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ORDAINED SERVANT

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INTRODUCING ORDAINED SERVANT

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift...And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...” (Ephesians 4:7 and 16)

In September of 1989, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s Committee on Christian Education appointed a special subcommittee with the title and task of “Equipping Ordained Officers.” This issue of *Ordained Servant*, mandated by the entire committee in September of 1991, is the first tangible result of that appointment. The immediate aim is to provide materials to help in the training and effective functioning of the elders (both teaching and ruling) and the deacons of our church. But in a sense *Ordained Servant* is a means to a more important end. For, as the above quoted text clearly shows, God’s purpose in giving his church ordained servants does not end with their being well equipped. Quite the contrary, in fact, be-

cause their calling is to equip the saints for the work of ministry as believers. It is only when both of these become a reality in the church—only when there is “*the effective working by which every part does its share*”—that we can expect to see the kind of growth that brings glory and honor to God.

The American church is enamored with methods—yes, and even gimmicks—that seem to promise numerical growth in the church. But let us put the question quite bluntly: what is the use of numerical increase when the church is not functioning “*according to the effective working by which every part does its share*” which, in turn, “*causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself*

in love”? The answer is that you have an even greater monstrosity. We believe the biblical view of church growth is quality first, and then increase in numbers. On the American scene it is too often quantity first, and then (much later on, if at all) quality. And, to be honest, our own churches are not all that they ought to be either. Can any honest person evade this? To answer that question ask yourself another: is there all that much difference between the way *our* people live and the way *their* people (the members of the liberal church on the next street) live? Can we honestly say, without hesitation, that the elders of Orthodox Presbyterian congregations are faithfully exercising oversight of the flock according to biblical standards? At the very least we should be willing to admit that we can—and must—do much better. It is this conviction that motivates the production of this journal.

We (the editor, and the editorial oversight committee) are aware of the difficulty of the task we are undertaking, but willing to do it because we sincerely believe the need is urgent. The exaggerated individualism of many, if not most, Americans today—even in the soundest Reformed churches—presents a difficult problem. How are we going to convey to the people of God a respect for authority, a respect that has so sadly diminished? How are we going to bring it about that, once again, membership vows will be awesome and sacred to our members? We will only see these deficiencies remedied if, first of all, the proficiency and diligence of the ordained servant is uplifted. So in this journal it will be our intention to point the way to more effective leadership by elders and deacons.

We do not intend to make this journal a forum for the invention of new ideas. We have too many of these already. But neither will we baptize the status quo as automatically holy. Further, we do not intend to use this journal to promote a partisan viewpoint, such as the *two-* or *three-office* view as exclusively legitimate. Our task, as we perceive it, is much more important. We want to find the best material written—old or new—to help all who are, and all who aspire to be, ordained servants.

This periodical is yours—the Lord’s (present *and* future) ordained servants in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—and your comments and contributions are welcome. One of the features that we plan to include in future issues, therefore, is a Question and Answer page. Here is a little sample. We received a letter from a young pastor a few weeks ago, asking this question: “*Should a ‘hospital baptism’ by a Roman Catholic nurse—performed when she feared an infant was about to die—be accepted as valid?*” Our answer was as follows. “*No, we do not think it should be. There is at least one instance in the Scriptures, of what could be called a private baptism (Acts 8:26-40). But it is important to note that, even in this instance, the one who administered this baptism was an office-bearer in the church, and the church in which he was an office-bearer was in genuine submission to the Word of God. It may have been just such biblical teaching that led the Westminster Assembly to insist that neither baptism or the Lord’s supper ‘may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained’ (Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 27. sec.4). This reason, alone, would seem to us to disqualify the nurse’s act. Furthermore, for baptism of infants to be valid they must be children of parents that the church acknowledges, at the time, to be true believers. It is extremely doubtful, to say the least, that this essential qualification was accounted for in the nurse’s unilateral decision to act as she did.*”

Some questions will undoubtedly stump us. But when this happens we intend to seek the wisdom of others. We also welcome your wisdom. If you have an insight that you believe to be truly biblical, and helpful in strengthening other office-bearers in the church, please send it to us. We cannot promise to use everything that is sent, but we will give everything that is sent to us our serious consideration.

You are invited to send any questions that you may have—and/or any other material that you may wish to have considered for inclusion in *Ordained Servant*—to the editor, whose address is listed above.

“As Christ is the only head of the Church, it follows that its allegiance is to him, and that whenever those outside the Church undertake to regulate its affairs or to curtail its liberties, its members are bound to obey him rather than men. They are bound to resist by all legitimate means such usurpations and to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free. They are under equal obligation to resist all undue assumption of authority by those within the Church, whether it be by the brotherhood, or by individual officers, or by Church councils or courts. The allegiance of the people terminates on Christ. They are to obey others only so far as obedience to them is obedience to him...” — Charles Hodge

TAKING ACTION IN TIME

“When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong” Ecclesiastes 8:11.

By Rev. Thomas E. Tyson

Rev. Thomas E. Tyson has been a pastor in several congregations in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and has also served two congregations of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. He is currently the General Secretary of our Committee on Christian Education and has given enthusiastic support and leadership at every step in the creation of *Ordained Servant*.

One of the most difficult things that a session has to do is exercise church discipline speedily. This is so for several reasons.

First, a session needs to surmount the obstacle presented by members who do not think that the session ought to exercise discipline *at all*. It may appear surprising to say this, but it's true. The session of an Orthodox Presbyterian Church served by this writer once faced a request by a member to have her name removed from the roll on the grounds that session had excommunicated someone! No doubt other sessions have faced similar situations. However, it is not the purpose of this article to lay again the biblical foundation for church discipline. I will assume that elders are well acquainted with their responsibility to exercise discipline.

Second, there is the objection presented not only by church members, but sometimes also by session members themselves, that church discipline ought not to be exercised *speedily*. Often this position is presented in the name of love and compassion. The thought is that offending members need understanding and time. Perhaps they will correct their way. Speedy discipline will only alienate them and maybe even tempt them to continue in their disobedient ways. So, a session ought to move very slowly, urging them to repent and praying for them, but moving on to formal discipline only when all else fails.

Third, there is the difficulty presented in each disciplinary case of knowing just how to proceed in a biblically ordered fashion. A session needs wisdom to discern how obedience to the Lord dictates both the session's and the member's behavior when an offense has been committed. Because that correct behavior is not always easy to discover, and because difference of opinion on questions of procedure may sometimes surface within the session, the temptation is always there to delay or postpone action. "We better not act hastily, especially when we don't enjoy unanimous agreement on how to act!"

This article addresses particularly the second of these three difficulties, namely, to establish that the *speedy* exercise of discipline is not an optional matter but is rather mandated by God in his Word.

To this end it will be helpful for us to take a careful look at the very pointed statement of Ecclesiastes 8:11 quoted above. The human author of this book of the Bible, called "The Preacher," or "The Teacher," considers the character of human life and can conclude only that it is vain. The existence of man, sinful as he is, can only be characterized as a vicious cycle. Locked in evil and unrighteousness, he confronts futility everywhere. His only hope lies outside himself: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). Consequently, it would be an understatement to say that the Preacher does not have much confidence in the likelihood of people doing the right thing naturally.

The truth of the matter is that people, left to their own devices, can be counted on to do the wrong thing. In fact, people keep on doing evil especially when they see that they're not punished right away. That is precisely the point of the verse called to our attention.

The Preacher tells us that "sentence" for a crime is not being carried out quickly. The word is *pith-gam*—not a hebrew word, but one borrowed from the Persians. Ahasuerus' edict regarding Queen Vashti, or Artaxerxes' and Cyrus' decrees regarding work on the rebuilding of Jerusalem, for instance. What is in view in this "sentence" is a *word* or a *saying* of a judge, king or other person in authority. It is, therefore, something that should, and (depending upon *who* is the authority!) will be carried out, or done. Here, it refers to the pronouncement of a judge—specifically, the sentence that he has prescribed for wrongdoing.

It is the delay in application of that sentence which the Preacher notices. And he warns us of an extremely disas-

trous result of such delay. It would not be an overstatement to describe it as a perversity that is inevitable: you can count on folks stepping up their sinning when they see that they're not being punished right away. Their hearts "are filled with schemes to do wrong" when they think that they can get away with them.

