



Challenges that deacons face today

Introduction

Let me begin by thanking you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening. I am not sure why I have been selected for this honour, except to say that perhaps gray hair and length of service have something to do with it. In any case, let me proceed.

First, let me say something about my approach. As you can well understand the topic of your office is very wide and broad and can be approached from any number of angles. There is the *traditional* angle whereby I would go over all of the biblical givens of your office. There is the *historical* angle that would show how your office has fared over the years. There is also the *practical* angle that deals with how you do your work and task. There is as well the *organizational* angle that has to do with how you work together as a group, as well as with the elders and pastors of the church.

Now, all of these angles are worthy of attention; however, I have decided to take a somewhat different tact, one that deals mostly with the **challenges** that you face. In so doing, I will also mix in aspects of the various angles just mentioned.

So let us look at your challenges, and begin by grouping them. As such I would place them under the following headings: personal challenges, congregational challenges and support challenges.

1. Personal challenges

Before we begin to explore the personal challenges of being a deacon, let me just remark that I have long believed that of all the offices in the church, the office of deacon is the most difficult. Why? Because it deals with money, and money is and always has been a powerful thing, as well as a very penetrating thing.

What do I mean when I say that money is a powerful thing? I mean that money is a god. It is not for nothing that the Lord Jesus calls it "Mammon" and what is "Mammon"? Mammon is the god of money, and many people worship this god. Look around you in the world in which you live and look around you in the church in which you serve. What do you see? Money does strange things to people. It can utterly dominate and control their lives. It can determine their happiness, their sense of worth, and their peace of mind. It often sets their priorities. It can rule their hearts and souls. As a deacon you should never underestimate the power of money.

But a moment ago I also said that money is a penetrating thing. What did I mean by that? I meant that in some ways money may well be the truest test of our spiritual commitment. Money has a way of revealing what lives deep down in peoples' lives. It can test and expose like nothing else.

Take the story of the rich young man who approaches the Lord Jesus (see: Matt. 19:16-24). He is bold in his speech and broad in his verbal commitment, but when the Lord Jesus puts him to the test. He fails! He fails because his money is more important than his Lord.

In the same way I have met any number of people who could talk very piously and often with great seriousness in their voice, but then when I, as a pastor, saw what they contributed to the support of the church, I saw something else entirely. I saw that their lives were devoid of giving. And that is not because they were poor either! No, it had to do with a disconnect between verbal utterances and heart commitment, or between public posturing and private devotion.

So, brothers, no one should under-estimate your office and your work. There is a sense in which you deal with something that has all of the volatility of dynamite.

But let's proceed to your personal challenges. What are they and what are they about?

The heart

The first personal challenge for any deacon is always a challenge of the heart. In other words, we are getting here into questions of commitment and devotion. It is possible to be a deacon in the church and yet have no real living relationship with the Lord. It is possible to say all the right things and do all of the right things but without really loving the Lord, calling on His name and depending on His grace and help.

Hence the first challenge is always a heart challenge. Am I doing my work as a deacon in fellowship with the Lord and in humble reliance on Him? Am I rooted in Him and seeking to do His will or am I doing this as a matter of course and for purely human consumption and adoration? Quite simply, what drives and motivates me?

Biblically speaking, it has to be, as you all know, a heart full of faith. Another way of putting it is what the apostles tell the believers in Acts 6 when they say, *"choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom."* (6:3) Now there you have it too – *"full of the Spirit and wisdom."*

A deacon who is "full of the Spirit" lives a Spirit controlled life, or if you will, a life dependent on the power and direction of the Spirit and a life full of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace... (Gal. 5:22ff).

Also, a deacon is full of "wisdom," and that is a quality that only arises in the lives of those who study, know and apply the Word of God to their lives. For this Word does nothing else but direct us to God and to fearing Him. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"* (1:7) as Proverbs reminds us repeatedly.

So, brothers, you need to start by examining your hearts. And in saying that I do not mean to imply that this is something only you need to do. All who consider themselves Christians need to do that, but we who minister in the church of Jesus Christ need to do that especially.

Time and priority

But then if the first challenge before you has to do with the heart, the second surely has to do with time and prioritizing things. You are all busy men. You have lots on the go. There are your families, your jobs, your business, your church and a host of other matters to consider. How does one sort all of this out? How does one keep it all straight? How does one find time for everything?

A popular way of dealing with this in Christian circles is to say that one's priorities should be God – marriage/family – work. But then where does the work of being a deacon belong? If we put it under God then it would come before marriage and family, as well as work. So, let's adjust the order and say that it should be: God – marriage/family – church and work.

