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# So, What is a Deacon?

MICHAEL SANSON

Until women began to be ordained as deacons in 1987, the diaconate in the Church of England had always in practice, with few exceptions, been a probationary year for candidates for the priesthood. It is, therefore, hardly to be wondered at that the ordination of women to the diaconate precipitated a crisis of identity. If women were not being ordained to an interim state, which would lead, after the space of a year, to ordination to the priesthood, then to what were they being ordained? It seems a strange way to proceed, that the business of deciding what a deacon is should follow only in the wake of a decision to ordain and it adds strength to the conviction that the Church of England had not gone much beyond the point of noting that while it has protested for 400 years that it has retained the threefold ministry, it has done so in theory rather than in practice. That is the more strange, since the reintroduction of a permanent and distinctive diaconate has been discussed at successive Lambeth Conferences for over 100 years.<sup>1</sup> In 1958 the Lambeth Conference recommended 'that each province of the Anglican Communion shall consider whether the office of Deacon shall be restored to its primitive place as a distinctive order in the Church'; in 1968 the Conference recommended that the Anglican Communion 'should move towards a recovery of the diaconate as a significant and operative order within the sacred ministry'. The 1978 Conference took the further step of recommending that those member Churches of the Anglican Communion which did not at that time ordain women as deacons should consider making the necessary legal and liturgical changes to enable them to do so. The 1988 Conference, recognising the growing demand for the revival of a permanent and distinctive diaconate, observed: 'We are confident that there is a need for a more credible expression of the diaconate. We need to rediscover the diaconate as an order complementary to the order of priesthood rather than as a merely transitional order.'<sup>2</sup>

The result of the failure to determine what a deacon is before beginning to ordain women to the diaconate has been that, in practice, there are at least four different kinds of deacon currently exercising a ministry in the Church of England. There are, first, those women who would wish to be ordained priest, but who at present cannot be and who have to cope with

- 1 It was first discussed at the 1878 Conference. Action 'in the near future' was promised in 1929 (A. M. Ramsey, ed, *Lambeth Essays on Ministry*, SPCK, London 1969, p 68)!
- 2 Michael Nazir-Ali and Derek Pattinson, eds, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, Church House Publishing, London 1988, p 56.

the frustration built into their role with a greater or lesser degree of good humour and graciousness; secondly there are those women who would not wish to be ordained priest, but for whom the option is not open anyway; thirdly there are those few men who have deliberately chosen to be deacons, with no thought of becoming priests; finally there are the men who expect to be ordained priest at the end of a year in the diaconate. On the face of it, the second and third groups should be coalesced, but there is a substantial difference in the way in which they are likely to be perceived. To many people it will seem perfectly explicable that a woman should have no ambition to become a priest and indeed it will even seem laudable, but for a man to opt 'only' to be a deacon may appear incomprehensible.

The absence of any official understanding of the role of a deacon has not, of course, prevented vigorous discussion of the subject, nor has it discouraged advocates of a distinctive diaconate from seeking to delineate the role of as deacon and to identify particular responsibilities as diaconal. In this article, I shall attempt to review some of the themes that have emerged in this process.

### The Inherited Problem

At its heart, the problem of the diaconate is twofold. First, the Church of England inherited from Rome a diaconate which was, as has already been observed, no more than a probationary year before ordination to the priesthood. In consequence, it perpetuated an expectation that candidates for the diaconate would, in due course, proceed to the priesthood. Secondly, the Church of England inherited the view that the diaconate was an inferior order. Both aspects of the problem are neatly expressed in the post-communion prayer in the BCP Ordinal that the new deacons 'may so well behave themselves in this inferior Office, that they may be found worthy to be called unto the higher Ministries in thy Church'. Omitting this collect, as is directed by Canon C 4A 3, does not do away with the problem, since it does not fill the vacuum that is left, even if it is the only practical solution available from a liturgical point of view.<sup>1</sup>

As it happens, however, it would be wrong to assume that Cranmer took over the Roman heritage without modification. It is true that he perpetuated the expectation of a rise from an inferior to a higher ministry, but he did make significant changes to the 'job description' of the deacon. The Sarum rite directed that the deacon should serve at the altar, read the Gospel, baptize and preach.<sup>2</sup> Cranmer greatly expanded the responsibilities of the deacon to encompass assisting the priest at divine service (especially at Holy Communion), helping with the distribution of Holy Communion (which has customarily, but with no particular good reason, been construed

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1 A change in the wording of the collect would require Parliamentary approval, although the 1968 Lambeth Conference did in fact recommend that the reference to an inferior order be removed (Resolution 32).

