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ORDAINED SERVANT

Statement Of Purpose

Ordained Servant exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal Ordained Servant will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

Editorial Policy

1. Ordained Servant publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of Ordained Servant or of the Church.
2. Ordained Servant occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Ordained Servant does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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EDITORIAL

In this brief editorial I want to try to say a few things about preaching—not as an expert giving out scientific material, but simply as one who has been at it for nearly half a century. It is my hope that I have learned at least a few things of value in ‘the school of hard knocks’ that I can recommend to others.

I will begin with a strong recommendation that pastors make expository preaching the mainstay of their pastoral ministry. In saying this it should of course be understood that there will be occasions in the life of any minister of the word when a topical approach

will be unavoidable. I remember just such an instance in my own ministry. An organization of foreign students at the University of Auckland once asked me to speak to them on the (to them) very mysterious subject of union with Christ. It was quite obvious to me that this required a topical approach. No doubt you can think of other situations in which a topical approach will recommend itself. I am only saying that expository preaching ought to be our forte. Let me give you my reasons.

When a newly ordained pastor first takes up the

task of regularly preaching to the same congregation it can be traumatic. At least it was for me. I had not been taught, in seminary, to expound books of the Bible. I was therefore confronted, every Monday morning, with a formidable question: *What shall I preach on next Sunday?* I tried different things. I tried to concoct a subject series, for example, but found only a very brief respite from the tension of not knowing what to preach next. It was somewhat better when I tried a longer series following the subjects suggested by the Shorter Catechism, or the Confession of Faith (I would even recommend this as a good practice, now and then). But I can truly say that my day of exuberant liberation only came when I decided to try expounding a book of the Bible. I was immediately, and permanently, delivered from ‘the slough of despond’ and I now understand that the reasons are both weighty and numerous.

In the first place, expository preaching compels a preacher to constantly study the text of the Bible. And by ‘the text of the Bible’ I mean *all* of it, not just the favorite passages, or the passages that deal with subjects that happen to fascinate the preacher. The preacher’s primary task is this: to expound the whole counsel of God. And when exposition is faithfully done that is exactly what is accomplished. Because it is there, in the text, the preacher will be forced to preach on many subjects, and many aspects of subjects, that would otherwise be neglected.

And that is not all. There will also be a new sense of power in preaching. I felt this right away when I began to do it, and have felt it ever since. And I think I have come to understand why. In the early days I would see a need and try to speak to it—by trying to find the proof that would convince people of ‘the truth’ that I thought they needed to hear, and accept. When I began to expound books of the Bible there was a subtle difference. People began to get a feel for the context of the book I was expounding. This, in turn, made an impact upon them precisely because it was *not* really me trying to impress upon them some truth that *I* happened to think they needed at that moment. No, it was now the case that they were feeling the impact of what the inspired author of that book was saying, much more than before. This is really the whole secret of preaching, as I see it. We need to preach to people in such a way that they sense—in a way that they can’t shake off—that they are hearing the *word of God* (and not, as is too often the case, just the word of man *about* the word of God). I am convinced that there is no other way that can quite equal systematic expository preaching for attaining this goal.

This was the method of the great Reformer, John Calvin. Nothing to this day surpasses his commentaries—in my humble opinion—and I think I know why. Calvin was explaining the text of Scripture, not in an atomistic way, but rather in an sequential and organic

way. He was following the line of thinking in a particular book of the Bible under the guidance of his consequently—and constantly—growing sense of the context of the Scripture as a whole. And he was expounding—explaining—the text in a pastoral way.

Let me put it this way. The more fully we enter into flow of what the Biblical writer is saying the more we will be able to see the relevance of the portion of the text with which we are dealing (whether it be a verse, or a chapter) to our modern situation. And there is certainly no reason to think that Calvin’s method has now been outmoded. Do people today—generally speaking—have more Bible knowledge than they did in the time of the Reformers? I doubt it. This, in itself, is a strong argument in favor of expository preaching. And it has certainly proved effective when faithfully done. Here I am thinking of the powerful preaching of the late Martin Lloyd-Jones. His series on Ephesians and Romans are excellent starting models for any preacher today (although, of course, no man should be followed slavishly).

One of the great hindrances to expository preaching is what is commonly called ‘the church year.’ I refer to the custom of giving annual attention (I would say: too much attention) to what is commonly called ‘Easter’ and ‘Christmas.’ Calvin—as is well known—did not interrupt his exposition to defer to these seasonal observances, and I think Calvin was wise. I am *not* arguing that a preacher should not preach about the birth of Christ, or his resurrection. Of course not. But these subjects—like all other Biblical subjects—should receive the measure of emphasis the Bible gives them. The birth of Christ, for instance, does not occupy the place of magnitude in the Bible that it has received in the modern church. Expository preaching, when it is faithfully done, helps to restore a Biblical balance. It also helps the people of God recover the joy and excitement that they *ought* to feel in hearing the word of God preached. Let me try to illustrate what I mean.

I knew a pastor who was preaching, a few years ago, through the book of Romans. He was preaching to a congregation with a long tradition of following the ‘church year.’ After some sixty weeks of sermons on Romans he decided to ask the elders if they wanted him to stop for a while, for the sake of variety. He was quite surprised when they insisted right away that they—and the people in the congregation—did not want *anything* to interrupt that series. And, a little later on, some of those people told him that *not* having the usual pattern of things during the ‘Christmas’ season was a great liberation to them. As he analyzed the situation he concluded that it was expository preaching that did it.

I do not claim to be a great preacher. But I’m convinced of one thing, namely, that I’ve found at least one of the ‘secrets’ of effective preaching.

Are Deacons Members of the Session?

by

R. Dean Anderson Jr.

Do deacons belong to the Session or not? Generally speaking in Presbyterian circles, the answer is no. Deacons hold their own meetings. They may advise the Session of elders on various matters within their sphere of operation, but in general they are guided and directed by the ruling body of elders.

But this is not always the practice. In many churches of continental Reformed persuasion, deacons and elders together form the ruling body of the church. Sometimes deacons are removed when discussion concerns pastoral methods, but the trend in many churches today is for more and more involvement of the deacons in the matters of the ruling Session. One need only look at the current practice (and church order) of the Christian Reformed Churches to name but one example.

I don't know how much this trend might be evident in churches of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, but it is surely an issue that ought to be examined. Why is it that Reformed and Presbyterian churches seem to differ on this point? Of course, the only way the point can properly be resolved is by going back to the Word of God and determining there the way that Christ would have His church ruled.

Yet as a preliminary to that study, I would like to investigate in this article the more historical question. Is it really true that Reformed churches have always differed with Presbyterians on this point? Or is the current practice in many Reformed churches a move away from their own heritage? As I hope to show, the current trend of including deacons as full members of a ruling Session was certainly not the practice of the Reformed fathers.

At the great Synod of Dort 1618-1619 the Arminians challenged the Reformed fathers by arguing that Article 30 of the Belgic Confession was in conflict with the church order and Scripture, as regarding the constitution of the Session, and ought

to be changed. The Reformed did not accept this interpretation of the Confession and thus did not acquiesce to the demands of the Arminians in this respect.

What lay behind this decision? And what had the actual rulings and practice of the Reformed churches up to this point in time been, with respect to the constitution of the Session? In what follows I hope briefly to outline the developments and decisions of the Reformed churches in this respect, firstly of those in France, and then of those in the low countries.

On May 25th, 1559, the first Synod of the French Reformed churches officially met with delegates representing 50 (out of a possible 75) local churches. At this first Synod the French Confession (drafted by Calvin) was adopted. Since this French Confession was to be the close model for de Bres' Belgic Confession, it is important to note that the French Confession does not make any allusion whatsoever to the constitution of a Session (cf. Art. 29).

Calvin (the draftsman) himself understood the Session to be composed of elders (cf. Inst. IV:xi:6), and this was also the practice of the churches in Geneva.¹

However the first French Synod also published a church order (the "*Discipline ecclesiastique*") which read in Art. 20:

*The elders and deacons are the senate of the church of which the ministers of the Word shall take the chair.*²

So while the Confession did not state it explicitly, the understanding of the French Reformed churches regarding the constitution of the Session was at first different from Calvin (and also from the Dutch tradition), as the French were in a number of

other matters! Deddens in fact shows that the French conception of the task of a deacon was heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism (e.g., in matters pertaining to assistance with preaching and sacraments, their understanding was identical to the relation between bishop and deacon in contemporary Roman Catholicism).³ This all changed with the 7th Synod of La Rochelle (1571) under the very capable direction of the chairman, Beza, from Geneva. Here the church order was modified stating:

*The ministers and elders form the Session, wherein the ministers shall preside, and the deacons may assist whenever the Session deems such appropriate.*⁴

The Synod of Nimes 1572 however stated more fully:

*The ministers of the Word of God, together with the elders, constitute the consistory of the church, over which the ministers must preside. And the deacons may and must be present at the assembly of the council, in order to be able to serve (the consistory) with their advice, just as we have up till now used them with success in the government of the church and since they were called to the task of elders. And in the future the deacons, joined with the pastors and elders shall have the direction of the church.*⁵

Here we see that the French inclusion of the deacons with the consistory was NOT because they viewed the office of deacon as a ruling office, but because they viewed their deacons as called at the same time to be assistant elders. Here they were evidently able to give some “after the fact” justification of their actual practice, while at the same time being careful not to blur (theologically) the Scriptural distinction between the office of elder and that of deacon. Nevertheless, this Synod still did not permit deacons to take part in discussion of discipline cases.⁶

In turning to the Reformed churches in the low countries, we come first to the Belgic Confession of Guido de Bres, published in 1561. As we have said, this was very closely modeled on the French Confession of 1559, yet the wording with respect to the offices of the church is slightly different. In Art. 30 it is stated:

*Wij geloven... dat er ook Opzieners en Diakenen (molten) Zion, om met de herders to Zion awls even road (Lat. quasi senates) der Kirk. [We believe... that there (must) also be overseers and deacons, who together with the pastors form a sort of a Council of the church]*⁷

Rutgers, the well known expert in church polity of late last century, noting the “awls” (and Latin “Quasi”) points out that the confession at this point is merely making a comparison between the officers of the church, and the senators on a town council. No church political point is made regarding the proper composition of a Session.

