



The task of the deacons

A number of years ago, I read a book by a certain Peter Keunig, written in part in some musical Dutch dialect; the book was entitled *Kinderen in Verstand en Boosheid*. This Peter Keunig endeavoured to relate, by means of a number of short stories, what life was like for the simple country people of Northern Holland around the turn of the century. Of the numerous short stories, one revolved around deacons.

As I recall, this one story about the deacon portrayed the deaconry to be strictly a source of funds for the absolute poor. It was the widows, the elderly and the ill that received their two pennies a week. The little they got was to be used for necessities alone; it was most unacceptable for the needy to purchase anything so luxurious as an egg. The picture that stands out in my mind from this short story is that the deacon distributed to the needy just enough to prevent starvation, but really too little to really live. The resulting consensus of the people was that it was a most humiliating thing to have to go to the deacons.

Whether the story as told by Peter Keunig (or my memory of it) is actually accurate I cannot say with certainty. But this concept of deacons as the final resort for the financially strapped, as well as the shame that came with approaching the deacons, was surely popular. In fact, there is even today, in the wider reformed world, this restricted and negative perception of the deaconry. It is generally held that the work of deacons revolves around distribution of money, that deacons are not generous in their distribution, and that receiving assistance from the deacons is actually something to be somewhat embarrassed about.

Yet in the course of the centuries, this has not been the accepted understanding of the task of deacons. Guido de Bres, in his (Belgic) Confession of 1561, writes that through the work of the deacons *"the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need."* The Church Order of Dort, 1618-19, in the original Art 25, stated:

"The office peculiar to the Deacons is diligently to collect alms and other contributions of charity, and ... faithfully and diligently to distribute the same to the poor, not only to those who belong to the Congregation but also to strangers, as their needs may require it; to visit and comfort the distressed and to exercise care that the alms are not misused ..."

Note that in both documents the work of the deacons climaxes in providing comfort.

Financial support certainly belongs to their work, but the fathers understood well that deacons were to do more than ensure that there was bread on the table.

Between the picture presented by Peter Keunig on the one hand and that presented by the Belgic Confession and the Synod of Dort on the other, there is an evident discrepancy. In the history of the Church, Confession and reality have apparently not gone hand in hand. So it will be good to look once more into Scripture as to why the confessions present the work of the deacons as they do.

As further incentive for a discussion of the task of the deacons, we may recall that the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, in their Synod of 1985, adopted a number of Liturgical Forms as printed in the *Book of Praise*, revised edition (1984). This, decision meant that the churches also adopted a Form for the Ordination of Deacons somewhat different from the Form which had been in use in previous years. The earlier form had described that task of the deacons as follows:

deacons "in the first place collect and preserve... the alms and goods which are given to the poor... The second part of their office consists in distribution" accompanied with "comfortable words from the Word of God."

In the Form adopted by the churches in 1985, the actual collection and distribution of monies receives a place much secondary to overseeing and ensuring *"the good progress of [the] service of charity in the Church."* According to this Form, it is the responsibility of the deacons to see to it that *"no one in the congregation of Christ (lives) uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty."*

It will be noted that in the 'new' Form there is an emphasis which did not really function in the 'old'. The result of this shift in emphasis is that our deacons have done more research into what the actual task of the bearers of this office really is. Does this office revolve primarily around money? Is that which the congregation sees of the deacons each week - these are the brothers who walk through the church with the collection bags - indicative of what this office is actually all about?

Scriptural data

It is a central concept in Scripture that God's people are to love each other and consequently help each other. When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, He replied that absolute love for the Lord God was the great and first commandment. A second command, however, was equally as important as this first: *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"* (Matthew 22:37ff).

Pentateuch

This command to love was not new to the New Testament dispensation. Christ's command is a verbatim repeat of that which the Lord God had long ago said to Israel at Mount Sinai: *"you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD"* (Leviticus 19:18).