2 F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, vol. 2, Rivingtons, London 1915, p 950.

as administering the chalice), reading the Scriptures and homilies to the congregation, instructing in the Catechism, baptizing and preaching (if licensed). In addition, however, Cranmer added to these liturgical and teaching responsibilities the further responsibilities of searching for the 'sick, poor and impotent people of the parish' and reporting them to the Curate so that they might be relieved. Clearly his reason for making these changes was scriptural: he wished to restore to the diaconate the kind of practical orientation that he believed was indicated by the New Testament.

Cranmer even made changes to the service itself which may lead us to conclude that he thought of deacons as being a distinct form of ministry. Paul Bradshaw is at pains to draw attention to the fact that although hands are laid on the deacons, there is nothing to parallel the words in the services for a priest or for a bishop 'Receive the Holy Ghost'; that the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the service only once (during the examination) and that no reference is made to the bestowing of the Spirit on the candidates. The absence of *Veni Creator* would seem to constitute further confirmation of this contention. Thus Bradshaw concludes:

It would seem that Cranmer distinguished between two different sources of power in ordination. The power or authority given to deacons at the imposition of hands was the permission of the Church to exercise certain functions for which they were fitted. This power originated from the Church, by which divine providence working through the Apostles had created the office of deacon. On the other hand, the power bestowed on priests came from the Holy Spirit, which had been given by Christ to the Apostles and their successors.<sup>1</sup>

Bradshaw therefore contends that Cranmer did not think of the diaconate and the priesthood as two consecutive orders, but as two completely different sorts of ministry.<sup>2</sup> But, whatever Cranmer's intentions, they were not sufficiently clearly spelt out and for the following centuries the diaconate remained essentially what it had been in the mediaeval Church, a stepping stone to the priesthood.

Nonetheless, Cranmer did afford a pathway for the exploration of the meaning of the diaconate which has received less attention than it deserved. It is a pathway which the ASB exposed to clearer sight in the Declaration, but which is still in part obscured by the very fact that the ASB

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1 *The Anglican Ordinal*, Alcuin Club/SPCK, London 1971, p 35; cf. Bradshaw's essay in Stephen Sykes and John Booty, eds, *The Study of Anglicanism*, SPCK, London 1988, p 150. Bradshaw further points out that nowhere in Cranmer's writings is there mention of the Holy Spirit being given by the Apostles to deacons, but only to bishops and priests (*The Anglican Ordinal*, *ibid.*). If he is right, there is a very substantial change of theology between the BCP and the ASB (and indeed most other modern ordination rites).

2 *The Anglican Ordinal*, p 34.

perpetuates the order of the services in the Ordinal which has been so long familiar. The impression that the diaconate is a stepping stone to the priesthood is reinforced by the order of the services, that for a deacon being followed by the service for a priest and then for a bishop. It may be significant that when Hippolytus describes ordinations, he begins with a bishop and ends with a deacon. For Hippolytus, there was no question of a movement 'through the ranks'. By the time of the Roman rites, as evidenced by the Sacramentaries (which, though dated between the seventh and ninth centuries, may well witness to a state of affairs as it was in the sixth or even late fifth century), a prayer was included for the newly ordained deacons that 'by fitting advancements from a lower grade they may be worthy, through thy grace, to take up higher things'.<sup>1</sup> The sequence of the services is reversed as early as the eighth century with the Sacramentary of Angouleme.<sup>2</sup> It is greatly to be welcomed, therefore, that the Scottish Ordinal of 1984, following the revised rite of the Book of Common Prayer of ECUSA, restores the ancient sequence.<sup>3</sup>

Recent exploration of the role of the deacon has tended to proceed in two particular directions. On the one hand attention has been paid to the liturgical role of the deacon and on the other to the notion of the deacon as in some way focussing the servant role. It may, however, for the purposes of this discussion, be helpful to consider the deacon not simply under these two heads but also under a third, so that we might speak of the deacon in the liturgical community, the deacon in the wider community, and the deacon as focus. The difficulty, however, is knowing exactly where to start.