The offender whose sentence is delayed thinks within himself: "I'm not punished yet—and maybe I *never* will be." The prophet Isaiah had a similar message from the Lord: "though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the Lord" (Isa. 26:10). Now, true it is: God often shows mercy in withholding punishment, and for this he is to be eternally praised. But this is no ground for us to fail to do what he has commanded.

God has commanded the elders of his church to discipline offenders for anything in their doctrine or practice which is contrary to the Word of God. "Are you not to judge those inside?...Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Cor. 5:12,13). The session "shall...exercise discipline over the members of the church" (Form of Government, XIII:7). Sentence for a crime needs to be carried out. Unrepentant offenders need admonishment, rebuke, suspension from membership privileges, deposition from office, or even excommunication. The sentence

needs to fit the crime, of course. But it must be pronounced, and administered.

And, according to the Preacher, it must be administered *speedily*. For if it isn't, this you can (should!) expect: offenders will use that delay as a base for carrying on their evil-doing. They just will. You have God, in his Word, to trust for that prediction.

Now, let there be no confusion on this matter. In nothing that we have said thus far have we intended to imply that elders ought to act in a rash, foolhardy, or capricious manner as they seek to exercise discipline in the church of Jesus Christ. Nor may the regulations of our denomination's Book of Discipline—which regulations protect and preserve member's rights—be either ignored or glossed over lightly. Wisdom, care, and painstaking attention to truthfulness must always characterize the session's endeavors. And love. Yes, love.

But it is not loving to delay discipline. It is not loving for parents to delay discipline of their children and it is not loving for elders to delay discipline of God's children. For, in both cases, the Preacher's dire forecast may be counted on to come true: wrongdoers gather strength for their wrongdoing from namby-pamby treatment!

We have not answered all questions in this article. More may be said. But let this, at least, suffice for now: church elders need to exercise discipline speedily. God's

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But it is not loving to delay discipline..."

How To Get Started

by

G. I. Williamson

“And let the presbyters [elders] be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always ‘providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man’; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgment; keeping far off from all covetousness, not quickly crediting [an evil report] against any one, not severe in judgment, as knowing that we are all under a debt of sin....Let them serve Him in fear, and with all reverence, even as He Himself has commanded us, and as the apostles who preached the Gospel unto us, and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Lord [have taught us]. Let us be zealous in the pursuit of that which is good, keeping ourselves from causes of offence, from false brethren, and from those who in hypocrisy bear the name of the Lord, and draw away vain men into error.”

— the Epistle of Polycarp [A.D. 65-155] to the Philipppians

The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, The Apostolic Fathers, p. 34

Preacher has told us!

In writing this account I want to begin by saying two things. First, it was my years of service in two of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand that taught me what it really means to have a body of elders acting as shepherds of the Lord’s people. I had heard of such things, of course, through my early contacts with the Christian Reformed Church back in the late 1950s. But I had never seen it in the Presbyterian churches I grew up in, or in those that I later served before going to New Zealand. Least of all did I learn it in Theological Seminary (which in my case was Pittsburgh-Xenia) even though I now know it is one of the most important things that a teaching elder can ever learn. Second, I do not want what I write here to be interpreted as criticism of any of my predecessors, who have served the church I now serve. Men who served here before me had the very difficult task of trying to minister to at first three, and then later on to two congregations at the same time. Anyone who has ever tried that will understand why some things we have done in recent years were not done before.

Yet I must confess that it was something of a shock to me to find that in the 50+ years of the existence of these North Dakota churches there had never been any regular and systematic visitation of the members by the elders. So, when it became possible to join the two remaining

OP churches in this area together we made it a matter of top priority to inaugurate a plan of regular home visitation by the elders of the church. Today I am thankful to be able to say that not only is this a firmly fixed part of the session’s work, but there is solid evidence of the Lord’s blessing upon it. The regular attendance at both services is much better than it was. While rural folk are noted for their resistance to change, even among our older people there has been a marked change in both attitude and outward practice.

How did we do it? We answer this by briefly describing the steps we took. (1) The first thing was to assure the elders that, in the beginning, the pastor would accompany them on every home visit. This was not the long-range objective, but it was a self-evident need at the beginning. I was experienced at home visitation having been taught by good Dutch elders in New Zealand. Now it was my turn to perform the same service to my brothers here. In this way it was not too difficult to get cooperation from most of the elders. (2) The second thing was to make the first round of visits one in which the Session made a sincere apology for having so long neglected the kind of oversight that the Scriptures require. So the elders did not come to the members to begin finding fault with them, but rather to confess their own fault and to ask forgiveness. Only after this was done was a small be-

gining made in exhorting the members where they needed it. (3) The third thing was to make a review of these visits a regular item on the session's agenda. This involved a distinct change in a typical session meeting. Much more time is now devoted to a serious consideration of the spiritual needs of our people, and to what measures we as a session might take to seek a remedy. This meant that much less time, proportionately, was devoted to the more mundane things which had often filled the agenda before. (4) The fourth thing—and I regard this as very important—was that through this process of elder visitation followed by reports and discussion in session, a common mind began to emerge among the elders. If there is anything that 40 years in the ministry has taught me, as a pastor, it is this: unless we first attain a basic unity in the session there is little hope that we will achieve any reform in the local church. We are all thankful to the Lord that this has been one of the great blessings he has given us through our visitation work.

It occurred to me, in writing this, that a personal testimony might be helpful. I therefore include, at this point, the personal testimony of one of our elders known to many of you from his service in both our smaller and larger assemblies.

“I was ordained a ruling elder in the OPC on October 14, 1973. We met for session meetings regularly every three months to carry on the business of the church, review the petty cash bill the pastor submitted for telephone calls, etc. Most of the business we did was of a trustee nature (such as deciding what repairs had to be done on the church building). The pastor would read correspondence and we would set dates for upcoming activities.

Most visitation—if any—was done by the pastor. If there was a discipline problem the session would instruct the pastor to write a letter. I have to confess, here, that I did not really understand what it meant to watch over the flock. (It was like standing on top of a doorstep and watching ants run around on an ant hill, not knowing what they were doing—just what was seen).

In 1969 I visited a Presbytery meeting for one afternoon. I thought it was a waste of time. I didn't care what was going on in Bancroft, South Dakota, or in Denver, Colorado. It wasn't until 1975 that through the preaching of Pastor Jack Peterson the Holy Spirit showed me—by getting involved—that it was my responsibility to help others in our Presbytery and denomination. I have been interested and wanted to be involved ever since, and every chance I had I was present at Presbytery meetings and

have attended 12 General Assemblies. But all of this wasn't enough. I still did not feel as though I was an elder doing my duty. In 1984 our present pastor was installed and our Session was led to take more responsibility for those God had placed under our supervision. We started a visitation program so that we could, for a change, do something before things became a problem. God has blessed us with both numerical and spiritual growth. The members of our congregation have grown spiritually because they have been able to ask the elder visitation team about things in a specific way—including personal questions that have been on their minds. We have also been able to exhort, admonish and encourage each member individually, letting them know by our actions that, yes, we do care. Yes, this is what was missing. Now, after all these years, I feel that this is what it is to be an elder.” — Ron VandenBurg

I do not believe it is in accord with the word of God to just have the teaching elder do this visitation. (But is it not true that this is pretty much the way it has been in the American Presbyterian tradition of recent times?) I also believe there is a scriptural basis for making this a team effort rather than a solo performance. I am not saying that there should be no visitation by individual elders. Of course there should be such visits. As a matter of fact I make such visits frequently myself. But I also maintain that there ought to be a regular official visitation—on at least an annual basis—of all the members of the church, and that this visitation is best made by two elders together. When Jesus “called the twelve to him” the Scripture says he “began to send them out two by two” (Mark 6:7). And, in my view, this is particularly important if we, the elders of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, want to begin a faithful oversight of the Lord's people.

I believe it is right here that many young men flounder at the very beginning of their pastoral ministry. They see the many glaring weaknesses and—yes, let's say it—sins in the congregation. So, with their burning zeal for the Lord's cause, they go to various members of the church to confront them. It doesn't take long before there is considerable opposition. (The uncomfortable sinners will insist, of course, that it's not so much what the young pastor said as the way he said it.) So the damage is already done. Enmity is focused on one person—the young inexperienced pastor. And the elders are often torn between their desire to placate the people and to support the pastor. Too often, I believe, placating the people wins out and the support of the pastor loses.

