

BOOK REVIEW

The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy

by Cornelis Van Dam

Reformation Heritage Books, 2017

Reviewed by David Nakhla, Administrator, OPC Committee on Diaconal Ministries

Despite being one of the two (or three) offices in Christ's church that we who are Presbyterian or Reformed believe are established by Scripture, the role of the deacon is often misunderstood in our circles today. I suspect that many deacons struggle to understand the scope and breadth of the work associated with the office to which they have been ordained. Dr. Cornelis Van Dam, emeritus professor of Old Testament at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario, addresses this in his new book, "The Deacon," a fitting complement to his 2009 book, "The Elder."

Van Dam's mature and balanced presentation of the subject is refreshing. It soon becomes evident to the reader that his material has been very thoroughly researched. Not only does he cite numerous Scripture passages (approximately 190 from 28 Old Testament books and 170 from 23 New Testament books), he also references many books and articles related to the various topics he covers. His comprehensive research has provided a number of resources that may be useful to the reader who wants to explore any particular topic further. Each chapter begins with an introduction that orients the reader to the topic, and concludes with a concise summary that often includes a clear segue into the next chapter.

The book is well organized with a chronological flow. It begins with the responsibility of God's people to care for the poor in the Old Testament, moves on to Christ's teachings about the poor and the apostles' establishment of the office of deacon, continues through early church history and the re-establishment of the office of deacon during the Reformation, and concludes by looking at how the various manifestations of the office of deacon are carried out in Reformed and Presbyterian churches today. Along the way, Van Dam expands upon certain topics as they arise. For instance, when covering the qualifications for deacons in I Timothy 3, he discusses whether or not female deacons are biblical, and how to understand what is meant by the "enrollment" of widows aged sixty or older in I Timothy 5.

A highlight of the book is Van Dam's detailed history of the ministry of mercy, which began long before the office of deacon was instituted by the apostles in Acts 6. Van Dam explains that ministry to the poor, weak, and afflicted was embedded in the law that God gave his people in the Old Testament, and was the responsibility of all the children of God. It was to serve as a reflection of the compassion that the Lord had on Israel in its affliction.

Most will agree with Van Dam that the ordination of the seven by the laying on of hands in Acts 6 is properly understood to establish the office of deacon. But what happened to the office of deacon after the closing of the canon? This part of the book was an eye-opener to

this reader!

During the years of the bishops and the centralization of ecclesiastical hierarchy in the early church, the diaconate lost its responsibility for the ministry of mercy. At that time, serving as a deacon was seen as a stepping stone towards reaching the priesthood, and giving to the needy was considered a means of meriting God's favor. Van Dam explains how the Reformation brought about "a renewed biblical vision for the office of deacon and worked to restore that office to its original task of helping the poor" (p.101).

Van Dam dedicates a chapter to the topic of "Women and the Diaconate," contrasting the reasons that women apparently served as deacons at certain times in the past with the current cultural reasons (feminism and women's rights movements) that this is debated today. He discusses what Calvin intended when he suggested the notion of a "second- rank deacon in the form of un-ordained widows." Van Dam concludes that, while "there is no biblical warrant for the ordination of women . . . a church has considerable freedom in enlisting women's help in the diaconate." (p.130)

The fourth and final section of the book is a factual and practical look at the office of deacon in Presbyterian and Reformed churches today, covering such topics as deacons' ordination, length of service, and relationship to the session or consistory. He suggests ways in which deacons can be equipped for service by means of special training. Regarding the diaconal offering, Van Dam helps his readers think through the touchy subject of whether or not Scripture mandates that Christians today should tithe.

Van Dam brings clarity to the roles that the family, the church community, and the state play in meeting needs. He introduces the concept of diaconal visitation and provides specific pointers for ministry to the unemployed, the sick, the elderly, the bereaved, the disabled, etc.

I was very encouraged by his recommendation that deacons serve proactively by providing pre-marital counseling on stewardship, or sponsoring stewardship conferences for the church or community. He also presents a good balance between the deacon's obligations to those within the congregation and those outside.

I commend this book especially to those who serve as deacons or who train deacons. A recurring theme in the book is that the primary objective of the ministry of mercy is to remove impediments that prevent people from sharing in the joy of deliverance that ought to characterize those who have been set free – set free to serve God and their neighbor. May this book lead Christ's church to grow in its appreciation for the gift of deacons as they help us in our spiritual journey.