

**IX** 9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# DEACONS

HOW THEY  
SERVE AND  
STRENGTHEN  
THE CHURCH



**MATT SMETHURST**

“If I could go back and pick one book to prepare for the onslaught of ministerial challenges our church has faced this year, it would be this one. Wary pastors, discouraged deacons, and churches struggling to stay on mission, get this book! It hits all the right notes.”

**Bobby Scott**, Copastor, Community of Faith Bible Church, South Gate, California

“The church has long needed this decidedly biblical, highly readable, and very practical book. Grounding the diaconate in the person and work of Jesus, Matt Smethurst answers the multitude of contemporary questions with judiciousness and care, drawing upon his deep knowledge of Scripture, history, and church life. *Deacons* should long remain the standard text in both the local church and the academy.”

**Malcolm B. Yarnell III**, Research Professor of Theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Teaching Pastor, Lakeside Baptist Church, Granbury, Texas

“My deepest concern in books on church polity is that the author would make his case based on solid Bible exposition, not denominational tradition or personal opinion. Smethurst has done this well: he has expounded the relevant texts on this widely misunderstood church office. With clear structure and striking insight, he recaptures the Bible’s intention for deacons.”

**Alexander Strauch**, author, *Biblical Eldership* and *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons*

“There have been many helpful books on almost every area of church life, ministry, and polity. The one missing area has been a full-length book addressing deacons. This book fills that gap. Smethurst doesn’t just explain the biblical teaching; he fleshes it out with numerous practical examples and illustrations.”

**John S. Hammett**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*

"A wonderful resource on a neglected subject. It is biblical, accessible, and practical—ideal for those in the process of serving as a deacon. Indeed, deacons who assist the elders, organize service, care for the needy, preserve unity, and mobilize ministry are wonderful gifts to Christ's body. Smethurst explains and applies these ideas clearly, concisely, and compellingly."

**Tony Merida**, Lead Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; author, *Ordinary*

"The church needs gospel-centered, theologically minded, servant-hearted deacons who care for others out of a deep love for Jesus. Smethurst offers historical context, biblical insight, and practical examples of this vital role in congregational life."

**Melissa B. Kruger**, Director of Women's Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Growing Together*

"Considerable confusion surrounds diaconal ministry. Faithful deacons, Smethurst reminds us, protect the ministry of the Word, promote the unity of the body, and provide for the tangible needs of our most vulnerable members. I plan to buy multiple copies, regularly give them out to our congregation, and use the book to equip new deacons and encourage current ones."

**Juan R. Sanchez**, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; author, *The Leadership Formula*

"This book is accessible, engaging, and substantial. Both nonspecialists and readers with theological training will learn from its biblical, historical, and practical reflections on the diaconate, even where they may disagree with some of its conclusions. All readers should emerge from this book with zeal and appreciation for Christ's great gift of diaconal ministry."

**Guy Prentiss Waters**, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson; author, *How Jesus Runs the Church*

"In some churches the office of deacon is underrated; members don't profit from deacons as they ought. In other churches the office is overrated; deacons want to function like and challenge the elders. Smethurst shows us the balanced and biblical view."

**Conrad Mbewe**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia

“Matt Smethurst serves churches well with this succinct treatment of deacons that is biblically faithful, pastorally relevant, and exceptionally clear. Even if you disagree with him (and you probably shouldn’t), you will appreciate the tone in which he describes and defends the vital ministry of deacons. The feeling you get after reading this book is like being in a crowded theater that erupts with applause after a memorable movie.”

**Benjamin L. Merkle**, Professor of New Testament and Greek,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*

“Matt Smethurst showcases how essential deacons are to gospel ministry, even while debunking misconceptions and unhelpful traditions. Practical, beautifully written, and full of encouraging stories, this is a helpful guide to an essential office.”

**Jenny Manley**, pastor’s wife, United Arab Emirates; author, *The Good Portion: Christ*

“Smethurst’s concise manifesto and practical manual succeeds in highlighting the glory of the office of deacon. This is not a dry, theoretical treatise but a clear and cogent call to recognize God’s irreplaceable gift of the diaconal ministry.”

**Cornelis Van Dam**, Emeritus Professor of Old Testament, Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *The Deacon*

“Matt Smethurst addresses a much neglected but vital part of church life. *Deacons* will encourage leaders and church members alike. It is full of biblical insight and inspiration. I can’t recommend it too highly.”

**Sam Allberry**, pastor; author, *7 Myths about Singleness*

“There is no greater joy in life than serving the Lord. What a unique calling it is to serve as a deacon. Smethurst will lead you in a process of loving God’s highest calling: to be a servant. This book will help many!”

**Johnny Hunt**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention; author, *The Deacon I Want to Be*

“Deacons have been the object of jokes for years—or worse, ignored. I love how Smethurst creatively fleshes out both the historical and biblical context of this important ministry—then presses into practical application. Use this crucial book to embrace and equip those called by God to serve as deacons.”

**Mark Dance**, Former Executive Editor, *Deacon Magazine*

“It is uncommon to find great, biblical, clear, and insightful content packaged in a small book. This is one of those occurrences. Today’s church needs this teaching urgently.”