But how different it is when it is not just one person

(the preacher), but the entire session (speaking with a unified voice) that comes to the people. How very different it is, too, when there are two witnesses (two elders) by which every word can be established. I can tell you from experience that there is a world of difference between these two ways of exercising oversight of the flock. When the elders are not there it should come as no surprise when they do not want to side with either party. But when the elders are there, knowing what was said—and what was not said—they are in a position to take the pastor's side very strongly if he is in the right. In my experience the practice of making a regular (at least once each year) official home visitation virtually eliminates opportunity for the common evil of having the pastor misrepresented. For this reason alone I would strongly recommend it.

But there are other reasons as well. One is the obvious fact that two heads are often better than one in dealing with the needs of God's people. What one elder may not be able to bring out, another can. In our Session we have elders with very diverse occupations and educational

training. What a beautiful thing it is to see a godly elder with a high-school education wisely assisting a college professor who is beyond his depth in meeting a certain need in a particular member being visited. What a wonderful educational process this is, not only for the members being visited but also, for the elders themselves. And, as they grow in their proficiency as elders, they also grow in their respect and love for one another. And that is not all. In my experience nothing enables an elder to know the needs of the people—individually, yes, but also collectively—as this does. As the home visits are discussed at each meeting, there will often emerge a collective sense of what is urgently needed in the public proclamation of the Word. Because of my strong conviction that regular home-visitation by elders is one of our greatest needs in the OPC we begin—in this issue—a reprint of Dr. P. Y. De Jong's excellent little book on the subject entitled *Taking Heed to the Flock*.

For your own good, and the good of your congregations, I plead with you, my fellow elders, to take heed to what Dr. De Jong has written.

At the end of this issue of ***Ordained Servant*** I have included a print-out of the pages that I put in spiral-bound note books for our Session members. (These pages are not intended for use but to be temporarily removed from your ***Ordained Servant*** notebook and photocopied as needed). Each elder has a list of families (or individual members) that he is primarily responsible for. In company with another elder he visits each of these homes annually. I also keep a master record of all these visits. The time (month) of each visit is recorded at Session meetings as reports on these home visits are made by elders. In this way I can make the Session aware of it if an elder falls behind in making his annual visits. Each elder also has a page for each family/member for notes so that when the next visit is made, a year later, he can recall the important facts from the previous visits. We hope that your Session will make use of these aids, or something like them, and begin a diligent visitation of the flock.

TAKING HEED TO THE FLOCK

A Study of the Principles and
Practice of Family Visitation

by

Peter Y. de Jong, Ph. D.

Dr. P. Y. de Jong has served during all of his long ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. He was at one time a professor at Calvin Seminary, and more recently helped to organize Mid-America Reformed Seminary. In the intervening years he has served as Pastor in several CRC congregations. We are grateful to him for permission to use this valuable material. Readers will note that Dr. de Jong uses the terminology familiar to Reformed Churches of Dutch origin. We will give a footnote for any of these that might need a word of explanation.

PREFACE

Many years ago a travel-worn visitor made his way slowly into the city of Geneva, which lay like a sparkling diamond beside the deep-blue waters of Lac Leman. He had no eye, however, for the physical beauty which greeted him on every hand. Men had told him of the spiritual attractiveness of that town which had made such an enviable reputation for itself throughout Europe.

John Valentin Andrea, preacher and teacher of the holy gospel in Germany, had come to see for himself the beauty of the Genevese republic. He had not been compelled to seek refuge there from the bloody sword of religious persecution. Rather, he was deeply interested in the secret of the spiritual prosperity of Christ's Church in those parts. Like many who had come there before him, he praised the high standard or morals which characterized its citizenry in a luxury-loving and licentious age. And in seeking some explanation for it, he was satisfied to conclude that it resulted chiefly from the regularity and thoroughness which had characterized the family visitation by ministers and elders since the days of Calvin.

To this very day one of the salient features of the Reformed church life is the type of spiritual care and supervision which the officers of the church exercise over the lives of the members. We who may still enjoy the rich fruits of the two great revivals in the Netherlands during the previous century, that of 1834 as well as of 1886,

have come to regard annual family visitation as part of our religious heritage. And those who give it more than passing consideration must agree that it has done much to keep the church strong and pure.

This, however, does not exclude the possibility of danger. Always when a practice has long continued in the churches, signs of degeneration put in their subtle appearance. People gradually lose sight of the meat, and content themselves with the husk.

Unmistakable signs of such an unspiritual attitude on our part toward the venerable institution of family visitation alarm those who know and love our church. Often derogatory remarks are freely made and go unchallenged. Some do not even hesitate to go so far as to denounce it as the fertile breeding place of hypocrisy in the churches.

As a result this work is not carried on with the same regularity which characterized its exercise some decades ago. Unless there is a revival of knowledge of, and interest in, family visitation, it will soon be relegated to oblivion. Naturally, if the practice has outlived its usefulness for a modern generation, we do well to dispense with it at once. However, it would be folly to pursue such a radical course without considering carefully the place which it was meant to fill in the life of the church. This the author aims to accomplish in these pages. At times he has leaned heavily upon Biesterveld's *Het Huisbezoek*, the study of which has been exceedingly profitable for him.

As far as we have been able to ascertain, no monograph has been written in the American language about this aspect of the official work of the churches. Hence, our elders are particularly at a loss when they must discharge this work which belongs specifically to their office. Lest we lose something which is distinctively Reformed and which has contributed immeasurably to the spiritual strength of our churches, our people should be

better informed on the nature, necessity and purpose of family visitation. To meet this need in some small way these pages have been written.

May what has been written here contribute in some measure to a better understanding and deeper appreciation of this worthy practice in our churches.

May it assist in the faithful and fruitful execution of this task.

Chapter 1

The Name and Nature of Family Visitation

“The shepherd has but imperfectly done his work when he has procured for, and administered to his flock, wholesome nourishment. He must watch over them; he must not allow either wolves or goats to mix with them, and, should such find their way among them, he must use appropriate means to get rid of them; he must endeavor to prevent the sheep from straying, and, when they do wander, he must employ every proper method to bring them back; he must endeavor to preserve them from the attacks of disease, and administer suitable preventives and medicines for prevailing maladies; and even at personal hazard he must protect them from those beasts of prey who go about seeking to devour them.”

— John Brown: Expository Discourses on First Peter

One of the most instructive and comforting doctrines of Holy Scripture for the people of God is undoubtedly that of the indivisible spiritual union of Christ and his church. We can no more think of Christ without the church, than we can conceive of the church without Christ.

Especially among Reformed Christians has the conviction of the Lordship of Christ over his spiritual body been influential in molding the government of the organized congregation and the spiritual life of its members. From earliest times, therefore, in our churches it was solemnly confessed that every one who believed was under obligation not only to unite himself with the church but also to place himself and his family under the spiritual care of the undershepherds who were appointed by the Exalted Savior. For although Christ himself had ascended to heaven to occupy the place of highest glory and exercise worldwide dominion as a reward upon his obedience to the will of the Father, he in his infinite wisdom and love was pleased for the sake of the good order of his church and the welfare of those for whom he gave his

life to institute and maintain to this very day the holy offices.

One of these offices, that of the eldership, is particularly concerned with the government of the church. Those to whom this work has been entrusted may find the New Testament replete with counsel and admonition relevant to the faithful discharge of their task. Thus Paul charged the elders at Miletus at the time of his fond farewell, *“Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28). In much the same vein Peter counsels the elders in the churches to which he wrote, *“Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock”* (1 Peter 5:2,3).

It is to the glory of the Reformed churches that they alone throughout the centuries have consistently maintained this office. Whereas in so many churches only ministers of the Word and deacons function as the spiri-

tual leaders of the people, the progeny of the Calvinistic Reformation in imitation of their greatest teacher and leader have insisted on the three offices, each representing in its unique way some aspect of the threefold office of the Savior.

The duty of these elders is to maintain good order and discipline in the church of Christ.