### **The Deacon in the Wider Community**

Yet start we must and I propose to take as my clue the 'job description' as provided by the ASB ordination service for a deacon. It is especially instructive because it takes work begun by Cranmer and presses it to a conclusion. What Cranmer did was to take the existing 'job description' from the Sarum rite, modify it slightly and then append a second section in which he spoke of the responsibilities of the deacon in respect of the sick, poor and helpless. Significantly, the ASB reversed the order of these two sections, so that the liturgical responsibilities of the deacon follow those for the poor, needy and sick. In other words, the deacon is now clearly seen as not being, first and foremost, a liturgical functionary, but one who is immersed in the practical, day to day, material, physical and spiritual ministry of the Church. In this respect the deacon appears more closely modelled on the deacon of the early Church. He/she is clearly seen as more than an assistant to the priest. Indeed, the ASB specifically comments that

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1 H. B. Porter Jr, *The Ordination Prayers of the Ancient Western Churches*, Alcuin Club/SPCK, London 1967, p 35.

2 *Ibid.*, pp 78ff.

3 The Church in Wales and the Anglican Church in Canada also observe this sequence.

the deacon is 'called to serve the Church of God and to work *with its members in caring for the poor, the needy, the sick, and all who are in trouble*' [my italics].

Potentially, then, there is a significantly different centre of gravity to the deacon's ministry, which is supplemented by responsibility for strengthening the faithful and searching out 'the careless and indifferent'. It is, however, unfortunate that there has so far been little indication of any serious attempt in the Church of England to follow through the lead offered by the ASB (though *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church* contains a substantial discussion of these and similar tasks). In consequence, it is a common enough complaint that ordination training does not offer any distinctive training for a distinctive diaconate. But how can it do so, unless there is some official owning of a distinctive diaconate, of such a kind that candidates may opt positively for it? It would seem virtually impossible to train candidates for a distinctive diaconate if the male candidates will in any case be proceeding to the priesthood after a year and if a substantial proportion of the women wish to be priests.

It is to be hoped that the plea of the Lambeth bishops in 1988 will not fall on deaf ears: 'We have come to see that the need now is for greater clarification and sharper delineation of the ordained ministries of bishop, priest and deacon within the life of the Church.'<sup>1</sup> Equally their words must be taken seriously when they say: 'We should ensure that such a diaconate does not threaten the ministry of the laity but seeks to equip and further it.'<sup>2</sup>

A substantial part of the problem of defining the role of a deacon derives from the development of other offices within the Church, most obviously those of the Reader and the Accredited Lay Minister, so that roles overlap to the extent that the offices are virtually indistinguishable from each other. When we add to that the considerable development of the concept of shared ministry, involving lay people to a far greater extent than has been the case for centuries, there is the inevitable danger that an extensive development of the diaconate might result in the disabling of lay ministry. Yet that may be a risk that we ought to take.

For all that it was written over twenty years ago, the essay written by Bishop John Howe for the 1968 Lambeth Conference has some pertinent observations to make.<sup>3</sup> In the first place he suggests that, if we take Acts 6 as a *general* starting point for the diaconate, the task given to the Seven is seen to have a considerable *ad hoc* element. They were to do what was wanted then and there in that situation. That points to flexibility and adaptation. Secondly he argues that the fact that the Seven were ordained at all, if the centre of their role was the running of a charity, suggests that in our day we have underestimated the need for grace and the 'manifest backing

1 *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, p 54.

2 *Ibid.*, p 56.

