

APPOINTED TO SERVE

Acts 6:1-7

Forbes Magazine reported that in 2019 businesses and individuals spent an estimated \$166 Billion on leadership training in the United States¹. The amount of money spent on leadership reminds us of an obvious truth – leaders matter. While Jesus agrees with the importance given to leaders, his understanding of leadership fundamentally differs from our world’s common understandings. Today we begin a process to select and appoint additional deacons, men who will join our church family’s leadership. Therefore, we will consider their role in the New Testament and how that role should shape our selection of new deacons.

Considering deacons

- Jesus announced the arrival of “the kingdom of heaven”² and declared his identity as the one to whom God had given authority over it (*cf. Matthew 4:23; 28:18*).
- Jesus’ kingdom, however, rejected the patterns of power common to kingdoms in his world in favor of a servant-oriented model (*John 18:33-36; Matthew 20:20-28*).
- Jesus used the Greek word *diakonos*³ to describe his servant-oriented model in Matthew 20:28. Even though he used the word from which we derive our English word “deacon,” Jesus used it in a universal way rather than about a particular leadership role in the church.
- The New Testament emphasizes Jesus’ universal servanthood model by, for example:
 - Highlighting individuals who embodied Jesus’ expectations like:
 - The group of women traveled with Jesus during his ministry and *ministered* to him (*Matthew 27:55*).
 - Phoebe, who was “a *servant* of the church at Cenchreae” (*Romans 16:1*).
 - Stephanas and his household, who “devoted themselves to the *service* of the saints” (*1 Corinthians 16:15*).
 - Noting that Jesus commissioned apostles, prophets, ministers, and elders to equip all his followers “for the work of *ministry*” (*Ephesians 4:11-12*).
- Even though the New Testament notes the universal application of Jesus’ service requirement, Paul twice used the same word Jesus used – *diakonos* – in a limited way to describe a specific leadership role among Jesus’ followers (*Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13*).
 - Paul’s opening address to the Christians in Philippi included a greeting to their “overseers and deacons” (*Philippians 1:1*), indicating two distinct leading roles in that church community.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2019/06/20/leadership-development-why-most-programs-dont-work/?sh=48bb31a661de>

² All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

³ Underlined and italicized words in the handout indicate that word translates either a noun or verb form of the Greek word *diakonos*.



- Paul confirmed the existence of the leadership roles of “overseers and deacons” when, in 1 Timothy, he listed the qualifications one had to meet to serve in those roles (*1 Timothy 3:1-13*).
- Paul’s lists of qualifications for elders and deacons offer a few insights into the role of a deacon (*1 Timothy 3:8-13*).
 - First, while his list expects ability from deacons (*1 Timothy 3:10, 12-13*), it emphasizes character more than ability.
 - Deacons ought to be men who are:
 - Dignified, which involves not being under the control of dishonesty, addiction, or greed (*1 Timothy 3:8*).
 - Faithful to the Bible (*1 Timothy 3:9*).
 - Good managers of their family and have wives of equally good character (*1 Timothy 3:11-12*).
 - Paul does not disregard ability but instead connects it to character – “tested” character reveals ability (*1 Timothy 3:10*).
 - Second, while deacons and elders share many character expectations, a key difference lies in the responsibilities of the two roles.
 - Elders have teaching responsibilities (*1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9; Ephesians 4:11-12*); deacons do not.
 - The responsibility of teaching helped motivate the appointment of men to serve in Acts 6:1-6, a passage that seems to provide an account about the appointing of deacons.
 - Men of proven character were selected to “serve” the needs of the widows.
 - The men overseeing the service to the widows allowed the apostles to focus on their service, “the ministry of the word.”

Applications to our search for additional deacons

The focus on character repeats a key New Testament message – proper character cultivates ability, but ability does not create character (*cf. John 14:15*). With that emphasis on character in mind, ask yourself:

Do those I am considering nominating exhibit an understanding of, and dedication to, Jesus that results in Christlike behavior?

When we consider the various passages about deacons in the New Testament, we find that Jesus intends their leadership role to address real needs within the church family in ways that enable other leaders – elders and ministers – to perform their role. With that purpose in mind, ask yourself the following question about those you are considering nominating:

Have the men I am nominating served within the church to facilitate others’ involvement and encourage their growth?

