



The Diaconate

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CURRENT ISSUE: THE WORK OF THE DEACON

August-September 2017

From the Editor

The spiritual nature of diaconal ministry is often overlooked or underestimated. Recent OPC deacons summits have helped emphasize this important biblical theme. Deacon Carl Carlson, who has attended several of those and been a deacon for a number of years, brings his experience to bear on his description of the office, its several tasks, and the details of diaconal ministry. Don't miss "The Spiritual Nature of the Office of Deacon."

On the same topic, David Nakhla reviews Cornelis Van Dam's recent book, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy* in order to provide a more comprehensive follow up on our theme of diaconal ministry.

Denominational historian John Muether brings us the seventh in the series of ten Reformed confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism. Culminating in our own Westminster Confession of Faith, this chronological treatment reminds us of the rich confessional tradition out of which Westminster grew, and the consequent richness of the doctrinal standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. We have much to be grateful for in this five hundredth anniversary year of Luther's shot across the papal bow.

T. David Gordon reviews Keith Houston's *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time*. This is an eloquent apologia for the enduring technology of the codex. No batteries, no distractions, a technology that concentrates the mind.

Danny Olinger's review article, "Mencken in Machen's World," on D.G. Hart's *Damning Words: The Life and Religious Times of H. L. Mencken* raises the intriguing question: why would anyone write a biography of a very non-religious man in a series titled Library of Religious Biography, "a series of original biographies on important religious figures throughout American and British history"? Olinger provides the answer. You may be surprised at what Machen and Mencken agreed upon.

Then D.G. Hart reviews Crawford Gribben's *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*. As I consider the sixteen volumes of Owen's works, averaging nearly five hundred pages each, on my study shelf, I marvel with Hart and Gribben that John Owen achieved so much in such an academically, pastorally, and politically busy life. Gribben justly names him "the genius of English Puritanism."

Finally, our poem by Richard Crashaw, shows the influence of George Herbert on Crashaw's sacred poetry. His *Steps to the Temple* (1646) are a tribute to Herbert's genius

and an exhibition of his own. The son of a Puritan preacher, Crashaw builds on the influence of the great metaphysical poets of his day, climbing to the heights of heaven on the ladder of Elizabethan English.

One of the delights of my editing labors is the reflective time I take each month to choose a poem. One excellent source is *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (Oxford, 1940) chosen and edited by Lord David Cecil. His introduction is very informative and his selections, ranging from 1290 to 1930, are sagacious.

The cover this issue is a picture I took of a poor neighborhood in St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands in 2009.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “If You Are a Deacon.” (Nathan Trice) 23 (2014): 72–78.
- “On Fasting, Death, and Joy: Reflections on My Upcoming Ordination.” (Hugh Lynn) 23 (2014): 78–80.
- “Are Deacons Members of the Session?” (R. Dean Anderson, Jr.) 2:4 (Oct. 1993): 75–78.
- “Balancing Sensitivity and Stewardship in Diaconal Assistance.” (the deacons of Franklin Square OPC) 7:3 (Jul. 1998): 67.
- “The Biblical Foundation of the Diaconate.” (George W. Knight III) 5:3 (Jul. 1996): 66–68.
- “Biblical Qualifications for Deacons, Part 1.” (Archibald Alexander Allison) 6:1 (Jan. 1997): 4–9.
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- “Deacons and/or Trustees?” (Roger Schmurr) 4:1 (Jan. 1995): 20–22.
- “The Ministry of Mercy for Today [part 1].” (Peter Y. de Jong) 3: 3 (Jul. 1994): 53–58.
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- “Pointers for Elders and Deacons, Part 2.” 2:4 (Oct. 1993): 79–85.
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- “Some Old Testament Roots and Their Continuing Significance.” (C. Van Dam) 1:1 (Jan. 1992): 14–21.
- “A Training Program for Deacons” (William Shishko) 6:3 (Jul. 2000): 62–70.

Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Servant Work

The Spiritual Nature of the Office of Deacon

by Carl Carlson

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heav'nly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Every Sunday, during morning worship, the saints of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church sing the doxology after giving their tithes and offerings to the Lord. Additionally, one Sunday each month, they make deacons' offerings immediately following the Lord's Supper. We can readily overlook the intentional nature of taking these offerings during worship. After all, we could just as easily mail checks directly to the treasurer or initiate a regular automatic withdrawal from our bank accounts.

But, before we treat our financial obligations to God as if they were a utility bill, we would be wise to consider the importance of our giving as part of worship and how this has a profound impact on how we view the nature of the diaconate. The deacons are charged with managing both these offerings in order to take care of the temporal affairs of the church. Given that the foundation of diaconal duty is bound up in the offerings that are an act of worship, their use must fulfill God's calling for the church: to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. The implication of this is that all financial decisions of the church must support this calling. Given the diaconate's role in managing these funds, it is incumbent upon the deacons to appreciate the spiritual nature of their duties and undertake them as such.