**Miguel Núñez**, Senior Pastor, Iglesia Bautista Internacional, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

“Dear reader, this is an excellent book! It is more interesting and important than you probably assume. You think I just have to say this because this is a blurb? Take a moment, open to chapter 1, and read the first page—just the first page!—then come back to this blurb. There are *lots* of other pages that good! You should buy the book now and read it. Go on and get some more copies, and get people studying it at your church. They will be encouraged and your church will be helped to flourish!”

**Mark Dever**, Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

## DEACONS

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BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# DEACONS

HOW THEY  
SERVE  
AND  
STRENGTHEN  
THE CHURCH

MATT SMETHURST

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS



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To my parents, Doug and Lynda,  
for modeling Christlike service my entire life.  
I love you.



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# SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

In this series, 9Marks has produced short, readable books on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church—plus a few more. These include books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, sound doctrine, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, church elders, deacons, prayer, missions, and corporate worship.

*Series Preface*

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,  
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman  
series editors

# INTRODUCTION

## *“At Your Service”*

I wonder why you opened this book (besides the arresting title that caught your attention). I can envision various scenarios.

### 1. *You're a pastor.*

- You're an aspiring pastor who wants to study deacons.
- You're a new pastor who wants to implement deacons.
- You're a seasoned pastor who wants to rethink or redeploy deacons.
- You're a frustrated pastor who wants to fire deacons.

### 2. *You're a deacon.*

- You're a potential deacon who wants to understand the role.
- You're a new deacon who wants to adjust to the role.
- You're a seasoned deacon who wants to grow in the role.
- You're a frustrated deacon who wants to quit the role.

### 3. *You're a church member.*

- You like how deacons function in your church—and you're curious to learn more.



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- You don't like how deacons function in your church—and you're curious if there's a better way.
- You simply desire to better grasp Scripture's teaching on this topic.

Or perhaps you've got another reason altogether. Suffice it to say, the topic of deacons—even just the *word*—can spark vastly different feelings among Christians. For some, the word is a bit nostalgic, perhaps a throwback to their childhood church. For others, it's beautiful; the word brings beloved faces to mind—specific servants laboring for the welfare of Christ's church. Yet for too many it's a painful word. It's painful for many *pastors*. How many times has the work of a church been hindered and harmed by those called to be its most exemplary servants?

## EVERYONE DEACONS

If you've put your trust in Christ, you are already a deacon in a broad sense. The Greek noun *diakonos* appears twenty-nine times in the New Testament and is almost always translated “servant(s)”<sup>1</sup> or “minister(s).”<sup>2</sup> (Same with the related noun<sup>3</sup> and verb.<sup>4</sup>) Here are a few examples from the Gospels, rendered literally:

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 2:5, 9; 12:26; Rom. 13:4; 15:8; 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4; 11:15, 23; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Col. 4:7; 1 Tim. 4:6.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 3:6; Col. 1:7, 23, 25.

<sup>3</sup> The noun *diakonia* is used thirty-four times to describe “ministry(ies)” (Acts 1:17, 25; 6:4; 20:24; 21:19; Rom. 11:13; 2 Cor. 3:7, 8, 9; 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 9:1, 12; Eph. 4:12; Col. 4:17; 2 Tim. 4:5, 11) or “serve/service/serving” (Rom. 12:7; 15:31; 1 Cor. 12:5; 16:15; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; 11:8; 1 Tim. 1:12; Rev. 2:19).

<sup>4</sup> The verb *diakoneo* is used thirty-seven times: “serves/served/serving/service” (Matt. 8:15; 20:28; Mark 1:31; 10:45; Luke 4:39; 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; 22:26, 27; John 12:2,

The greatest among you shall be your deacon. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matt. 23:11–12)

And [Jesus] said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and deacon of all.” (Mark 9:35)

If anyone deacons me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my deacon be also. If anyone deacons me, the Father will honor him. (John 12:26)

Above all, Christian believers are those who walk in the footsteps of the ultimate deacon, the suffering servant who came “not to be deaconed but to deacon, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

In sum, *diakonos* is usually just a generic term for “servant”—hence the attribution to non-Christian rulers<sup>5</sup> and even to demons.<sup>6</sup> A small handful of times, though, the word is employed in a narrower, more technical sense—hence this book.<sup>7</sup>

To “deacon” in this narrower sense—which is how we typically understand the word and how I will use it from now on—is not an informal role. It isn’t simply a ministry job title, like “campus director” or “children’s ministry coordinator.” It is one of two offices the New Testament establishes for the local

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26; 2 Tim. 1:18; Philem. 13; Heb. 6:10; 1 Pet. 1:12; 4:10, 11) or “ministered/ministering” (Matt. 4:11; 27:55; Mark 1:13; 15:41) or “bringing aid” (Rom. 15:25).

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 13:4.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor. 11:15. (Kudos to Wake Forest University, home of the Demon Deacons, for being theologically astute!)

<sup>7</sup> Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12; possibly Rom. 16:1. See the first appendix for a discussion of the Romans passage. It’s worth noting that this binary—generic service or formal office—isn’t always helpful, since there aren’t only two uses of *diakonos*. The recent work of Clarence D. Agan III demonstrates at least four uses of the term, as we will see in chapter 4.

