

Pointers for Elders and Deacons

Part 1 of an article from *Diakonia* translated from the Dutch, extracted from [Ordnained Servant](#) vol. 2, no. 2 (July 1993)

1. Introduction

Office-bearers come and go; that happens to be the custom of our church-life. As a consequence “green” elders and deacons begin their work in many congregations at the beginning of the new season. As a rule these men approach their task with some trepidation. Questions such as: What is expected of us? How shall we go about it? are on their mind.

For that reason alone it would be good if each consistory would organize an instruction day or at least an evening at the beginning of each new season. On that occasion office-bearers could talk with each other about their work and the best method and approach to it. That way the newcomers would have some idea of what to do and how to go about it. For that matter it would also be instructive for the seasoned elders to re-examine their way of doing things through mutual discussion. In that way Art. 73 of the Church Order, which states that office-bearers “shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office” is honored.

In order to give such an instruction session some direction, it would be advisable to prepare an essay or paper of limited length on some pertinent topic which would be studied by the participants beforehand. The following constitutes such a paper. In view of my limited experience as office-bearer and because of the relative value of various methods, no one should expect final answers to all practical questions. It is my intention to give some pointers, hoping that with the help of these everyone can arrive at a good plan of action as an office-bearer.

When an instruction session is held my paper or essay can be used as follows: The chairman gives a short summary of each section, supplemented if needed, by his own insights and experiences. The summary of each section should be followed by a discussion. In all probability certain sections, particularly those dealing with the principles of being an office-bearer, will raise few questions. Other points, such as the opening of house visits, the subjects to be discussed and perhaps the ward division, will elicit much discussion. It might be good if the chairman tables workout proposals regarding these points so that the meeting can come to well-founded conclusions. It would be useful to review the adopted decisions and methods to see if they are workable, if not during the year, then certainly at the end of the season.

2. An Overview of the Proposed Discussion.

In 1.3 I will deal in greater detail with the common position of both elder and deacon in connection with the form for the ordination of elders and deacons.

In II some aspects of the work of elders are related. That essay corresponds in structure and in subdivision 3 and 6 with what is said about the deacons in III. That parallel is not to be seen as a shortcut, but what is said about the one office also applies to the other.

In III some aspects of the deacons’ work are related. This is intended for discussion on a deacons’ meeting. It is a revision of the article “What do deacons actually have to do?” (Dienst, 27-2, March/April, 1979).

3. The Common Position of both Elder and Deacon

If office-bearers are to view their work correctly, they must above all be aware of their position vis a vis the congregation. We are inclined to think that elders and deacons are elected by the congregation under the guidance of the consistory. That is, of course, correct. However, a crucial factor has been left out, for as the form states, behind the election by the congregation stands God Himself. So in the final analysis the office bearers are called to their task by Him.

When we say that, we must take into account that God concerns Himself with the congregation via Christ, who is the head of the Church. As such He rules over her, but He does not do so directly. That is why the form for ordination says more, for not only are the office-bearers called by God, but they are also appointed by Christ. According to Eph.4:8,11 we may see them as gifts from Christ to his congregation.

The office-bearers may never see themselves as the bosses of the congregation who are only accountable to their colleagues. They should deport themselves humbly, for they are only executors of the Lord's will for His congregation. That is why they may never impose their own will on the congregation. The opposite is true; they have to realize that their work is subject to what God considers beneficial for His children.

That means at the same time that office-bearers are never to be viewed as errand boys, appointed and accountable to the members who elected them. They are in fact in the service of God and of Christ. Aware of that, they can work boldly in the congregation and if necessary oppose those who try to dictate to them. Not the likes nor the dislikes of the congregation but the instruction of their Divine Commissioner is determinative.

The conduct of the office-bearers in the congregation is then determined by two things. They are to be humble, for their significance derives only from the fact that they are God's servants. At the same time they ought to be bold, because their task consists of doing God's will. In all this the office-bearers strive to make the congregation grow towards Christ. It is therefore important for them to test their actions constantly in light of all scriptural teachings.

II. Something about the Work of the Elder.

The task of the elder in general.

We can follow here the form for the ordination of elders. This form is in fact the instruction to the elders and as such gives a broad survey of what their task is.

1.1 The Elder as Shepherd

The form states that elders (together with the minister) are shepherds, who in the name of the Good Shepherd feed the flock. The form borrowed that comparison from the New Testament, for both the apostle Paul (Acts 20:28-35) and Peter (I Peter 5:1-3) make use of that image. In doing so they are in line with the Old Testament, where not only God Himself but also the leaders appointed by Him are called shepherds (See Ezk. 34:1-23). Now a true shepherd cares for his sheep. He leads them to green pastures, brings back the strays, binds up the wounded and heals the sick (cf. Ezk. 34:14,16). The implication of this for the leaders of God's people is clear: as shepherds under God they must devote themselves to the faithful entrusted in their care. For elders this means very concretely (according to the form) that they must make sure that the members of the church confess the true biblical doctrine and live accordingly. In order to fulfill that task the elders have to visit church members in their homes. During such visits they should comfort, instruct and/or correct the people with the help of God's own Word.