The sphere of their labors embraces the whole visible church of Jesus Christ, old and young alike. And because the Reformed churches have always had a deep appreciation for the way in which Christ through his Holy Spirit employs the organic relations of human life for the coming of his kingdom, they have from the very beginning of their history conducted family visitation. By this means the churches have been able to wield an influence in the lives of their members as well as in the life of community and nation far in excess of their numerical strength. As we begin our study of this important aspect of the work of the organized church, we should first carefully consider the name by which it is designated and also understand clearly what is meant by the practice itself.

The Problem of the Name

Those who are at all acquainted with life in the Reformed churches will at one time or another have come across the Dutch term “huisbezoek.” This term, and its English equivalents, “home-visitation” or “house-visitation,” were lucid enough to win rather general acceptance. They immediately bring to our attention the fact that the church is deeply interested in the lives which her members live from day to day, particularly in the sanctuary of their homes. Not only are living members to make diligent use of the means of grace at the time of public worship, but the church through her officers must maintain a direct and close contact with those whose spiritual care has been entrusted to her by the Lord of the church himself.

In an attempt to find an appropriate English equivalent for the customary Dutch designation, our fathers encountered several difficulties. Language is living; has a flavor of its own. It is therefore always hazardous to satisfy oneself with a literal translation of any term. Thus speaking of “home-visitation” or “house visitation” met with

objections.

Many feel, and rightly so, that the church through her officers is not so much interested in the house as a place of habitation as in the family which has taken up residence in some particular place. It is of the very essence of the Reformed religion to stress not the individual as an isolated person but rather the individual in his organic relation to human society. Since the home is the foundation upon which the whole structure of society is built, the proper spiritual contact between the church and her members should be made first of all in the homes. Without ignoring or much less denying the fact that certain problems and difficulties in the lives of individual members will arise which cannot be discussed properly in the presence of others, the Reformed churches have maintained their conviction that under normal circumstances the contact should be sought in and through the family circle. The family consists of those persons who form a household under one head, generally the father. It consists of parents, children, servants (if any), and even such others who may live for a time with these as boarders or friends.

The Term Visitation

By some, great objections have been levelled against the second part of the term. They have even preferred using the word visiting to the term visitation, demurring that the latter refers to an unpleasant or calamitous experience resulting from the wrath of God.

A careful consideration of that word, however, ought to dispel such a notion at once. The New Century Dictionary lists five distinct uses of the term:

1. the art of visiting; a visit; especially visiting or a visit for the purpose of making an official inspection or examination.
2. the visit of the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth; a church festival held on July 2 in commemoration of this visit.
3. a visiting with comfort or aid, or with affliction or punishment, as by God.
4. a special dispensation from heaven, whether of favor or of affliction.
5. any experience or event, especially an unpleasant one, regarded as occurring by divine dispensa-

tion; an affliction or punishment from God; a judgment.

From this list it is apparent that no one need object to the term visitation at all. The very first meaning given suits our purpose admirably, when casting about for a suitable phrase to describe the work in question. For, after all, this work is part of the official program of any well-regulated Reformed church. Every minister and elder installed in the churches assume part of the responsibility which rests upon the consistory¹ to contact the families entrusted to it, in an official way. Such a call is definitely official, and thus does not depend upon the whims or wishes of either consistory or congregation. And its aim is to make an official inspection or investigation of the lives of the members with a view to ascertaining whether or not they are aware of their spiritual privileges and obligations.

The Name "Consistorial Call"

Some of those who object to the term discussed above have preferred to speak of the consistorial call. Such a designation has some decided advantages. It tells us at once who is charged with the responsibility of carrying on this important work. The consistory is constituted of ruling elders. It should be noted that this body always includes the minister of the Word, since he functions in a double capacity, serving the congregation both as ruling and as teaching elder. He must, therefore, give himself not only to teaching and preaching but also to shepherding and governing the people of God.

In a broad sense the consistory is the court in the Reformed church. Here the rules which must govern the members of the congregation are made and tested, applied and upheld. Thus, such a consistorial call is the official visit of the members of the church by an appointed committee of the consistory under whose spiritual jurisdiction they have placed themselves. Thus, strictly speaking the elders can carry out this work only with reference to those who are directly under their official supervision, that is, the members of the church by baptism

1 - It should be understood that the term *consistory* (in Reformed Church government) is roughly equivalent to *session* in Presbyterian usage.

and profession of faith. Others may be counselled by them, since the church must witness to all men, but the officers of the church have no direct spiritual authority over them.

Many arguments can be adduced in favor of this last designation. However, there are also restrictions on the name. Since calls are made by committees of the consistory for other reasons and with other purposes in mind, it may easily lead to confusion. The term family visitation undoubtedly deserves preference, since it emphasizes the official nature of the work, speaks of the Christian family as the object of the work, and as a general designation has been widely used and generally accepted in our churches.

Understanding the Nature of the Work

Although the phrase family visitation already describes in a general way the work of the consistory which we are discussing, it is necessary to consider this somewhat more at length.

During the course of the years we have been inclined, particularly in a democratic environment, to minimize the place and necessity of spiritual authority in the church of Christ. As a result too many people cherish erroneous conceptions concerning the right of private judgment in matters of faith and life.

In order that good order may be promoted in the church and that the kingdom of God may be established in the hearts and lives of men, Christ has been pleased to entrust the power of the keys of the kingdom to the officers of the church. By their use those who hear the Word of God may judge whether or not they have a part in the living church.

Our Belgic Confession,² although using slightly different terminology, makes mention of these keys in Article 29, when it speaks of "The marks of the true church, and wherein it differs from the false church."

"The marks by which the true church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of

2 - Similar in content and purpose to our Westminster Confession of Faith, this creed was written chiefly by one man, Guido de Bres, who died a martyr to the faith in 1567.

the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in the punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.”

The next three articles elaborate on this subject in such a way that anyone who reads them must conclude that the Reformed churches early placed a high value on the rules of discipline according to which they were to order their lives.

In the Heidelberg Catechism³ an even more elaborate description is given of these keys, which are there considered to be the preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline or excommunication out of the Christian church. To this definition is added the explanation of their use. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers. From such definitions it is evident that our Reformed fathers believed that the officers of the church were entrusted with a large measure of spiritual responsibility and clothed with great spiritual authority.

In the Roman Catholic Church the idea of the keys of the kingdom had always enjoyed a prominent place. It confessed that the visible church through the hierarchy could open or shut heaven to the individual. In fact, the whole papal system of church government rests upon that assumption.

However, through the centuries the use of the keys of the kingdom in the Roman church had shifted from the preaching of the gospel to the confessional. It was there and there alone that supervision was exercised over the faith and conduct of the believer. Upon such stated occasions the priest, who was clothed with all authority by virtue of his consecration at the hands of a bishop, could interrogate the members, evaluate their spiritual condition and impose the required penalties upon all who erred. The Reformed churches at the very beginning of

their independent existence again restored the preaching of the gospel to its rightful place. However, they claimed that since the church can never know the individual heart except in so far as the individual speaks freely and honestly, the judgment of the church is necessarily conditional. In the last analysis the individual believer must judge whether or not he is right with God and thus meets the conditions which the Word of God demands of all those who claim to be in the faith. But in order that the individual who heard the gospel might be able to examine his heart and life properly in the light of the Word, the Reformed churches early instituted the practice of family visitation.

Making Necessary Distinctions

From this it is evident that family visitation is a unique type of pastoral work carried on by the church of Christ.

It may never degenerate in the direction of becoming a purely social visit for the purpose of paying respects to those who hold membership in the visible church. This seems to be the emphasis in many of the denominations around us. Too often statements are made in which the zeal of a pastor for making such social calls regularly is lauded as the cause of his success in the ministry.

Should family visitation gradually begin to assume this character, we may be sure that the officers have long forgotten their duty laid upon them by the Savior Himself as well as the authority with which he has clothed them for the faithful discharge of the same. History demonstrates that where social demands overshadow the spiritual in the church, spiritual life suffers lamentably and the church of Christ languishes.

We ought to make a careful distinction between family visitation and mutual edification. The latter ought very definitely to assume a large place in our Christian life. It is impossible for the believer who is conscious of the great gift of salvation which he enjoys to refrain from speaking about this to others. The duty of testifying to and confessing Christ before men belongs to the office of all believers. Often the Scriptures speak of the necessity of exhorting one another to faith and good works.

