

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Choose Character**

Acts 6:1-7

At the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem, they have a problem on their hands. But in a way, it's a good problem, because it stems from the fact that their congregation is growing. As the fellowship has expanded, folks have started running into some linguistic and cultural barriers. Some members of the church speak Greek, while others speak Aramaic. Theoretically, everyone, no matter what their language group, agrees that the congregation should be looking out for its most vulnerable members—widows, orphans, resident aliens, the destitute, the powerless. In fact, the fellowship has a system set up for everyone to share their possessions, so that everyone's needs are met. But sometimes the diversity of languages makes it hard to communicate. And now, some of the Greek speakers feel like the widows in their group are being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

Naturally, the congregation looks to its leaders, the Twelve, for guidance and solutions. There's no government agency, no department of social services, for them to call upon. The local food pantry has very limited resources. One of the apostles even called the NETS office in Jerusalem, but they've already completed their Thanksgiving food basket distribution. And yet none of this can stop the Spirit of God, who is always creative and resourceful. In this case, the Spirit leads the Twelve to come up with a plan that draws upon the resources that are already there within the church, especially its human resources.

So the Twelve gather the community of disciples and tell them to choose seven men from among themselves. Not just any seven. Instead, seven "who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (v. 3a). Or as another translation puts it, seven "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Now there's a lot packed into that summary, so let's take a few moments to unfold it with a little more detail.

The expression "good standing" means that the person needs to have a good reputation that's based on the experience and testimony of others in the fellowship. This is essential if the selected individuals are going to be involved in leading others. This also means that the person's Christian reputation needs to have substance behind it. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it. The tree is the real thing."<sup>1</sup> Those who are chosen to lead in the congregation of God's people need to be the real thing. What's displayed on the outside needs to be consistent with what's actually happening on the inside.

Just over a year ago, author Moira Weigel wrote about the growing market for "athleisure," a term used to refer to clothing and accessories such as yoga pants, athletic shoes, and other workout apparel. Between 2009 and 2014, the size of the athleisure market grew from \$54 billion to \$68 billion, including brand names like Lululemon, Gap Body, Athleta, and Nike. But Weigel noted that there's a strange twist in the growth of this market. She noted that most people are just wearing this clothing, and not actually working out in it. She says, "For many wearers, the athletic part of athleisure remains aspirational. [For example], sales of yoga clothes increased 10 times as much as [actual] participation in yoga

classes over the 2009 to 2014 span.”<sup>2</sup> So as others have pointed out, in many cases folks prefer the workout look, without the workout lifestyle or practices.

Luke tells us that in the church, then and now, leaders can’t just have the Christian look. They need to have the substantive Christian lifestyle that gives the look integrity and solidity. That may be why Luke goes on to spell things out further, saying that the congregation’s selected leaders need to be “full of the Spirit,” which means they need to have a mature faith and the capacity for ministry that’s empowered by the presence of God. This leads into the final element, “wisdom,” which means not only that those chosen need to have some organizational talent, especially for the hands-on assignment of serving the poor, but that these practical skills need to be combined with spiritual authority that’s exercised for the good of the congregation and its mission.

That’s the basic set of qualifications needed to carry out this ministry of service to the congregation. Notice that it’s less of a position description and more of a person description. The emphasis isn’t primarily on the required tasks or expected activities, though these will certainly need to be spelled out and worked out. Instead, the focus is on the essential character of the individuals who will carry out this ministry. What matters most is reputation, not simply one’s particular skill set. Or, to put it another way, technique may be important, but not nearly as important as moral integrity and mature faith. The Spirit will help the congregation determine the individuals who fit this person description, and the responsibility for administering the distribution of material and financial assistance will be handed over to them, so that the Twelve can concentrate more on the ministry of preaching, teaching, and prayer.

Churches in our denominational tradition have historically looked to this account from the life of the early church, along with other Scriptural texts, to guide us in selecting and commissioning deacons for ministry in our congregation. Even though Luke doesn’t use the term “deacon” for those who were selected to serve in this particular situation, his description of the way that God provided leadership for the early church can give us trustworthy guidance in choosing and ordaining the individuals who will be part of our deacon ministry.