The general task of each office is merely circumscribed (which a reading of the complete article shows clearly).⁸ This was also the explanation current at the time of the Synod of Dort. The explanation was challenged some years later by the Englishman Seldon (an Erastian delegate to the Westminster Assembly) who alleged that the Synod of Dort had changed the meaning of the Confession by introducing the word “quasi” (“as if”) in the Latin translation. Voetius (Pol. Eccl. Pars III, Lib. I Tract. I Cap. VII, p. 62ff) (a delegate to the Synod of Dort 1618-19) however took Seldon to task, showing that in all the versions of the Confession prior to the Synod of Dort 1618-19, the text read “awls even Raedt der Kercke” (“as if a council of the church”), thus intentionally distinguishing the officers and authority of the church from that of the state.⁹ Thus, we may conclude that, like the French Confession, the Belgic Confession did not make any definitive statement on the constitution of the Session.

In 1568 a large gathering of office bearers from the low countries took place to prepare for the first Synod of the Reformed churches there. This Convent of Bezel (as it was called) also drafted a church order in which it was clearly stated that deacons were not a part of the Session (cf. Cap. 2 & 3; Cap. 4:1,3,S,7,9,10ff).

Yet the first Synod in Emden 1571 (which was highly influenced by the French who sent delegates) stated that deacons were a part of the Session!¹⁰

At the Synod of Dort 1574 this confusion was cleared up with a declaration declaring the intent of

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the decision of the Synod of Emden:

In explanation of the articles of the Synod of Emden: The ministers of the Word, elders and deacons form a Consistory such that the ministers and elders shall assemble together alone, and also the deacons shall assemble separately in order to handle their respective business. However in places where there are few elders the deacons may be allowed to attend (the elders meeting) at the pleasure of the Consistory. The deacons must attend whenever they are called to do so by the Consistory.¹¹

This way of putting things was continued by the various successive Synods in the low countries. Thus the Synod of Middelburg 1581 stated:

There shall be a Session (kerkeraad) in all churches, consisting of Ministers of the Word and Elders.¹²

In answer to a particular question as to whether the deacons may be allowed to attend Session meetings where there are few elders, the Synod said:

It is permitted as long as the Session requests their counsel and help. In addition they may also ordinarily attend Session so (long as) they serve both offices, that of elder and that of deacon.¹³

Here again we see that as with the French churches, when deacons were allowed to attend Session meetings, they were considered to be functioning not as deacons, but as elders. In the Dutch tradition, the deacons' attendance tended to be restricted to cases where there were very few elders. It should also be noted that the deacons were added for counsel and assistance, but nowhere is it said that they thereby became part of the Session proper. The idea was to include them for the sake of extra wisdom in discussion. The wording is in fact so cautious that it seems very doubtful that they ever had voting rights (even in cases of few elders). This is confirmed by the later objection of the Arminians to the Belgic Confession, for part of their objection was that the Belgic Confession seemed (to them) to suggest that deacons could have such voting rights (a practice unheard of!).

The Synod of s'Gravenhage 1586 continued the same line, and added the wording that was to

become standard in Reformed churches for centuries:

And where the number of Elders is very small, the deacons shall be taken up along with the Session.¹⁴

Again the wording is cautious, and does not actually say that in such instances the deacons form a part of the Session itself. This wording was only slightly changed by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619, which stated that "the deacons MAY be taken up along with the Session." As we have noted, at this Synod the Arminians argued that the Belgic Confession gave deacons voting rights on Session.¹⁵ However the Synod left the Confession as is, understanding the relevant clause not to be speaking of the constitution of a Session (see above). Therefore it did not see any contradiction between the Confession (Art. 30) and the Church order.

Thus from the beginning of the Reformation the general Reformed line has been to limit the constitution of the Session to elders only, and to permit deacons at times to attend (especially when the number of elders is few) and to give their wisdom, but not to allow them any part in the ruling of the church. When deacons attend such Session meetings, Reformed polity has consistently considered them not to be functioning in their office as deacon, but to be performing a special service and as such functioning as an elder.

It may be of interest to note that in 1644 four deacons from Rotterdam desiring to be considered part of the Session (but the Session having refused) appealed to the classis (using as argument the Synod of Emden 1571). The classis denied the appeal, so the brothers appealed to the next national synod (never held).

At the Synod of Utrecht 1905, the relevant article of the Church order was modified to state:

And where the number of the Elders is small, the Deacons may be taken up along with the Session according to local regulation; the which shall always occur where the number is less than three.¹⁶

Given the clear history of the Reformed practice on this matter, we as churches should be doubly careful to be sure that we have solid Biblical grounds

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if we choose to depart from traditional Reformed church polity. The churches of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church should not think that this is merely a Presbyterian versus a continental Reformed matter. It is rather a generally Reformed position (Session = elders only) versus a departure from Reformed tradition (Session = elders and deacons). Is such a departure really Biblically defensible?

— R. Dean Anderson Jr.

1. A. D. R. Polman, *onze Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*, Vol. 4, p. 25.
2. *Bekennnisschriften und K.o. der nach Gottes Wort ref. Kirche herausg. von W. Niesel, Munchen 1938, p. 77.*
3. P. Deddens, *De Positive van de Diakenen ten Anacin van den Kerkeraad* (1948), p. 16.
4. *La disc. ref. de France, par Dyes, Orleans 1675, p. 144.*
5. D'Huisseau, *op cit.* pp. 144-145.
6. Polman, *op cit.* vol. 4, p. 28.
7. Note that the points made in the following discussion are made with respect to the official text of the Confession. The English translation in common use today is very misleading at this point.
8. F. L. Rutgers, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, vol. 1, p. 277.

9. *Politica Ecclesiastica, Pars III, Lib. I Tract. I Cap. VII, p. 62ff.* Note too that in a similar way the Genevan Ecclesiastical ordinances of 1541 and 1561 spoke of the four offices for the government of the church (minister, teacher, elder, deacon) while deacons were at the same time excluded from the consistory. No contradiction between terminology and practice was understood by this way of speaking.

10. F. L. Rutgers (ed.) *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der 16e eeuw, s'Gravenhage 1889, p. 58.*

11. Rutgers (ed.), *Acta*, p. 139. .

12. Rutgers (ed.), *Acta*, pp. 385-386.

13. Rutgers (ed.), *Acta*, p. 405. .

14. Rutgers (ed.), *Acta*, p. 495.

15. *Acta et Scripta synodalia dordracena ministrorum remonstrantium: I:96f.* It should be noted that the Arminians at the time were attempting to find as many contradictions in the Confession as they could, for part of their general platform was that the Confession could not be held to be stringently binding on all office bearers. Their attempt at this point to show the Confession to be in conflict with the Church order and practice of the Reformed Churches, was thus in line with their general platform.

16. P. Deddens, *De Positive van de Diakenen ten Anacin van den Kerkeraad* (1948), p. 15.

“Though the word itself (diakonia) is of more extensive signification, yet the Scripture particularly gives the title of ‘deacons’ to those whom the Church has appointed to dispense the alms and take care of the poor, and constituted stewards, as it were, of the common treasury of the poor; and whose origin, institution, and office, are described in the Acts of the Apostles. For ‘when there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration’ (Acts 6:1-3), the apostles pleaded their inability to discharge both offices, of the ministry of the word and the service of tables, and said to the multitude, ‘Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.’ See what were the characters of the deacons in the apostolic Church, and what ought to be the character of ours, in conformity with the primitive example.”

— John Calvin

Pointers for Elders and Deacons

Part 2

From DIENST

3. THE ELDER ON FAMILY VISIT: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

3.1 Listening and Questioning

In visiting the elders must take into account that most people in the company of one or two office-bearers won't open their hearts and minds without much further ado. They would rather keep a lot of their thoughts and activities to themselves: they certainly don't parade their worries and cares before others. For that reason the elders cannot afford to be superficial for then their visit will be rather unfruitful.

Instead they should make every effort to penetrate deeper. In that regard the elder does well to listen and to ask questions. That won't be easy.

In the first place real listening is an art. You do not only listen to that which is said but more importantly to that which is not said. Therefore do not jump to conclusions too quickly.

For that reason it is important for the leader to ask questions. That, too, is not easy at first. For if the elder is to succeed he will have to ask more daring questions than those generally asked on social visits. He is after all an elder. He does not come to satisfy his curiosity, but to give Christian pastoral care a tangible form. In that realization the elder must overcome his diffidence so that he dares to seek more information than is normally the case. It goes without saying that this must be done with tact.

Therefore he will have to take care that he does not ask some of the questions mentioned in [2] literally. Then he comes on too strong and the result will be that people become close-mouthed. With probing questions the elder must let the person know that he is aware of the fact that he is becoming personal. He should also give the other person the chance to answer or not. That does not take away from the fact that only through penetrating questions the elder receives answers to questions like those mentioned. Only in that way does he gain insight into a person's outer and inner life, and only then can he truly comfort, instruct and correct him.

3.2 Corrections

As elder it won't suffice to merely get people to talk. You will have to come with the Bible in your hand, whether

you give them comfort, biblical information, or correction. That is the purpose of family visits. Certainly the purpose is not to examine the activities of people visited with the help of all sorts of cold rules and regulations. The elders are not pollsters to see whether or not the consumers like their package of religious commands. Their intention should be to help the members in their service of God. That means that in and with their words they must give direction.

That is difficult especially for young elders. They are inclined to think: "Where do I get the courage from to correct someone older?" Or you are afraid that the other person will think: "What business is it of that young whippersnapper?" Yet the elder has to overcome his reticence. Otherwise he cannot be a good elder. The fact that Christ wants to make use of his work for the sake of the congregation must be a living reality to him. Of course, he should not give himself airs, for after all he is only a servant of God and only passes on His words and the wisdom learned from Him. It can, however, give him enough courage to ask questions which he otherwise would not. In that way he can be helpful to the people in the service of God in this day and age.

3.3 Two Kinds of Visits

The elder is installed as an office-bearer of the whole congregation. For practical reasons and in most cases, only a part of the congregation is assigned to him. For that reason he cannot get away from taking complete care of that section. This the elders commonly do through two kinds of visits.

– There is the official family visit brought by two office-bearers. This happens once a year and applies to all members of the congregation.

– There are also the unscheduled visits which are mostly brought by one office bearer. There is often a particular reason for these visits and they are paid to those who need them most.