However, family visitation differs radically from this aspect of the life of the living church. It is conducted officially. Although we ought to admonish one another of-

3 - First published in 1563 this Catechism predates Westminster by nearly a century and is perhaps the most widely accepted of all Reformed creeds.

ten in the spirit and after the example of Christ, it has not pleased the Head of the church to grant spiritual authority to all. This he has reserved only for the officers. Indeed, as men and brethren of the congregation they are no more important and necessary than any of the other members. Yet by virtue of their holy calling they occupy a unique place and are called to a unique work. They are to tend the flock of God, and in order that they may be able to discharge their duty to the glory of God and the welfare of the church they have received spiritual authority.

In our days of revolution it is not amiss to emphasize often the place and purpose of such spiritual authority in the congregation.

A well-regulated Reformed church can not exist without a knowledge of and acquiescence to the spiritual powers which Christ has conferred upon her elders.

When, they conduct family visitation then, they enter the home not merely as fellowbrethren in the faith for the purpose of giving good counsel and bringing consolation. Rather, they are sent out by Christ as the Great Shepherd of his sheep to bring the members of his flock an official message in his behalf.

Such work places a heavy responsibility upon those who are called to perform this task.

All matters with which they must deal are strictly confidential. There is never the duty of prying into the secrets of the heart. Yet they must be able to form some adequate conception of the level of spirituality found among the members of the church. In the true sense of the word their work is that of shepherding the flock. They must lead and guide, instruct and exhort, warn and comfort all those whom God in his providence has entrusted to their spiritual care.

“When Calvin came to Geneva, he tells us himself, he found the gospel preached there, but no Church established. ‘When I first came to this Church,’ he says, ‘there was as good as nothing here... There was preaching, and that was all.’ he would have found much the same state of things everywhere else in the Protestant world. The ‘Church’ in the early Protestant conception was constituted by the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments: the correction of morals was the concern not of the Church but of the civil power... Calvin could not take this view of the matter. ‘Whatever others may hold,’ he observed, ‘we cannot think so narrowly of our office that when preaching is done our task is fulfilled, and we may take our rest.’ In his view the mark of a true Church is not merely that the gospel is preached in it, but that it is ‘followed.’ For him the Church is the ‘communion of saints,’ and it is incumbent upon it to see to it that it is what it professes to be. From the first he therefore set himself strenuously to attain this end, and the instrument which he sought to employ to attain it was, briefly—Church discipline. It comes to us with a surprise which is almost a shock to learn that we owe to Calvin all that is involved, for the purity and welfare of the Church, in the exercise of Church discipline. But that is the simple truth, and so sharp was the conflict by which the innovation won a place for itself, and so important did the principle seem, that it became the mark of the Reformed Churches that they made ‘discipline’ one of the fundamental criteria of the true Church.”

— B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Baker Book House, 1981, Vol. 5, pp. 15,16

SOME OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND THEIR CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE

by Dr. C. Van Dam

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Questions about the task of the deacons continue to persist. What precisely does this office entail? Is it still as relevant today as it was in former times? Since you have asked me to speak on the Old Testament background of the diaconal task, we will consider these basic questions from the perspective of the Old Testament in the first place. Next we will turn briefly to the New Testament and then look at some of the implications of all this for us today. Hopefully this introduction will provide a basis for discussion so that together we get further in thinking through the task of deacons, as well as our responsibilities as members of the congregation.

Attitude to the Poor and Needy

The Old Testament is full of concern for the poor, the oppressed, the widows and orphans, and others with special needs. Frequently the Lord impressed on Israel their obligations and duties over against these needy in their midst. He would not let Israel forget! The Lord also gave detailed social and economic legislation so that the poor and other needy people would be helped in concrete and effective ways. Indeed, the Lord promised that if Israel truly lived up to his good law, then the poor would cease to exist in Israel (Deut. 15:4ff.). However, due to disobedience, this could never be realized (Deut. 15:11).

Why did the Lord repeatedly express such great concern for the plight of the needy in Israel and warn Israel in no uncertain terms of his great wrath and vengeance to those who afflicted the needy and who did not help them (e.g. Ex. 22:22-24)? At the basis of the Lord's special interest and care for the needy and oppressed is the fact that he, the Lord, had once led Israel out of the bondage and oppression of Egypt and had claimed them as his own precious possession, his covenant people. And the Lord who saved them from that oppression and bondage no longer wanted to see any of his people bound in any way! Therefore God motivated his laws regarding the poor and needy by saying: "you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and

the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today." (Deut. 15:15; 16:12; 24:12,22. Also see Lev. 25:38, 42, 55 for a similar justification for helping the poor). God had set them free, and they must stay free of all oppression be it the oppression and bondage of poverty, or of fear, or of loneliness. His people are a royal people, claimed by the Lord of heaven and earth, and they must therefore not suffer any kind of want! He, the Lord, will provide for them (Lev. 26:1-13), but his provision included that his people remember their past deliverance, and appreciate their freedom which they did not deserve but is of grace alone, and therefore obey his good law in joy and thankfulness (Lev. 26:1-13; Deut. 24:19-22; 28:1-14). Therefore, if an Israelite sold himself to pay debts, he was not to be treated harshly as a slave, but as a hired servant who would be released in the year of release (Deut. 15:12-18) or the year of jubilee (Lev. 25:39-43). And he was not to leave empty-handed (Deut. 15:13)! God did not want any of his people yoked to bondage! Everything must serve their freedom and joy, including the material things of life.

We will get a deeper appreciation of this freedom of the people of God and the proper use of possessions if we look briefly at the main implications of the Eighth Word of the covenant. Understanding this commandment is important for dealing with the care of the poor and maintaining oneself in the freedom of God's salvation.

**God Shows the Way
The Eighth Word of the Covenant**

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall not steal.” In this basic covenant word, the Lord lays the groundwork and principles for freedom and the use of possessions in Israel, principles which the Lord later elaborated on.

In order to understand some of the implications of this word of the covenant, we can ask ourselves: “What was the worst sin imaginable against this command?” That was an Israelite stealing or kidnapping a fellow Israelite for gain (i.e. for sale abroad as a slave). That this was not unknown in Israel is clear from other passages that refer to this crime, for example, Exodus 21:16: “Whoever steals a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” (See also Deut. 24:7). Obviously what made this crime so terrible was that here one stole from the Lord God his most precious possession (Deut. 7:6; 32:6)! The fact that such a kidnapped person would for obvious reasons almost always be sold abroad and separated from the covenant community meant that he would be effectively separated from the Lord and his people. And so the Lord lost a most precious possession of his and the Israelite involved lost his place and freedom within the covenant community of God. But God’s people must not be bound in any way! Each Israelite’s place and freedom must be guaranteed within the covenant community! Therefore do not steal any of God’s people! That is the clear message of the eighth commandment.

However, for the purpose of this introduction, something else should be added. One could also paraphrase the meaning of the eighth word of the covenant this way: Do not rob yourself from the Lord and from the freedom in which God has placed you by being bound to your possessions and being a slave to them and therefore seeking out whatever means possible to increase them. That, too, brings terrible bondage; it will also bring hardship to widows, and the poor will be oppressed. (Think of the time of Micah and Isaiah.)

This command reminds us that man is but a steward of the material possessions he has. He owns nothing in any absolute sense. It all belongs to God, and he has given it to his people of grace alone without their earning it. How clearly the Lord taught this to his people by leading them into a land which was ready and prepared for them. They could enter Canaan and simply receive it from God’s

hand and take the fields, houses, vineyards (see Deut. 6:10,11; Josh. 24:13). Now the danger is always great that God’s people forget that they have earned nothing, but have received all the material things of grace alone, and that they are but stewards (Lev. 25, 23) whose aim in working is not to gather riches and ensure one’s food and drink, but whose aim in life must be the seeking of God’s kingdom and the laboring for the Lord and his precious possession; namely, his people, that they remain in the joy of their Lord, free from all bondage. (See Matt. 6:31-33. The Heidelberg Catechism is to the point when it says concerning the eighth command: Q. What does God require of you in this commandment? A. That I further my neighbor’s profit wherever I can or may... and labor faithfully that I may be able to relieve the needy.)