So, how does the deacon approach his office? He recognizes that while his duties may be temporal in nature, they cannot be fulfilled properly without understanding that the very mission of the church undergirds all that he does.

1. The Office

When considering Acts chapter 6 as a foundational text for the office of deacon, it is important to recognize how Acts 2 through 5 set the tone. The apostles are preaching Christ and performing miracles in his name. The growth of the church is breathtaking, with three thousand baptized in one day (2:41); more are added daily (2:47). As the church grows the Sanhedrin becomes concerned. Admonition, arrest, and beatings follow, but the apostles carry on with their mission. They admonish the Council, "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29). Meanwhile, the believers devote themselves to the church, including combining their wealth to help those in need (2:45).

We can imagine a large congregation—moved by the teaching, signs, and wonders of

the apostles—demonstrating their thankfulness for God’s grace by being generous with their own possessions. The connection to Deuteronomy 15:7–11 could not be clearer:

If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, “The seventh year, the year of release is near,” and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.”

The deacons enter against this backdrop. The role of these men is to allow the apostles to fulfill their duties in teaching and praying. Right away, the deacon has a purpose: free the apostles from tasks that take away from their primary duties. The immediate need was for men who could administer the daily distribution for the widows. Perhaps the deacons even took over the task of accepting the offerings that were previously laid at the apostles feet (5:37).

But, these first deacons are not just administrators of a social security office. They are fulfilling a duty established in the Law, rooted in the Ten Commandments. The congregation’s offerings are freewill, not compulsory. The apostles take care to instruct the congregation to choose men of high character with appropriate spiritual qualifications. The men chosen were “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (6:3). Stephen sets an example of the deacon’s character by being a defender of the faith to the point of martyrdom.

The new deacons are effective. In 6:7 we learn that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

As we move along in church history, Paul’s church plants are instructive. He did not record a book of order that we can follow. But, when we study his ministry both in the book of Acts and through his epistles, a framework of church government with elders (bishops, overseers, presbyters) and deacons (servants) becomes evident. Paul echoes Acts 6 when he lays out the qualifications for deacons, emphasizing character over skills or abilities. Paul provides more details than the broad “full of the Spirit and wisdom” from Acts 6. In 1 Timothy 3:8–13 he instructs:

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith

that is in Christ Jesus.

There is much here to consider, but a good summary would be that a deacon's life must show evidence that it is formed by the gospel. In order for the deacon to be a good servant of the Lord, he must show that he is obedient to him.

2. The Duties

With spiritual *qualifications* as the background, it is incumbent on the deacon to see his office being fulfilled by the performance of spiritual *duties*. It is here that we encounter the biblical concept of stewardship. Stewardship is a key concept in the Christian life. We are called to be good stewards of all that God has given us.

The "Cultural Mandate" of Genesis 1:28 could just as easily have been named the "Stewardship Mandate." It makes clear that mankind is to subdue and rule over the earth but it also implies that ownership is still God's. He hasn't gifted it to us to dispense as we wish. We have been given possession of his gifts to use them only as he directs. He alone sets the requirements for how we may use his goods and his world. All wealth and possessions that God puts under our oversight are to be used for his glory. Consider these three passages from Matthew:

6:19–21 Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

6:31–33 Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

16:24–26 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"

Jesus is telling his disciples to make choices. Is their master God or money? Is their guide in life faith or anxiety? Is their ultimate place in this world or the next? These are powerful contrasts that show us what a good steward does with his wealth, how he makes life decisions, and what is most important to him.

Stewardship is governed by the Ten Commandments. When we summarize them by saying, "Love the LORD with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself," we have a concise statement of how our lives are to exhibit good stewardship. But, how do people hear about God's demands for stewardship? Through the church. The first deacons freed the apostles so that the church could fulfill its central duty to teach and pray.

Stewardship is given a central role in the life of the believer, and it is the deacon's role to promote good stewardship. As the Word is taught from our pulpits, faith liberates

the believer to a new life of obedience. Out of obedience good stewardship naturally flows. The deacons are inspired by the same teaching to stimulate obedience in everyone. They are the lead stewards of the congregation. As the elders call the congregation to good works, the deacons channel these efforts to the particular needs of the congregation: cash offerings to provide assistance where needed, in-kind help where appropriate, physical work to care for the building, calling upon individual talents and abilities where they can be used. In short, the deacon must be a good steward of the congregation's money and talents.

3. The Details

The deacon's duties can be divided between two main areas: church financial management and ministry of mercy. In the carrying out of duties in both categories, exercising biblical stewardship is central. If the deacons do not support their work with sound principles of stewardship they will be prone to poor judgment, missteps, omissions, and confusion.

Financial Management

Under session oversight, the deacons have authority over the financial management of the congregation. This means managing both the congregation's cash and assets. For most churches the primary asset is its building and all the furnishings, equipment, and supplies in it. Even churches without a building may have assets of considerable value. An effective diaconate harnesses the value of all these assets in order to ensure that the mission of the church is accomplished.