## *Introduction*

church. Only elders (or pastors) and deacons are ordained to formal, public service in the life of the congregation.

How crucial, then, is diaconal service to church health? Crucial enough for God to carve out an official position for select members, recognized as model servants, to mobilize practical service in creative ways.

## **CONTRASTING CLONES**

Clint and Tom are two pastors who couldn't have more in common. Same age, same theological degree, same denomination, same church size, same temperament, same basic level of spiritual maturity, same amount of ministry experience. And both of their churches are doing well. Growth isn't explosive, but it's steady. Conversions are happening. Their members are mostly happy. But while Clint is tired, Tom is tanked. For Clint, joy is a battle; for Tom, joy is a distant memory. Clint doesn't meet his sermon-deadline goal every week; Tom hasn't in a year. So what's the difference? What's draining Tom's time and energy? Hard thing is, it's always something different. But always something important.

- **Three weeks ago**, Tom had to purchase a new sound system for the church. He planned to spend an hour or two researching quality and cost-effective options, and then making a decision. It sucked up his entire Wednesday. *Zero energy left for anything else*, he thinks.
- **Two weeks ago**, Tom coordinated volunteers for a local park cleanup, an ideal yearly opportunity for the church to serve its neighbors and strike up gospel conversations. He created an online sign-up sheet, then notified the

church via email, then monitored the response, then got discouraged, then sent a few private requests, then realized Friday afternoon was over. *Sermon isn't nearly done, and thirteen empty slots remain for this stupid cleanup project. What's wrong with everyone?*

- **Last week**, Tom planned a welcome cookout for college students. This is one of his favorite times of the year. The university is a short walk from his church building, and as someone who got saved in college, Tom loves opportunities to reach incoming students. Or he used to. His excitement finally succumbs to disillusionment as he stands in the grocery-store aisle, adjudicating the merits of hot dog buns. *Wait, is the off-brand really more expensive? How is that even possible? I've got so much left to buy . . .*
- **This week**, Tom was a man resolved. *I will not get sidetracked. I will delegate. I can't be all things to all people.* His phone buzzes. Text from his wife. "Martha called. She's still in the hospital and wants you to come again. Said she hasn't heard from you this week." *It's only Tuesday morning!* "Also said she can't pay her bill. Apparently another patient is getting money from his church. Asked if we can help her."

Remember happy Clint? His month wasn't easy, but it was different. It was . . . manageable. So, again, what's the difference between the pastoral experiences of Clint and Tom? Answer: only one has deacons. Both do, actually, but only Clint's seem to know—and love—what being a deacon entails. They delight in relieving Clint from shouldering practical tasks so that he can channel his energies to the ministry of the Word and to prayer.

## ***Introduction***

- Tom had to pore over countless customer reviews to find the right sound system. Clint has a deacon who was eager to do the needed research.
- Tom had to recruit volunteers for the park cleanup. Clint has a deacon who finds joy in gathering a team.
- Tom got stressed about hot dog buns. Clint has a deacon who is glad to run point on picking up groceries.
- Tom had to look at the church budget and assess giving trends in order to determine whether money can be spared for Martha. Clint has a deacon who excels at determining what the church can do to help financially.

The complexities of ministry are endless, aren't they? And when you add the fluidity of people's expectations to the immovable rock of limited time, you collide with some maddening math. I've witnessed this dynamic on both ends, in a sense, as I was privileged to serve in two diaconal positions before becoming an elder.

If you are an elder, and particularly if you are the primary preaching pastor in your church, internalize this: deacons wrongly deployed can *halve* your ministry, but deacons rightly deployed can *double* it. They can also build up the whole congregation—or not.

For better or for worse, deacons are difference-makers.

## **MANIFESTO AND MANUAL**

In the coming chapters, we will consider many pressing questions about this sometimes misunderstood subject. I hope this book will serve as both a manifesto and a practical manual for ordinary churches like yours.

So here's where we are going. Chapter 1 will briefly sketch the various ways deacons have functioned throughout Christian history, as well as common (not necessarily healthy!) models in churches today. Chapter 2 will examine the forerunners to the office (Acts 6). Chapter 3 will then examine the qualifications for the office (1 Timothy 3). Following this discussion of what deacons must *be*, chapter 4 will zoom in on what deacons must *do*. In chapter 5, we will hear stories of real churches that have been strengthened by faithful diaconal service. Chapter 6 will consider the One whom deacons ultimately reflect, followed by a brief conclusion. The question of whether women may serve as deacons, or deaconesses, will be addressed in the first appendix. (Throughout the book I will use male pronouns for the sake of style and readability; but as you will see, I believe the diaconate is open to qualified women as well.) A second appendix will provide a sample questionnaire for prospective deacons.

The basic thesis of this book is that deacons—rightly understood and deployed—are an irreplaceable gift to Christ's church. They are model servants who excel in being attentive and responsive to tangible needs in the life of the church. In what ways do they serve? By assisting the elders, guarding the ministry of the Word, organizing service, caring for the needy, preserving unity, mobilizing ministry, and more.