4. THE OFFICIAL FAMILY VISIT

4.1 Direction and Length

In view of its official character this is customarily done by two office-bearers. That arrangement has a great deal going for it, for two hear more than one. They can

also support and complement each other in the discussions. Naturally one of them, preferably the district elder, leads. The leader opens the discussion. He should also give the discussion proper direction and it is up to him to ask probing questions. The elder who leads should bring the discussion to a conclusion. His fellow office-bearer can close the visit with prayer.

It is difficult to estimate how much time must be set aside for a visit. Often two visits can be brought in one evening. Sometimes half an evening won't do. It is probably best not to keep a set rule but to consider each visit individually.

4.2 Opening and Closing

It is abundantly clear that each visit is closed with prayer. If possible the prayer should refer to the discussion which took place. If problems come to light they should be presented to God. In any case a blessing should be asked over the visit which has been brought and help should be sought in the fulfilling of daily tasks.

The question of how to begin a visit is more difficult. There are those who argue: "Don't begin with prayer and Bible reading for that way the start is far too artificial." That can indeed be so. However, it can appear equally appropriate, if the visiting elder without much further ado, comes to the point. Hence, there is nothing wrong in starting with prayer and Bible reading (in that order). Of course, such a way of starting a conversation should not be considered an iron clad law. It can happen that as an elder you find yourself in the middle of a substantial discussion even before the question of prayer and reading has arisen.

In such cases the elder who leads should not interrupt the discussion in order to open the family visit officially. Such behavior would be utter foolishness. In general it seems fitting to start with prayer and reading. In the first place the visiting elders are then forced to end the small-talk, no matter how interesting, and to go on to a more meaningful discussion. Such a start is also meaningful for the church members who are visited, for it reveals the true character of the visit. By praying and reading the leader indicates: "We have not come here as acquaintances nor for the conviviality, but as elders to speak together in the presence of God about His service in our time." The two opening elements should be so directed. In the prayer God is asked for strength and wisdom, and that He, through His Spirit, will lead the discussion so that it may be open and edifying. The Bible passage should be a sort of introduction to the subject about to be discussed. It is difficult to say what passages are suitable for the opening of a house visit, because the subject to be

discussed can be almost anything. Seeing that the purpose of home visits is to listen to others and if necessary to correct them, such passages should be short (about three to four verses in length). Starting from the passage one can change over to the first subject for the evening. This should be done in a few sentences (no sermon, please). That way you are forced to talk about a certain subject, and that in itself is another advantage of starting with prayer and Bible reading.

4.3 Subject Material

Two things are necessary with regard to the subject material. First of all, the visiting elders should decide with which subject the visit should be opened. It should not depend on the introductory chat, for in that way it could be difficult to go into depth. Besides, the passage to be read is dependent on the first subject to be discussed. Of course, it goes without saying that these remarks no longer count when an important subject presents itself prior to praying and reading. For the rest it holds that you do not begin a visit without a plan.

It is further necessary for the visiting elders to keep two subjects which they could or should discuss in the back of their minds. If they leave the progress of the visit to chance the conversation may shipwreck and deteriorate into superficial chatter. Then, after 10 or 20 minutes it can happen that the visiting elders frantically rack their brains for another subject, particularly if the host/hostess is tight-lipped. Those kinds of failures can be prevented if proper preparation is made beforehand. Whether or not you broach these subjects depends on their importance and the progress of the conversation.

At any rate the leader should make every effort to talk for the most part about meaningful subjects. That means that subjects which in particular concern the (un)Christian thinking and acting of the member visited are discussed and not general Christian matters. While listening and questioning it will become clear to you at what point you come with words of comfort, instruction or correction.

The question of which subjects should be discussed on a certain visit can be answered in two ways.

– First of all the visiting elder determines them with the help of the information he has about the member concerned. With one it could be about church attendance, with another about being single and alone, with yet another about the stress experienced in the work place, etc. The danger inherent in that approach is, however, that certain subjects which are important to everyone, never come up for discussion. That is why it is advisable to use a different method occasionally.

– The elders can decide to discuss at all visits a theme which has been dealt with beforehand at a

consistory meeting. At the same time a number of Bible passages suitable for opening a visit, and the way these can be used to open a discussion, can be pointed out.

4.4 The “Finishing Touch”

As elder you cannot afford to stop the discussion thoughtlessly and leave it for what it is. Each house visit ought to be carefully rounded off. That means various activities:

– In the first place the leading elder should summarize matters at the end of the visit for clarity’s sake. For example, the subjects discussed and the promises made by one or other party should be reviewed.

– It is to be recommended that after the visit the elders briefly review the conversation to ascertain whether or not mistakes were made and why, whether or not something was left undone and if so, whether or not to pursue the matter. If agreements have been reached or promises made, the elders should see to it that they keep their part of it.

– Not only in connection with the above, but also for other reasons the district elder should make notes of the visit for himself. He should in the first place write down the date of the visit, further what was read and what in particular came to the fore during the visit. In that way the elder can easily refer back to it on subsequent visits and some continuity in visits is established. It goes without saying that when the elder retires he will destroy such notes.

– Finally the home visits must be reported to the consistory. Because the visits are confidential the elders should be reticent in the giving out of information. They only have to relate what the consistory ought to know (for instance that the person visited left a good impression or why they gave rise to doubt) and information with which the consistory has to deal (complaints which could not be settled, suggestions made concerning local church life, etc.).

5. UNSCHEDULED VISITS

5.1 Significance

It is the task of the elder to involve himself with every member in his district. Not only with the people in a certain category (e.g., those in danger of falling away), but with all the members entrusted to him. If he is to do justice to that concept he will have to visit more than just once a year.

Because of his limited time he will have to make a choice. In particular he will have to visit those who experience difficulties, however, that does not mean that he should forget the others. Through personal association with his people he forges the bond of trust with them. It should not be his fault (through noninvolvement), when church members come to nought. As a

matter of fact the official family visit would be far more open and run more smoothly, if the relationship between the member visited and the elders is one of trust.

5.2 Method

During unscheduled visits certain points dealt with on the official visit could be followed up. A certain incident or something else could be an occasion for the elder to drop in. Possibly his only motive is the time elapsed since the last official visit. (See under 4.4 for the importance of notes.) Because of the limited purpose of unscheduled visits they don’t have to last long. Often 30 to 45 minutes will suffice. In certain cases dropping in for a few minutes can be enough.

Sometimes, however, it may be wise to stay for the whole evening or half of it. It also may be wise for the elder to take his wife along. There are no set rules for this kind of visiting.

The purpose of the visit should be clear to the elder. That is why he should determine for himself whether he intends to follow up on a certain matter. If that is the case he should take the time to think about how he is going to do that. Furthermore, it is beneficial if the elder makes the purpose quite clear early in the visit. Otherwise people keep asking themselves for some time why the elder has really come. To prevent that he should explain quite soon why he has come (e.g., because he wants to follow up on something said at a house visit, because he has not seen the member(s) in church for some time, or because he only wants to see how things are).

In view of the character of unscheduled visits they are best brought by one elder. If a serious matter has to be discussed he can bring a fellow elder along. Also, because of the character of these visits, they are never to be opened with prayer and Bible reading. Whether or not they are to be closed that way depends totally on the situation. If, for instance, a serious matter has been discussed it is almost self evident that at the end a prayer is said. Sometimes an appropriate Bible passage will suit the occasion. In short, for the closing of unscheduled visits there is only one general rule: one prays if the situation demands it. Often we Reformed people, office-bearers as well, are somewhat shy about praying and reading with others. We will have to overcome that. When it naturally follows from the discussion, we should not forget to listen together to God’s Word and to present the matter discussed to Him. It is always wise to end visits to the sick and elderly with prayer and reading.

5.3 The “Finishing Touch”

Much of what is said in 4.4 about summaries, review

and note taking, and reporting applies to unscheduled visits as well. As far as the reporting of such visits is concerned, I don't think I am far wrong when I assume that little of that is done. To judge by what Art 73 of the C.O. says about the mutual exhortation and admonishing of elders "with regard to the execution of their office", I think it is incorrect not to report such visits. For how can one do that if one doesn't know that visits, besides the official house visits, are made. To stimulate one self and one's colleagues it is useful for an elder to relate something about his unscheduled visits. Often just mentioning the fact that a visit has been made will be sufficient. It will have a beneficial effect on the activity of the other office-bearers.

6. CLOSING REMARKS

6.1 District Division

In a very small congregation there may not be any district divisions. Each elder is involved with the whole congregation. That seems to me to be an undesirable situation, for it remains unclear both to the congregation and the elders which office-bearer is responsible for what member. As a result the contact with various members can easily be lost.

The same objection, to be sure much less so, can be made when two elders have one district together. In that case the one so easily assumes that the other is handling the case and does nothing. All kinds of difficulties and misunderstandings may arise.

With good communication between the respective elders this objection can indeed be overcome. But how often does it not happen that you only decide the day before or at the last moment to visit someone? If that is the case you may be unable to consult with your colleague. Inefficient use of man power may be the result. In addition, a pair of elders can vary greatly in their attack and method. That in turn can make the work at one and the same address still more difficult.

Therefore, it is best if each elder has his own district. Then the office-bearer knows precisely for which part of the congregation he is personally responsible. When a limited number of people are entrusted to him alone, it would be difficult for him to shirk his duties over against them. He can forge closer ties with them than when together with another elder he has to take care of double the number of people.

Conversely, the church members know to which elder they can go with their questions and worries. Of course regular visits (house visits and certain unscheduled visits) should be made by the two of them. It seems more practical to me that there are set pairs of elders each season. That can be done in two ways:

– The consistory can decide at the beginning of the season which elders should work together this time around.

– It can also be decided that elders of certain districts always work together. (If the system of two elders to one district still exists, the district could simply be divided between the two of them, while the two elders continue to work together.)

The advantage of both systems is that for a year at least you work together with a regular partner. It is far easier to consult him, because he is also acquainted with your district. It seems advisable that a more experienced elder is paired with one who has less experience. Such an approach works better under the first than the second system.

Unless both elders retire at the same time, the second system has more advantages when the time has come for the "changing of the guard", for then the remaining elder, because of his knowledge of the district, can assist the newly-elected elder in his orientation.