So the Lord in the Old Testament gave detailed legislation precisely regarding the material things of life. For God did not want to be robbed of his most precious possession by bondage to Mammon, but he wanted to keep them in the freedom in which he had set them free! (See Lev. 25:39-46.)

Provision for All

The detailed social and economic legislation in Israel, therefore, underlined and stressed in the first place that the Lord provides for his people’s needs and freedom! (Think, for example, of the Sabbatical years when no crops were to be grown and the Israelites had to leave the land fallow; or of the jubilee year when again the land was left fallow and when also property was returned to its original owners and the poor who had lost their freedom were released [Lev. 25:28,54].) All the resources God had given were to be used to keep all His people free, unburdened by poverty and want. God taught Israel as it were to put a distance between themselves and their possessions.

There was another basic reason why God commanded the care for the poor and needy and others who were disadvantaged. This second reason is that everyone in Israel was to be able to do their office and calling in the fullness of life. By office I mean the God-given responsibility that God has given to each of his people (for example, the office of father and mother). The care for all those with special needs would enable everyone in Israel, the covenant people, to do what was expected of them and so also share in the joy of God’s people.

When thinking through God’s laws for the care of the poor and needy and their implications, two further points

could be made. In the first place, the laws governing Israel's attitude to the poor amounted, so to speak, to a list of God-given rights for those who would benefit from these laws (cf. Is. 10:2). For example, the poor had a right to be paid their wages the same day they worked for them (Deut. 24:14f.); not to be charged interest on loans (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36; Deut. 15:7); not to be sold food at a profit (Lev. 25:37). The poor could present less costly sacrifices (Lev. 14:21f.; 27:8). Why all these special laws? So that the poor would at least have a chance to perform their offices, as for instance fathers and providers, or whatever they needed the money for. Similarly, so that the poor would have food, they had a right to the gleanings of the field, orchard and vineyard, including the corners of the field, forgotten sheaves or whatever grew on its own in the Sabbatical year (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; 25:5ff.; Deut. 24:19; Ex. 23:11). Also the tithe of the fields was to be used for the poor and the fatherless, etc., every third year rather than being sent to the sanctuary (Deut. 14:29; 26; also Neh. 8:10ff. and Esther 9:22). Furthermore, the poor had the right to a normal night's rest. Therefore no cloak given in pledge was to be kept overnight (Deut. 24:12). The poor also had the right to be encouraged and share in the joy of the covenant community. Thus the underprivileged were specifically invited to join in the festivities of the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 11:11,14). No one was to feel depressed or neglected outside the fellowship. All could share in the joy. And so, the poor were really to be part of it. As much as possible they were to be able to function like any other Israelite so they could fulfill their responsibilities and calling.

A second point that can be made is that not only the poor, but all Israelites, individually and collectively, would be fulfilling their calling by helping the poor. For in this way of obedience to God's demands regarding the poor, Israel showed herself as God's holy people. They showed themselves as God's people who showed God's image and did his will, for God's concern for the poor was well-known to Israel (e.g., Deut. 10:18, Prov. 14:31; Ps. 146, etc.). They showed themselves a holy people who by their care for the poor, stood apart and were separated from other nations. In the laws of other nations there is not such an elaborate concern for the poor. Furthermore, unlike other nations where any concern for the poor is the task of the rulers or the temple, in Israel, the nation as a whole and as individuals are directly addressed by God to take care of the poor! It is everyone's responsibility! The King's (Prov. 31:5, 8-9; Ps. 72) but

also the people's! Now it is remarkable that there are no specific penalties for disobedience. That is, no human authority was according to the law specifically instructed about punishing neglect here. Why? It may well be intended to emphasize that obedience to this law, was to be a fruit of thankfulness and not the result of coercion. Think of the Lord's primary motive. Remember, you were once in bondage. Therefore, do not let others be so burdened! Now God made it clear that he would avenge those who trample the rights of the poor (Prov. 22:22-23; Ex. 22:23-24). The oppressed therefore knew that they could always turn to the Lord if they were wronged or neglected by men (e.g., Ps. 7:9; 26:1; 35:24; 43:1; 4:2; etc.).

Summary and Consequences

The Lord does not want any of his people bound or oppressed in any way! He does not want any to be handicapped in fulfilling his office and calling! When these two conditions are met, there can be joy in the covenant community. I want to emphasize (as can be deduced from the examples) that although the poor and the orphans and widows appeared more often than not to have financial needs (the Lord reckoned with this; for example, Deut. 24:19-21; 14:29), yet this did not necessarily always have to be their first or most important need. The widows and orphans could be socially neglected and/or despised. They may need special protection. The Lord therefore says in Exodus 22:22ff.: "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry" The word "afflict" indicates "to humiliate" and includes not only unjust oppression, but every kind of cold and contemptuous treatment.

Also judicially they are not to be mistreated (Deut. 24:17, see Jer. 7:6). The Lord is their protector (Ps. 68:5; 146:9)! It is therefore the holy calling of the people of the Lord likewise to protect and see to their needs, that the widows and orphans may share in the joy of the Lord and may know that their place and freedom is secure within the covenant community. In this way they also can fulfill their calling and responsibility.

We have also mentioned that they were to share in the joy in the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths (Deut. 16:11,14). Again, money did not answer this particular need.

All were to share in the joy of redemption! Thus all were to be free from oppression and all were to be full,

participating members of the covenant community who exercised their calling. Indeed, anyone who was prevented from sharing in this joy, and was in one way or another oppressed or wronged in the covenant community, or whoever therefore did not see his place free and secure was called “poor and needy.” (See, for example, Ps. 40:17; Ps. 86:1; 109:22). So the Hebrew words for “poor”, while they can mean economic poverty are also terms colored by the other afflictions and forms of bondage that suffering children of God can experience within the covenant community. Over against all these poor and needy, of whatever origin their poverty, bondage, needs, and unhappiness was, the people of God as a whole had the holy calling to see to it that they shared in the joy of the covenant people of God. Yes, all had to share in that. As far as the covenant joy is concerned, this was to be shared even with the strangers in the midst of Israel.¹

The Strangers

Because this sharing with strangers may have some bearing on the task of the diaconate today, let us briefly consider the position of strangers within the context of our topic. In Leviticus 19:34 we read: “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God”. The stranger, therefore, received virtually the same treatment as the Israelite poor. He was not to be oppressed (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33ff.). He is ranked with the fatherless and widows, and God is also his protector and defence (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 94:6; 146:9), although as a stranger he is not set free in the year of jubilee (Lev. 25:45ff.). (He is subordinate to Israel and in their service.) He can, however, share in the joyous eating from the festive tables of the tithes of the first fruits (Deut. 14:28 ff.) and the feasts of Weeks and Booths (Deut. 16:11,14; 26:11).

Although the sojourners were not really foreigners, they were distinct from Israel. But the Lord saw to it that Israel’s non-covenant neighbors could share in many of the benefits of the covenant and profit in a real way also

1 - After all, the law of Levirate marriage gave the widow considerable security (Deut.25:5-10; see Gen. 38:11) and a childless widow could return to her father’s house (see Lev. 22:13; Ruth 1:8). The orphans, too, were not without security. Their rights of inheritance were to be protected, and many would be aided by family and friends (see Job 29:12; 31:17).

from the service of covenant love and the economy of mercy which the Lord had instituted in Israel.

Key Principles

To round off the Old Testament section and to bring to mind the key principles found, we could sum them up as follows. 1. There are two main motivations for the care of the poor: a) the Lord who had set His people free wanted this nation, His most precious possession, to remain in the joy of their deliverance and free from all want and oppression, be it financial or otherwise. b) Everyone was to be able to execute his office and calling. Poverty cannot form impediments to that in the covenant community. 2. The poor and needy are all those who because of special needs cannot share in the joy of the covenant and cannot fulfill their task and responsibility in the covenant community. We must therefore never see the needs of the poor in too restricted a sense (for example, only financial). All the different needs of “the poor and needy” must be met by the covenant people as a whole. 3. The Lord never waited for extreme needs to develop before taking action. The detailed legislation shows how in many and various ways the poor and needy were constantly to be remembered and provided for. The extreme needs and hardships that did develop were due to disobedience to God’s law. 4. Man is but a steward of his material possessions, and must never be in bondage to them, but remain truly free as God’s possession and use his material possessions for the well-being and the freedom of the children of God. Israel’s wealth and possessions were entrusted to them for the benefit of all. 5. The Lord saw to it that Israel’s non-covenant neighbors shared in many of the material and nonmaterial benefits of the covenant.