A church without biblical deacons may exhibit signs of health for a while, but over time its health will suffer. We rob ourselves of the benefits of God's revealed wisdom when we

## *Introduction*

either unduly *elevate* the role of deacons (say, to de facto elders) or unduly *reduce* their role (say, to glorified janitors).

Thankfully the Word of God charts a more excellent way. What it says about deacons is not extensive, but it is enough.

When deacons flourish, the whole congregation wins.

# THE BACKSTORY AND THE BLUNDERS: HOW DEACONS HAVE FUNCTIONED

The Nazis, it turns out, did not like deacons.

After the Netherlands fell to Germany in 1940, deacons in the Dutch Reformed Church rose up to care for the politically oppressed, supplying food and providing secret refuge. Realizing what was happening, the Germans decreed that the office of deacon should be eliminated. Responding in a General Synod on July 17, 1941, the Dutch believers resolved, “Whoever touches the diaconate interferes with what Christ has ordained as the task of the church.’ . . . Whoever lays hands on *diakonia* lays hands on worship!”<sup>1</sup>

The Germans backed down.

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<sup>1</sup>In this opening section I am quoting (with only slight paraphrase) from Frederick Herzog’s essay, “Diakonia in Modern Times, Eighteenth–Twentieth Centuries,” in *Service in Christ*, ed. James I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 147. Thanks to Jonas Bültemann for tracking down the original German source and confirming the citation for me.



## DEACONS

### DEACONS THROUGH THE AGES

Most diaconal stories are, of course, less historically momentous. Rarely are they less beautiful. For two thousand years deacons have shone as they've served churches and communities around the globe. The witness of history is plain: a congregation without biblically functioning deacons is impoverished, but a congregation with them is incalculably rich.

How, then, have deacons functioned through the ages? The question is neither irrelevant nor dull; it is practical. If you are a follower of Jesus, then Christian history is *your* history. Studying it is like opening a photo album and flipping through your family heritage.

So let's begin. Embark with me on a flyover survey—admittedly fast and fragmentary—of the diaconal landscape since the apostolic age.

#### Early Church

Deacons were held in a place of honor in Christianity's earliest centuries. Based on the precedent of Acts 6:1–7—a passage generally seen to establish, or at least preview, the office—deacons in the early church were tasked with supporting the work of pastors by caring for the “outward” or “physical” concerns of church life.

Historian Rodney Stark notes that deacons in the early church were of “considerable importance,” assisting in liturgical functions and administering the benevolent and charitable

activities of the church.<sup>2</sup> A series of fourth-century treatises called the *Apostolic Constitutions* further outlined diaconal duties: “They are to be doers of good works, exercising a general supervision day and night, neither scorning the poor nor respecting the person of the rich; they must ascertain who are in distress and not exclude them from a share in church funds, compelling also the well-to-do to put money aside for good works.”<sup>3</sup> Historian Charles Deweese aptly summarizes:

They visited martyrs who were in prison, clothed and buried the dead, looked after the excommunicated with the hope of restoring them, provided the needs of widows and orphans, and visited the sick and those who were otherwise in distress. In a plague that struck Alexandria about AD 259, deacons were described by an eyewitness as those who “visited the sick fearlessly,” “ministered to them continually,” and “died with them most joyfully.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, it was this kind of risky, self-giving love—modeled often by deacons—that bewildered the Roman world. As the African bishop Tertullian (AD 155–220) observed, “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1997), 108. See also Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 32.

<sup>3</sup>As quoted by Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol. 1 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908), 161. Also quoted in Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 87.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons* (Nashville: B&H, 1979), 12–13.

<sup>5</sup>Tertullian, *Apology* 39.

## DEACONS

It is all too easy to lose sight of the spiritual value of deacons because their role is so practical in the life of the church. But many of the earliest deacons were giants of the faith, and they defended it with valor. Two stories must suffice.

First, let's travel to ancient Rome, epicenter of the mightiest empire on earth. Only eight years have passed since Emperor Decius sought to exterminate all who refused to pledge allegiance to his sovereign rule. Untold Christians were killed. It is now AD 258, and a man named Laurence is one of seven deacons serving in Rome; his task is to oversee the church's money and distributions to the poor. In August the news hits: Decius's successor, Valerian, has issued a chilling edict—all bishops, priests, and deacons must be rounded up and killed.

Laurence is soon taken before the magistrate. The offer: *surrender the treasure of the church, and you will be freed*. The deacon agrees. He only requests three days to retrieve it. Leaving the court, Laurence wastes no time. He entrusts the church's money to safe hands, and then gathers together the sick, the aged, the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned. At last he returns to the court, pitiful band in tow. Incensed by the commotion, the magistrate demands an explanation. Laurence responds, "Sir, I have brought what you asked for." Then, gesturing toward the people he's gathered, he declares, "These are the treasures of the church." Subsequently sentenced to a martyr's death, the deacon endures the flames with startling calm, even quipping to his executioners, "You may turn me over; I am done on this side." The spectacle of Laurence's

profound courage makes a great impression on the people of Rome, leading to many conversions.<sup>6</sup>

Now fast-forward seventy years, and let's journey south-east to Telzeha (in modern-day Turkey). Persecution against Christians has again intensified, this time under Licinius. New emperor, new edict: *citizens must repair the altars and sacrifice to the god Jupiter*. What happens? A deacon rises up:

Now Habib, who was of the village of Telzeha and had been made a deacon, went secretly into the churches in the villages. He ministered and read the Scriptures, encouraged and strengthened many by his words, and admonished them to stand fast in the truth of their belief and to not be afraid of the persecutors. . . .