6.2 Transfer of the District

When an elder retires it is not enough for him to give his successor only a list of names, addresses and birth dates. He has to transfer his district in more detail. I don't mean that he should extensively inform his successor about the personality and Christian character of all the members in his district. A newly elected elder should have the opportunity to meet the members entrusted to him without any prejudices. Conversely, the church members receive a chance to begin with a clean slate.

What the new elder has to be told are the external circumstances such as family relationship, the children living outside the congregation (their church ties included), the dates of death of the marriage partner or children, church attendance; membership of study societies, occupation (or former occupation); school education, etc.

That kind of information can greatly help an elder in his orientation. Much of that he will get to know when he informally visits the members in his district. It should be a matter of fact that he does so. In doing so he gives himself, in my opinion, a head start.

6.3 Praying

Up to now we have concerned ourselves for the most part with the work of the elder in the congregation. That pastoral activity, however, can only be fruitful if it is supported by his personal prayer at home. On a regular basis the elder should pray for the congregation, in particular for his own district.

He cannot only do this in general terms. He must concretely place the names and the concerns of the people in his care before God.

The office-bearer should also pray for himself. He must fully realize that he is responsible for the members entrusted to him (see Heb. 13:17). I do not mention this to scare anyone but to show that it is necessary for the elder to ask God for wisdom and strength in order to execute his task well. It is also essential for him to ask God for forgiveness for wrongdoings and to ask Him to curtail the damages resulting from them.

If the elder makes his work in the congregation part of his prayer life he can do it in the correct frame of mind. If he only pays attention to the work load and its troubles and pains particularly in relation to the limited scope of his activities both in quantity and quality, it would only discourage him and bring about despair. But since he has entrusted the congregation and himself to God, he can be at peace. In the final analysis he does not have to keep the people on the right track; Christ does that. As the Head of the Church He does the actual work by His Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-7). Even if an office-bearer fails, Christ completes His plans. Such knowledge should give an office-bearer courage, in spite of the disappointments he experiences.

Of course, others with their problems can get to him. However, with the help of prayer an office-bearer should not let himself be swept along by feelings of either uselessness or superiority. He realizes that he, as much as the others, depends on Christ's atoning blood.

III. SOMETHING ABOUT THE WORK OF THE DEACONS

Many consistories have difficulty with the question, what do deacons really have to do? Many deacons are confused as well. Let's face it, such confusion causes the deacon to be the odd man out. It is self-evident that this has dire consequences for one's estimation of the office of deacon. To say nothing about how miserable a deacon must feel under such circumstances.

From all sides you hear suggestions about how to make the office of deacon more functional. Written material to remedy this is plentiful. We only have to think about the many articles on the subject in *Dienst*. Yet in spite of the practical remarks made in them, the step from theory to practice appears to be very difficult to make.

The following is intended to narrow the gap somewhat. I have collected practical pointers from the various volumes of *Dienst* and arranged them schematically. You will not find much new material in it, but perhaps by presenting the available material in this way, the deacons may be helped.

1. THE TASK OF THE DEACONS

IN GENERAL.

We begin by following the form for ordination. There we find a description of the deacon's task in broad outlines. That the form speaks about the task of the congregation first and then about the task of the deacon is remarkable.

1.1 The task of the congregation

All our serving finds its origin in the love of Christ. He came into the world to serve, and even went so far as to offer himself up for God's enemies. He also took pity on many who were in need. In their serving the congregation must follow her Lord. That, among other things, means that the congregation should joyfully provide the deacons with sufficient means to do their work. In addition the members of the church must be good stewards over what has been entrusted to them. Briefly, everyone in the congregation should consider themselves called to serve, for in Christ's congregation no one may live uncomforted under the stress of sickness, loneliness and poverty. It is precisely the suffering who ought to share in the joy of God's people.

1.2 The task of the deacon

The deacon, the elder, is a gift from the ascended Christ to his congregation. It is a gift he gives in his continuing care for His flock. The task of the deacons, then, is to see to it that the service mentioned under 1.1 is continually rendered to the congregation. If he is to do that work properly he must do three things:

- Call on the families in order to ascertain the possible needs in the congregation and urge the congregation to serve;
- Collect and manage the donations and dispense them joyfully in the name of Christ to those in need;
- Comfort and encourage the church members who receive help with God's Word.

In short, the deacon ought to make visible through word and deed the communion of saints, which the Holy Spirit cultivates in the congregation and which is enjoyed at the Lord's Supper table. Therefore, he must be a help to those who are troubled and lonely. In his work he must be a good example of the service which Christ requires of all his members.

1.3 Additional remarks about the deacon and the congregation

1.3.1 The congregation

It is certainly not the task of the deacons to serve on behalf of the congregation. It is in the first place the

congregation which must serve. Its members ought to insure that assistance is rendered when someone finds himself in distress. That is a mandate which the members may not fob off on the deacons, for then they themselves would fall short in their following of Christ. That's why a deacon should never allow the congregation to push all sorts of odd jobs on him. He must resist the temptation to do everything himself. Instead he should put the congregation to work. You could say that he should make himself redundant.

1.3.2 The deacon

In actuality the deacon will really never become redundant, for the service of the congregation, because of sin, will never be what it ought to be. Hence there is always enough work to do for the deacon.

– In the first place, he will have to find out where and what kind of help is needed. The fact that someone in the congregation is in need can quite easily remain hidden. That it remains hidden is often because of a lack of trust in the community on the part of the person concerned. This may be understandable in light of previous experiences. That is why a trusted person (a deacon) is needed to whom one can tell his trouble, and of whom one knows that he will do everything he can to help.

– Furthermore, the deacon should use every effort to make the congregation understand their calling and urge them to greater service. He will have to point out to them where and how they can help. In the first place he will have to point out what they can do in the local congregation as well as in the church federation. In the second place the deacon should make the members aware of (charitable) organizations which are not only beneficial to church members but to non-Christians as well.

– The deacon himself should really serve. That means that he is busy on behalf of the congregation, particularly when an emergency situation has arisen. He can also do something for someone, for an extended period, either because the congregation has failed in their calling to do so themselves, or to provide the congregation with an example to follow. The deacon will have to act on behalf of the congregation where it concerns financial support. The nature of such support is very sensitive and common knowledge is undesirable.

– In view of what has been said in 1.3.2 it should be clear that if a deacon is to execute his task properly, it is necessary for him to visit the members of the congregation. Only in that way will he find out if help is needed. As a matter of fact his visiting can be service in itself, for by his example he encourages the rest of the congregation to follow suit.

1.4 The deacon and the elder

According to the form for ordination, the elder's task is to lead the congregation. He is to see to it that each member holds Christian convictions and conducts himself properly. In order to do that work he has to visit the congregation to comfort, instruct or correct them with God's Word. From that description it appears that the work of the elders and deacons partially overlaps. The deacon, as well as the elder, concerns himself with those who because they are single, old, sick, or, for some other reason, have difficulties. However, for the elder that is only part of his work, for the deacon it is his work exclusively. That is why it is the task of the deacon, not the elder, to busy himself completely with those members who through external circumstances are in difficulty. It is he and not the elder who comes with financial aid and words of comfort.

2. POSSIBLE NEEDS IN THE CONGREGATION OF WHICH THE DEACON OUGHT TO BE AWARE

The deacon should be continually on the look-out for the needs of the members of the congregation; for situations where possible help or extra attention is needed. Even though the list is really endless, I'll mention a few practical examples. Let's suppose that:

2.1 Someone is a member of the congregation

That gives rise to questions such as:

– *Does he make any efforts to mean something to his fellow church members; in other words, does he visit them, does he do something for them (shopping, odd jobs, baby-sitting), does he pray for them?*

– *Does he realize in his money management that he is a steward of God's possessions; does he give a proper percentage to the church, the mission and all kinds of other (charitable) organizations, in and outside the church community?*

2.2 Someone is elderly.

That gives rise to questions such as:

– *Can he do his housekeeping, or does he need some assistance (e.g., with the laundry, shopping, window cleaning, taking out the garbage, odd jobs such as wallpapering)?*

– *Can he get by financially?*

– *Does he get many visitors; if not would he appreciate more?*

– *Can he come to church, are rides to and from church (when needed) well regulated. If he cannot come to*

church does he receive a cassette or video recording of the service?

— Can he still read or does he need someone to read to him on a regular basis? Is he interested in large print books or tape recordings from other sources?

— Would he like to go someplace for a visit?

2.3 Someone is house-bound because of sickness or handicap

— Are sufficient technical means available for him to get around at home, or is help from a variety organizations necessary?

— Are there financial problems?

— Is he visited enough or would he like more (at least on a weekly basis)?

— Can he enter into the spirit of church life sufficiently, does he appreciate the cassette recordings of the church services or other events held in the church?

— Does he occasionally need transportation? Would he like to go on holidays or go out for a day or part of it?

2.4 Someone is hospitalized or institutionalized

— Does the person receive visits (in a hospital if possible daily), is any thought given to family members at home?

— Is it possible for family members to visit regularly or is help needed for transportation, baby-sitting, money?

2.5 A mother is ill or suffering from a (near) mental breakdown

— Is regular assistance with the housekeeping a necessity; if yes, how much temporary replacement or other help is needed with certain things (laundry, house-cleaning, mending, or baby-sitting during the day)?

— Does the wife need the opportunity to go out with her husband alone, for a day (or part there of), for a set period?

2.6 Someone has a sensory handicap

— Can someone whose hearing is impaired still follow the church service, are ear-phones a requirement in church; does the sermon have to be printed or can it be followed reasonably well on cassette recordings?

— Can someone whose vision is impaired still read, or is someone needed to read to him, is he interested in large print (Bible) books and/or tape-recordings?

2.7 Someone is a widow with children

— Can she manage financially; are her insurances kept up, does she need help with the filling in her tax papers?

— Do certain jobs remain undone?- Is she able to go out for a day or can she not get a baby-sitter?

— Does she get enough visits from couples, or do the women visit her without their husbands?

— Are there special problems with the children?

2.8 A family is threatened with bankruptcy

— Is it necessary to give (temporary) help?

— Do the persons concerned need to be taught sound financial management?

2.9 Someone is out of work

— Are the burdens becoming too heavy because of lack of income?

— Can he and his family cope with the situation and is he in that respect supported by the congregation?

— Is he totally bored and would like to have a certain task within the congregation?

— Does he look for work or is there only certain work he wants to do? Is he too choosy?

2.10 Someone becomes a Church member

— Is he welcomed by non-office-bearers?