For example, the purchase or construction budget of a building must take into account the congregation's ability not only to pay the mortgage, but to have sufficient funds remaining to pay a pastor and fund all the ministries of the church. The building's purpose is to have a place for the church to meet in order to worship God. Without a pastor to teach and preach, it is useless. What good is a building with no room in the budget for a full-time pastor? Decisions for building upgrades require the same scrutiny. Why fund expensive upgrades to furnishings if it takes away from the ability to fund the presbytery's home missions fund?

This logic drills down into the details of yearly budgeting. The line by line minutiae of the budget is the diaconate's domain. The details of budgeting are a statement of a congregation's priorities of stewardship. The deacons must take their role as stewards with all due care. All areas of spending, however indirectly, must come to bear on the church's mission of proclaiming and spreading the gospel. Questionable items must be considered thoroughly so that unnecessary spending is eliminated and the funds are used more efficiently for God's glory. If the diaconate takes this role lightly, the church can easily be led astray in all kinds of worldly ways.

Ministry of Mercy

The diaconal mercy ministry is affected profoundly by stewardship. Mercy ministry should be carefully dispensed in Christ's name. The deacons must balance delicately the principle of Matthew 25:45 ("as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me") with the need to be discerning. This is a difficult task. It is no wonder that Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 demand that deacons exhibit strong character. Without it, they

will wither under fire.

The OPC has spent considerable effort over the past several years offering training and materials to deacons that emphasize principles of mercy ministry. One main theme coming out of these efforts is the division of diaconal aid into three main categories: 1) response to crisis or disaster; 2) helping a person or family become self-sufficient; 3) helping a person or family develop plans to deal with future crises or disasters without the need for diaconal aid.

This is, in essence, teaching biblical stewardship. Supporting the temporal focus of diaconal aid is a foundation of spiritual ministry: encouraging the person or family to address the stewardship issues that all sinners face while recognizing that material want and financial hardship exacerbate those challenges. This is a recognition that it can be “easy” to be a good steward when you are not facing financial hardship, but also that financial hardship can be caused by poor stewardship. Again, wisdom on the part of the deacons is essential here. These are not issues that can be dealt with in short meetings or by emails. The deacons are called here to dig deep, spend much time, and devote themselves to the people’s lives.

As the deacons encounter mercy ministry opportunities, they must look for and encourage good stewardship from the potential recipient. The deacon’s fund can be a powerful tool for good or ill, so cash or other assistance cannot be distributed without taking the time to assess the recipient’s level of stewardship. If the potential recipient of the diaconal aid wastes his gifts, the church rightly expects that he will be denied funds that would merely subsidize his misuse. Wisdom here is essential, and who has it but a deacon who has been instilled with biblical stewardship?

By exploring and probing the level of stewardship of a potential recipient, the deacons are testing the person. While the deacons are called to use the means of creation to relieve suffering, they have a more urgent duty to fulfill before bringing temporal relief: guarding against trusting the means of creation over trusting the power of God. The resurrection comes to mind here. Fear of the world shows lack of faith in the power of the resurrection (death does not win). Ministry of mercy must reflect resurrection glory, not worldly fear. We cannot act as if death wins.

This ties into another purpose of mercy ministry: repentance. While teaching stewardship is a task more appropriately administered to members, encountering mercy opportunities with non-members is an occasion for witnessing. While we may never come to know what effect our contact has had on someone, we must always act with a call to repentance in mind.

Jesus spent a great deal of his earthly ministry performing miracles of healing. While a cursory look at these works could leave one thinking that Jesus merely had people’s basic health in mind, it is important to remember that Jesus was performing them so that they would know that he was their Messiah and the kingdom was coming. Knowing this fact was to bring about repentance. We can make the same analogy to mercy ministry. We bring mercy in Christ’s name so that the recipient will know Christ’s love, admit their need of a savior, and repent. Deacons must also be as patient as Jesus. Many healing miracles did not produce repentance and neither will much diaconal aid. Luke 17:11–19 is instructive:

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as

he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

If a deacon finds that one of ten recipients of his church's mercy ministry repents and confesses Jesus, he should rejoice that his work has done what he intended, praising God for his saving grace in at least one sinner.

Conclusion

The deacon is marked by strong character combined with a servant heart. He gains biblical wisdom instilled by listening to the Word preached, studying the Word, and participating in training. Then he brings those things together in carrying out his duties to the church. He is not a mere business manager or case worker, but a steward of all the church's temporal gifts. He uses those gifts to enable those under his care to fulfill their chief and highest end: glorifying and enjoying God.

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ServantHistory

Reformed Confessions: The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

by John R. Muether

When Frederick III (or Frederick the Pious), elector of the Holy Roman Empire from the Palatinate, came to Reformed convictions in 1561, he removed Lutheran leaders from the capital city, Heidelberg, and replaced them with Calvinistic pastors and professors, including Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus. The two were traditionally credited with co-authoring the Heidelberg Catechism (when they were twenty-six and twenty-eight years old, respectively), although the consensus of recent scholarship is that the older Ursinus was the primary author and Olevianus played a secondary role.