This means that your first priority should always be God in terms of prayer, Scripture reading and worship. Here the First Commandment comes to mind when it tells us that God should be our first and foremost concern.

As for your second priority, it should be your marriage and your family. Now, in the past among ministers, elders and deacons this was not always the case. I know of many ministers, elders and deacons who did their church work at the cost of their marriages and families. There is no shortage of bitter stories out there of children who remark that their father was always gone and never around because he had church work to do. These men put their church work first and their wives and children second. No doubt they meant well, but still they were wrong.

Yes, and it is good for us to learn from this. On the one hand it is so easy to get totally caught up in our work, be it our daily work or church work or both. Yet on a regular basis we need to stop and reflect on what we are doing and the time we are spending. As well, it would be a most healthy thing to ask your wife to keep you accountable, and it would not hurt either to ask your children whether they think that you are away too many evenings.

What this means concretely is that deacons need to limit their time out at night. One evening a week should be the norm. Two evenings a week should be the maximum. Only in emergencies is there reason for spending more time outside of the home.

Education

Thus far then, we have dealt with the challenges of the heart and of time, but there is also a third one and it has to do with education. What do I mean with that? Am I suggesting that you all need to go to college? No, I am thinking here of self-education and group education.

First, there is the challenge of self-education. This means that every deacon needs to be committed to learning and self-improvement. For starters, I am thinking here of taking the time to become more and more rooted in the Scriptures, as well as the confessions of the church. It is true that you are deacons, but it is also true that you are deacons in Reformed churches, so you need to be reformed deacons. And this means studying the Reformed basics: the Bible, the confessions, the church order, the history of the church. It also means studying up on all those biblical aspects that touch on your office: money, property, stewardship, giving, saving, budgeting. In short, personal development is crucial to becoming and being an effective deacon.

Of course, that personal development does not happen in a vacuum or in isolation, so there is also room here for group education. As deacons together, make every attempt to spend some time doing more than just counting money and discussing cases. Use at least some of that time for discussing other matters and wider issues. Also, give some attention to good books that help you in your work. Make every attempt to sharpen one another.

In this connection, it would also be helpful for the deacons in every church to develop a diaconal resource center made up of books, videos, and articles. Of course, it is good to have a personal library too; however, the expense may be prohibitive for some and hence it would be good to have a resource center in the church that can be used by all the deacons. And, by the way, I see nothing wrong with deacons covering the cost of such a center from out of the money that is donated. It may not be direct mercy work but it will surely benefit all those who are the recipients of mercy work. On the other hand, if such a move proves to be contentious then there is always the church budget. A well-educated and equipped deaconate will prove to be a rich blessing in every church.

2. Church challenges

Having said something about the personal challenges that face every deacon, let me move on to challenges in the church or to the kind of challenges that you will meet as you work in your local congregations.

Organizational challenges

Under church challenges, the first may well be an organizational one. In other words, how do the deacons organize their work in relation to the congregation?

For starters, you will have to elect an executive made up of the usual offices of chairman, secretary and treasurer. It goes without saying that the chairman is responsible for presiding over the meetings, but he is also responsible for the overall diaconal work and effort in the congregation. In other words, he needs to measure the pulse of the congregation and insure that it is being well served by the current group of deacons.

As for the secretary, it is not so important that every jot and tittle be recorded, as that every decision taken be put down and every assignment be properly recorded. In the process keep a separate record of policy decisions that would otherwise be forgotten over time.

As for the treasurer, he should make sure that the funds collected are properly stored, deposited and recorded. He should insist that all cheques have two signatures.

Moving from the inner workings of the deaconate to the congregation, it would be beneficial if the deacons would make it a point to either divide the congregation into wards and districts, or else piggyback on the elders wards and districts.

Having done that, each deacon should be assigned at least one or more wards and be made the primary care giver in that ward or district. This means that every deacon needs to get to know his ward(s)/district(s) as best as possible.

Might I suggest that you do a close scrutiny and an intense inspection of your ward(s)/district(s) looking for the following:

- The number and names of singles

- The number and names of families

- The number and names of the elderly

- The number and names of those with special needs – physical sickness, mental conditions, children with special needs, single mothers, the divorced.

- Those who have special helping gifts and skills – listening, encouragement, counseling, assisting, budgeting, homemaking, transporting, etc.

Once you have a good handle on the people under your care, prioritize them in terms of need and make up a schedule of those who should be visited regularly and those who should receive a more occasional visit.