— Is he informed about the way things are done in the congregation and is he made to feel part of the community?

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TAKING HEED TO THE FLOCK

A Study of the Principles and Practice of Family Visitation

by

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Chapter VII

OBJECTIONS TO FAMILY VISITATION

“We admit, therefore, that ecclesiastical pastors are to be heard just like Christ Himself, but they must be pastors who execute the office entrusted to them. And this office, we maintain, is not presumptuously to introduce whatever their own pleasure has rashly devised, but religiously and in good faith to deliver the oracles which they have received at the mouth of the Lord. For within these boundaries Christ confined the reverence which he required to be paid to the Apostles; nor does Peter (I Pet. 4:11) either claim for himself or allow to others anything more than that, as often as they speak among the faithful, they speak as from the mouth of the Lord.”

JOHN CALVIN: REPLY TO CARDINAL SADOLET.

“Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification . . .”

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH — Chapter XXVI, 2.

To anyone who has followed our discussion to this point, it will be apparent that some careful attention must still be given to the many objections which are raised against the practice of family visitation, if the practice is to profit the churches in the years to come.

We have with us those who claim that in spite of all the good features of this venerable practice, the insurmountable difficulties are so many, that we do best to dispense with it at once and perhaps substitute some other type of spiritual care.

In dealing with the difficulties we ought to bear in mind that it is not necessary to give more than a passing glance to those who refuse to be convinced. Perhaps there are some also in our churches who have closed their minds to all arguments in favor of this official church care of the families. These, however, are not motivated by genuine love for the church of Christ and may be dismissed together with all their protestations without more ado.

But others who are sincere in raising objections are entitled to a fair hearing.

In the main the objections are of two kinds. First of all, there are some who maintain the principle that ideally in the Reformed churches there should be no supervision of the membership by those in authority, since all believers are equal in rank before Christ and God in the New Testament church. Others point out the many practical difficulties which arise wherever this custom is followed and argue that it would be beneficial to spiritual life to dispense with it. In this section we would look into the arguments which the opponents of family visitation have raised.

A Poor Substitute for the Confessional

Occasionally we will still hear individuals make the claim that family visitation, as we know it, should have no place in the churches, because it is at very best but a

poor substitute for the Roman Catholic confessional.

On the surface this argument seems to have the support of history, for Calvin did institute the practice in the churches of Geneva after the confessional was rejected. In many respects there are striking similarities between the two forms of membership supervision. Both are deeply concerned with the spiritual life of the believer and proceed on the assumption that the church through her officers has the divinely-given duty of watching for the souls of those entrusted to her care.

A more careful scrutiny of the matter, however, will prove that this similarity is only superficial. Calvin never suggested that it was a substitute for the confessional in any way. There were very positive Scriptural objections to the Romish confessional which made its rejection imperative. Thus family visitation was only part of the broader positive reformatory ideal of bringing the life of the church closer to the New Testament pattern.

Family visitation should not be confused with personal work among the members required by the consistory. This last has a province all its own. Time and again it will be necessary for the elders to call upon individual members of the congregation, in order that they may be strengthened in the faith and warned against the ways of sin. We need only mention that family visitation in the Reformed churches has never displaced the visitation of the sick, the spiritually distressed and the wayward.

What the Bible teaches plainly is the close relation between nature and grace. When bestowing His salvation, God does not take us out of this present world. Neither do we become "new creatures" in this sense that the social relationships found among all men can be ignored by us. Therefore it is a fallacy to suppose that the spiritual problems of the believer can be considered in isolation.

The fact that we have been created as social beings for whom it is not good to live alone comes to its fullest and richest expression in our relation to the families. Our whole life consists of relationship—to God, ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our fellowmen in general. As a result we cannot live out our faith in a vacuum. The spiritual life controlled by love to God and His Word can never be practiced solely in the recesses of our hearts. In family visitation this truth becomes a guiding principle for the spiritual labors of the elders. Our religious life is organically related to all that we think and speak and do, and this is not only of the greatest consequence to our families with whom we live most intimately but can also be properly understood and evaluated only when considered in this light.

Thus Reformed family visitation differs radically from the practice of the confessional. It alone can do

justice to the organic character of human life.

Even more, we reject the whole Romish system of penance which is intimately bound up with the practice of auricular confession. For it there is no place in our churches. Thus the elders may never pry into the recesses of the heart, in a vain endeavor to bring secret sins to light. By emphasizing so strongly the priesthood of all believers the Reformed churches reject the notion that the visible church is the necessary mediatrix between God and the soul. What we possess in the type of spiritual care of the members of the church is not a poor substitute for the confessional but a practice which is in principle far different from anything known to the Roman Catholic church and vastly superior to it.

A Denial of the Equality of All Believers

Others insist that family visitation ought to be discarded, because it conflicts with the democratic ideal of the equality of all members before God. These claim that no group in the church ought to possess the right of ruling the others.

Now if we are at all aware of the confusion which characterizes Protestant thinking today, we will realize at once that this objection can only be raised by those who either consciously or unconsciously have rejected the Reformed theory of the church of Christ. It was among the Anabaptists of the days of the Reformation that such claims for the absolute equality of all believers were made.

Reformed Christians indeed believe strongly that in the sight of Almighty God all men are equal and therefore have the right to be treated alike. God is no respecter of persons; hence rich and poor, bond and free, learned and ignorant stand alike under the condemnation of the law by nature and can receive salvation only by sovereign grace. However, this is something far different from the Anabaptist insistence on equality which repudiates authority in the visible church.

Although there is a basic equality of person in the sight of God, there is no equality of function or calling. The Scriptures plainly teach that God Himself makes distinctions for the sake of the good order and the edification of His people in the church. "And He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the building up of the body of Christ..."¹ Likewise are the faithful enjoined to "submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you, be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility."² Still stronger is the language used by the

¹ Ephesians 4:11,12

² I Peter 5:5

writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, *“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is not profitable for you.”*³

From these passages it must appear that government in the churches is necessary. For our spiritual welfare God has entrusted the rule to men of good repute who have been chosen in the lawful way by the members themselves. Though in no way enjoying any personal preeminence, they are charged with the rule of the congregation. And since it is a ministry or spiritual service, it may never lead to tyranny. To prevent such a calamity there are always several in office, so that each elder in turn must submit himself to the government of the rest.

Instead of being contrary to the New Testament teaching of the spiritual equality of the believers, the Reformed practice of family visitation is in complete harmony with its insistence that officers have been appointed for the strengthening of the body of Christ in the true faith and godliness. Without such official supervision grievous heresies and wicked practices would soon overwhelm the church in this present evil world and threaten her with total extinction.

A Legalistic Conception of Spiritual Life

At times the objection is raised that family visitation roots in a legalistic conception of spiritual life and the relation of the officers of the church to her members. On these grounds it should then be refused a place of honor in our church life.

By legalism is meant the theory that spiritual life can be reduced to external compliance with a set of rules or principles adopted to regulate the conduct of God's people. On this basis the elders would act in the capacity of spiritual police with the duty of enforcing the laws. If the laws are obeyed, they may conclude that all is well. Such a policy of enforcing obedience, so the objectors counter, robs the Christian of his New Testament liberty in Christ and hinders rather than promotes true spirituality. On this basis they would not hesitate to compare family visitation with the medieval inquisition which insisted on strict conformity in all matters religious and arrogated to itself the right to judge the heart.

It need hardly be said that this representation rests entirely upon a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of family visitation. The proper supervision of the members, as has been demonstrated before, must not degenerate into a system of policing and spying on the

³ Hebrews 13:17

congregation.

Yet it ought to be added that the tendency of our modern age is revolutionary. There is little respect for law and government. The individual, as a result of the insidious influence of much of modern philosophy, regards himself as the final authority in spiritual matters. He claims for himself the inherent right of deciding how and when and where he shall serve God and his fellowmen. Should such fallacious theories become wide-spread in the church, its spiritual life would suffer appreciably. All insistence upon law is not per se legalism by any means. Would that we had more regard for the authority with which Christ promulgates His laws in the church!

Instead of being an inquisition, family visitation is a discussion of spiritual life and its problems, to be conducted in such a way that both elders and members of the church profit thereby. Because the work is spiritual and positive in character, aiming at the edification of the believers, it requires the whole-hearted cooperation of those who are visited. If at any time this objection can be levelled against the present practice with any degree of justification (a possibility which may never be ignored!), it ought to be regarded not as an objection to family visitation as such but rather to the way in which it is conducted by certain individuals.

A Fruitless Work Because of Its Formal Character

An objection of a somewhat different color is that this work is necessarily fruitless, because of its formal approach to spiritual life.

Voices are raised in protest occasionally against the formal character of this work. They argue that since the announcement of the day and hour of the call is made, with the result that all the members of the family are adequately prepared, no true judgment can be made of the spiritual condition of the people under those circumstances. A conscious effort is made by every individual to present himself in the best light. All the questions are answered most cautiously. When the elders leave after an hour, they carry with them an impression of the family which is far from being a true reflection of what they really are.

Again, this is not an objection to the principle of family visitation at all, but rather to the way in which it may be conducted. That there will always be certain families who try consciously to present such an unreal picture of their spiritual condition can hardly be doubted. Yet would we dare claim that this is true of the majority in our churches? Has not every minister and elder in seriously attempting to perform this work effectively been gratified upon many occasions with the unaffected

and frank response on the part of many of the people? That we do not see our people at their worst ought to occasion no surprise. However, that they would definitely try to deceive the officers of Christ's church by posing as better than they really are can be maintained only by the most thorough-going pessimist. And should this situation obtain among a sizeable number of members, it can be overcome by regularly and patiently explaining to the people the true spiritual purpose of the visits which are made.

An Unwelcome and Unappreciated Work

But our church members, so some would claim, do not like family visitation at all; they tolerate it simply because it has been the rule for so many years and the consistory still insists on it. If the members of the congregation were permitted to decide on the matter, the vote in favor of its abolishment would be overwhelming.

Now this objection is a very serious one, if it can be substantiated with facts. It would prove that the spiritual life of the congregations has sunk to a new low, both because the members are unwilling or unable to discuss spiritual matters and because the elders have not learned the art of conducting this part of their calling properly and profitably.