How the Israelites of old were to show love was also indicated by the Lord. It is one thing to show a measure of love to a rich man; after all, demonstrating one's adoration for him through positive conversation about him, laying out the red carpet for him and the like, can encourage some of his wealth to roll into your lap. But it was not so much the rich that God instructed His people to love as the poor. I draw your attention, e.g., to Deuteronomy 15:7ff:

"If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him..."

Similarly, *"when you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap your field to its very border... neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner"* (Leviticus 19:9f).

Love for the other dictated that one give of one's abundance for the benefit of the less privileged. This self emptying love for the other was to be displayed specifically at Israel's numerous feasts. At those occasions Israel was to ensure that the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow could join in celebrating together with the Israelite family (cf Deuteronomy 14:26f; 16:11,14).

Why was it that the people of Old Testament Israel were to show such love to each other? They had to show that self emptying love because of WHO their God was. As God loved, so Israel was to love also. This God of love had shown His love by redeeming an unworthy people out of Egypt and adopting this nation of redeemed slaves to be His people. God's identity as the LORD, Jahweh, covenant God, benefited each Israelite exceedingly in that Pharaoh's slaves were made children of God Most High. Indeed, those who in Egypt had no future and no security were graciously given a land flowing with milk and honey, wherein each Israelite inherited his own vineyard and his own fig tree.

This concrete redemption from Egypt, together with the abundance granted in the Promised Land was itself a picture of a greater redemption from Satan's power through the coming Exodus in Jesus Christ and the abundance that follows in the forgiveness of sins. In a word, God's love for this undeserving people meant that they were transformed from rags to riches.

Given that God in love had done so much for the scum of Egypt, it was God's instruction that these slaves-become-kings should also show love to each other. They had **received** much; they were therefore to **give** much. Because the numerous feasts recalled specifically God's abundant love revealed in the Exodus, it was also so appropriate that at that time the poor in Israel be remembered in a special way. All should be able to rejoice because of the redemption God had lovingly and graciously given to His people.

Gospels

This self emptying love among the saints of the Old Testament was earned on in the New Testament. In fact, the example of love is given by none other than God Himself. He so loved that He gave up His only Son for the salvation of the unworthy. From eternity the three Persons of the Godhead enjoyed together the heavenly glory (cf John 17:5). But in self-emptying love, the Father sent His only, dearly beloved Son out of the glorious chambers of heaven to live on earth, and there go to the cross for the sake of unworthy sinners. Willingly the Son went, giving up His glory with the father so that He might lay down His life as a ransom for many. Herein is love so profoundly displayed, that the eternal Son of God gave up His glory for a cross (I John 4:9). His life was a life of self-sacrificing love, service for the benefit of those who deserved it not.

It is true that the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ comes into focus most sharply on the cross of Calvary. Yet within the life of Jesus there were countless examples of His service to others. The hungry He fed, the sick He healed, the dead He raised, the destitute He comforted, the sinners He forgave. Although Christ's help came in very concrete, practical terms, it always climaxed in comforting the distressed. Nor was Christ frugal in what He gave; the hungry were well satisfied, the sick were fully healed, the sinners completely forgiven.

We do well to note that Jesus understands His works of love to be evidence that *"the acceptable year of the Lord"* has come (cf Luke 4:18ff). This *"acceptable year of the Lord"* is a reference to the Jubilee which Israel had to celebrate once every 50 years (Leviticus 25). In that Jubilee, all debts had to be cancelled, everybody got back freely the land that they had sold in the previous 50 years in order to pay off a debt, etc. In one word, the year of Jubilee was the year when the poor of Israel received a new freedom; they could start again on own land without any debts. Understandably, such a year in Israel was designed to produce in the land great feasting and rejoicing for the mercies granted them by God. Such a year, Christ proclaims in Luke 4, has come with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Christ emptied Himself so that there might be rejoicing and feasting among the people of God. He came to comfort.

