

Outline

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The Deacon

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THE DEACON

Introduction

“The Lord Jesus Christ, who has shown us the Father, came into the world to serve. In His mercy He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and showed compassion to the afflicted. Thus He gave an example, that His Church should do likewise. The ministry of mercy, as assigned to the deacons, proceeds, therefore, from this love of our Saviour.” (Form for Ordination).

1. The Office

The Lord as the Head of the church has entrusted the care for His congregation in the hands of the overseers. The office is thus an official charge received from the Lord through his congregation, with a view to building up the congregation. It has three components: a legitimate calling, authority coming from the Lord and a specific charge to serve the congregation of the Lord. Because the office comes from the Lord all office-bearers are duty bound to fulfil their office in obedience to the Lord. It is a comfort to know that the office comes from the Lord. One need not campaign for it. The Lord will open the way when He so decides. In addition, since the office comes from the Lord, He will also provide his servants with the necessary strength to do their work.

2. Scripture

Deacons are entrusted with the Ministry of Mercy. This mercy is necessary because mankind fell into sin. The LORD shows His mercy to His people and wants His people to show mercy to each other. We see this clearly in the O.T. The LORD calls Himself a merciful God.

Ex. 34 : 6

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

He hears the cries of His people and is willing to help because of His promises.

Exodus 2:23-25

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

Deut. 4:31

For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath

Jer. 4: 12

" 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever.

The LORD wanted His people to show mercy as well. In this way Israel could show that life is well protected in the covenant with God. With Him life is healed.

Deut 14:28-29

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deut 24:19-22

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Micah 6:8

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

The Lord Jesus is the visible proof of God's mercy. He taught that in His Kingdom life is restored and thus His kingdom is characterized by mercy.

Luke 6:36

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

He gave the example of mercy in His deeds and in His death.

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

John 13:12-17

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

The early church followed this example.

Acts 2 : 46-47

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-35

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

We do not read in the Bible the institution of the office of deacon. In Acts 6 several brothers are ordained to serve the tables and their task have elements which the deacons have as part of their mandate. We cannot say that these Seven were deacons, but the office of the deacon certainly flows from their work. Twice is the word deacon used in the New Testament. In the letter to the Philippians they seem to be part of the council.

Phil 1:1-2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

In 1 Timothy we meet the deacon as an existing office as well. The fact that Paul mentions the requirements for deacons shows that they had an office as well.

1Tim 3:8-13

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

For further texts see:

The Diaconal Visit

The Service of mercy

The Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons

3. Confessions/Church Order/Forms

3.1. Belgic Confession

The office of deacon is mentioned in the article that deals with the government of the church.

Article 30

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

3.2. Church Order

There are several articles in the Church Order which require the involvement of the deacons.

See 3-5 Council/Consistory

Two articles deal with the task of the deacons

Art. 23

The specific duties of the office of deacon are to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; and further, to gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. They shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

Art. 42

When the deacons meet separately, as a rule once a month, to deal with the matters pertaining to their office, they shall do so with calling upon the Name of God. They shall give account of their labours to the consistory. The ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy and, if need be, may visit these meetings.

3.3. Forms

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

Prayer # 15 - An Opening Prayer for the Meeting of the Deacons

4. The Office of the Deacon

The Lord assigns to the deacons the Ministry of Mercy. The word "ministry" shows that we are dealing here with a task, a service, given by the Lord for the benefit of the congregation. The task of the congregation is the service of charity, but the deacons' calling is the Ministry of Mercy. In the Great Reformation of the 16th century this was rediscovered. Whereas in the Middle Ages the task of the deacon has changed into being a helper of the bishop, in the Reformation the churches learned again from the Word of God the proper place and task of the ministry of mercy. The deacon is not any less an office-bearer than the elder. A correct view on the work of the deacons is based on a proper understanding of what the church is. The history of the church shows this. Reformations had consequences for preaching and discipline, but also for the ministry of mercy. This is reflected in the Form for Ordination in that we have one Form for both Elders and Deacons. Although the Form distinguishes between the task of the elders and deacons, the first part of the Form which deals with the institution of the office applies to both elder and deacons. This shows that the office of deacon is no less than the office of elder. Both are ministries given by the Lord. In both we see the care of the Lord for His flock. As the church cannot do without elders, so the church cannot do without deacons. Deacons are not a luxury but a necessity for the church. Without the ministry of mercy the church dies. To be church is evident in being merciful. In this context we see the wonderful task of the deacons.

5. Deacons and Congregation

The deacons have been assigned the Ministry of Mercy. The congregation is called to the service of charity. This distinction comes from the Form of Ordination and helps us see the task of the deacons with regard to the congregation. On the one hand there is a clear connection. Mercy and charity are closely connected. At the same time this distinction highlights that the tasks of the deacons and congregation are to be distinguished. Deacons are not called to do all the work of charity in the congregation, they are to encourage the congregation to serve each other. In their work as deacons they also have to give an example to the congregation. There has to be a good cooperation between deacons and congregation. The faithful ministry of mercy will stimulate and direct the service of charity. The willing service of charity will greatly help the ministry of mercy.