THE NEW TESTAMENT DEVELOPMENTS

With this Old Testament background we can start to appreciate something of the situation in the early Christian church which was firmly rooted in the basic principles that have just been mentioned.

Joy and Freedom

The church was happy, and small wonder, for the deliverance had come in Christ! They who had received the Spirit knew themselves as those who had been set free from the bondage of sin and Satan and death in the great

year of release and jubilee! (See Luke 4:18-21.) The Christ had come in the covenant service of love for the freedom of the children of God!

There was therefore joy in Jerusalem, and the church saw to it that this joy would stay! They loved each other and with the love of Christ made sure that no one was lacking anything (Acts 2:44ff.). Furthermore, they had meals together and “partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). So the joy and the gratitude for the salvation in Christ was expressed and strengthened. In the tradition of the Old Testament, festive meals with the brothers and sisters, including the needy, were held (See Deut. 14: 26,27,29). They took care of each other in loving service for the joy and the freedom of the children of God. No poverty or affliction must bind anyone and take that joy away!

Why Deacons were Needed?

And now one day that joy was not there as it should have been. Mutterings were heard in the rapidly growing church of the Lord. Some widows had been neglected in the daily distribution. The joy and therefore the freedom of God’s children was threatened. Deacons were appointed (Acts 6). The apostles could no longer oversee everything. But the matter of maintaining and providing for the fellowship in the joy of the Lord was of great importance, and therefore special office bearers were chosen. These deacons were to serve at the tables (and therefore also distribute gifts), the tables of fellowship, so that the joy of salvation might continue to be tasted and savored.

Let us never forget this origin of the office of deacon. Deacons are those who protect the communal joy of the congregation, and who, therefore, see to it that the exercising of the communion of saints, with all that that implies, continues. Deacons are those who see to it that there are no forgotten or neglected people in the church of God, or that there be none who are so bound and oppressed that the joy of salvation and release from all bondage in Christ is no longer apparent. They make sure that everyone can fulfill his or her calling as parents or members of the church because they are not disadvantaged.

It is therefore never just a matter of seeing to it that no one is without food, but it is a matter of seeing to it that the joy in the Spirit, as free children of God (who have been set free by Christ), be realized in the communion of saints, a communion where the life of each and every member of the church has a place and so is safe and free

from bondage and affliction and where everyone can function according to the responsibilities each has been given, yes, so that the joy of eating of the same Table of the Lord be always evident.

When this is seen as the key character of the task of the deacons, it is also immediately obvious that the deacons cannot and should not do everything. No, for just as in Israel, the service for the joy of the covenant people where none are poor and all can do their task, is a service in which all are to be involved (although the deacons are to give leadership and guidance).

Principles

What are some of the New Testament principles for the diaconal ministry of love and mercy which are to be stimulated, guided, and overseen by the deacons?

1. This ministry of mercy is service (diakonia, the Greek word from which “deacon” comes, already says it), a service of love. The Lord indicated its character when he washed the feet of his disciples and said: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14ff.). We must therefore be moved by his love, and so serve his people, that the joy of his redemption be maintained in the congregation by the ministration of his riches and the comfort of his salvation that so the God of our salvation be glorified.

2. The Lord who wants to keep us free in his salvation warns us of the cruel bondage of materialism and egoism (Luke 8:22-25,12:13-21) and says in his Word that all the needs of the covenant community must be satisfied (2 Cor. 8:15). This does not, for example, mean that all must have an equal amount of money (the church is not a form of communism), but what is to be equal is the satisfaction of all the needs. The Lord illustrated this in his giving manna in the desert. Some could gather more than others, and yet the Lord saw to it that all were helped equally and all were adequately provided for (Ex. 16:17,18). This principle is referred to by Paul in connection with aiding the needy (II Cor. 8:15).

We must therefore see to it that all needs in the congregation are met, so that all are equally satisfied, and all can fully function according to their responsibility and so all can fully share in the joy of the Lord! This is possible if it be realized that everything in the church is in a very real way owned communally for the benefit of the Body of Christ. (Think of the attitude in Acts 2:45: They

shared “as anyone might have need”; see also Acts 4:34). No one in the communion of saints must or can enjoy the freedom and joy of the Lord individually and selfishly. The Lord places at the festive tables of joy also the poor, the needy, and the orphans, etc. (Deut. 16, 24).

3. The ministering service of love not only includes taking care of the financially poor, but also sees to the relieving of other forms of oppression and affliction so that these “needy” can function in the covenant community and so also enjoy as fully as possible the joy and salvation of the Lord. Matt. 25:31-46 speaks of the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, and the imprisoned. James 1:27 speaks of the necessity of visiting “the fatherless and widows in their affliction,” and serving unselfishly wherever possible (John 13:14).

If the deacons are to serve properly, these areas also need their attention. Christ says: “As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt. 25:40). Indeed, for these are dear to Christ. They are his most precious possession, set free from the bondage of sin and Satan, and therefore they must not be left to suffer a renewed bondage of loneliness and sense of not belonging but must share in the full joy of their Lord and truly function in the communion of saints.

4. Scripture teaches that the immediate family has the first responsibility to minister this service of love (see Lev. 25 25; 1 Tim. 5). Children must help their parents and grandparents as much as possible. The church must not be needlessly burdened (1 Tim. 5:16). Indeed, the deacons should keep diaconal matters decentralized as much as possible. For they are to activate and equip the congregation “for the work of service (diakonia), for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). 5. According to the New Testament we have responsibilities to those “without.” As we read in Galatians 6:10: “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (See also 1 Thess. 5:15b; 2Pet. 1:7). We must therefore not exclude deacons from a supportive role in projects such as Mission Aid and the Canadian Reformed World Relief Fund (CRWRF). Also, there may be other opportunities closer to home.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Let us draw some conclusion on the basis of what we have seen in Scripture, and, where necessary, reckon with what has taken place in history, so that we can come to a concrete understanding of what all this means for our

task as deacons, here and now.

A Double Service

If the deacon focuses on maintaining the freedom of God’s precious possession, his children, and to enable all the poor and needy to have means to function according to their responsibilities so that their joy be full in the covenant community, then their ministry of mercy is to be done with a view, not only to the needs of those financially oppressed, but also to the needs of those burdened by sickness, loneliness, or the like. After all, both types of hardships can take the joy of salvation and freedom away and can give difficulty in the realization of their covenant responsibilities. Deacons are therefore to do more than handle money. Calvin even had two kinds of deacons; one for the poor and another for the sick. The Convent of Wezel in 1568 likewise spoke of two kinds of deacons. In the French Huguenot churches, the deacons visited not only the poor, but also the sick. It is, therefore, noteworthy that in contrast to the old form for the ordination of deacons, the new form (adopted by Synod Cloverdale 1983) specifically mentions the needs of the sick and lonely. The deacons are to do what they can that these needs of the congregation are met and to stimulate the congregation in the service of love, so that the joy of God’s children in the communion of saints becomes a daily reality. This two-fold concern has brought this form more in line with Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession which also recognizes both financial and non-financial needs.

Family Visits

How can the deacons best fulfill this task? The new Dutch form (adopted by Synod Kampen 1975) explicitly mentions a new element which answers this question; namely, the family visit. The diaconate must, as it were, go on the offensive and visit all the families of the church. There is great merit in this, precisely in these times of rush and busyness when we do not always know what lives among the people... because there is no time to visit (contrast the assumed situation in Israel).

An objection can be raised. Is this not a duplication of the family visits by the ministers and elders? No. The purpose of their visits is different. The family visits by the elder and minister have in view, first of all, spiritual oversight and supervision, so that the congregation be watched over and encouraged in a life of holiness. (See the form for the ordination of elders.) The purpose of a

diaconal visit, however, is first to see and to ask if there are any needs, financial or otherwise (for example, loneliness), and to see to it that those needs are met. The second purpose of a diaconal family visit is to encourage and stimulate the congregation in the service of love. One must not only ask: “Are there needs here?” but also: “What are you doing, or what do you think you should be doing, for the well-being and joy of the communion of saints? What is your service for the upbuilding of the body in love?” (Think of Ephesians 4:12.) In this way the talents and energies of love and compassion can be discovered and put into circulation, talents and energies which otherwise, without the stimulus and encouragement of the deacons, might never be used.