Many were strengthened by his words . . . and were careful not to renounce the covenant they had made. When the men appointed with reference to this particular matter heard of it, they informed [Licinius], the governor in the town of Edessa: "Habib, who is a deacon in the village of Telzeha, goes about and ministers secretly in every place, and resists the command of the emperors, and is not afraid."<sup>7</sup>

Not afraid indeed. Enduring a barrage of questions from the governor without wavering in his faith, Habib is burned

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<sup>6</sup>This story may be apocryphal despite its wide circulation, with slightly varying details (except for the punchline!), ever since the fourth century. The earliest known source is Ambrose of Milan, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, book 2, ch. 28, sect. 140–41 (c. AD 391), in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 10 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893). The annual calendar in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) designates August 10 as "Feast of St. Laurence, Deacon and Martyr at Rome, 258."

<sup>7</sup>"Martyrdom of Habib the Deacon," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 690–95. I have updated the translation only slightly for readability. Interestingly, Emperor Licinius would later coauthor, along with his brother-in-law Constantine, the Edict of Milan in AD 313, granting official toleration to Christians throughout the Roman Empire.

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at the stake. Stories like these offer a glimpse into the breathtaking conduct of the earliest deacons—and their steady yet staggering impact on the Roman world.

As the church sought to manage geographical expansion and as various heresies popped up to threaten the faith, a formalized hierarchy was developed to streamline—and centralize—decision-making authority within the office of bishop. So rather than only two church offices (bishops and deacons) there were now three: bishops (overseers), presbyters (elders or priests), and deacons. With the advent of this “monarchical episcopate” system—one bishop overseeing a geographic area—the primary role of deacons shifted from agents of charity to, essentially, secretaries to the bishop. They increasingly functioned as on-the-ground liaisons between the region’s bishop and its local congregations.

Despite gradual distancing from the New Testament pattern, deacons continued to perform biblical tasks. Yet this didn’t hold. Mark Dever summarizes the fateful decline:

As the monarchical episcopate developed, so did a kind of monarchical diaconate beneath it. As the role of bishop developed, so did the role of archdeacon. The archdeacon was the chief deacon of a particular place and might be described as a deputy concerned with material matters. . . . Abuses eventually crept into the office of deacon, and deacons—especially archdeacons—became quite wealthy. How ironic that those who were meant to serve others instead used others to serve their own desires!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Dever, *Understanding Church Leadership*, Church Basics, ed. Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 8–9.

## **Middle Ages**

With this shift away from charitable work, two developments in the Middle Ages caused the diaconate to deteriorate even further.

First, the office was reduced to a mere steppingstone to the priesthood. Second, and more concerning, charitable giving came to be viewed as a means of saving one's soul and lessening another's time in purgatory. "By the Middle Ages," Cornelis Van Dam laments, "the chief motive for giving to the poor was to gain entrance to eternal life." The tragic downward spiral was complete, it seemed, as deacons soon "ceased to function in any biblical way."<sup>9</sup>

The time had come for a diaconal reformation.

## **John Calvin's Influence**

No Reformer was more influential in restoring the diaconate to its ancient model—of ministering help to the poor and distressed—than John Calvin. Upon returning to Geneva in 1541, Calvin's first official act as pastor was to present to the city council a detailed plan for the order and governance of the church. These *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* called for the installation of deacons along with pastors, doctors (teachers), and elders. Historian Timothy George notes the "high esteem" in which Calvin held the diaconate:

Deacons were public officers in the church entrusted with the care of the poor. He urged that they be skilled in the Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Cornelis Van Dam, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2016), 99.

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faith since, in the course of their ministry, “they will often have to give advice and comfort.” . . . Calvin admitted that the diaconate could sometimes serve as a “nursery from which presbyters are chosen,” yet he opposed the Roman custom of making the deacon the first step to the priesthood. This practice was an invidious undermining of “a highly honorable office.”<sup>10</sup>

Under the leadership of Calvin, as well as contemporaries like Martin Bucer (1491–1551), deacons again began to serve not merely as protégés of priests but as ministers of mercy.

### Reformation to Modern Era

Ever since Calvin gave fresh attention to the diaconate more than five centuries ago, the office has taken various shapes among Protestants.

- In the *Presbyterian and Reformed tradition*, deacons have always functioned mainly as mercy ministers, caring for the needy and distressed and often helping oversee the finances of the church.<sup>11</sup>
- In the *Anglican communion*, deacons are either “transitional,” moving toward the priesthood,<sup>12</sup> or “vocational,” appointed for life; all are theologically trained and formally ordained. In fact, every Anglican priest or bishop begins as a deacon, and none ever formally forsakes the office. Thus some archbishops have asked to be buried in their deacon

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 249.

