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Our Vision: *"We strive to be a haven of healing, reconciliation, joy and peace in service to our wider community and beyond, so that our example in prayer and practice may reflect Christ's love for us all."*

THIS SUNDAY – SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2026

OF GREATER MEANINGS

No Mere Thing:

Gospel, Table, and the Diaconal Ordering of the Church in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–22

The following is an article from September 18, 2026, originally written by the Rev. Jason Thomas for The Living Church's Online Journal, The Covenant.

In his provocative article "The 'Transitional' Diaconate Is Not a Thing," Matthew Kemp argues that the Church should stop speaking of "transitional deacons," because the term distorts the theology of cumulative ordination and diminishes the diaconate as an abiding order of ministry. He writes, "While it is true that presbyteral and diaconal ministries are not the same, there is a real sense in which the ministry of the priest presumes the ministry of the deacon. The actual practice of ministry proves this, and I don't mean merely reading the Gospel and setting the altar." Later, Kemp adds that "a healthy priest begins ministry every day from a place of



servanthood, diakonia, not merely adopting that posture and attitude when absolutely necessary." I agree with Kemp's theology of cumulative ordination and with his insistence that priestly ministry begins in diaconal servanthood. Yet the tension between these two uses of "merely" leaves a trace of the very functionalism Kemp seeks to overcome, as though reading the Gospel and setting the altar were ceremonial tasks adjacent to diakonia rather than practices through which diakonia is enacted and learned. The deacon's liturgical prerogatives are not exceptions to Kemp's point. They are among the Church's embodied practices for forming ministers in that daily posture of diakonia. To read the Gospel and set the altar is to help order the Church toward Christ.

This concern for ordered ecclesial life is not a later institutional overlay on the gospel; it is visible already in the earliest Pauline churches. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–22, Paul shows that the early Church depends upon a disciplined and peaceable ordering of communal life that respects those who labor, admonishes the idlers, encourages the fainthearted, helps the weak, remains patient with all, and prays without ceasing. While Paul is not describing later liturgical offices, his exhortation reveals an ecclesial logic later liturgical practice still embodies, for by Gospel and Table the Church is ordered and sent out as Christ's witness.

First Thessalonians is addressed to a church under pressure. Nijay Gupta reads 1 Thessalonians as Paul's attempt to help a community shaken by "problems, questions, and perplexities" recover "terra firma beneath their feet" (2). Abraham Smith likewise argues that opposition from Gentile neighbors was likely "a critical ingredient" in the occasion of 1 Thessalonians, probably aroused by the believers' "countercultural glorification of Christ" (289).

Paul first turns to those who "labor among you and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you" (1 Thess 5:12 NRSVue). Although Paul names real practices of leadership here, Beverly Gaventa cautions against retrojecting later clergy-laity structures into the passage (80). The authority of these practices rests not in office as status but in ministry as work. Smith presses this further by arguing that Paul's plural participles do not identify "single offices" but "ideal activities for aiding the community," practices potentially shared by several persons (333). The text then turns leadership toward communal peace, since those who labor are esteemed "in love because of their work," and all are commanded, "Be at peace among yourselves" (5:13). Order here is relational before it is institutional, but not therefore less real. This is not to read later orders back into Paul, but to notice that ecclesial orders preserve in durable form needs already visible in the earliest Pauline churches.

Paul then expands this mutual responsibility, telling the Thessalonians to "admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them." Gaventa and Smith both read "idlers" as naming the disorderly or disruptive, not merely the lazy, and so highlight Paul's concern for communal peace (Gaventa, 81; Smith, 334). Paul's concern, then, is not simply productivity but the fragile peace of the community. Even so, he does not prescribe blunt uniform discipline. The disruptive are admonished, the fainthearted encouraged, the weak supported, and all are met with patience. Pauline order is differentiated care, the disciplined arrangement of the community for peace, endurance, and love.

This ordered life also turns outward: "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all." Smith notes that this exhortation prevents Paul's directions from addressing "an introverted group," since Paul remains "the mission-directed pastor" concerned with the church's conduct before outsiders (334). The Church's order is not self-protection alone but worship formed for public holiness.

Paul then deepens this outward-facing order into worship and discernment. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (5:16–18) are not decorative spiritual sentiments. Gaventa describes 5:16–22 as "Elements of Church Order," since these imperatives concern worship, prophecy, and communal discernment (83). Gupta reads 5:16–22 as Paul's response to anxious questions—"What is God up to? What does he want? What is his will?"—and argues that Paul redirects the Thessalonians away from attempts to "divine" the future and toward "divine virtues and habits: joy, prayer, thanksgiving" (113–14). Yet this ordered life does not quench the Spirit. Prophecy is neither rejected outright, nor accepted uncritically, but tested. Pauline order is not control but disciplined discernment, and worship trains the community to perceive crisis truthfully before God.

The point sharpens with prophecy: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (5:19–22). This is neither spiritual gullibility nor institutional control but ordered openness. The Spirit is not quenched, yet claims to divine speech are not swallowed whole. Paul Sciberras argues more precisely that Paul’s command to test everything requires the Thessalonians to discern God’s will in the concrete life of the community by holding fast to the good and rejecting every form of evil, a present task carried out in view of the Lord’s coming (184). Good order, then, makes the Church capable of receiving the Spirit without panic and testing speech without fear.