3 *Lambeth Essays on Ministry*, pp 69f.

of the Church for those carrying particular Christian responsibilities' and that we may actually be guilty of reading into Acts more ideas of ordination than the text requires.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly he argues that when a diaconate of humble service is absent, compensating ministries arise to fill the gap, whether in the shape of minor orders or of readers, catechists and administrators and remarks: 'Without denying that the diaconate is of the Ministry, one may suspect that an error is made whenever it is associated exclusively with hierarchy and the clergy.'<sup>2</sup>

The implication of this, then, is that any thoroughgoing review of the role of a deacon must also take into consideration those other ministries which have indeed sprung up to fill the vacuum. In reviewing the non-liturgical responsibilities of the deacon, I said nothing of the teaching and preaching tasks, but clearly they also have become part of the remit of those other ministries.

### **The Deacon in the Liturgical Community**

It may be tempting, then, to avoid this particular dilemma by turning away from non-liturgical to liturgical responsibilities. If we attempt to root the liturgical responsibilities of the deacon in Scripture, we are doubtless doomed to failure, but it may be legitimate to suggest that, if the task of the deacon was essentially to take care for those who were most vulnerable, then it would make good sense that they should take the sacrament to those who were absent (as Justin Martyr describes), who doubtless included the sick. It may then have seemed appropriate that they should also administer the sacrament to the rest of the congregation. Moreover, the fact that St Paul explicitly denies that he was involved to any great extent in the administration of baptism at Corinth (2 Cor. 1:15-17) and the curious silence of Acts 19 about who administered baptism at Ephesus coupled with the explicit mention of the role played by Paul in the laying-on of hands on the newly baptized (Acts 19:5f) may give ground for supposing that Paul left such matters to his assistants and that in turn may have encouraged the delegation of that role to deacons.

If we do argue in this way, however, or find such an argument attractive and plausible, we should also remember that this is no more than reasonably intelligent conjecture and that we should avoid supposing that on such slender evidence we can construct a picture of what the deacon did in the early Church. We might also take into consideration the possibility

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1 We may note the requirement in Acts 6:3 that the Seven be full of the 'Holy Spirit'. Thus, Bradshaw observes of Cranmer's ordination services: 'These differences between the rites suggest that Cranmer saw a distinction between the rite for the diaconate, in which the candidates are expected to have the gift of the Holy Spirit before hands are laid on them, and the rite for the priesthood where the Spirit is conferred by the imposition of hands.' (*The Anglican Ordinal*, p 35).

2 Op. cit., p 70.

that the early Church did not have any careful theological rationale for its practice and especially must we beware supposing that we can construct a blueprint for our own practice on the basis of the precedent available to us: the evidence is too thin to support such a process and in any case the early Church was a changing and developing entity which therefore had to adapt its practice to meet its needs.

There is a tendency in recent discussions of the diaconate<sup>1</sup> to assume that it is proper to gather together the various roles served historically by deacons and to conclude that such are the duties of a deacon. Most especially is this true of the liturgical role of the deacon. Thus it suddenly becomes the deacon's task to summon the people to pray, to explain the rite (whatever that means!), to give instructions to stand, pray or kneel, or to order movement (whether of candidates for baptism to the president or of the bearers of gifts to the altar or of the people to receive Holy Communion) and to utter the dismissal.<sup>2</sup>

It is probably inevitable that the question of the liturgical role of the deacon should be discussed, partly because it is true that, historically, the deacon has had a variety of liturgical responsibilities, and partly because the present climate of uncertainty about the role of a deacon (exacerbated by the uncertainty of the future for women deacons in those parts of the Church which have not yet opted to ordain women to the priesthood) has provoked something of an identity crisis. But it is, in my view, extremely dangerous to seek to identify diaconal responsibilities in the liturgy because of the way in which they then come to be seen as prerogatives and even privileges reserved to those who are in deacons' orders. In view of the development of other ministries, such as those of Reader or Lay Minister, not to mention the growth of active lay participation in the liturgy, there is a serious danger of encouraging the jealous protection of privilege or of, once again, disabling the lay membership.

There is, in my view, nothing that needs to be done exclusively by a deacon in the liturgy. What the deacon does in any particular congregation needs to be determined not so much by the needs of the deacon, but the needs of the congregation and the occasion. If the deacon is a genuine deacon, he/she will be happy to serve in whatever way seems appropriate, both in terms of the needs of the occasion and in terms of his or her own particular gifts. It may be messy that in each church there is a different tradition concerning the way in which a deacon is used, but that is no bad thing if the church is alive and operating effectively.