The “triple knowledge” of “guilt-grace-gratitude” divides the catechism into three sections of different lengths. The first section outlines the predicament of human misery: “We are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil,” (Q. 8). The longest section on grace follows, describing redemption and its benefits by following the structure of the Apostles’ Creed. Gratitude provides instruction on thanking God for his deliverance. The third use of the law is affirmed in the placing of the Decalogue (along with the Lord’s Prayer) in this third section, as guides for the Christian’s life of gratitude.

The Heidelberg throughout exhibits an experiential, autobiographical character, with questions phrased in the second person (Q. 1, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”) and answers in the first person (A. 1, “That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ . . .”). Like the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg was designed as a statement of faith particularly under conditions of persecution. Its kinder, gentler Calvinism largely avoided the polemics of its age. One notable exception was question 80, inserted at Frederick’s instance, which dismissed the Roman Catholic mass as a “condemnable idolatry.”

Within a year the Heidelberg Catechism was translated into Dutch and Latin, and soon after in French and English. Although Lutheranism was restored in the Palatinate by Frederick’s son and successor, Lewis, in 1576, the Synod of Dort established the catechism as a confessional symbol of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands in 1619, and it came to North America through Dutch Reformed and German Reformed immigration. After the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and the *Imitation of Christ*, it is considered the most widely circulated book in the world. Ursinus’s lectures on the catechism, edited by his successor, David Pareus, became a standard text in Reformed theology for centuries.

The catechism not only instructed the young, but also found a role in Reformed pulpits. To facilitate its use in catechetical preaching, the catechism’s 129 questions and answers were divided into fifty-two “Lord’s Days,” allowing it to be covered within one year, typically in the preaching at a congregation’s second Sunday service.

Philip Schaff said of the Heidelberg, “It combines Calvin’s strength and depth without his severity, Melancthon’s cordiality and warmth without his indecision, and Zwingli’s simplicity and clearness without his cool sobriety.”¹

An Excerpt: Q/A 26

Q. What do you believe when you say: “I believe in God the Father, almighty, maker of heaven and earth?”

A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 who out of nothing created heaven and earth
 and everything in them,
 who still upholds and rules them
 by his eternal counsel and providence,
is my God and Father
 because of Christ his Son.

I trust him so much that I do not doubt
 he will provide
 whatever I need
 for body and soul,
and he will turn to my good
 whatever adversity he sends me
 in this sad world.

He is able to do this because he is almighty God;
he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

The Sequence of Confessions

Sixty-Seven Articles of Ulrich Zwingli (1523)
Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)
First Helvetic Confession (1536)
French Confession of Faith (1559)
Scots Confession (1560)
Belgic Confession of Faith (1561)
Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
Second Helvetic Confession (1566)
Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619)
Westminster Confession & Catechisms (1643)

John R. Muether *serves as a ruling elder at Reformation Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Oviedo, Florida, dean of libraries at Reformed Theological Seminary, and historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.*

¹ Quoted in W. Robert Godfrey, *Reformed Sketches: Insights into Luther, Calvin, and the Confession* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 122.

ServantReading

The Deacon by *Cornelis Van Dam*

by David P. Nakhla

The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy, by Cornelis Van Dam. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017, xiii + 253 pages, \$18.00, paper.

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 twenty-eight Old Testament books and 170 from twenty-three 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 1 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 1 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" (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" (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.

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ServantReading

The Book *by Keith Houston*

by T. David Gordon

The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time, by Keith Houston. W. W. Norton & Company, 2016, xvii + 428.

Both reviewers and readers of Houston's *The Book* will be tempted to compare it to Elizabeth Eisenstein's 1980 two-volume *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*; and each will quickly get over the temptation. Eisenstein's volume was political and economic in nature (concerned primarily with the sociological changes associated with and influenced by the industrialized production of printed books); Houston's is technological in nature (concerned primarily with the various inventions and developments in the history of the making of books). Eisenstein was primarily interested in the fifteenth century (a synchronic study); Houston is interested in the over-four-millennia period that brought us to our current place (a diachronic study). Each is *exhaustive*; only Eisenstein was *exhausting*. I was (pleasantly) surprised at how interesting Houston's narrative is, almost embarrassed at how hard it was to put down. Students of human civilization will enjoy Houston's book, even if (prior to now) they had no particular interest in book-formation, because his tracing of the series of human actions—mistakes, intrigue, good fortune (and bad), good intentions (and worse), hard work, sloth, obsequiousness, ambition, greed, and more—has nearly the insight of a Tolstoy novel, with little of the dreariness.