<sup>11</sup> Elsie Anne McKee offers helpful historical perspective in *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). For a modern evangelical treatment, see Van Dam, *The Deacon*.

<sup>12</sup> Speaking of the Church of England, Francis Young writes, “All ordained ministers in the Church of England are ordained to the diaconate before they are admitted to the priesthood” (Francis Young, *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England* [Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015], xxv).

robes—the conviction being that if you cut open an archbishop, you find a bishop; if you cut open a bishop, you find a priest; and if you cut open a priest, you find a deacon. For diaconal service is at the heart of all ministry.<sup>13</sup>

- In many *congregational and baptistic churches*, a model of plural elders and deacons—the elders devoted to spiritual oversight, the deacons to practical service—largely endured until the early twentieth century, when many congregations began favoring a “solo pastor and deacon board” model, often accompanied by an array of committees. (“Of the making of many committees there is no end,” a modern Ecclesiastes might read!) Yet this structure is not uniform, and in more recent years there seems to be a drive, among many such churches, to replace the executive-board mentality with a more historic vision for deacons. In this approach, deacons coordinate various ministries in the church, as a means of supporting the elders.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to my friend Dan Marotta, rector of Redeemer Anglican Church in Richmond, Virginia, for bringing this anecdote to my attention. It is noteworthy, moreover, that anti-slavery activist Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) was a deacon in the Church of England when he joined the abolitionist cause and campaigned alongside William Wilberforce. He helped to pass the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which ended the British slave trade. It is difficult to imagine a deacon making a more positive cultural impact on the nineteenth-century world. See Young, *Inferior Office?*, xxiii–xxiv.

<sup>14</sup> In an essay titled “Elders and Deacons in History,” Mark Dever details the former prominence and subsequent decline of plural eldership in Baptist life. In summary he writes: “It is indisputable that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Baptists either had or advocated elders in local churches—and often a plurality of elders. They had done so for centuries. . . . Yet throughout the twentieth century, both the practice of plural eldership and the use of the title ‘elder’ grew increasingly scarce in Baptist life. To mention elders in many Baptist churches today would raise suspicions of being crypto-Presbyterian. But in the past few decades, the office of elder has seen a significant revival among Southern Baptists” (Mark Dever, “Elders and Deacons in History,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015], 238).

Dever then offers an anecdotal observation: “Many Southern Baptist churches increasingly sense that the present structures are simply not working. Some churches led by a single pastor suffer under an authoritarian rule too much like the Gentile leadership Jesus forbade in Mark 10:42. Other times young pastors have gone into churches and



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### BIBLICAL MODELS?

As mentioned earlier, the Bible doesn't say a great deal about deacons. (How's that for an incentive to keep reading?) Acknowledging this, however, should forge a twofold resolve: one, to pay extra careful attention to everything Scripture *does* teach on the topic; and, two, to treat those who see or "do" deacons differently with a special dose of generosity.

But even though the Bible's treatment of deacons is sparse, it is sufficient. We have enough scriptural material to judge between various approaches. And I'm convinced there are several common mindsets that fall short of God's soaring vision for the diaconate. Why is it so important we get this right? Not only so that we might experience swells of unity and joy in the churches we love, but also so that the servant nature of Jesus himself might be on full display.

Therefore, let's turn our attention to six popular conceptions of a deacon that fall short of the Bible's high vision for the office.

#### 1. Pastor-in-Training Peter

*"Heard they're making you a deacon. How long, you think, before they make you an elder?"*

Peter is used to such questions at church. He's not bothered; if anything, he's a bit flattered.

We've already seen how, in the fourth century and into the Middle Ages, the diaconate had calcified into a mere entry-level

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found them ossified, effectively ruled by deacons, a nominating committee, a personnel committee, or some other group that has no biblical standard of maturity in understanding and teaching the Scriptures" (240).

clergy role, a pit stop on the path to priesthood. The priest-in-training model remains common in the Roman Catholic Church and, despite key differences, in much of the Anglican communion as well. But some low-church evangelicals have their own version of this approach: elders in training. To be sure, certain deacons should eventually become elders—but that’s assuming they meet the qualifications for *elders* (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). And as we’ll see in chapter 3, while the qualification lists for the two offices are similar, they are not the same.

Deaconing is not training wheels for eldering. It is a different office with different aims requiring, in many cases, different gifts. To take just one example, a man could lack the ability to teach—and therefore be unfit for eldership (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9)—and yet nonetheless be a truly spectacular deacon.

So, can Deacon Peter pursue pastoral ministry? Of course, but that should not be *why* he’s a deacon. Every shepherd must first be a servant, yes, but not every servant is meant to become a formal shepherd. Diaconal service is too significant—too glorious—to be a mere stepping-stone toward anything else.

## **2. Toolbox Terrance**

*“You’re good at fixing things. They should make you a deacon.”*

Many days, Pastor Jim is glad to have Terrance in the church. Terrance is a successful general contractor who may own more tools than the rest of the small church combined. What did Jim do when the church water heater broke three winters ago? He called Terrance. When the HVAC system sputtered out on that blistering Saturday in June? He called Terrance.