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1 James Barnett, *The Diaconate*, Seabury Press, New York 1979; *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church*, Church House Publishing, London 1988; *The Liturgical Ministry of Deacons* (GS Misc. 281), General Synod, London 1988.

2 *The Liturgical Ministry of Deacons*, p 4. The subsequent pages spell out the responsibilities in even greater detail.

## The Deacon as Focus of the Servant Role

To speak of the role of the deacon in the liturgy or in the community is to speak largely of what a deacon does. Small wonder, then, that since no small energy has been invested in seeking to define the nature of priesthood (that is to say, what a priest is), similar energy has been invested in seeking to determine what a deacon is. This exploration has been phrased, notably, in terms of the deacon as a focus, sign, representative or symbol. Thus *The Liturgical Ministry of Deacons* makes the assertion that 'the deacon is primarily the servant of the assembly, focussing the servant ministry of the whole Church'<sup>1</sup>, while *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church* complains that there 'would seem to be little or no understanding of these "diaconal" ministries as focussing Christ's diaconal ministry through the Church'.<sup>2</sup> John Tiller, similarly, asserts that deacons 'are ordained as a focus of the Church's diaconal ministry'.<sup>3</sup> In a similar way Brother Victor SSF says 'the deacon is to be a sign, a representative/icon of Christ the Servant as servant-leader in the Church'<sup>4</sup>, while James Barnett speaks of the deacon as a symbol and asserts that deacons 'are not ordained essentially in order that they may perform the distinctive functions of their order but to hold up *diakonia* as central to all Christian Ministry'<sup>5</sup> and the Lima text says 'Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world.'<sup>6</sup>

In his sermon at the ordination of Rowan Williams to the diaconate Mark Santer also spoke in terms of the deacon as a sacramental representation of Christ's presence to his people as their servant and drew his inspiration from Ignatius of Antioch, who, he asserted, wrote to the Trallians that the bishop is an image of God, the presbyters an image of the college of the apostles, and the deacon an image of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Curiously, Ignatius says nothing of the sort: certainly he speaks of the bishop as a type (*typos*), but he does not use the same word of either the presbyters or the deacons. It might even be said that he studiously avoids using any such language of the deacons: 'let all respect the deacons as they would respect Jesus Christ'. There is a similar restraint in his letter to the Magnesians where, having spoken of the bishop as presiding in the likeness of God, the presbyters in

1 p 6; cf. also p 1.

2 p 90. The 'diaconal' ministries of which it speaks include Church Army officers, Readers and Lay Ministers.

3 *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry*, CIO Publishing, London 1983, p 112. The earliest occurrence of the word 'focus' in connection with diaconal ministry that I have been able to locate is in R. Nowell, *The Ministry of Service: Deacons in the Contemporary Church*, Burns and Oates, Tunbridge Wells 1968, p 5, where he argues that the diaconate of some should focus the duty of all Christians to love and serve their neighbours. Vatican II did not use this terminology.

4 *The Servant Leader*, ACCM Occasional Paper 27, London 1987, p 8.

5 Op. cit., pp 141ff.

6 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, WCC, Geneva 1982, p 27.

7 M. Santer, 'Diaconate and Discipleship' in *Theology* vol. LXXXI (1978), pp 179ff.

the likeness of the council of the apostles, he adds 'the deacons, who are so dear to me have been entrusted with the ministry of Christ'. They are not likened to anything.

We have, then, these various ways of speaking of the deacon: as a focus, as a symbol, as a sign, as an icon, as a representative. On the one hand a deacon acts as a focus of the Church's vocation to service, on the other as a focus of the servant character of Christ himself, as the one from whom the Church's vocation is derived. I do not think there is any significant difference intended by the different terminology, though there may be a good deal of difference between saying that the deacon is *called* to be a focus/sign/symbol and saying that he/she *is* a focus. It is the difference between descriptive and prescriptive language.