We are convinced that this is a totally inaccurate picture of the church today. That there are some who do not appreciate these visits at all need not surprise anyone. If the spiritual life of the believer reveals no depth, he will feel very uncomfortable indeed, when these matters are considered and he finds himself with little or nothing to say. Also those who have hardened themselves in sinful practices of one kind or another will resent any supposed interference in their lives by the elders on the fallacious ground that they have the right to live as they please.

Let us remember that such unpleasant and unspiritual conditions in the church argue strongly in favor of family visitation rather than against it. When conducted in the spirit of Christ, be it with weakness and imperfection, most believers will soon learn to appreciate this work deeply, convinced that this spiritual counsel and comfort is administered in the name of the Savior Himself.

If for one reason or another a large element in the congregation continues to resent this aspect of pastoral work, the consistory should nevertheless patiently and lovingly bear with such individuals and persevere in instruction and admonition, knowing that the appreciation of men is never the standard by which we are to judge the value or effectiveness of a Christian ministry. Often the

most necessary labors in life are the least appreciated.

An Unnecessary Work in a Normal Church

When all is said and done, there will still be individuals who, while admitting many of the principles which underlie this work, hold that it is unnecessary in a congregation where spiritual life is normal.

To reinforce their contention they will argue that in the days of Calvin and shortly thereafter, it was absolutely essential to visit the families, because so many of the members of the Reformed churches at that time had but recently left the Roman Catholic fold and were still strangers to most of the practices of the true religion. Therefore they admit that the Convent of Wezel (1568) did right in instituting family visitation. However, with centuries of Reformed teaching and tradition behind us and with all the excellent facilities which we enjoy for the development of spiritual life such as Christian homes and schools and churches, it is sheer waste of time and effort to visit our families annually.

Granting for a moment that spiritual life in many of our churches is rather normal, should we not add immediately that family visitation would still be necessary, in order that the elders may be reasonably assured of this healthy condition? How else, if this practice were discarded, would the supervisors of the church be able to discharge their duty and give a good account of themselves and their work to Christ who is the Head of His church? Is not the preventative work which is performed every time a visit is made worth all the time and effort expended? Surely no one can with any show of reason deny these facts.

But more than this, we ought to consider seriously the question of what constitutes normal spirituality in the church. Just what do those who object to family visitation mean by that phrase? Is it ever possible to find "normal" spirituality in this abnormal world, so full of sin and temptation on every hand? Spiritual life consists of our religious fellowship with God through Jesus Christ by the operation of His Holy Spirit. And nothing less than perfection may be considered normal, since it involves our relation to the infinitely perfect and holy Covenant God and prepares us in this life for an eternity of unbroken and indescribably blessed fellowship with Him.

Here we find so many ailments and diseases which constantly undermine and seek to destroy that blessed covenant relation. The eye of our faith is often dimmed by both the trials and pleasures of this life. The desire of the heart to serve the Lord with undivided affection is not nearly so fervent as it should be. Instead of an unhampered growth in the grace and the knowledge of

the Lord Jesus Christ, we must often complain of spiritual coldness and uncertainty resulting from our apathy to and neglect of the things of the Spirit of God. And since such disturbing factors impinge upon our lives not once or twice but are a constant source of danger and discouragement on the way of sanctification, we should become increasingly convinced of our need of instruction and encouragement in this life.

This is, of course, first of all worked in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Yet who can deny that it is also admirably reinforced by the personal contacts made by the elders at the time of family visitation? In a word, spiritual life can never be said to be "normal" in the true sense of the word as long as we are in this life. For that blessing we must wait for the dawning of the eternal day, when we shall serve God perfectly and shall be satisfied with beholding His face forever. Until then the eldership in its spiritual work should help the believers grow unto full salvation.

A Disregard of the Needs of the Individual

Yet one more argument against the practice of family visitation should be considered at this time. It is presented perhaps more often than any other today. Modern psychology has reminded us of the inestimable benefits of personal discussion with those who are spiritually distressed. But, so the argument runs, no one feels free to discuss his individual problems in the presence of the other members of the family.

There is, to be sure, much truth in this presentation of the case. Still more if we suppose that these visits

should be patterned after the policy of the Roman Catholic confessional, they will never attain their goal. In spiritual life there is much which we confess only to God and can occasionally reveal only to some intimate and trusted friend. To uncover these hidden thoughts and troubles of the heart and discuss them in the presence of others violates the dignity of human personality.

But let us remember that this is not the purpose of these visits, any more than it can be the aim of the gospel preaching to make a direct application to all the needs of the members of the congregation. Because family visitation offers a wonderful opportunity for considering the needs and nature of spiritual life from time to time, it will stimulate the members to examine their lives in the light of God's Word and regulate them accordingly. At the time of preaching we are taught to make the application of God's truth to our own lives. The same holds true of family visitation. Furthermore, when this work is carried on in the spirit of Christian sympathy and helpfulness, confidence in the elders is awakened in the hearts of the members. Then those individuals who still have perplexing problems which ought not and cannot be revealed in the presence of all will meet one of the elders privately for counsel and help.

We should never forget that family visitation may and often must be supplemented with calls of a more personal character. Such follow-up work yields rich and satisfying results for all concerned. The good undershepherd will learn to know his sheep better as he meets them regularly and will be prepared to help them when occasion requires. But this can hardly be successfully realized, unless the ground-work of mutual trust and respect has been laid. For this last no time is so propitious as that of the annual visit to all the families of the church.

"Home-visitation is a unique part of the pastoral oversight of the congregation. The congregation is divided into a number of Elder-districts, each of them preferably containing no more than 12-15 families. The District-Elder is responsible for the families in his own district. Home-visits are made by a team of two Elders; this ought to be the norm. A lack of qualified and available Elders may force a Session to allow visits to be made by the District-Elder alone, but that should be regarded as a temporary emergency only and not accepted as a normal practice. Of course this does not exclude visits by the District-Elder on his own to show some specific concern and share some of the joys in the home. Visited families must never regard their Elders' call as a social visit...They have come to tend the flock of God and for that they have received spiritual authority...Their visit has a spiritual purpose [which is] to challenge the members...to use their talents and gifts for the advantage of others in the communion of the saints. Home-visits are a necessity for the Elders of the Church to gauge the spiritual condition and needs of the members. There is great value in this practice both for the Elders and for the families in the Church...Elders must make an effort to follow a definite plan in their visitation."

— The [New Zealand] Church Order Commentary by D. G. Vanderpyl (1992)

Diseases of Church Government

by

J. G. Vos

Part 1- Regarding Compromise as a Principle

Anyone who wishes to purchase a curio or object of art in an oriental bazaar should realize beforehand that compromise is of the essence of such a transaction. Many an American tourist has been roundly “stung” by immediately paying, without question or objection, the price first asked by the merchant, only to have the latter laugh at his simplicity once he is out of earshot. In such circumstances haggling and bargaining is not only the accepted practice, and so recognized by all parties (except American tourists), but is also something of an end in itself. It is not merely a matter of the economic facts of life, such as supply and demand; the bargaining process is itself a form of pleasure, a battle of wits which affords the participants something of the satisfaction of a game of chess. It is known at the beginning of the process that if a sale finally takes place, it will be at a figure which is approximately one-half of that originally asked by the seller. But the tacitly accepted rules of the game forbid that this final price be arrived at directly, by a shortcut as it were; it must be reached by a process of repeated offers and bids, each of which involves a degree of compromise on the part of the bargainers.

Americans, not having the oriental point of view, tend to regard this long-drawn-out process as a nuisance and a waste of time. Probably no one, however, would pronounce it morally wrong, or sinful in itself. But it is different in the case of bargaining or compromise in the courts and assemblies of the Church of Jesus Christ. In the processes of church government and discipline, compromise may sometimes be unavoidable, as the less of two evils, but it should never be regarded as the ideal mode of procedure. Compromise is not an ideal nor a principle, and it should not be regarded as the normal and proper way of concluding church business, whether administrative or judicial.

Matters come before church courts and assemblies in various ways, such as by petition, by complaint, by appeal, or by reference from a lower court. It is the duty of a court of Jesus Christ to determine the matters before it according to righteousness. The true aim of a court of Jesus Christ is not to satisfy the greatest possible number of people, nor to seek at all costs to avoid displeasing anyone, but to glorify God by carrying out as fully as possible the will of Christ, the Head of the Church. Just as the decisions of civil law courts cannot please everybody, so the decisions of church courts cannot please everybody. But church courts should always aim to please the Head of the Church.

The conclusion of business according to righteousness is clearly the Scriptural ideal for church courts and assemblies. Yet it is to be feared that the actual practice, in various American denominations at least, often falls far short of this ideal. And it is to be feared, even, that this ideal itself is not always recognized as the true ideal. Over against this Scriptural view of the transaction of church business, there seems to exist another view, which regards compromise as the normal and proper way of handling church business. Thus compromise tends to supplant righteousness as the norm. And this tendency to regard compromise as proper and normal—to regard compromise as a principle—is an immoral tendency. When this tendency becomes firmly fixed in a denomination, it is like a cancerous growth; it “will increase unto more ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:16). Neither individuals nor church courts can tamper with the moral law without reaping, eventually, what they sow.

It would be easy to give concrete instances of the tendency we are discussing from American church history, taking our examples from both large denominations and smaller ones. Instead of citing such examples, however, we shall endeavor to present an outline of the pattern which compromise often takes in church courts. Let us say that a complaint has come before a presbytery or synod or other church court, alleging improper action on the part of some church organ. It may be, for example, that a minister or group of ministers have filed a complaint with their synod, alleging improper action on the part of their presbytery. This complaint comes before the synod, accompanied by various items which are presented as evidence. The synod is then faced with the necessity of doing something about the matter. Under the customary procedure in most Presbyterian denominations, such a complaint will first be referred to a committee for study—either a regular committee on discipline, or a special committee appointed for that particular matter.

The committee studies the matter and later brings in its report, with specific recommendations for action on the part of the synod. This is then taken up for debate and possible adoption. If the matter is one on which there is a sharp difference of opinion, there may be considerable debate, with speeches both for and against the recommendations of the committee. The procedure may become more complicated by motions from the floor for amending the committee’s recom-

mendation, or for substituting something else for it. As the debate continues it may be not only wearying, but even somewhat painful.