Approach challenges

Approaching the members in your care for the first time can also prove to be a challenge. In some cases, it may be possible to invite them to a barbecue at your home or to a potluck at the church. It may also be good if every deacon, after he is ordained and assigned a ward(s)/district(s), writes up a letter introducing himself to his members and offering his help in different areas. Such a letter can be easily distributed by making use of the church mailboxes.

In addition to introducing oneself by letter, it is also necessary for the deacon to do so in person. Again, after having surveyed, examined and prioritized your ward, draw up a visitation schedule and go out. Under no circumstances are you to sit back and expect them to call you. You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ and Christ expects you to go out and into his flock. You need to get out and get into peoples lives.

I have been a church visitor in the various classes in which I have lived and served as a pastor and I was once astounded to come across a church wherein the deacons never went out unless they were called by a member who had a certain need. You might say that they acted more like firemen who stay in their fire halls waiting patiently for a fire to start and the alarm to ring and not at all like Christian deacons who try to make sure that fires never start in the first place.

I might also add that when a deacon goes out to introduce himself to his district, he does not need to bring another deacon along. In that case he can do solo work.

In going out you will also discover that while families and married couples are easy to visit, it are the singles under your care who will prove more difficult. Still, do not give up on them or bypass them. Some of them are in special need of stewardship and financial counsel and assistance. If

they appear hesitant to have you over to their, sometimes untidy premises, you might suggest a local coffee shop (be thankful for Tim Horton's!).

Needy challenges

But then if there are organizational and approach challenges, there are also needy challenges. What do I mean by that? I mean trying to assess the needs of various families and individuals and trying to assist them in the most effective way.

The easy

In this connection you as deacons will meet various types of needy. First of all, there are the needy in the congregation who are easy to work with. Either you go to them or they come to you. They present you with a clear case of need, speaking freely about their difficulties, showing you their books, if need be, and responding well to your advice, counsel and assistance. In short, they display Christian commitment, honesty and openness. Thankfully there are still many of these around.

The proud

But then there are those other cases. There are, for example, the proud cases. Here you know as a deacon that there is a definite need or a series of needs that should be addressed, but the persons in need are too proud to accept any form of assistance.

How to deal with them? Your best approach is to try to educate them to see that there is no shame in being assisted and that this is not the money of the church or the money of the members that is being re-distributed. No, this is the money of Christ. When they refuse the help of the deacons, these people need to be made aware that they are refusing the help that Christ wants to offer them through His servants. For the rest, you need to give time to let the Spirit work, and if nothing changes, they may simply have to experience the consequences of their pride and stubbornness.

The inept

When we come to the inept we are dealing with members who really have very little or no financial ability. They do not know how to budget, how to save, how to spend, how to prioritize. They just spend, spend, spend. And then there is always credit and more credit.

What to do? Here is a case where basic financial skills may need to be taught by the deacons. Most believers learn these skills at home and in the family setting, but some Christian and unbelieving families are dysfunctional and children from these homes need to be taught from the ground up. Needless to say, this will require a lot of time and effort; however, if there is a willingness to learn, this can be a most rewarding experience. On the other hand, if this willingness is lacking, it can also be a most frustrating experience.

I might add too that often young, single people and newly married couples fall into this category. Early preventative work here by you as deacons can save you and the deacons a lot of future headache.

The private

On occasion as deacons you will come across individuals or families who say that they need help but who refuse to disclose all of the pertinent facts to you. Now if this is a case of short-term assistance, it is one thing, but if this is a matter of long-term help, it is something else (as I will come to soon). In most cases I would counsel you not to assist those who hold things back. I realize that at times they may be holding back things that are a huge embarrassment to them, but they need to realize and learn that effective help depends on full disclosure.

The devious

Unfortunately even the Christian community is not free of thieves, embezzlers and con artists. I remember well the time that the deacons of a local church where I was serving came to me with the case of a man who always spoke to them very piously; however, there was always a

suspicious air about the man. Whenever the deacons assisted him, they did so with the distinct impression that he was deceiving them.

And indeed he was. For one day on a visit one of the deacons had drunk too much coffee and needed a toilet break. He was given directions to the toilet but heard wrong and opened the wrong door. Instead of entering the bathroom, he entered the bedroom. Now that would ordinarily not be such a big deal; however, upon entering the bedroom, he could not help seeing that it was filled with all kinds of fancy and expensive electronic gear. This man who claimed to have nothing in fact owned a great deal.

What to do? They admonished him, demanded to see the real books and told him that he would have to make restitution. In addition, the deacons also informed the elders of the church of the problem, and they took the matter even further.