That is a difficult task. In ordinary life we associate for the most part with people that are compatible with us. That can be because they are sympathetic, because they have the same

interests, or because they occupy a similar social position, etc. As an elder, however, you will have to associate with all kinds of people, regardless of your attitude towards them. Put more strongly, you as a shepherd must care for them. That is why you may not let them go even if their attitude is negative towards you and your Divine Commissioner.

That is difficult, but at the same time beautiful. Elders in their contact with church members may not confine themselves to the usual polite chit-chat. They have to pass on God's promises and, for that matter, His commandments and His threats. With them they must support or guide church members in their choice for or against God. No effort should be too much. Shepherds devote themselves with all their power to the sheep entrusted in their care.

1.2 The Remaining Work of the Elder.

The form for ordination mentions still more when it comes to the task of the elders.

a) Their correction of church members can lead to the application of discipline.

b) Furthermore, they will have to take care that everything in the church happens in an orderly fashion. From this phrase one may conclude that the consistory may not act arbitrarily, but only with forethought in order that the church members always know where they are at. In the first place we can think here of the calling of office-bearers, but there are many other matters which also demand a systematic approach, which in turn promotes mutual harmony.

c) Finally, the elders must assist the minister. In view of that they must see to it that he doesn't go wrong in his opinions and behavior. They must prevent the minister from adversely influencing the congregation. According to the form, this means that they are to pay attention to his visits and preaching, and to see that they indeed edify the congregation. This underlines the importance of a regular discussion of his preaching during consistory meetings. Such a point should be on the agenda.

Perhaps the minister, fearing criticism, hesitates to put it on the agenda. That being the case he will have to learn to listen and to deal positively with critical remarks. That is beneficial for both him and the congregation. He should therefore be prepared to urge the office-bearers to make their critical remarks and their praise (for a minister needs that also), truthfully known.

To give such a discussion some direction, we do well to make a distinction between form and content.

With reference to the matter of *form*, the following could be discussed: - How is the sermon structured? (Does it develop logically?) Is sufficient or insufficient use made of repetition? What about linguistic usage and how is the sermon delivered? (Does he speak too loud, too soft, or is he boring? Are his gestures functional?).

With reference to the matter of *content*, the following should be discussed: - How does the minister deal with the text? (Does he remain faithful to the whole of the Bible and the confessions? Does he explain enough? Does he remain superficial or is he too profound) and

How does the minister approach the congregation with the text? (Does he deal with the concerns of the congregation or does he leave the situation for what it is and avail himself only of the usual clichéd applications? Does he make an effort to let the chosen text speak in light of the situation today?). To be sure, it is extremely difficult to criticize in such a way that it becomes useful for the minister in the preparation of his sermons. Don't expect the minister to act upon all sensible criticism either, for as it is, each of us has his own character and capabilities. The intent of all criticism then is to help the minister reach the maximal development within his own limits, for the sake of the growth of the congregation toward Christ.

1.3 The Elder over against Himself

The form of ordination mentions one more task for the elder, not over against the congregation, nor over against the minister, but over against himself. It is stated that in order for the elders to be able to fulfill their task they must study the Bible diligently and train themselves in serving God. In agreement with that the final task, to be examples to the flock, is impressed upon them.

In it the necessity for elders to live close to God is indicated. There must not be a conflict between an elder's official function and his private life. This is something which can happen quite easily. You might do what you can to keep the flock within the fold, meanwhile your own faith is found wanting. The busier you are, the greater that danger. For that reason the apostle Paul remarks in I Cor. 9: 27, "I beat my own body and make it my slave so that after I have preached, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." Office-bearers, therefore, must make sure that their own faith keeps pace with what they tell the church members. They must pay attention to their own bond with God, and for that reason must busy themselves with God's Word. Then there will be harmony between their personal opinions and behavior and what they have to say and do as office bearers.

1.4 The Elder and the Minister

Until recently the minister alone was denoted among us as the shepherd. When a church became vacant, it was called shepherdless. This terminology arises from an unscriptural over-estimation of the minister's task. Not only he but all elders are shepherds. The new form for the ordination makes this clear.

At the same time it means that an elder absolutely cannot unload the visiting on the minister. Of course, a minister has been freed from non-ecclesiastical work, so that he can devote himself to the congregation all day long. That is primarily because of his teaching function, which requires much study and thus much time. You may expect too that pastoral work, which requires extra time, effort and skill, will be pre-eminently his domain. For the rest the minister and the elders are equal. Both are to involve themselves intensely with the sheep.