This self-sacrificing love Christ holds up as an example for His people of all ages to follow. Says the Lord in Matthew 20:

"whoever would be great among you must be your servant..., even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve..." (vs. 26ff).

So also in the context of washing the disciples' feet, Christ proclaims: *"I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you"* (John 13:15). As Christ loved, denied Himself, served those around Him, so the disciples were to do.

Acts

The early church understood that the example of Christ was not for the twelve disciples alone. As Christ has served the entire church by laying down His life for all His own, so the entire early church was diligent in serving. So we read that all who believed *"had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need"* (Acts 2:44f). Those with extras sold their extras so that the poor might be supplied at the tables. The result of this active communion of saints was that the body of believers could eat together *"with glad and generous hearts, praising God."* Here was displayed the loving concern that God wishes to see among His people; here was joy, joy rooted in the redemption from Satan graciously received from Jesus Christ on Calvary. Here was a caring for each other, and therefore a sharing with each other, so that all creation might rejoice together in the salvation received. What die early church did

here was put into practice the instruction God gave so long ago through Moses (cf Deuteronomy 15:7f; 14:28f; 16:11ff; Leviticus 25).

Yet that delightful situation in the early church did not last. After the favourable account of an active looking after each other (Acts 2:46), we read that *"the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved"* (vs 47). The small group of disciples swelled so that in short order *"the number of the men came to about 5000"* (4:4). Let alone their wives and children. Understandably, the sheer numbers made spontaneous caring for one and all impossible; some needy received much, others little; That development in turn prompted a measure of organisation, with as result that the apostles became the middle men in the caring and distribution process. So we read at the end of chap 4 that though everything was held in common, the proceeds of another sale of land were not directly given to needy but rather *"laid...at the apostles' feet"* (vs 32ff). And that evidently worked fine, for we read in vs 35 that *"distribution was made to each as any had need."*

But the number of believers continued to grow. *"And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women"* (5:14). That blessing of increased growth gave its own problems. *"In these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured..."* (6:1). Growth was such that the apostles could no longer keep up with looking after the needy; a number of widows of Greek origin were somehow forgotten in the daily distribution. So the joy of the congregation was replaced by a measure of murmuring. That the work of distribution was simply too much for the apostles is evident from Acts 6:2, 3:

"The twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men...whom we may appoint to this duty."

So it happened; seven men were appointed to oversee the distribution of food. These seven had to *"serve tables"*, had to make sure that all had sufficient to rejoice in the redemption received.

Epistles

Does this mean that the work of looking after the congregation was suddenly left to the seven? Not at all. As the congregation itself was initially responsible for being each other's keeper (as also in the Old Testament), so it remained despite the appointment of deacons. That is evident from the various letters of the apostles. Paul, e.g., writes to the churches of Galatia (and not the deacons only): *"So then as we have opportunity, let us do good..."* (6:10). To the saints of Thessalonica Paul writes: *"may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another..."* (1 Thessalonians 3:12). And to the Philippians Paul says that each is to look *"not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others"* (Philippians 2:4). Again, the author of Hebrews enjoins all his addressees not to neglect to do good but rather to share what they have, *"for such sacrifices are pleasing to God"* (13:16).

So also John: *"but if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"* (1 John 3:17).

Peter summarises it: *"as each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace"* (1 Peter 4:10). Or, as the text literally says, *"as each has received a gift, serve, deacon one other."* Although deacons were appointed in Acts 6, it remains the task of the congregation as a whole, and therefore the task of each member individually, to be a hand and a foot to each other. In other words, the members of the congregation must be a communion of saints, must be **deacons** for each other. It was the responsibility of the seven to see to it that the young congregation indeed did function as a communion of saints to the neglect of no one. So the task of the seven was primarily one of management, organisation. The Form for the Ordination of Deacons says it well: *"it is...the responsibility of the deacons to see to the good progress of (the) service of charity in the Church"* (Book of Praise, 631). The deacons are not so much the church's arm of charity as the persons responsible to see to that the arm of charity functions well.