The historian David McCullough has often written about or around (non-) discoveries or (non-) inventions: the Johnstown flood, the Panama Canal, the Brooklyn Bridge, American painting and sculpture, etc., and yet has woven throughout such narratives many fascinating sub-narratives of human interest. Houston does the same, choosing *The Book* as the organizing meta-narrative. In the process, he appears to have as much fun as an uncle does in inventing a bed-time story for nephews and nieces. The reader encounters wryness where he expected dryness, play where he expected gray:

In 2009, in an apparent attempt to carry out the world's most ironic act of censorship, Amazon silently deleted certain editions of George Orwell's *1984* from their owners' Kindles as part of a copyright dispute, and news outlets continue to report on the plight of readers whose e-books have vanished without warning. . . . pluck a physical book off your bookshelf now. Find the biggest, grandest hardback you can. Hold it in your hands. Open it and hear the rustle of paper and the crackle of glue. Smell it! Flip through the pages and feel the breeze on your face. An e-book imprisoned behind the glass of a table or computer screen is an inert thing by comparison. (xvi)

If book-lovers are not already interested, consider the concluding words from Houston's introduction:

This book is about the history and the making and the *bookness* of all those books, the weighty, complicated, inviting artifacts that humanity has been writing, printing, and binding for more than fifteen hundred years. It is about the book that you know when you see it. (xvii, paraphrasing Justice Potter Stewart)

My own interest in Houston's work was and is four-fold: I am an academic, whose most frequent companions are books; I am a (Protestant) practitioner and clergyman of the religion that the *Qur'an* calls "the People of the Book;" I teach an introduction to Media Ecology—the discipline that studies the influence of various media on individual consciousness and on social structures and behavior; and I am an impenitent example of what C. S. Lewis referred to as a "literary type" of individual. If you are any of these, Houston is for you; if you are not, why are you reading a book review anyway?

In fifteen chapters, Houston gives thorough, detailed, yet engaging coverage of: the invention of papyrus, parchment, and paper; and the development of writing and alphabet(s), illuminated manuscripts, woodcuts, copperplate printing, lithography, photography, papyrus scrolls and wax tablets, the codex, and book-binding. He identifies where many or most of the skeletons are, and what many or most of the competing claims are for who invented what (and when and where). Throughout, he resists the simplifications and self-congratulations that so many of us have been taught (and, in my case, have mistakenly *taught*). In the process, he challenges many of our prejudices, and not a few of our sensibilities:

Gutenberg was not the father of printing so much as its midwife. (114)

Papyrus's usefulness in bookmaking, in fact, was only one of the many forces that drove its journey: of equal, if not greater importance, were humanity's parallel obsessions with religion, war, and underpants. (56)

Though the *Qur'an* referred to Christians as "People of the Book," the crusaders burned books as readily as they did heretics. (56)

In 1719, de Réaumur regaled the French Royal Academy with an account of his travels to the New World, where he had observed wasps making papery nests out of chewed wood pulp. Might not these industrious insects be emulated in order to make real paper? (68)

[Correcting those who over-estimate the pious devotion of medieval scribes, such as this anonymous one]: Writing is excessive drudgery. . . . It crooks your back, it dims your sight, it twists your stomach and your sides. . . . Thank God, it will soon be dark. (166)

[Houston referred to the 1896 discovery of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri as] . . . one particular episode of archaeological dumpster-diving. (261)

Books are rectangular because cows, goats, and sheep are rectangular too. (312)

In addition to such striking language, Houston gives full, interesting, and nuanced accounts of many events with which we are already somewhat familiar, such as the making of papyrus, parchment, rag-based paper, wood-pulp paper, the development of ink, the several printing presses that antedated Gutenberg's (many readers will be surprised to learn that, between printing *Ars grammatica* and the *Bible*, Gutenberg printed two thousand indulgences for Pope Nicholas V), the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, etc.

The Book is itself sumptuously produced, and includes many pertinent and helpful illustrations, rich bibliographical annotations, and a helpful index. Any work of this size (sixty-five pages of notes) is bound to have an occasional small mistake,¹ but they are rare in this superb book.

Readers of *Ordained Servant* are already firm believers in God's providential dealings,² and most have already recognized how crucial that providence was when it culminated in the printing of Gutenberg's Bible, without which our great formative principle of *Sola Scriptura* would have made little practical sense. Houston's narrative, however, assists us in seeing how remarkable God's providence was for well over a millennium before Gutenberg's time (though Houston himself betrays no religious opinions at all). In fact, as a lifelong lover of books, and a lover and minister of the Holy Scriptures, I am inclined to think that this extraordinary narrative that culminated in the printing and widespread distribution of the Bible was not an "ordinary providence" at all, but an extraordinary one.

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¹ I happened to notice that when he mentioned the standard introduction, *The Birth of the Codex* (1954), he refers to "T. C. Roberts and C. R. Skeat," giving each of their initials to the other's surname.

² WCF 5:3: "God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure."

ServantReading

Mencken in Machen's World

A Review Article

by Danny E. Olinger

Damning Words: The Life and Religious Times of H. L. Mencken, by D.G. Hart. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016, xiv + 259 pages, \$14.04 Kindle, \$19.37.