2. Questions to Which the Elder Should Try to Get Answers.

In what follows I will leave what has been said under 1.2 and 1.3. It is not so much my intention to deal with the enforcement of discipline, nor with the task of the elder over against the minister and himself. Above all I wish to give pointers for the ordinary work in the congregation. Therefore, I will deal in detail with his task as shepherd. It has already been determined in 1.1 that he has to comfort, instruct and/or correct the congregation. If he is to do that effectively, he must be well-informed about someone's relationships. That will bring about all sorts of questions.

I will mention a few. In parenthesis I have added some practical remarks, which are intended to help the elder to speak about cases in question (much of what follows can be discussed with children from age ten and up, it is good therefore, that they are present at the beginning of a house-visit). The questions an elder must ask themselves are related to:

2.1 The External Circumstances

- How long has someone lived here and where did he originally come from? (This can be of importance for getting to know the person); What type of a job does he have (or has he had) and how can he be a Christian in it? (because of the time and energy jobs demand they often mark a person. In addition the cares and the joys one experiences while working have everything to do with being a Christian. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance to talk about it as an elder.)

- What is the makeup of the family and how do the children view the church? (It is also important to ask if there are children who have left home. In that case they are outside of the direct concern of the visiting elder, however, it stands to reason that their welfare plays an important, if not dominant role, in the parents' life); What kind of education are the children who are still at home receiving; are they going steady? (information about that can lead to a separate discussion with the children).
- What about a special ecclesiastical task? (e.g. office-bearers, organist, caretaker, committee member; such a task often demands a great deal of the person concerned and his family, while the appreciation for the work done is often not forthcoming. Interest shown in the work done by the visiting elder contributes to a greater pleasure in that work.)
- Are there certain needs present? (For a detailed summary of possible needs I refer to section III-2. It is primarily the task of the deacons to care for those who are single, old, sick, or find themselves in financial distress. But elders too should keep an eye open for those whose external circumstances are difficult. In the first place because of the interest one has in the church member in question, but also to be of service as long as it is remembered that it is the deacons' task to do so in depth).

2.2 Living with the Bible.

- Is the Bible read at the table according to a system? (Passages arbitrarily chosen for reading leave much of the Bible a closed book; if one is busy with the O.T. it is recommended that it be alternated daily with the N.T. Singles too, should make Bible reading a regular habit.)
- Are certain parts skipped? (The reading of Gen. 38 and Song of Songs could be a good starting point for sex instruction and may promote a relaxed attitude towards sexuality).
- Do the parents and older children read the Bible privately with or without study-aids; do the parents encourage their children to do so? (Most people have to force themselves more or less to study the Bible, but for the sake of our personal bond with God we cannot do without it).
- What is done for the younger children? (In this connection an appropriate children's Bible can be of great help.)

2.3 Prayer

- Do the parents pray aloud at the table; is regular attention paid to family circumstances, everyone's daily work, the church and her members, those who because of their faith are in distress, the government etc.; are the children allowed to lead in prayer as well? (This is of great importance in training children to pray, and it strengthens the common bond with God).
- Besides meal time prayers, does one pray extensively at other set times? (It is much better to do so at a set time rather than deciding every time when to pray. To such an extensive prayer belong praise and thanks to God; the recognition of one's sin and the request for forgiveness, the petition for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for all that you need to do your work and prayer for others. To keep your attention focused it is perhaps advisable to do as the people did in Bible times, namely to whisper or to speak the words aloud.)
- Do the parents discuss with their children whether or what they pray? (It does happen that adolescents still use their children's prayer or even omit their personal prayer. This is often so because they do not notice that God answers prayers and how. For that reason there is much work here for the parents as well.)
- How do the parents deal with the younger children on this point? (It seems sensible to me that parents say or sing an evening prayer for the one and two year olds; with children of three years it can be expected that they will begin to participate in the prayer, and occasionally they could be prompted to pray for certain people and matters.)

2.4 Church Attendance

- Do we attend church twice if possible, or do we skip once in a while e.g. to receive visitors or to go visiting? (Because a church service is a dialogue between the two parties in the covenant, God and His people, we cannot remain uncommitted. The more since according to Heb. 10 non-attendance and contempt for Christ's redemption work naturally follows, one from the other. In Lord's Day 38 we recognize that faithful attendance is a command of God.)
- Do we attend the church we belong to? (Regular weekend recreation is harmful for the bond with our own local church and for involvement in church life. Simply attending church twice somewhere is not in keeping with the command for faithful attendance. In our going to church we strengthen the bond with the community in which we live.)
- Are we actively taking part in the worship service, by singing and praying along and by listening intently to the sermon. Are we open to the preaching in order to be changed or strengthened by the Word of God? (In listening your attention may come to a halt because you find the form of the sermon uncomfortable or you object to the application.)
- Do we think and speak about the sermon; do we restrict ourselves to the superficial side of the sermon, or does the Word of God receive full attention? (You can neutralize the beneficial effect of the sermon for yourself and/or others by keeping silent or by tearing the sermon apart.)