Acts again

Yet the work of the group of seven was not restricted to 'serving tables', i.e., managing and overseeing the exercising of the communion of saints. Stephen, e.g., preached (cf Acts 6:8, 10 & chapter 7). Philip is, referred to as an evangelist; he brought the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). These deacons went beyond serving the tables because looking after the poor cannot be separated from bringing the gospel. For looking after the poor is not simply an act of Christian philanthropy. Old Testament Israel was to rejoice because of the redemption they had received from Egypt, a redemption that symbolised their deliverance from bondage to Satan. Because of this redemption there was to be universal joy in Israel; the joy of none was to be dampened by any need of any nature. Yet if such counted for the Old Testament dispensation, how much more does it apply in the New Testament! Gifts were to be brought to the poor **so that** they could rejoice without concern in the salvation in Jesus Christ. So it follows that deacons cannot simply bring dollars and leave it at that; deacons are to come primarily with the gospel. It is in order to make joy in the gospel possible that they come also with financial relief.

Here, then, is a principle for all deacons: on their visits, they first of all bring the gospel and shed its light on the specific needs that there might be in the homes they visit. So one ought not to be surprised when a visiting deacon reads from the Bible and leads in prayer. Such opening of Scripture belongs not only to the office of the elder. There is a reason why the apostle Paul stipulates in that list of qualifications needed for the deacon that deacons *"must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience"* (1 Timothy 3:9).

Motivate the Saints

From the Scriptural data presented above, the conclusion followed that no one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty; all are to be able to rejoice in the redemption obtained by the Saviour.

The question critically important for our subject is this: whose responsibility is it that there be no member of the congregation living uncomforted? The Scripture references alluded to above indicate that the responsibility lies ultimately with the congregation itself. Paul, for example, instructs his readers to *"bear one another's burdens."* And Peter says: *"as each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace"* (1 Peter 4:10).

Yet as things are, the congregation is made up of sinful persons. The result of that reality is that some needs go unnoticed; others are ignored, while again other needs are flooded by assistance. Here, then, is the specific task of the deacons: they are to see to it that the communion of saints functions in such a manner that all needs are adequately met. We do well to bear in mind that deacons were first appointed when the communion of saints no longer functioned adequately due to the massive size of the congregation in Jerusalem (Acts 6). And when deacons were appointed, it was not so that these seven fed the poor of the whole crowd of at least 20,000 strictly by themselves. Caring is and remains the task of the whole body. As such, it may properly be said that much of the work of deacons is organisational; deacons are to motivate and organise the congregation to be an active communion of saints. What Paul writes in Ephesians 4 about the gift of office bearers is true for deacons too: they are *"to equip the saints for the work of ministry (literally 'deaconing'), for building up the body of Christ"* (vs 12).

What are the needs in the congregation which ought to have the attention of the deacons? Or, to ask the question more properly: what are the needs among the individual saints which ought to have the attention of the communion? What are the burdens that the various members of the congregation are to carry for each other?

Needs not just financial

A 'need' is not necessarily only financial. That is a fact we can all quickly attest to. Our society is an advanced welfare state with relatively few financially needy people. Yet it is commonly understood

that there remain countless needs in the society around us. Also in the congregation, we are aware that there can be needs other than financial. There is the sick mother who cannot keep up with the laundry. There are the lonely, the handicapped, the shut-ins, etc. And we are all aware that these various needs in the congregation must be addressed by the communion of saints as much as possible. The example of the Lord Jesus is here instructive; the hungry He fed, the sick He healed, the demons He cast out, the dead He raised, the handicapped He restored, sins He forgave. Christ was confronted with needs far beyond the financial, needs that took away joy from the children of God, and His response was compassionately to meet these needs so that each might be happy in God's goodness. That's the example for the congregation to follow in bearing each other's burdens. Then it's true that the specific need of the congregation of Jerusalem in Acts 6 was material; certain widows could not earn their own crust, and therefore needed support. Yet that does not mean that we are to define the term 'needy' today in financial terms alone. In as much as needs can change, so must the nature of the help given change. Always is it the task of the congregation to (endeavour to) remove whatever obstacle there may be to anyone's participation in the joy which flows out of Christ's gift of redemption. If it be hunger that prevents rejoicing, it is food that must be provided. If it be lack of shelter that overshadows the rejoicing, it is shelter that must be provided. If it be loneliness or sickness or worry that dampens joy, these are the needs which the body is to address. That's why we can be told that being a communion of saints implies visiting the widows and orphans (James 1:27), the sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25:31ff).

