anybody, there was a high standard of reputation, men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Not full of worldly wisdom or business savvy or popular or good-looking – certainly not men full of *themselves*, but full of *the Spirit* of God.

These qualities summarize the character qualities later codified in 1 Timothy 3 for deacons (*diakonos*) - the noun form of the same root word in Acts 6 for “serving / ministering” (*diakoneo*). The early chapters of Acts didn’t use the same titles that developed later in the New Testament (you only find the words “pastor” and “deacon” in Paul’s epistles), but these seven men, these servants chosen to serve the needy in Acts are a clear illustration of the following:

- the *principle* and need to free up the other servant-leaders
- they are the *prototype* for deacons,
- they are the *pattern* for a second type of servant or officer in the church, helping shepherd-teachers focus on the Word

John Stott sums it up well:

‘A vital principle is illustrated in this incident, which is of urgent importance to the church today. It is that God calls all his people to ministry, that he calls different people to different ministries, and that those called to ‘prayer and the ministry of the word’ must on no account allow themselves to be distracted from their priorities ... Neither ministry [pastoral or deacon] is superior to the other. On the contrary, both are Christian ministries, that is, ways of serving God and his people. Both require spiritual people, ‘full of the Spirit’, to exercise them ... The only difference between them lies in the form the ministry takes, requiring different gifts and different callings.

... The apostles were not too busy for ministry, but preoccupied with the wrong ministry. So are many pastors. Instead of concentrating on the ministry of the word (which will include preaching to the congregation, counselling individuals and training groups [and other shepherding tasks]), they become overwhelmed with administration. Sometimes it is the pastor’s fault (he wants to keep all the reins in his own hands), and sometimes the people’s (they want him to be a general factotum). In either case the consequences are disastrous. The standards of preaching and teaching decline, since the pastor has little time to study or pray. And the lay people do not exercise their God-given roles, since the pastor does everything himself. For both reasons the congregation is inhibited from growing into maturity in Christ.⁶

The truth is very clear in this passage – actually applying it takes much work and wisdom and time, but this is our desire here. I have no ambition to be in control of everything, in fact, the fewer things I’m involved in and decisions I have to make, the better! Some tasks can be shared by the other elders to help me devote to my priority as the full-time pastor-teacher here, other tasks are more appropriate for the deacons of this church, and other tasks can be done by others in this church, but delegation requires discernment. Verse 3 seems to make clear that the seven men would not be able to serve all the widows themselves (the church was many thousands in number if you read the context) but they would have probably been over teams of people that they organized over their tasks. NKJV says at end of v. 3 “appoint **over** this business.”

For many months now, the recognized servants and servant-leaders of our church here in Shingle Springs have been working hard together to try and put this passage into practice, and it’s still in process, but it’s an exciting process anytime God’s truth transforms man’s traditions. As elders we began discussing this passage in-depth last year, and as we looked at the page it was like we were looking in the mirror. As our church had grown we were trying to do too much, including a lot of deacon-type work and discussions that were consuming most of the time in our elder’s meeting. And the blame falls on our feet, because we had never really given the deacons much training or direction on what we wanted them to do, no clear tasks or duties other than sit on an Executive Board once a month and vote on business decisions. This is certainly not their fault, because they’ve been doing what their leadership has expected of them - the problem is our fault as elders as it is our responsibility to instruct and lead.

The former tradition and culture has been changing as we've taken responsibility for the imbalance we've caused and we've been studying with these men all year the biblical role of deacons as servants of mercy who use their gifts and godly wisdom to help the servant-leaders to have time to shepherd the flock in the Word and to pray. And it's been encouraging to see the focus of our monthly Executive Board meetings change to more of a focus on study and spiritual discussions of how we can best serve the body together, and the deacons this year have begun having separate deacon's meetings to discuss some of the other business and practical matters, benevolence, building, some finances, etc. We're moving away from the boardroom mentality to separate meetings by the two groups to focus on serving and shepherding respectively.

Notice in verse 3 that the original 12 leaders of the early church:

- did not jealously keep everything to themselves, they were eager to get qualified godly servants to take over needs
- The leaders were not dictators, they were delegators. And before delegating the task to seven godly men, they presented the course of action to the whole church, and verse 5 says the believers affirmed or approved the decision
- The leaders did not just charge ahead without involving the congregation in the selection process – in fact there is a balance in this verse between congregational nomination of men to consider (“brethren, select from among you”) and shepherd leadership (“whom we may put in charge”).
- There's no contradiction with having godly men in charge and also involving the congregation in the selection of the godly men to serve, because those who have the Holy Spirit can discern the Spirit's obvious work in others. Look at v. 5

⁵The statement found **approval with the whole congregation**; and they chose **Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit**, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

Stephen in particular is singled out in the text as being full of the Holy Spirit, and it seems that many in the congregation who knew him instantly thought of Stephen. Verse 10 mentions Stephen's wisdom and Spirit that was even obvious to unbelievers. Verse 15 says his face was like an angel. And as Stephen is stoned, Acts 7:55 again points out he was full of the Holy Spirit even while this faithful servant becomes the first Christian martyr. What an example he is of a Christ-like servant (also to Saul in audience).