Of Great Benefit

It seems to me that much could be gained by considering and preparing ourselves for a similar practice of diaconal family visits in our own circles. Especially in today’s world, much profit could be realized by periodic visits by the deacons to all the families of the congregation.

We live in a time of much individualism and loneliness. We also live in a time when, in spite of the cry of love and the heat of eroticism, the world is growing colder and colder. As the Lord himself said: “Most men’s love will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12). In the same discourse in Matthew 24 and 25 the Lord stresses the serving love that must characterize the church—going out and visiting those in need and seeing to their needs (Matt. 25:31-46). Deacons who see it as their task periodically to visit and stimulate this service of love will do much to ensure that the joy and warmth of the mutual love and communion will continue to characterize the church in a loveless and cold world. In this way the church will also be more and more a light of hope and a joy in a world of sin, a community of love that repels Satan and attracts the elect children of God!

There is also something else. We live in a time of great prosperity in which the dollar has become known as the “Almighty Buck,” a god to be reckoned with and to which many are bound. Good periodic visits of a deacon alone will heighten the awareness that our possessions are not ours in any absolute way. It will make us realize all the more that everything which believers have, they hold in a real sense communally for the welfare of the covenant joy and freedom of the liberated people of God. In no way must anyone in the church be bound to his riches, for that is possessiveness! (Think of the impli-

cations of the eight word of the covenant again.) Our riches must be used for the equal satisfying of all the needs in the church.

Related to this is another point—the bondage of secularization. We struggle against that enemy by, for example, sending our children to Christian schools. That is a need today, that is a responsibility parents have. Every one must have equal opportunity for that education: otherwise one is “poor and needy” in the Old Testament sense of the term and unable to fully execute one’s responsibility to their children. Then children are afflicted unnecessarily by secular forces. Then there is an unnecessary dimming of the joy of the liberation we have in Christ. And yet...it may be that, while the children may go to Christian schools and the sun may now shine in that area of our life, there is darkness and affliction of new sorts, and a bondage of another kind, back home where it can be truly difficult to make ends meet, and where parents in order to exercise their responsibility regarding Christian education now need both to leave home to work leaving little time and opportunity for a normal, joyous, Christian family life. So the fulfilling of one need and responsibility can create an even greater need: Where parents can no longer truly fulfill their first office and calling with regard to their children in the home! With the disintegration of the normal functioning of the family unit all around us, how vitally that Christian family life is needed today. That remains their first calling!

Periodic visits by deacons will bring genuine cases of need such as these (the above was but an example) to light more readily than now is often the case. Need and poverty are relative concepts, and we must not say too quickly there is no need. The communal riches of the congregation must be used so that all needs for normal, Christian living in the joy and freedom of our King’s salvation can be equally satisfied. That is the principle of 2 Corinthians 8:15 as the early Christian church also acted on in its own way (Acts 2,4). In church everyone must feel that they fully belong. There is to be no room for people to feel as though they are second class because genuine financial concerns prevent them from fulfilling their normal covenantal obligations.

Many more examples can be thought of. Think of the shut-ins, the ill and the depressed. The point is that the office of deacon can and must retain its full relevance for the church. The diaconal task must not be seen in too narrow a way!

The Heart of the Matter

The needs are different today, but needs are there, and probably in greater number than we often think, in the first place, in our own congregations; but, there are to be no “poor and needy” in any sense of the term, for the congregation of God is a redeemed, liberated people, a royal people, in whom and through whom God wants to see evidence of His great work of salvation and so wants to be glorified!

It is the office of the deacons to have as their specific concern the needs of God’s children and to mobilize the entire congregation so that all the needs be met in the concrete service of the love of Christ, in order that all may know themselves free from want and equipped to do their part in the covenant people of God. May so the joy of the congregation and the praise of God’s name be served by deacons and by all of us.

THE DEACONS

Reprinted from *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, the constitution of the Church of Geneva,
by John Calvin

There were always two kinds [of deacons] in the ancient Church, the one deputed to receive, dispense and hold goods for the poor, not only daily alms but also possessions, rents and pensions; the other to tend and care for the sick and administer allowances to the poor. This custom we follow again now for we have procurators and hospitalers.

The number of procurators appointed for this hospital seems to us to be proper; but we wish that there be also a separate reception office, not only so that provisions be in time made better, but [also so] that those who wish to do some charity may be more certain that the gift will not be employed otherwise than they intend. And if the revenue assigned by their Lordships be insufficient, or should extraordinary necessity arise, the Seignery will advise about adjustment, according to the need they see.

The election of both procurators and hospitalers is to take place like that of the elders; and in electing them the rule proposed by Paul for deacons is to be followed.

With regard to the office of procurator, we think the rules which have already been imposed on them by us are good; by means of which, in urgent affairs, and where there is danger in deferment, and chiefly when there is no grave difficulty or question of great expense, they are not obliged always to be meeting, but one or two can do what is reasonable in the absence of others.

It will be their duty to watch diligently that the public hospital is well maintained, and that this be so both for the sick and the old people unable to work, widowed women, orphaned children and other poor creatures. The sick are always to be lodged in a set of rooms separate from the other people who are unable to work: old men, widowed women, orphaned children and the other poor. Moreover, care for the poor dispersed through the city should be revived, as the procurators may arrange it.

Moreover, besides the hospital for those passing through which must be maintained, there should be some attention given to any recognized as worthy of special charity. For this purpose, a special room should be set aside to receive those who ought to be assisted by the procurators, which is to be reserved for this business.

It should above all be demanded that the families of the hospitalers be honorably ruled in accordance with the will of God since they have to govern houses dedicated to God.

The ministers must on their side inquire whether there be any lack or want of anything, in order to ask and desire the Seignery to put it in order. To do this, some of their company with the procurators should visit the hospital every three months to ascertain if all is in order.

It would be good, not only for the poor of the hospital but also for those of the city who cannot help themselves, that they have a doctor and a surgeon of their own who should still practice in the city, but meanwhile be required to have care of the hospital and to visit the other poor. As for the hospital for plague, it should be wholly separate and apart, and especially if it happens that the city be visited by this scourge of God.

For the rest, to discourage mendicancy which is contrary to good order, it would be well, and we have so ordered it, that there by one of our officials at the entrance of the churches to remove from the place those who loiter; and if there be any who give offense or offer insolence to bring them to one of the Lord’s Syndic. Similarly for the rest of the time, let the Overseers of Tens take care that the total prohibition of begging be well observed.

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Elders Visitation Roll

0

Section # _____ Elder: _____

Family Name	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					

Notes:

0

First Name: Father _____
 Mother _____

0

Street _____ State _____ Zip _____
 City _____
 Phone _____

Children: (Name) (Born) (Baptize)
 1 - _____
 2 - _____
 3 - _____
 4 - _____
 5 - _____
 6 - _____

Notes from home visits:

0

0

From
The Form of Government
of
The Orthodox Presbyterian Church
Chapter X

RULING ELDERS

1. Christ who has instituted government in his church has furnished some men, besides the ministers of the Word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereto. Such officers, chosen by the people from among their number, are to join with the ministers in the government of the church, and are properly called ruling elders.
2. Those who fill this office should be sound in the faith and of exemplary Christian life, men of wisdom and discretion, worthy of the esteem of the congregation as spiritual fathers.
3. Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ.

They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals.

Evils which they cannot correct by private admonition they should bring to the notice of the session.

They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and nourish and guard the children of the covenant.

They should pray with and for the people.

They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors.

Guidelines for Home Visitation*

1. Each family (or individual adult member) should be visited at least once each year.
2. It is the duty of each elder to set the time of the visit and enlist the assistance of a fellow elder for the visit.
3. Notes should be made of any important problems that may need follow-up at a later visit.
4. The home visit should begin with all the covenant children of the household being present. After due attention has been given to the needs of the covenant children, it may be expedient to dismiss them for further discussion with the parents.
5. A full report of each home visit should be given at the next session meeting.
6. The date of the home visit should be recorded in the record sheet included in this booklet.

* This is only a suggested procedure. It is **not** a part of the OPC constitution.