But if it holds true that members of the congregation are to satisfy the needs found among each other of whatever nature these needs may be then surely it follows that deacons too are to look after more needs than only the material. Their task, after all, centres around motivating the congregation to be the communion of saints it is supposed to be. So the fathers formulated the Belgic Confession so correctly: through the work of the deacons, *"the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need."* The Form for Ordination echoes this: *"No one in the congregation of Christ may live un comforted under the pressures of sickness, loneliness and poverty"* (Book of Praise, pg 631). Note that poverty comes last in this triad...

But how are deacons to satisfy the various needs within the congregation? We know: it is not so that they are to do it all themselves. Rather, where there are needs within the congregation not met by the congregation, it is for the deacons to motivate and organise the membership so that the need is met. For the deacons are not so much the church's arm of charity as the persons responsible to see to it that this arm of charity functions well.

In order that the deacons might be able to organise and motivate the congregation, it is necessary that the brothers in that office have a close and warm contact with the various members of the flock. That implies that the deacons make regular visits to the various homes and families. The primary purpose of such visits is then not to inquire about possible need in that home; the primary purpose is rather to determine whether each member in the congregation is indeed doing what each can to discover the needs that exist around them and whether each is doing whatever they can to answer these needs. In one word: are you pulling your weight in the communion of saints? Are you showing to others the love and care which Christ showed to you? So these visits can also be used to direct the attention of the visited family to a need elsewhere so that the family visited is encouraged to use its talents to satisfy the needs of others.

In this context, the deacons do well on their visits also to establish an inventory of available talent and resources in the congregation so as to be able to address a future need efficiently.

Beside this primary purpose for the regular diaconal visits, there is the secondary purpose of learning whether there are any needs in the visited home? Be they financial or spiritual or psychological? that take away from the joy that there is to be in the redemption Christ gave, needs which are not being met by the communion of saints. In the event that there is an unmet need which the deacons can themselves meet with a cheque, they are to provide that cheque. But more often, the need is not simply financial strain because of a one-time unexpected expense. Financial stress more often results from thoughtless spending and careless bookkeeping (or none at all). Simply writing a cheque in such circumstances is evidently not the answer. What may be needed is advice, instruction in money management. The deacons may have the time and talent to give this

instruction themselves, but are certainly within their right to employ the services of congregation members talented in money management and teaching, or even directing the brother and/or sister concerned to some financial experts.

Loneliness

The need discovered may be loneliness (a phenomenon true especially of older persons and widows). In such circumstances, a cheque is not at all in place, but rather attention and visits. Yet it is not for deacons to do the needed weekly visit themselves; it is for them to motivate and organise some sisters (or brothers) who have the time and the talent to look after the lonely.

Illness

Again, it may be that the deacons stumble across a home where the mother is ill and so cannot do the wash and the mending. If others have not spontaneously taken it on themselves to do the laundry and mending, it is for the deacons to organise able sisters.

Unemployment

Or there is someone unemployed. There may be need for financial assistance, but the bigger need will probably revolve around the tension which unemployment brings to the home. For having a restless husband pace the floor day after day is enough to drive any house wife around the bend. Besides, not being able to find a job corrodes one's self esteem, so that one begins to feel inadequate and inferior. If the deacons have no leads to a full time job, let them seek out places where casual help is needed. It may even be necessary that the deacons extend financial reimbursement to the employer if he cannot afford a hired hand. And so one can go on enumerating possible examples.