Deacons are ordained lay leaders who serve Christ and the community of Christ’s people in partnership with the pastor and other leaders of the congregation. Deacons help lead in corporate worship. They’re heavily involved in the ministry of pastoral care to individuals and families. They administer the church’s benevolence fund, so that financial assistance is provided to people in material need. Deacons have responsibility for oversight of the congregation’s overall health and functioning, making sure there are policies and practices in place that help us fulfill our God-given and Spirit-led mission.

Now that I’ve gotten back in the flow of our church’s ministry after my recent sabbatical, I think we can see even more clearly and appreciatively just how much an active and effective deacon ministry means in the life of our congregation. While I was away, a lot of what was done to support our weekly ministry and to further our mission was done by deacons. Individually and together, our deacons were at the forefront of our church’s worship, work, and witness. They’re a crucial part of the way that God provides leadership for our church.

So it only makes sense that those who are chosen and commissioned for this form of ministry be, as Luke says, “of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Again, this goes primarily to the matter of character. It’s true that deacons need to have certain skills that make their ministry more effective, such as the ability to communicate, to listen, to

guide, to collaborate, and to make decisions. They need to exhibit certain qualities, such as generosity, trustworthiness, consistency, self-discipline, and team-mindedness. But all these, and many other techniques and traits, have to be more than just components in a job description. They have to be rooted in and the fruit of an individual's Christian character. And Christian character is primarily about having Christ himself formed in you. In other words, being shaped into the likeness of Christ. Being filled with Christ.

Erin Bunting once wrote about an experience she had while shopping for a bottle of juice. According to Bunting:

[The label on the bottle said:] "Blueberry Pomegranate, 100 percent juice, all natural."

[There was also a picture of] a ripe pomegranate [spilling] its exotic, glistening seeds onto mounds of fat, perfect blueberries. . . .

And then I read the ingredients list: "Filtered water, pear juice concentrate, apple juice concentrate, grape juice concentrate." Where was the blueberry? Where was the pomegranate? Finally I found them, fifth and seventh on a list of nine ingredients, after mysteriously unspecified "natural flavors."

By law, food ingredients are listed in descending order of weight. That means a product contains the greatest proportion of the first ingredient on the list and successively less of those farther down. So according to this list, the jug in my hand held mostly water and other juices, with just enough blueberry and pomegranate for flavor and color.

In the bottom corner of the front label, in small, easy-to-miss type, were the tell-tale words: "Flavored juice blend with other natural ingredients." The enticing pictures and clever labeling were decoys to sell a diluted, blueberry-pomegranate *flavored* product, convincingly disguised to look like something it wasn't. I put the juice back on the shelf.

I left the store empty-handed and wondering, *What if I had an ingredients list printed on me? Would Jesus be the main ingredient? If not, how far down the list would he be? Would my "label" accurately represent my contents? Or would I falsely project a misleading outward appearance that cleverly masked diluted ingredients? My packaging may be convincing. I may look and sound like the real thing. But what if someone came to me looking for Jesus beneath my "Christian" label and found something else? Something Jesus-flavored, but not Jesus-filled? . . .*<sup>3</sup>

Bunting's story is a reminder that Christian character is about being filled, not merely flavored, with Jesus. Choose from among you leaders who are "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Today, we give thanks to God for how he provides leaders for our life together as his people. And we set apart and commission Steve Norbrey as one filled with the Spirit of our Lord, called and gifted to help lead us, individually and together, in the way of the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> From *Lincoln's Own Stories*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 41, No. 8).

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Moira Weigel, "Pajama Rich," *Real Life* magazine (August 22, 2016). At <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/october/5103116.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Condensed from Erin Bunting, "Jesus Flavored, or Jesus Filled?" *Kyria.com* (October 7, 2009). At <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/november/4111609.html>.