If Paul is this serious about the ordinary practices that order the Church’s life, Kemp’s “merely” cannot hold. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–22, ordinary actions carry ecclesial weight. Although Paul addresses the whole body, the later Church did not invent this logic when it gave such burdens durable liturgical and ministerial form in the diaconate. Here “order” means not hierarchy imposed from above, but the disciplined arrangement of common life, worship, and ministry toward Christ. Thomas Currie names this ordinary ecclesial texture well, arguing that Paul’s exhortations concern the “small ties” that bind church life together, where grace is encountered not as “glorious abstraction” but in the visible life of an actual congregation (446). The apparent smallness of these practices is precisely where their ecclesial force lies. The deacon’s liturgical actions must therefore be tested by whether reading the Gospel and setting the Table order the assembly toward Christ through proclamation and thanksgiving.

If Kemp is right to resist reducing the diaconate to a temporary apprenticeship, Ormonde Plater shows why he is wrong to treat its liturgical actions as mere ceremonial preliminaries. In *Many Servants*, Plater names the contradiction Kemp is trying to overcome: the Church has tried to hold together “the deacon as temporary intern for priest” and “the deacon as permanent agent of the church,” two forms that are “by no means equivalent,” when what the renewed diaconate requires is “a theology of mutual and distinct ministry” rather than practices that nourish disorder and competition (xi–xii). Kemp’s argument gains force from this distinction, but his “merely” still fails to grasp what Plater sees most clearly. In *Deacons in the Liturgy*, the deacon’s presence “goes beyond mere assistance” because deacons are not decorative helpers but “heralds of the word, servants of the church, and agents of the bishop,” setting others free for “worship of God and action in the world” (6).

Plater’s account turns the apparent smallness of diaconal action into its theological point. Deacons are both “angels” and “waiters,” messengers who proclaim the good news and attendants who oversee the sacrificial meal, bringing the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely into the Church’s worship so that “the messiness of human existence” enters the liturgy (6–7). Even the preparation of the table is not mere setup. Plater notes that the prayer book describes the deacon’s work in domestic terms—bread, wine, food, drink, and festive table—while the presider and people are described in the language of temple, including “sacrifice, offering, and altar” (48). The distinction matters because the deacon’s domestic work at the Table is joyful precisely because it is service: it enables the Church’s priestly work of praise, making room for the whole assembly to offer thanksgiving and share the messianic banquet. To read the Gospel and set the Table, then, is not to perform ceremonial errands on the way to priesthood; it is to enact the Church’s ordered life before Christ, who addresses his people in the Word and feeds them for the life of the world.

Kemp is right that the Church needs a theology of cumulative ordination in which the priest never leaves the deacon behind. Severed from diakonia, priesthood too easily becomes clericalism. Yet if that claim is true, the Church must also reject the functionalism that treats the deacon's liturgical actions as incidental to the real work of ministry. Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians shows that the gospel's cosmic claim is sustained in ordinary, embodied practices, and Plater shows that the deacon's liturgical work belongs to the same pattern.

My constructive proposal, then, is to deepen Kemp's proposal rather than reject it. Let every ordinand be ordained deacon, but not as a brief transitional fiction. Let the diaconate be inhabited deeply enough for the future priest to learn that ecclesial leadership begins not in presidency but in ordering the Church's common life. Perhaps Kemp is, in this respect, shaped by the very system he wishes to overturn. One can imagine a hurried liturgics instructor saying, "Let me quickly show you how to set the table, and then we will put the chasuble on you and work on the prayers."

But for those of us formed for the vocational diaconate here in Boston, our memory returns elsewhere. We return to a twilight vigil before the conventual Eucharist of the Sisters of Saint Anne, with the stone walls of the chapel separating us from Massachusetts Avenue not only in space but somehow also in time. We return to careful instruction in receiving the thurible and rightly incensing the Gospel book, and to the quiet insistence that the corporal be set with such care that not even one crumb be lost. In all these things, one thing was never in doubt:

Pay attention. This is the important part.

READINGS FOR THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32 + Philippians 2:1-13 + Matthew 21:23-32
+ Psalm 25:1-8

CALENDAR

Note: We worship in our historic church. The service will also be on Zoom. The service time is 10:00 AM. Tuesday Noon Mass is held in All Saints' St. Mary Chapel.

SUNDAY September 27th, 2026 The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
10:00 AM Mass in All Saints' Church
Join Zoom Meeting from our website at www.allsaintschurch.org
Recording of Mass available before noon at www.allsaintschurch.org

Christian Formation and First Communion Instruction for Children
Ages 5 to 12 in the Parish Hall, from 10:00 AM - 10:45 AM

Christian Formation for Adults (the 2nd and 4th Sundays)
Youth and adults around noon after the Mass in the Library
Recording of Mass available before noon at www.allsaintschurch.org

OUR CORE VALUES:

- Welcoming strangers like old friends
- Embracing the Anglo-Catholic tradition
- Being dependable members of a caring community
- Respecting each other's differences
- Being faithful stewards of God's gift
- Remembering that God loves everyone unconditionally