

Reforming the Diaconate

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Part 2: Training Prospective Deacons

It is hard to believe that any church which is serious about being a “pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15) would permit men to be ordained to office without some form of training prior to their placement before the congregation for election. If truth could “out”, however, we would be surprised and appalled at how frequently this is and has been the case. I have no doubt that many of our ecclesiastical weaknesses, inefficiencies, and failings stem from precisely this tragic omission. Is this the case in the congregation in which you serve? How well, if at all, were you prepared to serve in the office you now hold?

We need not go far for reasons to challenge us to conscientiousness in the training of prospective officers. God’s own warning about the seriousness of vows (see Ecclesiastes 5:1-7) should be sufficient to make any officer-elect say “NO!” to taking the ordination vows for ruling elders or deacons unless he has been carefully apprised of what they mean. Greater responsibility in the church certainly warrants greater training so that those responsibilities might be fulfilled with understanding. And the very practical benefits of a pastor and perhaps other officers working with prospective officers before they begin official service cannot be overestimated. Is not the model of our Saviour in His “training of the twelve” a sufficient rationale for us?

No doubt it is for these reasons that the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church stipulates (XXV:3): “In order that these sacred offices not be committed to weak or unworthy men, and that the congregations shall have an opportunity to form a better judgment respecting the gifts of those by whom they are to be governed and served, no one shall normally be eligible for election to office until he has been a communicant member in good standing for at least one year, shall have received appropriate training under the direction of or with the approval of the session, and shall have served the church in functions requiring responsible leadership.”

The focus of this article is specifically on training prospective deacons. Once you have defined the diaconal task (see my previous article in *Ordained Servant*), how do you actually go about preparing men to function in that capacity?

Some churches make no distinction in training ruling elders and deacons. This is certainly far better than doing nothing, and it has the advantage of giving what (hopefully) is a full and uniform program of instruction to all men in the congregation who show promise for office. If you find that helpful then you may want to skip on to the next article. The approach I am suggesting is different, but we have found it to work well in the congregation I pastor, and we have also found it to bring more advantages than the other model.

Our elder training program takes far longer (usually about 18 weeks of two hour sessions, along with “practical training”), and deals with doctrinal matters in far more detail. It also includes large segments of pastoral theology and church polity, which are not as directly applicable to the diaconate. Our deacon training program (see Appendix A) is only 6 weeks in duration (not counting the “practical service” which displays the prospective deacon’s gifts and commitment). It covers the main heads of the Westminster Confession of Faith from the perspective of diaconal work, after which it focuses in on the biblical characteristics required of deacons, and their specific responsibilities in the congregation. To my mind, the very fact

that I Timothy 3 gives a distinct listing of gifts and graces necessary for each officer is a sufficient warrant to make a distinction in the way each group is trained. The practical advantages are also great. Here's how we do it.

The first three weeks (sessions are usually 90 minutes to two hours in length...depending on how discussion oriented your prospective deacons are!) focus in on “The Deacon and Doctrine.” While elders must be “apt to teach,” I Tim. 3:2 (and I see no reason why this qualification is confined to “Teaching Elders” alone), and therefore must know well the doctrine they are called to present to others, deacons must “hold the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience,” I Tim. 3:9. Our prospective deacons have required homework covering the basics of Reformed doctrine, and the class sessions offer applications to the diaconate which flow out of the heads of doctrine as represented in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and elaborated upon in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. This is done under a series of “Doctrinal Propositions Which Must Guide the Ongoing and Developing Work of a Diaconate.”

For example, growing out of our confession regarding “Holy Scripture” (WCF, chapter I) there is the affirmation that “There must be a dogged determination to align every diaconal practice with the precepts and directives of Holy Scripture.” Questions like “How is mercy to be shown? To whom? To what extent?”, and principles for drawing up budgets, recommending salaries, the use of the church building, etc, must all be answered or derived from the Word of God. We emphasize this, and explain how that is to be done in the “real world” of the official work of the church.

Another example is from our application of the Westminster Confession’s doctrine of “God’s Covenant With Man” (Chap. 7). In coupling this with various Scripture passages we point out that “There must be an unashamed differentiation in our dealings with those who are inside or outside the covenant of grace.” Here we deal with basic principles for diaconal service to believers and to unbelievers. This introduces prospective deacons to the excellent material on “covenantal benevolence” developed by Leonard Coppes and others in the OPC. It is important to take time with this because in contemporary Evangelicalism there is little awareness or appreciation of this aspect of Biblical teaching.

Over the first three weeks of the training program we discuss the reading assignments and give an overview of our confessional standards from this very practical diaconal perspective. It enables us to cover a wide terrain of doctrine, and do it in such a way that the prospective deacons begin thinking biblically and confessionally about the diaconal task. Particularly in covering the material on soteriology it gives me the opportunity to give prospective deacons some help in the evangelistic and personal ministry they will inevitably become involved with if they are doing their work conscientiously. We obviously do not cover every head of the WCF, but isolate those confessional materials which most relate to the diaconal functions we have defined for this congregation. The beauty of this approach is its flexibility and practicality in applying the doctrinal standards of the church.

The next three weeks are devoted to “The Deacon and His Work” (again, see Appendix A). This begins with an analysis of the biblical qualifications for deacons as given in Acts 6:3 (the “macroscopic” view), followed by a similar analysis of I Timothy 3:8-13 (the “microscopic” view). It is crucial to point out that these are non-optional qualifications, i.e. the “must” of vs. 2 carries over to the “likewise” of vs. 8.

Time is also spent on giving basic directives for cultivating these qualifications. There is usually much profitable discussion at this point in the training program.