Damning Words, D.G. Hart's religious biography of H.L. Mencken, does not fit the norm for the genre. Mencken, perhaps the most well-known American newspaperman and satirist of the first half of the twentieth century made no pretense of being religious. Mencken took prophet-like status among secular intellectuals as he warred against popular causes (sexual oppression, Prohibition, etc.) and superstitions (Christianity) prevalent in rural America. So disdainful was Mencken of faith in Christ that he named the final volume of his memoirs *Heathen Days*.

Andrew Ferguson, senior editor of the *Weekly Standard*, emphasized this angle from the start of his review of *Damning Words* in the December 14, 2016, issue of the *Wall Street Journal*. He wrote,

Everyone involved with “*Damning Words: The Life and Religious Times of H.L. Mencken*” seems to know it’s pretty wacky—publishing a book about Mencken in the Library of Religious Biography, “a series of original biographies on important religious figures throughout American and British history.”¹

Ferguson noted that series co-editor Mark Noll in his forward to the book asks why Hart would think anyone would be interested in a religious biography of Mencken. After listing Mencken's literary accomplishments in the first two pages of the introduction, Hart himself poses the question, “What does any of this have to do with religion? Why should Mencken qualify for entry in a series of religious biographies of prominent Americans?” (3). In Ferguson's judgment, Hart is not persuasive in supplying an answer. For all the book's virtues, particularly its charming writing and the author's knowledge of the subject, Ferguson concluded that Hart became enamored of Mencken as a literary figure and wanted to write a Mencken book.²

It is a fair question, and Ferguson wrote a fair review. But, for readers of D.G. Hart's writings on J. Gresham Machen, there are clues to his motivation. In his intellectual biography of Machen, *Defending the Faith*, Hart on his opening page established the post-World War I setting in America through the lens of Mencken. What Hart found intriguing was Mencken's belief that the whole Protestant project of refashioning Christianity in modern garb had failed. Mencken wrote, “What survives under the name of Christianity, above the stratum of the mob, is no more than a sort of Humanism with little more supernaturalism in it than you will find in

¹ Andrew Ferguson, “Poking the Ribs of Believers,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2016.

² *Ibid.*

mathematics or political economy.”³ Mencken the secularist echoed the verdict of Machen the Calvinist.

The connection between Mencken and Machen undoubtedly played a part in Hart’s motivation. Mencken wrote two memorable pieces about Machen in 1930 and 1937, but, as Hart writes, “to Mencken devotees, Machen is just one more obscure figure from the past” (6). For Machen devotees, however, Mencken provides historical context and a level of discernment for Machen and the Presbyterian Conflict. He might have loathed Machen’s Calvinistic beliefs, but he understood the import of Machen’s argument. Lose the authority of Scripture and the supernatural, and you lose historic Christianity. Upon Machen’s death, Mencken wrote:

[Modernists] have tried to get rid of all the logical difficulties of religion, and yet preserve a generally pious cast of mind. It is a vain enterprise. What they have left, once they have achieved their imprudent scavenging, is hardly more than a row of hollow platitudes, as empty [of] psychological force and effect as so many nursery rhymes. They may be good people and they may even be contented and happy, but they are no more religious than Dr. Einstein. Religion is something else again—in Henrik Ibsen’s phrase, something far more deep-down-giving and mudupbringing. Dr. Machen tried to impress that obvious fact upon his fellow adherents of the Geneva Mohammed. He failed—but he was undoubtedly right. (8)

Hart concludes that Mencken seemed to be able to tell the difference between serious and ephemeral forms of belief. This is the thread that Hart pursues in *Damning Words*. It is also why he believes that a religious treatise on Mencken is valuable.

Born on September 12, 1880, in Baltimore, Henry Louis Mencken was baptized into the Protestant Episcopal Church. The christening was not because of the faith of his parents, August and Anna, but because Anna believed it was a rite of passage in civilized society. When Henry was old enough to go on his own, August would send him off to Sunday School with the Methodists. August’s motivation was not that his son would grow in the knowledge of Christ, but that August would have a quiet time to nap.

At fourteen years old Mencken was confirmed on Palm Sunday 1895 at the Second English Lutheran Church. The Episcopal connection for the family had ended with the 1891 death of his paternal grandfather, Burkardt Mencken. The custom remained in the Mencken family, however, that the children were to join the church, even if, like Henry, they did not believe.

In 1899 August Mencken died, and Henry was free from family expectations. He did not want to be a part of the church; what he wanted was to be a newspaper writer. He was soon hired by the *Baltimore Morning Herald*. Hard working and ambitious, Mencken was soon writing around five thousand words a day for the paper. A few years later he started taking on editorial tasks and even found time to write books, including *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* published in 1908.