2.5 The Attitude towards the Office-bearers.

- Do we see the office-bearers in the right light? (It can happen that in them we only see weak fellow church members. With all their limitations they must be recognized as people whom Christ uses and through whom He concerns Himself with the congregation).
- Do we pray (at the table) for the office-bearers and their work; do we prepare ourselves in prayer for the church services and house visits? (Important for the children as well, for he who prays, promotes in himself, and in others, a correct attitude towards office-bearers, church services and house visits).

2.6 The Place in the Community.

- Do we go out of our way to do something for fellow church members; in other words, do we visit them, and if necessary, do we do things for them (shopping, little jobs, babysitting); do we pray for them? (Complaints about lack of contact within the congregation are often a sign that we don't do anything ourselves. Do not ask: "What are others doing for me", but "What am I doing for others?" Of course you cannot be everybody's friend, but you should feel responsible for those to whom you are especially related, e.g. those of the same age, those that live close by or those you especially can help. You will have to emphasize constantly that together with the other members you belong to Christ and commonly share in His gifts. This aspect must also have the attention of the deacons).
- Do we attend ecclesiastical meetings, such as congregational meetings, mission evening, annual meeting, etc. (It is contradictory if we pray, for instance, for the local church or mission work but fail to attend the meetings where information about these activities is given. In addition, meetings such as these strengthen mutual bonds).

2.7 The Giving and Receiving of Instruction.

- Do the parents free themselves or make any effort to talk with the children about the service of God today? (This for example in connection with a certain incident, a book, a TV program, a particular question asked by someone, etc. It is not enough for parents to command and forbid, or just to say "because it is that way", or "because I say so". You will have to give children and especially young people arguments based on the Bible. It should be noted here

that the most important part of upbringing takes place at home, not in school or in catechism classes).

- Do the parents pay attention to the education their children receive in school, notably the ideological subjects and the literary works they read and have to read? (In case of non-reformed education corrections may be necessary. Even if the education is reformed, the interest of the parents is indispensable).
- Are young people stimulated by their parents and/or peers to be active members of a study society; do the parents show interest in what the young people do there? (Parental involvement promotes the interest of the young people).
- Concerning those twenty years old and up: Are they members of a Bible study society and do they study beforehand? (Many remain on the side lines saying “I am not a society-person”. In the meantime it is a fact that a systematic, private Bible study often fails. By going prepared to a study meeting you force yourself to be busy with the Bible on a regular basis. In addition you receive the opportunity to learn from others and/or to serve others with your insights).

2.8 The Further Life of a Christian

- Do we make an effort to read Reformed magazines and Reformed books about parts of the Bible and Biblical doctrine; do the parents stimulate their children to do so? (It is remarkable that many church members have a color television and/or an extensive collection of modern novels, while they have hardly any books about the Bible and Biblical doctrine. What then is the value of recognizing the Bible as God’s Word?)
- Are we conscious of the fact that in the matter of money we are stewards of God’s possessions; do we donate a proper percentage to the church, mission and various (charitable) organizations in and outside the church community? (This again is an area which pre-eminently falls within the domain of the deacons. In case the deacons have not adopted the new procedure elders can busy themselves with these matters as well. This also applies if the member in question, despite the efforts of the committee of administration, continues to donate little or nothing to the church).
- Do the parents speak openly about sexual matters with their children? (Today young children have to be informed plainly about such matters; it is also necessary to give concrete directions for sexual behavior based on Biblical norms).
- Have young parents any problems with starting a family? (Many have difficulty in dealing with that matter and would like to talk to someone they trust. Others, who are not experiencing any problems in that respect, are rather selfish in their approach to the subject and are, therefore, in need of counseling.) How do the unmarried experience their status? (Because of their personal difficulty with it and their possible mistaken view regarding the single life, many of them would experience relief in a discussion of their situation.)
- What is the relationship of young people going steady? (Do they recognize the fact that physically they must exercise restraint? Do they talk enough with each other about matters of substance and principle? In a society dominated by sex the danger is great that the physical side of a relationship begins to dominate, while the spiritual dimension of the relationship remains superficial.)
- Does one make an effort to be known in the neighborhood or at work as a Christian?

(Most of us tend to hide those aspects of our Christianity which an outsider finds unacceptable. Furthermore many of us do not make use of opportunities to witness because of uncertainty or even fear. Everyone of us must therefore learn to witness unashamedly, when the right moment presents itself. The person who does that will notice that he is strengthened in his choice for God.)

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