At this stage someone is likely to come forward with a proposal that the whole matter be terminated by a compromise solution, which he proceeds to outline. The typical form of compromise solution avoids pronouncing on the actual right or wrong of the matter originally complained against. Instead, without committing the court as to the righteousness of the complaint, the proposed compromise grants to the complainers some concessions, and at the same time some recommendations as to future action which, it is felt, will tend to remove the cause for similar complaint in the future.

This compromise plan is not proposed on the ground of righteousness. It is urged on the ground that it will promote the peace of the church, that it will avoid scandalizing the young people, that it proceeds from Christian love, and so forth. Perhaps several very emotionally-colored speeches will be made. Then someone will call for the question, the vote will be taken, and the compromise will very likely become the official decision of the court. Some will go home satisfied, and others less satisfied. But few, perhaps, will ask the question, What did the great Head of the Church think of the decision?

The plea of Christian love, of zeal for the peace of the church, and so forth, which is put forth by those who promote compromise, is rather nauseating. The tacit implication of this plea is that they only are actuated by such noble motives as Christian love, while those who hold that the issue should be decided on its merits without compromise are not moved by Christian love. Does Christian love imply that compromise must be regarded as a principle? Does Christian love mean that church courts must split the difference between right and wrong, and make some concessions on both sides? Are those who are opposed to this sort of procedure necessarily lacking in Christian love? Surely these questions must be answered by an emphatic No. The fact that some brethren do not talk a great deal about Christian love does not mean that they are not actuated by Christian love. It is possible, certainly, that they have a deeper and truer Christian love than do the promoters of compromises. For real Christian love seeks the purity of the church as well as its peace; real Christian love includes love for God and for His truth and for righteousness, as well as love for brethren with whom one may not agree about important matters.

In the foregoing discussion we have been concerned only with matters involving a real difference of right and wrong, or those in which at least one of the parties holds that there is a real issue of right and wrong. We are quite aware that church business includes some matters which not only may properly be determined by compromise, but which really cannot be

determined in any other way. These are matters which do not involve an issue between right and wrong. For example, in formulating a church budget for the coming year, there must necessarily be compromise all around. The different fields of work request certain sums of money for the year, but these requests add up to more than can be regarded as available. There must be compromise. That of course is entirely legitimate. There are other administrative matters not involving a moral issue which may properly be settled by compromise. For instance some may prefer for the next meeting to be held in June, while others would rather have it in August; this may properly be settled by deciding to hold the meeting in July. Many similar matters will readily occur to the mind of the reader. It is not such matters as these that we have in mind. When we say that it is wrong to regard compromise as a principle, we mean compromise where at least one of the parties maintains that a moral issue is involved. When compromise is regarded as the ideal way of settling such matters, it should be regarded by all who love God's law as a serious disease of church government.

Part 2 - Following the Line of Least Resistance

It has been aptly remarked that following the line of least resistance is what makes rivers and men crooked. The winding, meandering river has followed the line of least resistance. And the man whose life reveals numerous deviations from the straight and narrow path has followed the line of least resistance. When faced with a moral crisis involving a difficult decision, he regularly takes the easy way out of the situation. To choose the path of righteousness would involve self-denial and suffering, perhaps also embarrassment and reproach. So the man who follows the line of least resistance chooses the easy way out, and by doing so he sins against God, deepens the corruption of his own character, and makes it harder for others to do right.

The Church in its organized form is also subject to the temptation to follow the line of least resistance. And it is sad but true that church courts, when faced with a crisis involving a moral issue, often follow the line of least resistance, taking the easy way out of a bad situation, instead of accepting the position of self-denial, suffering and reproach which befits the body of the rejected and crucified Christ. Too often the courts of the Church of Jesus Christ have chosen to avoid looking a bad situation squarely in the face and dealing with it according to righteousness, in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Head of the Church. Too often a carnal fear of embarrassment, suffering and reproach has led to an easy but unrighteous solution—a solution which obscures the moral issue involved, and results in a superficial but false peace and harmony in the Church.

This tendency to follow the line of least resistance, it would seem, springs from a double root. In the first place, it springs from the indwelling sinfulness of men—even of Christian men. The Bible is realistic in reporting the sins of the saints. Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's untruthfulness, David's adultery and murder, Peter's thrice-repeated denial of Christ—all these and others are truthfully reported in Scripture. Clearly even true believers have within their hearts a fearful tendency toward evil. Even persons in positions of leadership and responsibility in the Church, such as ministers and elders, have in their hearts this sinful nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that church courts, even in their solemn decisions made in the name of Christ, may be guilty of great sin.

The other root of the tendency to follow the line of least resistance, we believe, is the modern philosophy of Pragmatism. Pragmatism is not merely a specialty of a few university professors. It has deeply infiltrated our modern life, and is constantly being subtly propagated by our educational system, our popular magazines and newspapers, and other media of our modern culture. Pragmatism leads people to say that results are more important than principles. It leads people to feel that the end may justify the means, that a particular course of action may be proper if it can be expected to achieve favorable results and avoid unfavorable ones. People who are influenced by the viewpoint of Pragmatism do not ask "Is it right?" but rather, "What will happen if we do it?"

Church courts are composed of fallible men. The fact that they are Christians does not take away their human fallibility. Being human, they are influenced by the prevailing thought and culture of their time. That this prevailing thought and culture may be directly opposed to the mind of Christ is seldom realized. It is not to be wondered at, then, that church courts of the present day sometimes manifest a tendency to adopt the viewpoint of Pragmatism, in which the all important question is not "Is it right?" but "What will happen if we do it?"

A good many examples could be cited of church courts following the line of least resistance. The writer has observed this kind of action in connection with several widely varying issues. It is not proposed to describe or discuss all of these, but only to portray one type of such action. What we are about to describe is not a particular case but a pattern which has occurred, with variations of course, over and over again. The pattern is manifested in some such way as the following.

A bad situation develops in a congregation. Some of the members--perhaps many of the members--become disaffected toward their pastor. It may be that the pastor is at fault, perhaps seriously at fault. Ministers are human and they are sinners, therefore it is entirely possible that the pastor may be to blame, in whole or in part, for the bad situation in the congrega-

tion.

On the other hand, it must be realized that church members are human and also are sinners. As there are no perfect ministers, so there are no perfect congregations. It must not be assumed, therefore, that if a bad situation develops the minister it to blame. It is certainly possible that the blame may rest, in whole or in part, on the congregation--either the congregation as a whole, or a part of its officers and members.

What happens when a congregation, in whole or in part, becomes disaffected toward its pastor? The pattern is surprisingly uniform. In one way or another, pressure is put on the pastor to resign. This may be done gracefully or it may be done disgracefully, but it is often done. It may be done by economic pressure. Ministers and their families have to live, and it is possible to force a minister out of a congregation by keeping his income below what he and his family can live decently on. Official church rules about minimum salaries have mitigated this sort of thing, but not by any means entirely eliminated it. Many a minister with a family to support receives less salary than is received by school teachers in the same community.

Ministers may be forced out of congregations by social pressure. It is possible to make things so downright unpleasant that only a minister with determination like iron and brass (Jer. 1:18) can bring himself to face it out. The writer has known of cases where some church members refused to shake hands with their pastor after Sabbath services. Such conduct does something to a minister and it also does something to his wife and children. A minister might steel himself to face it out if he were the only person affected, but it is hard to keep his wife and children in such a hostile atmosphere.

Some denominations have officially adopted definite forms of procedure by which a congregation, at the end of a set term of years, can vote on whether the pastor shall be called upon to continue as their pastor for another term of years. The so-called five-year plan adopted by the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America provides such forms of procedure. This plan provides certain safeguards against improper pressures and certain compensatory benefits to ministers who are not asked to continue in their pastoral charge. On the other hand, the "five-year plan" seems to be open to certain abuses. It may encourage some church members to think that they have a right to vote against their minister for no reason at all except that they would like a change. Whether this apparently rather common notion is in harmony with the Scriptural teaching on the relation between pastor and people is a serious question. It is one thing to ask a pastor to resign for valid reasons; it is another thing to ask him to resign for no reason at all. In this connection, it seems strange that the Book of Church Government of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (adopted 1945), Chapter VIII, Sections 10 and 11

(Constitution of R. P. Church, page 256) requires a pastor who wishes to resign to present "valid reasons" for his request, whereas in the case of a congregation wanting its pastor to leave, no "valid reasons" are required; apparently a majority of the members of a congregation can petition the presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship, without presenting any reasons for this request to the presbytery. It would seem that pastor and congregation should be on the same basis, and that in case either requests the presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship, valid reasons should be presented.

The so-called five-year plan is also liable to abuse in that it may, under certain circumstances place a minister under a strong temptation to preach a toned-down, man-pleasing message in order to avoid losing his pastorate. Where influential members of the congregation are known to be opposed to certain doctrines or principles of the church, a minister may be powerfully tempted to avoid preaching on or emphasizing these matters lest he lose his position.

The result of opposition to a pastor on the part of his congregation is usually that the minister decides, or is persuaded, to resign "gracefully." This may be with the benefits provided by the "five-year plan," or perhaps the minister may be promised that if he leaves by a certain date without resistance, the congregation will continue to pay his salary for two or three months beyond that date. The resignation is presented to the presbytery or other church court having jurisdiction, with the statement that the pastor and the congregation have come to agreement that it would be for the best for the pastoral relationship to be dissolved. The presbytery hears brief statements by the minister concerned and by representatives of the congregation. This is followed, perhaps, by some discussion which, however, seldom inquires into the real causes of the breach between pastor and people. There is general agreement that it is a bad situation. Finally the decision is reached that under the existing bad circumstances, it would be "for the best" for the pastoral relationship to be dissolved.

The congregation will very likely have a farewell social for the departing minister. On the surface everything will be sunshine and roses. Speeches will be made, prayers will be offered, gifts will be presented. The program will be nicely written up in the church paper, as well as in the local newspaper. The minister leaves town in an apparent atmosphere of friendship and goodwill. But the real truth may be—regardless of who is to blame—that it is the funeral of another wrecked pastorate.