Mencken’s interest in Nietzsche was tied in part to Mencken’s desire to break the hold that he believed Christianity had on American culture. Nietzsche had argued that Christianity was untrue and degrading. Mencken would labor throughout his career to find scientific support for these philosophical contentions.

The same year that Mencken published his Nietzsche volume, he started writing for the literary magazine *Smart Set*. Through *Smart Set*, Mencken’s national reputation was

³ D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 2.

established. In 1913 he assumed the role of co-editor with George Jean Nathan. In their editorial policy, they wrote, “Both of us are opposed to all such ideas as come from the mob, and are polluted by stupidity: Puritanism, Prohibition, Comstockery, evangelical Christianity, tin-pot patriotism, the whole shame of democracy” (77).

Mencken’s mocking definition of Puritanism in 1917—“Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy”—is perhaps his most well-known epigram. The individual that embodied Puritanism for Mencken more than any other was Woodrow Wilson, the Presbyterian president who advocated the adoption of Prohibition. Wilson unwittingly helped to create the new era of American Puritanism where “the special business of forcing sinners to be good was taken away from preachers and put into the hands of layman trained in its technique and mystery, and there it remains” (93).

For Mencken the problem with mixing Christianity and politics to create right-thinkers often depended on a belief in the goodness of man. Hart writes:

Perhaps Mencken’s greatest objection to his Christian citizens was their optimism about human nature, a concern that ironically put him closer to Augustinian notions of depravity than his churchgoing opponents. Mencken observed perceptively that causes like Prohibition and Comstock depended on the “doctrine that virtue and ignorance were identical—that the slightest knowledge of sin was fatal to virtue.” Consequently, the way to prevent drunkenness was not through moderate consumption of alcohol, but through complete avoidance of it. (115)

Mencken’s view that men were inherently selfish, envious, and fearful of others had a resemblance to Calvinistic anthropology. According to Hart, the difference was “where the Calvinist saw such defects in all persons, Mencken attributed them overwhelmingly to rural folk; for him the city dwellers were superior” (124).

The 1925 John Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, allowed Mencken to extend his views regarding rural backwardness and urban enlightenment to evangelical Christianity and scientific knowledge, respectively. Mencken, who was friendly with Clarence Darrow and despised prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, attended the trial in person.⁴ Mencken encouraged Darrow to put Bryan on the witness stand. Bryan said, “They came here to try revealed religion. I am here to defend it” (136).

Hart also recounts Mencken’s observations about attending a week-long revival meeting headlined by Billy Sunday, “the celebrated American pulpit-clown.” Mencken reported that men came forward every evening, crying out for help against their sins. He did not see one woman come forward. He concluded that they had too much good sense.

By 1930 Mencken believed that the landscape for Christianity in America was shifting. There was less antagonism among Protestants. Christians were adopting the progressive spirit. He predicted a common American religion was coming soon, one part Wesleyan, the other part Roman Catholic.

Mencken continued to write about Christianity from the perspective of a skeptic throughout the rest of his career. He never fully recovered from a stroke in 1948, and died on January 28, 1956.

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⁴ Interestingly, in *Defending the Faith*, Hart writes that lead counsel William Jennings Bryan had requested in writing that J. Gresham Machen appear as an expert witness at the trial. Machen declined. See, Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 84–85.

ServantReading

John Owen and English Puritanism *by Crawford Gribben*

by Darryl G. Hart

John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat, by Crawford Gribben. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, xvi + 401 pages, \$60.94.

For most contemporary English-speaking Calvinists, John Owen is an unending source of wisdom and inspiration. In his biographical sketch of the English Puritan, John Piper justified his own admiration by quoting J. I. Packer, Roger Nicole, and Sinclair Ferguson. Packer wrote that “without Owen I might well have gone off my head or got bogged down in mystical fanaticism.” For Nicole, Owen was the greatest theologian of the English language, even superior to Jonathan Edwards, something that certainly caught Piper, the Edwards aficionado, off guard. And for Ferguson, “Owen’s penetrating exposition opened up areas of need in my own heart, but also correspondingly profound assurances of grace in Jesus Christ.” Not to be outdone, Piper could not help but be impressed by how many people wrote about Owen and praised him for his character. “When a man like this, under these circumstances,” Piper wrote, “is remembered and extolled for centuries for his personal holiness, we should listen.”

Readers will not receive the same impression from Crawford Gribben’s meticulous intellectual biography of Owen, though they may still come away singing (now in a minor key) the English Puritan’s praises. A professor of history at Queen’s University Belfast with great sympathies for Puritanism, Gribben’s purpose is to situate Owen in his cultural and political contexts. As an intellectual historian, Gribben knows that ideas have consequences, but as a social historian of ideas he also writes with the conviction that contexts have consequences for ideas. His attention to contexts extends even to book production. Gribben believes that the standard way most modern readers encounter Owen, namely, through the Banner of Truth collected works, distorts the ideas that the English theologian developed. For instance, volumes three and four of that edition produces under one title, *Of Communion with God*, six different treatises written at different times in Owen’s life. Such an arrangement is “misleading” (19). He writes to correct a tendency to make Owen’s theology into an abstraction.