Week number 5 is given over to presenting “The Deacon as an Officer: General Considerations.” This begins with an exposition of Acts 6:1-7, operating under the presupposition that this pericope describes the origin of the diaconal office (see my previous article). Here the practical necessity of the diaconal office is laid out, its official and

authoritative character is presented, and its relation to congregational life is described. I cannot overstate the importance of deacons and prospective deacons having a good grasp of this passage. From that you must move to actual contemporary application of this office of “waiting on tables.” In the description given in our training program we conveniently list these as: 1. The table of the genuinely needy among God’s people. 2. The table of the church as an organization. 3. The table of the pastors, i.e. teaching and ruling elders. 4. The table of the Lord, i.e. setting up for the Lord’s Supper.

This introduces prospective deacons to the actual responsibilities expected by us of those in that office. The Christ-like role of official service is put before the men as a summary of the diaconal role.

The final actual training class deals with “The Deacon: Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Yearly.” During this time we offer a potpourri of directions and suggestions for growing in grace as a deacon. Habitual attentiveness to personal communion with God on a daily basis, cultivation of “diaconal mindedness” before God and one’s fellow man, duties during Lord’s day services and other church meetings, requirements for Board of Deacons meeting attendance and involvement, working with the session, conforming to the OPC Form of Government and local church By Laws, and miscellaneous ethical responsibilities are all presented and applied in detail. Prospective deacons must know what they’re in for if they should be called out by the congregation and ordained to the diaconal office. It is far easier to deal with problems in an officer if the man was told in advance what was expected of him.

Following successful completion of this course prospective deacons are, upon the approval of the session, actually presented to the congregation for election to the office of deacon. It is emphatically not our practice to put a number of men before the congregation and ask the members to vote for a certain number to conform to the “quotas” set by the church By Laws. If a man has been “proved” (I Tim. 3:10), i.e. he has shown himself to be faithful in service responsibilities given to him prior to and during his time of diaconal training, and the session and congregation judge him to possess the requisite qualifications for the office he is called out by congregational election to serve as a deacon...for life!

After men are elected by the congregation to serve as officers, they are examined by the session in what in fact becomes another officer preparation meeting. Deacons-elect are expected to be familiar with the Book of Church Order of the OPC, and also with our own local church constitution and by-laws. They are examined by the session in any of the areas reflected in the ordination vows the deacons-elect will be expected to take. Even as prospective church members have the vows reviewed with them by the session before a public profession of faith, so prospective officers must have the ordination vows reviewed prior to the actual laying on of hands. This is always a most salutary exercise for all involved.

Ordination follows in a worship service that is truly a celebration. God has given another officer to represent the hands and feet of Christ in the service of His Church! And you may be assured that whenever God gives laborers He will give labor! When the first corps of deacons was ordained in accordance with the divine prescription, the result was that “the Word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly...” (Acts 6:7). May the same thing be true as you go about praying for, preparing, and properly calling out men to serve the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in the exalted office of deacon.

In the final article we will look at how the deacons in the congregation I pastor actually function. This will take all the theory and put it into practice. I think you will see that the results are wonderful.

Appendix A: Deacon's Training Program

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this program is to give a general overview of the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture and undergirding the work of the diaconate; and to provide an introduction to the qualifications necessary for deacons as well as to the basic principles which will govern their service in the church.

TEXTS:

Required reading will be from the following:

1. Berkhof, Louis, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Eerdmans).
2. Berghoef, Gerard and Lester DeKoster. *The Deacon's Handbook* (Christian's Library Press).
3. Coppes, Leonard J. *Who Will Lead Us?* (Pilgrim Publishing Co.).
4. MacNair, Donald J., *The Growing Local Church* (Baker).
5. MacNair, Donald J., *The Living Church* (GCP).
6. Kuiper, R. B. *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Banner of Truth).
7. *Deacon's Manual* (OPC, Franklin Square, N.Y.)
8. Westminster Confession of Faith (We recommend the edition published by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland).

Books are preferably purchased for personal use and reference.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Classes will meet on the established dates from 7:30-9:30 P.M. Classes meet in the lower auditorium.

CLASS OUTLINE:

WEEKS 1 - 3: AN OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE.

“Deacons must...hold the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience” (I Timothy 3:8,9).

- Week 1: God and Man. Required Reading: WCF, I-VII, IX, Berkhof, pp. 9-89
- Week 2: Christ and His Work. Required Reading: WCF, VIII, X-XXVIII, Berkhof, pp. 93-148
- Week 3: The Church and Last Things. Required Reading: WCF, XIX-XXXIII, Berkhof, pp. 151-198

WEEKS 4 - 6: THE DEACON AND HIS WORK.

“Let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless” (I Timothy 3:10)

- Week 4: The Deacon as a Man. Required Reading: Acts 6:1- 7, I Timothy 3:8-13, MacNair, *GROWING...*, pp. 79- 86, 195, MacNair, *LIVING...*, pp. 155-157
- Week 5: The Deacon as an Officer: General Considerations. Required Reading: Coppes, pp. 105-138, Kuiper, pp. 150-157 (handout)
- Week 6: The Deacon as an Office: Specific Applications. Required Reading: Berghoef and DeKoster, pp. 135- 181, Coppes, pp. 139-154, MacNair, *GROWING...*, pp. 109-125, *Deacon's Manual*
- Week 7: Between Election and Ordination. Required Reading: OPC Standards, Congregation/Corporation Bylaws.

“...in the delineations given of the qualifications that should be sought in those who were appointed to fill the office of presbyter or episcopos in the several churches, nearly the whole have respect to character; so that out of thirteen or

fourteen different qualities mentioned, only one has distinct reference to the gift of teaching; virtually implying that character was the most essential thing, and that if matters were but right there, others would in good measure follow as a matter of course.” Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology*, Old Paths Publications, 223 Princeton Rd., Audubon, NJ 08106 (1992 reprint).

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