There is much for the deacons to do. One would be inclined to wonder how the deacons could ever adequately see to it that the communion of saints functions properly so that no one in the congregation lives *"uncomforted by the pressures of sickness, loneliness and poverty"*.

How, indeed, can they encourage the congregation to show to others the love that Christ has shown to them? In truth, deacons have much to do. And that may necessitate that we also think of increasing the number of deacons we currently are used to.

Yet the work of the deacon is not at all impossible. For if the congregation as a body acts as a living communion of saints, readily and cheerfully using available opportunities to show to each other the love which Christ has shown to them, then the pressure is off the deacons. It is when the members of the congregation no longer serve each other as selflessly as Christ did that the work of the deacons becomes difficult. Indeed, when that selfless serving is no longer alive, deacons can in no way do all that there is to do. For then the problem has become one of dead faith.

Deacon task outside the Church?

We've seen that the deacons have a task within the framework of the congregation's responsibility to be a communion of saints. Another question remains: is the task of the deacon restricted to the confines of the congregation's four walls? In pursuing an answer to this question, I draw your attention to the following Scriptural data.

Old Testament Israel was to do good to the stranger living in the land. Leviticus 19:

"The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (vs 34).

Israel's care was to extend beyond fellow Israelites and include strangers because (says the Lord) *"you were strangers in the land of Egypt."* They had themselves experienced what it was to be a minority in the land, to be second class citizens. Israel had to treat strangers not as they themselves had been treated in Egypt, but as they would have liked the Egyptians to treat them.

Yet the motive for doing good to strangers lies deeper. Israel in Egypt was not at all an attractive, desirable nation (cf Ezekiel 16). Prestige, wealth, honour and beauty Israel did not have. Yet it pleased the Lord to cast His eye on Israel, deliver this nation of slaves, make His covenant with them at Mount Sinai, and so make them His children. In as much as unworthy Israel was the blessed recipient of God's love and goodness was Israel also to demonstrate to the unworthy around her this love and goodness of God. Serving others, carrying the burdens of others, making a joyful life possible for others, was a task not to be directed to the faithful within Israel alone; no, the people Israel were to go out of their way to relieve the needs of all those around them. So it was that God instructed His people to see to it that they include the strangers in the land when they celebrated their feasts and enjoyed the gifts God gave (cf Deuteronomy 14:28). So also Jesus Christ, though He came specifically to God's special people Israel, did not hesitate to extend the gospel with its healing power also to strangers, even the heathen. He went to Genessaret, and cleansed there that demoniac (Mark 5:11ff). He crossed the path of a Syro-phenician woman and healed her daughter (Mark 7:24ff). He healed the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:55ff), spoke to the Samaritan woman (John 4:7ff), extolled the example of the Samaritan in that parable (Luke 10:25ff).

"Do good to all men"

The apostles write in a manner consistent with that Old Testament legislation and Christ's resulting practice. Paul instructed the Galatians to *"do good to all men"* (Galatians 6:10). Granted, Paul adds that this good is to be done *"especially to those who are of the household of faith."* But he begins with instruction about all men. And elsewhere Paul voices his prayer that *"the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men"* (I Thessalonians 3:12). Quite correctly has the Church summarised and confessed God's revelation on this matter in LD 42:

"What does God require of you in this (eighth) commandment? I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may ..., and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need."

The identity of the neighbour is exemplified in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

How shall we do good to the neighbour? Is our work of mercy to the unbelieving in the community to be restricted to giving monetary assistance in a time of disaster? Yet if providing assistance within the congregation goes beyond the financial, it follows that doing good outside the congregation is also to go beyond the financial. Indeed, promoting my neighbour's good wherever I can and may implies an attempt to address my neighbour's needs whenever he has need of whatever nature. And the real need in today's world is not so much financial as it is loneliness, depression, anxiety. If indeed it is loneliness and depression that eat away at our country men, it is for us to do good to them as we have opportunity; share with them in word and deed the wealth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such is following the example of our Lord who did good to such unworthy persons as we, those who were dead in their sins.