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There is seemingly nothing Terrance can't find a way to fix. When it comes to tending the church's building and grounds, his know-how is unmatched.

Wouldn't Terrance make an ideal deacon? Not so fast. I haven't yet told you whether he's a mature believer. A deacon is far more than someone who knows his way around Home Depot. Does he know his way around his Bible?

### 3. Spreadsheet Sam

*"Our church budget is a mess; we're looking at another financial shortfall and don't have any clear income projections for the next fiscal year. Why don't we make Sam a deacon—doesn't he fix people's money problems for a living?"*

Sam's weekday-morning routine is not complicated: he wakes up, brews some coffee, and checks the market before hopping into the shower and heading to work at his financial-planning firm. On Sundays, it's not uncommon for church members to gingerly approach him for some casual financial advice. When it comes to shrewd economic sense, Sam is unrivaled in the church.

Wouldn't Sam make an ideal deacon? Again, not so fast. I haven't yet told you whether he's a mature believer. Spreadsheet wizardry is a welcome skill, but it's not sufficient for holding an office in God's home (1 Tim. 3:15).

### 4. Corporate Cliff

*"Seminaries may teach ancient languages, bless their heart, but they can't teach executive skills. What this church really needs are some decisive deacons with business sense."*

Cliff has been a member at Pinehill Community Church for thirty years and has served as a deacon for almost twenty. Around the time he joined the church he started a company in his basement; now it operates out of a skyscraper downtown. It's no secret Cliff has done well for himself in the marketplace. He's got scores of employees and decades of business savvy.

Isn't Cliff an ideal deacon? Once more, not so fast. I haven't yet told you whether he's a mature believer. Executive-leadership experience can be a serious asset, but it's no indication of spiritual fitness.

## **5. Veto Vinnie**

*“What's the point of being deacons if we're just 'yes men'? Of course, I tell Pastor Dave how it is—who else will? Besides, I only want to keep him humble. Last thing we need is a puffed-up pastor.”*

Deacon Vinnie is nothing if not a contrarian. He's not trying to make Pastor Dave's life miserable, though he often succeeds. He has simply taken it upon himself to keep the pastor grounded. Frankly, Vinnie doesn't want much about the church to change, but he can smell the desire for innovation wafting from the pastor's office. Just last week, Dave was “dreaming” of starting some pastoral internship and—*voilà!* *just like that!*—ending two longtime church programs in order to fund it.

Vinnie likes to carefully bubble-wrap his complaints. “Some people are talking” is a favorite. (It's important Pastor Dave knows it's not just Vinnie's concern.)

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Isn't Vinnie an ideal deacon? I think we can agree he's not.

### 6. Pseudo-Elder Steve

*“Welcome to First Baptist Church, where the pastors say things and the deacons run things. (Seriously, though, if you want to get something important done around here, you’ve got to convince those deacons.)”*

Steve sits on the board of a few organizations; none gratifies him more than serving as a deacon at First Baptist. He loves the congregation and cares deeply about its long-term health. Steve is fine with the pastor leading the way on spiritual things—a paper hanging in his office claims he mastered divinity, after all—but it's the deacons' job to oversee everything else, right?

This sort of approach is not rare. I think of how one pastor-friend described to me the mindset he inherited in his church: “Basically, elders and deacons have separate but equal spheres of authority: elders govern the ‘spiritual’; deacons govern the ‘physical.’ What does this mean practically? Deacons can’t dictate what elders do with spiritual matters, since that’s their lane; and elders can’t dictate what deacons do with pragmatic matters, since that’s *their* lane.”

When deacons start to function either as leading shepherds over the whole congregation, or as a board of directors overseeing various staff and committees, the Bible’s job description for deacons has become blurred. Further, any structure that encourages deacons to function as a counterweight to the pastor or elders—a second house of legislature to “check

and balance” pastoral decisions—has overstepped its biblical bounds.<sup>15</sup> Though this may not have been the intention, far too often it is the effect.

## TWO CAVEATS

At this point I want to be careful to acknowledge a couple of things. First, the intent behind this pseudo-elder/executive-board setup is rarely adversarial—it’s rarely some powerplay to

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<sup>15</sup> This model remains especially common in the Southern Baptist Convention—America’s largest Protestant denomination, representing more than forty-seven thousand churches—despite decades of internal critique. Writing to Southern Baptists in the mid-twentieth century, Robert Naylor warned, “There is a ‘board’ complex and a general feeling that deacons are ‘directors’ of the church. Nothing could be farther from the Baptist genius or the New Testament plan” (Robert E. Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon: From a Pastor with a Special Heart for Deacons* [Nashville: B&H, 1955], 3). Howard Foshee, in his influential 1975 book *Now That You’re a Deacon*, writes: “As a new deacon, you must understand that you have not been elected to an ‘official board’ to exercise authority in the life of the church. The office of deacon is not an office of authority but of service” (Howard B. Foshee, *Now That You’re a Deacon* [Nashville: B&H, 1975], 13). Likewise, Henry Webb’s *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church*—probably the most influential Southern Baptist book on deacons in the past forty years—details what will occur in a mature church: “The deacons will reject the role of the board of directors who are ultimately in charge of running everything, including telling the pastor what to do” (Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church*, rev. ed. [Nashville: 1980; repr., B&H, 2001], 61).