6. The task of the Deacon

See Service of Mercy (2-2) and Diaconal Visit (1-2)

The Form for Ordination states that it is the responsibility of the deacons to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church. The Form works this out as follows

- a. acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties;
- b. exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy;
- c. gather and manage the offerings;
- d. distribute the offerings in Christ's name according to need;
- e. encourage and comfort with the Word those who receive the gifts of Christ's love;
- f. promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit.

The first two (a. and b.) point to a more general task. The deacons have to acquaint themselves with existing needs and exhort the members of the church to show mercy. This shows that the deacons should not do all the work of mercy, but allow the congregation to do its work as well. One could say that the deacons try to make their involvement superfluous as soon as feasible. The acquainting with existing needs takes place through the visits by the deacons (see 1-1), through information from elders, congregational members, or family members. Confidentiality is very important in this regard.

The points c., d., and e. address the specific task of the deacons. They have to gather and manage the offerings. The deacons are to collect the money during the worship service. Each year the deacons inform the congregation how much has come in and how much has gone out. If the income is too low the deacons usually make the congregation aware of this. As a rule the congregation responds well. To manage the funds also means that the deaconry should have some money for unforeseen circumstances. It is not the goal of the deaconry to build up a surplus, but to keep extra in the bank in cases of emergency. If it happens that more comes in than goes out, the deacons can look for others causes connected to the service of mercy.

Next to gathering and managing comes the distribution of the gifts. This distribution is the work of the deaconry as a whole. It is not up to the individual deacon to decide what to give. As the deacons evaluate the need they must also see whether the family is able to help. Other aspect is the question whether the need is a legitimate need. The deacons may have to look at the cause. In order to establish this the deacons should not be afraid to ask for figures. It would not be responsible to give money while not knowing the figures. Financial advice can at times be more in place than financial help.

It can happen that financial problems are connected to spiritual problems. There are situations in which members feel bad about asking for help. There can also be the case that members are too quick in asking for help. Then also it is the task of the deacons to establish whether a member has a legitimate request. The Bible teaches that those who refuse to work should not be supported by the church. That is not a financial matter, but rather a disciplinary one. In such cases the elders can be involved as well. When the need is related to the tuition for education, see 1-7, the elders are usually involved as well.

The distribution must be done in the name of the Lord. The members who are helped may know and feel the love of Christ for them. To show this the deacons must also come with the Word of God. In this way they encourage and comfort the members who need help.

The last element mentioned in the Form (f.) is again of a more general nature. The deacons are called to promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit. See 1-4 about the collection at the Lord's Table. This determines the way in which the congregation is exhorted, helped and comforted. To show this by deed the deacons visit all the elderly, handicapped and lonely in the congregation on a yearly basis.

7. Meeting of Deacons

The deacons meet at least once per month. These meetings are opened in the required manner and minutes are kept. All correspondence is put in the archives of the deacons. Minute books and archives that are outdated will be placed in the church archives. If decisions have to be made between meetings, e.g. after the worship service, these must be written into the minutes of the next meeting. If there are matters which the deacons want to bring to the attention of the elders this can be done in two ways, the ward elders are informed of a particular situation, or the matter is brought to the council meeting as a matter of mutual concern.

8. Give account

The Church Order requires that the deacons give account of their labours to the consistory (Art. 45). The consistory is the ruling body and thus also the decisions of the deacons fall under their jurisdiction. This does not mean that the consistory has to make the decisions for the deacons, but they may at any time ask who is being helped and how much help is given. The deacons have their own task, yet in fulfilling it they are subject to the oversight of the elders. Part of this giving account is that the income and expense is published on a regular basis and that the books of the deacons are audited by two elders.

9. Minister

Article 42 of the Church Order states that the ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy and, if need be, also may visit these meetings. The connection with the minister is of an advisory nature. The minister will benefit in his work from the input of the deacons. The deacons may also ask advice from the minister.

10. Literature

See chapters about Ministry of Mercy and Homevisits
Huizinga, W., Diaconal Visits, in *Diakonia*, Vol. XVI No.3, December 2002
Lodder, Th.B. The Ministry of Deacons in Calvin's Institutes, in *Diakonia* Vol. XVII, No.2, September 2003

11. Evaluation

1. Do we agree on the Biblical basis?
2. Do the deacons fulfil their calling faithfully?
3. Is the congregation diligent in the service of charity?
4. Is there good cooperation between deacons and elders, between deacons and minister?
5. Are we satisfied with the way in which the deacons give account?
6. Are there items that need to be followed up? Why? How will we do this?