When the qualifications and reputation of recognized servants are described, godly spirit-led believers can recognize such men. In fact, the church rather than the leaders, often know their reputation and character more closely. And 1 Timothy 3 says the reputation and character outside the church must also be considered.

Acts 6:6 “And these they brought **before the apostles**; and **after praying, they [the apostles] laid their hands on them.**”

The leaders still had to affirm and confirm the men nominated and it was the leaders who prayed before they laid hands on them. 1 Timothy 4:14 says it was the eldership who laid hands on Timothy. Laying on of hands was a public appointment by recognized leaders for someone being given authority to serve in some way.

Numbers 27:15-23 (NASB95) ¹⁵ Then Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, ¹⁶ **“May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation,** ¹⁷ who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD will not be like sheep which have no shepherd.” ¹⁸ So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, **a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him;** ¹⁹ and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and **before all the congregation, and commission him in their sight.** ²⁰ “You shall put **some of your authority on him,** in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey *him*. ²¹ “Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, *both* he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation.” ²² Moses did just as the LORD commanded him; and he took Joshua and set him **before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation.** ²³ Then **he laid his hands on him and commissioned him,** just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

Acts 13:1-3 (NASB95) ¹ Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, **the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”** ³ Then, **when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them,** they sent them away.

*Notice the common theme is that prayer is always dominant in appointing men, sometimes with fasting for protracted prayer. On the night before Jesus chose and called His disciples, Luke 6 tells us He spent the entire night in prayer awake in prayer. If the Lord Himself, with all wisdom and knowledge, prayed all night before-hand -- how dare we as mere men take lightly the appointing of men to serve in the church or to be commissioned by the church?

The original apostles had divine revelation direct from God unlike today, where the Holy Spirit would actually audibly say specific things like in verse 2 “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul.” I am struck by the fact that even with a sure word from God like that, they still fasted and prayed, and because it says “fasted” you can tell this was a period of time, not just a brief prayer meeting before appointing or commissioning these men.

God doesn’t speak from heaven or give direct revelation to the churches anymore to tell us who He’s chosen, instead He gives us the requirements of what they look like in 1 Timothy 3. So how much more do we need to be in prayer and take this seriously, even willing to give up food or sleep or both before such a momentous action as appointing men to serve the church of the Living God which was purchased with the blood of His Own Beloved Son.

*Notice it is God who ultimately calls and makes them servants or servant-leaders, the church does not *make them* such, we simply *recognize* God’s calling and the character of the spirit-filled and called man, and the way they do it is by what Scripture laid down.

Acts 20:28 says “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”

Acts 1:23-26 (NASB95)

²³ So **they put forward two men,** Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. ²⁴ And **they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen** ²⁵ **to occupy this ministry** and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

There are some unique and supernatural things that occurred in the early part of Acts, but when God inspired the letters to Titus and Timothy for how officers should be selected for the church, He lays down the clear guidance for how to know God’s will today.

1 Timothy 3:8-12 (NASB95) ⁸ Deacons likewise [like the elders / overseers in v. 1-7] *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹ *but* holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ **These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.** ¹¹ Women *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households. ¹³ For **those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing** and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. [they're truly great in God's eyes]

Verse 10 teaches that there must be some testing or examination of prospective servants or nominees before they can serve as deacons. It doesn't say exactly how, but a couple chapters later it speaks to the elders about not laying hands on or appointing people prematurely and it reiterates the need for time and examination.

1 Timothy 5:22 (NASB95) ²² Do not lay hands upon anyone *too* hastily and thereby share *responsibility* for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.

Certainly the congregation can give feedback about prospective officers or on any check in their spirit regarding the character of faithfulness of a candidate, but it seems the greatest responsibility falls on the other leaders to thoroughly evaluate men before laying on hands, and it's a sin to appoint the unqualified or even untested.

As our deacons have been doing much more than ever before, the need for more help has become evident to them. We don't know how many more gifted men the Lord may desire us to consider in the months ahead as recognized servants, but pray for us as we consider these matters with prayer and care and seek to honor God's truth. And remember, there are a few faithful servants who may become recognized servants who may have the title, but all of us are called to be servants. And we would encourage you to talk to any of the deacons about areas they may need to help with their daunting responsibilities, as there are many places where service is needed in our growing body, for both men and women.

At the end of our text in Acts 6, it records God's blessing when God's people did things God's ways and honored God's priorities

Acts 6:7 "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

May our Savior who served and gave His life for us, help *us* to be more Christlike so that the Word of God may keep spreading and growing us (spiritually, most importantly) in our community as we seek to be obedient to the faith and as we strive to one day hear the words of our Master "well done, good and faithful servant."

¹David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament*, 1st ed. (Clarksville, Md.: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), Ac 6:1.

²A. W. Tozer, *We Travel an Appointed Way*, 29, 28.

³William J. Larkin, D. Stuart Briscoe and Haddon W. Robinson, vol. 5, *Acts*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers, Ill., USA: InterVarsity Press, 1995), Ac 6:3.

⁴John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts : The Spirit, the Church & the World*, (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 120.

⁵ As cited by *Bible Expositor*.

⁶Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 122.