How, though, did this unhelpful model originate? Webb envisions the scene: “The board role did not begin as a power grab on the part of the deacons. Possibly one hundred and fifty to two hundred years ago a couple of church members came out of a church house, one saying to the other: ‘Ah, that was tough. I’m not sure I enjoy those business meetings. We have to discuss things that sometimes we differ on and sometimes we argue about. I think it would be great if we just asked the deacons to decide those things and tell us what we ought to do.’ Thus was founded the board of directors approach to deacon ministry. There are two problems with the board role for deacons. The first problem is that the people are giving away a responsibility that they have no right to give away. The second problem is the deacons accept that responsibility. I think that the deacons accept that responsibility with good intentions, thinking they are serving the congregation. However, deacons are not really serving their congregations when they accept a controlling board role” (111). Additionally, Mark Dance, former executive editor of LifeWay’s *Deacon Magazine*, remarks, “Some deacons assume a more supervisory role than a support role. [This began to happen over a century ago] when some churches began adopting a secular board model. This has unfortunately led to an unbiblical role-reversal with the office of pastor. Instead of washing his feet, this model encourages deacons to hold the pastor’s feet to the fire” (Mark Dance, personal correspondence, March 31, 2020).

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neutralize the pastor. If anything, the model is simply meant to capitalize on different strengths. And the Bible *does* point to a clear division of labor between pastors and deacons, which we'll explore in coming chapters. Their offices are not the same.

Second, some of us who believe the pseudo-elder/executive-board model falls short of God's design need to face the music: this configuration is often downstream from emergency situations in which a church's deacons were left scrambling for solutions and stepped up to fill a leadership vacuum in the wake of another departed pastor. To be sure, some churches have a revolving door of pastors because the deacons are insufferable. Still, what often occurs is a new pastor arrives—armed to the hilt with new energy! new vision! new initiatives!—only to become another episode in a very old series. Conflict arises. Eventually the pastor leaves. People assume he left for greener pastures. And who stays? Who always stays? The deacons. It's natural that a certain authority would accrue to the church's living furniture.

Many deacons who are stuck in unhelpful models are godly saints, doing their best to serve churches they've faithfully loved. Yes, I hope to convince them (you?) that there's a better way. Stay tuned. I simply wish to sound this note from the outset, because I mean it: deacon, if you haven't grasped for power but have risen to take responsibility in situations of unstable leadership, I am grateful for you.

## CAVALRY OF SERVANTS

Whether the role of deacons in your church has been wrongly inflated or wrongly reduced, the solution is not to swing from one extreme to another, but to restore deacons to their in-

tended biblical purpose and irreplaceable biblical role. Deacons are not the church's spiritual council of directors, nor the executive board to whom the pastor-CEO answers. They are the cavalry of servants, deputized to execute the elders' vision by coordinating various ministries. Deacons are like a congregation's Special Ops force, carrying out unseen assignments with fortitude and joy.

If you want to find a qualified deacon, don't look at his garage to see how many tools he has. Don't look at his financial portfolio to see how many investments he has. Don't look at his company to see how many employees he has. Look first at his attitude, his character, his life. Is he eager to listen, or is he angling to be heard? Is he humble and flexible, or does he always insist on his own way? Does he covet status, or does he yearn to serve? Gratefully, we don't have to improvise diaconal qualifications—the Bible provides them plainly; we'll examine them in chapter 3.

The Nazis were threatened by those Dutch deacons because of their gladhearted service and lionhearted faith. Those Roman emperors weren't big fans of deacons, either. And no wonder: Satan hates deacons and has sought to sideline them for two thousand years. Inconveniently for him, though, an omnipotent God loves them. The office of deacon was his invention, designed for the harmony and happiness of his people and the advancement of his kingdom.

And we see its first flickers in the New Testament's first church.



## HOW CAN DEACONS MOBILIZE SERVICE IN THE CHURCH?

Deacons are essential to a church's health—yet confusion abounds regarding their biblical job description. What's their God-given role in a local congregation and how do they relate to the church's overall mission?

In this short book, Matt Smethurst makes the case that deacons are model servants called to meet tangible needs, organize and mobilize acts of service, preserve the unity of the flock, and support the ministry of the elders. Clearing away common misconceptions, Smethurst offers practical guidance for deploying deacons and helping churches to flourish.

“If I could go back and pick one book to prepare for the onslaught of ministerial challenges our church has faced this year, it would be this one.”

**BOBBY SCOTT**, Copastor, Community of Faith Bible Church, South Gate, California

“My deepest concern in books on church polity is that the author would make his case based on solid Bible exposition, not denominational tradition or personal opinion. Smethurst has done this well. With clear structure and striking insight, he recaptures the Bible's intention for deacons.”

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“The church has long needed this decidedly biblical, highly readable, and very practical book. *Deacons* should long remain the standard text in both the local church and the academy.”

**MALCOLM B. YARNELL III**, Research Professor of Theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Teaching Pastor, Lakeside Baptist Church, Granbury, Texas

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DEACONS / CHURCH RESOURCES