What does all of this teach us? For openers it teaches us to trust our instincts. Usually if a number of brothers think that a situation smells, it most likely does smell for a reason. In addition, it also teaches patience. Realize that sooner or later those who deceive and extort will be exposed. They either trip themselves up or someone else does it to them.

The uncooperative

As a deacon you will also meet situations in which people play games. They tell you one thing and another deacon something different. If they cannot get what they want from you, they will try a colleague. If they do not like your approach, they will lobby for another deacon whom they think has a different approach or an easier personality. Oh, the games people play.

In such situations it is absolutely mandatory that as deacons you discuss these cases thoroughly together and make sure that you all adhere to the same approach and give the same advice.

The long-term

A good deal of the help that you as deacons give is short-term help. It may relate to someone who is sick and cannot work, or to members who have unforeseen expenses that they can cover, or to those who are in transition. Often these are not difficult cases.

And then there are the long-term cases where members need help over a considerable period of time, and sometime to a considerable extent. The cause may relate to health issues, the death of a spouse, marriage breakdown or the presence of special needs children in the family.

How should such cases be approached? Here it is necessary that you as deacons be made privy to all of the facts. You need to know the total and complete financial picture. If there is a reluctance to disclose or a refusal to do so, then, in these types of cases, as deacons you should refuse to assist. I know that this is hard and unpleasant, but you cannot help these members rebuild their financial lives if they are holding back.

Once complete disclosure is forthcoming, then it is important that you work together on a financial plan that is comprehensive and compassionate. By comprehensive, I mean that it should cover all of the needs of daily living. By compassionate, I mean that you should not demand of the materially strapped that they adopt a standard of living that is below the congregational average. Our Form for the Ordination of Deacons and Elders says it well when it states, that *"the weak and needy (shall) share abundantly in the joy of God's people"* and *"no one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness and poverty."* (p. 631)

One more thing that needs our attention with regard to the long-term needy and it has to do with government assistance. In the past the church and her deacons have often been very reluctant, if not resistant, to the acceptance of governmental aid and assistance (sometimes called "welfare"). I for one do not share that reluctance. My view is and has always been that as members of the church we are also citizens of society and taxpayers in society. Hence when a member of the church falls ill and cannot make ends meet, there should be no shame in them receiving

governmental help. At one level they are simply receiving back something that they have previously paid for in one form of taxation or another.

3. Support challenges

Let me quickly and briefly move on to one last set of challenges. I have called these "support challenges" and under this heading I mean all of those many requests for support that deacons receive from outside the local church and from around the world. What to do with them?

Well, let me begin here by stating that there are many, many worthy causes in this world, and we can be thankful for them and for the work being done. At the same time there are also many, many unworthy causes in the world, and we cannot be thankful for them. Hence the challenge arises as to who to support and who not to support. How do we find our way in this confusing situation?

Well, here again it is necessary to establish a set of priorities. Generally speaking, the deacons in a local church should make sure that they give support to those causes and organizations that are directly related to their local church. Here I am thinking of Mission Aid Brazil as an example.

Still, you may have noticed that I started my last sentence with the words "generally speaking" and I do so for a good reason, and it relates to the fact that some times, even in our own churches, organizations are created whose cause or organizational structure may be questionable. All the people in a particular organization may be Canadian Reformed, but if their aims are not clear, if their accounting is sloppy or if there are too many relatives involved, watch out!

So here comes my first rule of thumb in giving aid or assistance: *no matter who it is, check it out as to its intent, purpose and structure!*

In addition, often requests for support come to us from organizations within the church that use para-church organizations or from para-church organizations directly. Here I think of Canadian World Relief Fund, MERF, Christ for Russia, the Bible Society, World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, Blind International, Cascade, Bethesda, and so forth. Am I saying that there is something wrong with these organizations as such? Not at all, but here too a certain rule applies, so here comes my second rule of thumb, and it is this: *scrutinize their financial statements and budget!*

You should do so especially if it is a large North American charitable organization and it is not a member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (EFCA).

Also, in scrutinizing the organizations records pay special attention to the amount of money that goes to overhead expenses.

A third rule of thumb is this: *give preference to those organizations that are reformed in nature and character.* In saying this I am not saying that we should never support evangelical or even secular organizations; however, I do think that we do well to favour those causes and organizations that stand with us on the same confessional basis.

Well, it is time for me to bring this introduction to a close. I hope that I have presented you some food for thought, as well as any number of matters that will make for a good discussion.

Brothers, may the Lord bless your work in your respective churches. Do it thankfully and humbly. Do it in the awareness that in a world of many churches, faithful Reformed churches also stand out and are unique because they have a real, functioning deaconate.

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