What is wrong with the pattern which has been described above? Just this: the presbytery or other church court took the line of least resistance, instead of investigating and settling the matter according to righteousness. It did not ask "Is it right?" but rather "Will it have good results?" The presbytery had a sick

congregation within its bounds. It neglected attending to this sick congregation until matters came to a crisis. Then it took the easy way out. A congregation having valid complaints against its pastor should seek a remedy by the lawful processes of church government, not by the application of lawless pressures. If personal conference in a spirit of love and friendship does not remedy the situation, the congregation has the right to petition the presbytery to investigate matters. If the minister is neglecting his work, if he is preaching heresy, if he is guilty of other offences, the presbytery should be informed, and being informed, it should investigate and act as the situation may require. The delinquent pastor should be dealt with by the presbytery, which has lawful jurisdiction over him in the Lord. If the matters alleged are embarrassing, the presbytery can discuss the matter behind closed doors, in executive session. But it can and should act as righteousness requires.

A congregation wanting its pastor to leave for no special reasons should at least have the grace to wait until the end of a five-year term and then vote on him in the orderly manner prescribed by the rules of the denomination. Even so, it should be realized that something may be legal without being right in the sight of God. To vote to ask a pastor to leave his charge without giving "valid reasons" for this demand may be legal according to officially adopted rules of church government. Whether it is right in the sight of God is another question.

But a congregation's disaffection toward its pastor may not be the minister's fault at all, or it may be his fault only to a minor degree. Perhaps the minister has done his duty by preaching plainly against sin. Perhaps he has incurred the enmity of the leading members by speaking to them of their sins and exhorting them to repent. Perhaps he has faithfully preached and taught the accepted standards and principles of the denomination, thereby incurring the opposition of those members who are bent on doing as they please and are more or less openly violating their own profession and membership vows. It would be very unrealistic to deny that such conditions sometimes exist. Under such circumstances a minister's life may be a very painful one, and it may be extremely difficult for him to go about his duties with a serene countenance and a cheerful attitude of mind.

When a minister is put under pressure to resign and he honestly believes that the principal fault is not his own, it is his moral duty to report the situation to the presbytery and to call for an investigation of conditions in the congregation. For the minister to resign "gracefully" may be the pleasantest way out of an ugly situation, but it is morally wrong if he believes that the fault is on the side of the congregation. Ministers should not resign "gracefully" when under fire. The matters at issue should first be investigated by the courts of the church, and determined according to

righteousness. Then after righteous judgment has been executed, if the minister wishes to resign and seek a new field of service it is his privilege to request the presbytery to release him from his pastoral charge. But until the bad situation in the congregation has been faced and dealt with according to righteousness the minister owes it to himself, to the church at large and to the Lord, to refuse to be pushed out by unlawful pressures.

It has been this writer's observation that presbyteries seldom investigate troubles in a congregation thoroughly. It is much more common, after hearing both parties briefly, to decide that it will be "for the best" just to terminate the pastoral relationship. The present writer cannot claim that he himself is free of responsibility for such following of the line of least resistance. He makes no claim of being more righteous or consistent than others. The purpose of these articles is not to justify or condemn anyone, but to call attention to weaknesses, abuses and sins in church government, in the hope that these may be duly considered and if possible corrected.

Why do church courts hesitate to deal with bad situations in congregations according to righteousness? It would seem that sometimes, at least, this is owing to a carnal fear of consequences. For example, it may be known that a number of people in a congregation are opposed to some of the doctrines and principles of the denomination. They may be trying to get rid of their pastor because he preaches faithfully on these matters, and they resent the implication that they are unfaithful to their own profession and vows. Perhaps some prominent members and some financial "pillars" of the congregation are involved. The session or presbytery fears that if anything is said to these people about loyalty to their profession they will leave the church in a huff. So a faithful minister is pushed out of his charge, and a sick congregation is left in its sickness, untreated and unhealed. If their next pastor does not accommodate himself and his message to the congregation's sickness, he will not last long in that charge.

What is needed in situations of this kind is not merely prayer for revival, but positive action on the part of the presbytery. When a crisis occurs in a congregation, a special meeting of the presbytery should be held. This should not be a hasty half-day or one-day affair. The presbytery or a duly empowered commission of the presbytery should meet within the congregation where the trouble is for as long as may be necessary to get at the root of the matter. If it takes four or five days to find out what the real root of the trouble is and administer corrective measures, that will be time well spent in an acceptable service to Christ, the Head of the Church. If the pastor is at fault, he should be counseled with and admonished as the facts may require. If the congregation or the session is to blame, the same course should be followed. If individual mem-

bers are to blame for the trouble, they should be dealt with faithfully, without respect of persons. The trouble should be adjudicated according to righteousness, difficult and painful as this may be. Oh, but if such a course be followed, people will leave the church, it will be objected. Very possibly they will. There is no way to maintain righteousness and at the same time conciliate people who want to have their own way. There is no way to maintain the rules of the Lord's house and at the same time please people who are living in sin. Instead of the present common attitude of extreme reluctance to offend anyone and risk their leaving the church, we should heed and obey the instructions of the apostle Paul: "*Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality*" (1 Tim. 5:20,21).

A minister owes something to his church. He has taken her vows upon himself. He has solemnly pledged himself to follow no divisive courses from the doctrine and order which the church has officially recognized and adopted. It is his duty to preach that doctrine and practice that order faithfully and consistently, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear. A minister is not to preach in accordance with the likes and dislikes of his congregation. He is to preach in accordance with the solemn vows he took when he was installed as pastor of the congregation.

A denomination also owes something to the minister who has given his life to serving Christ in its congregations. If it is the minister's duty to preach and practice the doctrine and order which the church has adopted, it is the denomination's duty to protect the minister in carrying out that commission. It is the duty of the courts of the church to protect the minister from the effects of unlawful pressures. The courts of the church which require loyalty of the minister must also protect the minister in rendering that loyalty.

By what right can a presbytery, in the presence of God and in the name of Christ, require of a minister the most solemn pledges of loyalty to the doctrine and order of the church, if the presbytery is not prepared to stand back of the minister and protect him in the discharge of these obligations? Is a presbytery to stand on the high ground of righteousness and principle when a pastor is ordained and installed in a congregation, and then default to the low level of following the line of least resistance when a crisis arises in the congregation and some of the members want to get rid of their pastor? Let us learn to do right regardless of consequences. Let us be moved by the fear of God, not by a carnal fear of men.

This article first appeared in Vol 9 of *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, issues 2 and 3, published in 1954.

BOOK REVIEW

ACTS, by Larry Woiwode. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, \$17 (U.S.) & \$23 (CAN). Available for a limited time for \$15 (U.S.) plus postage from Pleroma Press, Box 242, Carson, ND 58529. Reviewed by Stephen Sturlaugson.

I like *Acts* for its apologetics, or defense of the faith. Cornelius Van Til, late professor of apologetics at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, said apologetics is, in a broad sense, the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life. Throughout *Acts*, Larry Woiwode, American novelist and OPC elder, attempts numerous vindications.

Like Van Til, Woiwode rejects the nonsense of trying to refer to “facts” not stated in intelligible words—uninterpreted or brute facts. A writer’s words, Woiwode understands, must submit to the leading and correction of the written Scriptures. A writer himself must bow to Christ, the Word made flesh. See page sixty-seven for Woiwode’s comments on Van Til.

In *Acts*, Woiwode succeeds in conveying how the book of Acts vindicates, as only Scripture can, the doctrine and practices of Christ in the early church—all that Jesus began to do and to teach in the Gospels. Insofar as the Christian church today conforms to the book of Acts, the book serves as an apology for us, too. Where the church doesn’t conform to Christ, however, the book of Acts stands as an indictment. The church cannot defend itself against Christ. Woiwode draws attention to areas of disconformity—practices surrounding foreign missions, and their effect on local diaconal ministries, for example.

For several years Woiwode was the chairman of the English department and director of the creative writing program at SUNY-Binghamton. As he has worked on *Acts*, he says, he tried to “address students who might be hearing about the church and biblical concepts for the first time. But another dimension seemed necessary. When I thought back to the time of my entry into the church, I remembered the trouble I had finding an overarching view of the teachings of scripture—much less one from a writer’s perspective, with a writer’s gravitation toward contemporary culture, nor the writer so aged he wouldn’t need to worry about literary-political correctness or incorrect ecclesiastical politics. So I have tried to address the needs of the student I once was” (p 3).

Woiwode lives now on a sheep and quarter horse ranch in North Dakota with his wife and children, who attend Bethel OPC in Carson. The overarching

view of Scripture’s teachings in *Acts* is Reformed, in its predestinarian, confessional, and covenantal aspects, and the viewpoint helps Woiwode’s readers to apply Scripture to numerous contemporary thoughts and actions: fact, fiction, fantasy, feminism, farming, far-flung missions, and Reformed forms of government, to name a few. Van Til says Christians must express the Gospel in terms fallen men understand. Van Til chose the language of secular philosophy. Woiwode writes from a writer’s perspective, and discerns the spirits of Chaucer, Shakespeare, C. S. Lewis, John Updike, science fiction writer Thomas Disch, and Stephen King. With the variety of topics covered and writers mentioned, an index would have been helpful.

Why *Acts*? you might ask. Woiwode writes: “[*Acts*] is the most overtly narrative book of the New Testament, and narrative is the writer’s business. It is also, to my eyes and ears, such a shapely narrative I’m not sure its equal exists in either the Hebrew or Greek testaments, and its curious genius is that its teachings are enacted. True, there is a complex doctrine in many of the sermons that *Acts* records, but it rises from dramatic speeches within the momentum of the narrative itself. The more attention you pay to the actions and attitudes in *Acts*, then, besides what is explicitly stated, the more its text begins to open up. It has the power to put pressure on your personal life” (p 1).

Acts draws out a wide range of apologetic acts in *Acts*: preaching, teaching, close reasoning, poetry, personal opinion, reminiscence, story-telling, miracles, which are not available to us in these post-apostolic days, and rebuke and reconciliation, which are.

Woiwode on Christian scholarship: “Disputing an unprovable point is about as interesting as watching paint dry, and during the last part of this century the American Church has consumed itself on such scholarship” (p 9). One of most neglected gifts men have received from God, he says, is the brain, which *Acts* exercises with the scholarly restraint familiar to Calvin’s commentaries.

Acts itself is apologetics enacted by a writer whose faithfulness to Scripture, broad cultural intelligence, and clear style of engagement form a confluence issuing in a body of writings reminiscent of J. Gresham Machen’s. Woiwode credits Machen’s introduction to the New Testament (published by Banner of Truth) as one of his most consistent helps.

Acts by Larry Woiwode is applied apologetics, a book ready to put into the hands of those who ask why we act in the way we do.