However, it may be useful to ask why the language of focussing came into prominence. The word 'focus' certainly became fashionable in the wake of the work of ARCIC I, in which it was asserted, in keeping with the reiterated theme of *koinonia*, that 'the Church requires a *focus* of leadership and unity, which the Holy Spirit provides in the ordained ministry.'<sup>3</sup> In particular ARCIC I had in mind the orders of priest and bishop when it spoke in this way. It did not go on to assert that the priesthood acts as a focus for the priestly ministry of Christ, though it did say that the priest is representative of the whole Church in the fulfilment of its priestly vocation of self-offering to God as a living sacrifice<sup>2</sup>, which would seem to amount to the same thing. Neither did it say that the episcopate acts as a focus of the pastoral or overseeing ministry of Christ. While the notion of the priesthood as focussing the priesthood of Christ may appear attractive to some, there is, I suspect, some hesitation about pursuing it because there are major aspects of the priesthood of Christ (at least, as expounded in Hebrews, the only part of the New Testament to discuss it at all) which it would be clearly inappropriate to suggest are focused, or represented in any other human being. Nevertheless, *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church* is not hesitant on this score. It roundly asserts '[Christ's] ministries, particularly those of oversight, of high priesthood and of service, are focused within three orders'<sup>3</sup>, though it does stop short of identifying any of those roles exclusively with any one order.

Whatever hesitation there is in the use of 'focus' language with respect to other orders may or may not be an argument in favour of resisting the use of focus terminology in respect of deacons. If it is our belief that each order must focus some aspect of the work of Christ, then we may find that difficulty in specifying precisely what it is in the case of a bishop or a priest (or, to muddy the waters further, a presbyter) demands that we draw back from specifying what it is in the case of a deacon. On the other hand we may cheerfully dismiss as irrelevant the demand for symmetry in order to contend for the propriety of such talk specifically in the case of the deacon.

1 *The Final Report*, SPCK/CTS, London 1982, p 33 [my italics].

2 *Ibid.*, p 36.

3 *Op. cit.*, p 84.

The word 'focus' turns out to be a very tricky word to handle. Perhaps we are intended to understand that the deacon focuses the vocation of the Church by being a particular example of service to the world, so enabling the Church on the one hand to identify the shape of its vocation and on the other hand to direct its attention and efforts in the right direction. To put it another way it casts a sharp image of Christ the servant onto the screen constituted by the setting of the Church and at the same time becomes the means whereby the activity of the Church is brought to bear on that scene. The deacon, however, is unlikely to be able to do either of these things by conscious intention. Indeed, it is important to assert that the Church does not appoint symbols; it appoints people to tasks (that is where Barnett overstates his case when he asserts that they are ordained *essentially* 'to hold up *diakonia* as central to all Christian ministry'). In fulfilling the task, the deacon becomes, either consciously or unconsciously an example – good or bad. But he or she does not strive to become an example or a symbol: that is a matter for the Holy Spirit. It may, nonetheless, be perfectly appropriate to say to a deacon: 'Your task is to hold up a lens to Christ, so that others may see him clearly as the one who came to serve; you are to do it both by what you do and by what you are', but only if we also say the same to the bishop and to the priest, and indeed to every believer.

Ultimately my unease concerning the vogue for talking of the deacon or indeed the priest or the bishop as a focus of anything else but unity is that it all too easily becomes pretentious: however much it is intended as prescriptive language, it slips over into being descriptive language. And when that happens, we are apt to lose sight of the real focus of attention.

It is essential that in seeking to determine what the deacon is to be in the late twentieth century, we avoid falling into four traps. The first trap is fundamentalism, either biblical or patristic. It will not serve the Church well if we attempt to answer the question before us by simply lumping together all the functions that we discern the deacon may have fulfilled in the past. If we learn from history that the Church and the circumstances in which it finds itself are constantly changing, then it follows that the Church must be able to adapt its ministry to the times. The second is the trap of holding apart the functional and ontological aspects of ministry and attempting to elaborate a doctrine of the diaconate purely on the basis of one or of the other. The third is the trap of attempting to identify an essence of diaconate, rather than recognising that most of our classification procedures operate on the basis of a family likeness.<sup>1</sup> The fourth is the trap of turning responsibilities into prerogatives, in such a way that we conclude by defending the status of the deacon instead of advancing the gospel.

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1 Christina Baxter, 'Doing the Truth: A Consideration of *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church*' in *Anvil* vol. 5, pp 233f.