Doing justice to the contexts of Owen’s life (1616–1683), however, is another question altogether. The theologian and pastor, born to an Anglican vicar, led anything but a remote or ivory-tower existence even if knowledge about his career comes mainly from published writings. Owen ministered and wrote at a time of great political and social upheaval in England. The fortunes of his ministerial career were bound up with the political struggles that saw Parliament go to war with Charles I and execute him for treason, and led England into its brief experiment with republicanism. Owen’s life

coincided with Puritanism's greatest success (at least politically) and its equally devastating defeat.

As a young man Owen served as chaplain to English nobility before coming to the attention of the House of Commons in the 1640s through his critique of Arminianism. Invitations to preach before Parliament led in 1646 to his meeting Oliver Cromwell who in turn enlisted Owen to serve as chaplain to English soldiers on a campaign to subdue Ireland. After the execution of the king, Owen was in regular contact with English officials whether in preaching to various political bodies or serving the Commonwealth as an advisor on its religious policy. Owen also received from Cromwell in 1651 an appointment as dean of Christ Church College at Oxford, which led to his post as vice chancellor of the university under Cromwell, arguably the crown jewel of Owen's posts. Throughout the 1650s Owen continued to work in close proximity with the government even while publishing widely on a range of theological topics. Once Cromwell died in 1658, Owen's fortunes shifted. Parliament restored the monarchy, and Owen was relegated to the role of a dissenting minister, and sometimes suspected of being a political troublemaker. That last phase of his career involved creating space for nonconformists in England's new religious establishment. All the while he continued to write at a feverish pace.

Imagine if Jonathan Edwards, while pastoring, served in the government of Boston, or if Charles Hodge, while teaching at Princeton, had also worked for President James Buchanan, and you have something of a picture of Owen's many-faceted responsibilities. Equally impressive is the way that Owen produced material on some of the most important of doctrinal subjects even while working in the context of very turbulent politics. Owen's achievement on this score is impressive.

The social history of ideas results in some remarkable coincidences. For instance, the sermons behind Owen's *Mortification of Sin* (1656) came while he was still vice-chancellor at Oxford when John Locke was a student, and while grieving the death of two sons. Six years later came *A Discourse concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition* (1662), a book that Owen needed to publish anonymously because of the religious policy that was to come later that year with the Act of Uniformity. Owen's defense of extemporaneous prayer was decidedly at odds and even a threat to political stability thanks to the return of the state church and the policy of liturgical uniformity. But at the very same time, Owen was writing in defense of the ecclesiastical establishment's rights, which seemed to be at odds with his own interest as a dissenting Protestant. These contexts suggest that Owen was engaged in a bit of self-fashioning throughout much of his career since his ability to preach and publish depended on his political fortunes. One last example from Owen's corpus is *The Doctrine of Justification* (1677)—a book written likely with a sense that the English Reformation was running out of steam and basic doctrines needed to be reaffirmed. During this time as well, Owen's health suffered and his chief work was preaching, pastoral care, and attention to family.

Gribben's book sometimes raises questions about how much context mattered to ideas. If Owen's theology shows no obvious references to his personal circumstances, can a historian conclude that context matters? More often than not, however, Gribben highlights how remarkable the theologian's accomplishments were considering how many responsibilities he had and how fragile his political standing was. The theme of defeat, as the subtitle indicates, makes Owen's accomplishments all the more impressive

since he continued to labor on even as he experienced an “enduring sense of failure” (271). The main insight that Gribben’s method yields is that Owen was “not a systematic thinker.” Instead, he treated themes individually and in great detail without necessarily keeping previous writing in mind. None of this takes away from Owen’s achievement. According to Gribben, Owen “emerges as the genius of English Puritanism—its preeminent thinker, and a formative influence on successive generations of evangelicals” (272). The author adds that Owen would likely have wanted his contribution to be a reform of the English churches, not an inspiration for contemporary evangelicalism. That said, Gribben gives even better reasons for esteeming Owen than those that prevail in Calvinist circles. Such theological insight forged in a context of political intrigue and personal adversity make Owen truly exceptional.

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Servant Poetry

Richard Crashaw (1613?–1649)

On Mr. G. Herbert's Book
intituled *The Temple of Sacred Poems, sent to a Gentlewoman*

Know you fair, on what you look;
Divinest love lies in this book,
Expecting fire from your eyes,
To kindle this his sacrifice.
When your hands untie these strings,
Think you've an angel by th' wings.
One that gladly will be nigh,
To wait upon each morning sigh.
To flutter in the balmy air
Of your well-perfumed prayer.
These white plumes of his he'll lend you,
Which every day to heaven will send you,
To take acquaintance of the sphere,
And all the smooth-fac'd kindred there.

And though Herbert's name do owe
These devotions, fairest, know
That while I lay them on the shrine
Of your white hand, they are mine.