But if the congregation is to be active in showing the love of Christ to those who do not know Christ, should not the deacons encourage and even stimulate this expression of joy and gratitude for the redemption received? No, not that the onus of giving such help to the poor of our society is to fall on the deacons.

Doing good remains primarily the responsibility of those who have received the best good in Christ. But there are occasions where a degree of organisation is required in helping those outside, in the same way as a measure of organisation can be needed in helping those within the congregation. It would seem proper that this organising falls within the perimeters of the deacons' work. Further, if the task of the deacons within the congregation is to see to it that the saints are giving from the abundance received so that all can live together in sweet communion, men surely these same deacons ought to see to it that the saints are sharing their treasures also with the needy outside and so show to society at large the love which Christ has shown to these saints.

Needy outside the church

As things are, the fathers of old thought in this direction. Art 25 of the Church Order of Dort reads:

"The office peculiar to the Deacons is diligently to collect alms and other contributions of charity, and... faithfully and diligently to distribute the same to the poor, not only to those who belong to the Congregation but also to strangers, as their needs may require it; to visit and comfort the distressed..."

And though it may be true that the term "strangers" in Art 25 was understood initially to refer to believers from other congregations, deacons in time past cared for all needy in the community and hence collected gifts of charity from everyone and even received funds from the government. Although such support from the government is surely undesirable, the concept of looking beyond the membership of the congregation is not. In the words of the Form for the Ordination of Deacons, as polished by the 1996 Synod of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia: deacons are charged to "encourage the congregation to do good to all men."

Again, what sort of support should be given to the needy outside the church? The Synod of Dort spoke primarily of collecting alms for distribution. Yet that is not to say that the Synod of Dort saw the work of charity to be restricted to distribution of needed moneys. That the Synod saw the work of charity to extend beyond the financial is made clear by the Synod's reference to visiting and comforting the distressed. And the need in society around us today is certainly beyond the financial. Let then the saints in general, encouraged by the deacons, cast about for ways and means to address the numerous needs that be in our society.

For the sake of clarity I add again that such efforts to do good to all men are to occur in conjunction with the opening of the Word of God. For the Word answers the deepest need.

How can the people of God relieve needs in society around us? In time past, it was the churches who were instrumental in establishing hospitals in various communities. Understandably, these hospitals were not just institutions for health; these hospitals also indicated to the community at large the compassion Christians had learned from Christ's example. As such, they also became centers for the spreading of the gospel. In the communities wherein we live, there is scarcely need for the construction of hospitals as such. But in a society filled with paranoia about assisting AIDS patients, is there a possibility that we can demonstrate in concrete deeds to such patients the compassion and love we were allowed to receive from Jesus Christ? And what possibilities exist to provide help to the unhappy pregnant who seek an abortion?

In a society with so many street kids fleeing the traumas of the broken homes, is there a possibility that we show them something of the goodness God has graciously shown to us in Christ? Surely it should be we who have received so much who dare to go to the streets and lanes of the city, to the highways and hedges, to bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should like to repeat what I said earlier: it is not for the deacons to do all the work. The work belongs to the congregation. But the deacons can surely motivate, encourage, even lead the way.

Conclusion

What task have the deacons? It is for them to encourage the congregation to show in concrete and tangible terms its gratitude for the abundant goodness received from Jesus Christ. As He emptied Himself in self-sacrificing love for unworthy sinners, so God's people are to do likewise. That is a self denial directed to all men, especially to those of the household of faith. It is when God's people "increase and abound in love to one another and to all men" that the deacons' task is not difficult. For then the needs that be are being met.

C Bouwman