

Reforming the Diaconate

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Part 1: Defining the Diaconal Task

In the previous issue of *Ordained Servant* Dr. C. Van Dam of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches presented a rich overview of the diaconal task, focusing on the deacon's task of "maintaining and providing for the fellowship (i.e. the congregation) in the joy of the Lord." In this article and the two to follow I would like to focus in on the more "nuts and bolts" aspects of bringing our Boards of Deacons into line with the practical dimensions of Holy Scripture.

It is tragic indeed that in many of our congregations a Board of Deacons is either non-existent or virtually non-functioning; and in many of the situations in which a Board of Deacons meets regularly it does so with little awareness of its Biblical and church constitutional responsibilities. This was very much the case over a decade ago in the congregation I presently pastor. For years the Session and Board of Deacons has worked carefully to reform both of these groups of officers, and it is from that reforming process that I would like to draw for these articles. My hope is that lessons from our experience will be helpful for you in your particular situation. For ease in presentation, and for maximum helpfulness I will offer these lessons under a series of practical exhortations:

I. Go Back to the Directions!

In my office as a teaching elder I took several months to preach a series of messages on "The Well-Marked Church", based on Psalm 48:13. That series dealt with the meaning of church membership as well as the qualifications, calling, and functioning of church officers. That gave the entire congregation the opportunity to receive a full-orbed presentation of, among other things, the work of deacons in the church. The apostle Paul included such material as part of that which was necessary "that you may know how it is necessary for you to conduct yourself in...the church of the living God, which is the pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15). Ministers should have no hesitation in doing the same in their preaching. Reformation always comes when driven by the preaching of the Word of God.

During that series and in the discussions among the officers which followed we settled on several basic convictions regarding the diaconate: 1. It is our view that Acts 6:1-7 describes the inauguration of the diaconal office.^[1] The context of this passage is remarkably like that in which the eldership was inaugurated in the Old Testament (compare Acts 6:2 with Exodus 18:17ff.). The frequent use of "diakonia" (vss. 1, 2, 4) to describe the function in view cannot help but draw one to the conclusion that the term describing the seven officers is appropriately "deacon." Further, if this passage is not a description of the origin of the diaconal office, one wonders both why there is a reference to ordination and authority in vss. 3 and 6, and where one would find the origin of the office so obviously assumed in I Timothy 3:8-13.

2. It is also our view^[2] that "ministry of mercy" is only a specimen of the work of the diaconate as put forward in Acts 6:1-7. This, quite frankly, is a different emphasis than that of the OPC Form of Government (Chapter IX) which makes "relief of the needy" the prominent work of the deacons, while "other forms of service may also be committed to the deacons" (section 4). The apostles had directed "relief work" prior to this, and actually continued to be

involved with “ministry of mercy” even after the diaconate was instituted (II Corinthians 8,9). The thrust of Acts 6:2-4, however, is that the officers to be called out here would function in such a way that the apostles might be given over to prayer and the ministry of the word. The elders, and particularly the teaching elder, are now given that task (I Timothy 5:17). Deacons, in our view, continue their role of serving the congregation in any and every way that frees the elders to most fully do the work of praying, ruling, and teaching according to the Word of God.

3. The specific functions of the office are somewhat fluid, and always functional. What official functions may deacons perform which will relieve the elders of responsibilities other than those most immediately connected with their primary duties? Elders oversee everything in the church...but elders cannot do everything. Deacons are placed over (cf. Acts 6:3) those spheres of responsibility which demand official (i.e. deacons are officers: they are ordained and installed) involvement. We began by adding a category simply called “temporalities” to the regular “ministry of mercy” previously carried out by the deacons. Over the past several years we have built on these basic convictions. You also must formulate your convictions from the Scriptures...not from tradition.

II. Get to Work!

Preaching must be applied in corporate church life, or congregation members will never believe it is to be applied in their individual lives. A wholesale revision of our church By Laws followed the sermon series and discussion among the officers. We sought to reflect our Biblical convictions on paper, had informal “hearings” with the congregation to discuss the proposed changes, and finally proposed a new Constitution and By Laws which were overwhelmingly adopted by the congregation. Do your local church documents reflect your biblically forged convictions? An exercise like the one our officers went through (which took almost a year and a half!) would be eminently worthwhile for officers and congregations still functioning with church documents that may be formed far more by thoughtless pragmatism than Biblically formulated principles.

You must get to work with a reforming view of the diaconate. The work which was formerly given to a “Board of Trustees” was given to our Board of Deacons. The Session communicated with the Board of Deacons on a monthly basis regarding needs and problems which the deacons could help the elders with. Our twice yearly joint meetings were filled with plans that served both to free the Session members to devote themselves to their work, and also to broaden the diaconal role making it far more visible and influential in church life. The fruit of this has been an expansion of our overall ministry which has made us better understand and appreciate what happened after the first Board of Deacons was constituted and set to work: “And the Word of God spread, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly...” The point is: You must apply the principles of the Word of God!

We also reformed our procedure for training prospective deacons. We will cover that in the next article, and then follow it up with a look at our present practices...and some warnings.

Endnotes

[1] This is confirmed by such Reformed theologians as John Owen (“...the reason of the institution of this office was, in general, to free pastors of the churches who labor in the word and doctrine from avocations by outward things such as wherein the church is concerned...”, [WORKS, Vol. XVI, p.147].) and James Henley Thornwell (“It must be perfectly obvious to every candid mind that the entire secular business of the Church was entrusted to the Deacons.” [Collected Writings, Vol. IV, p. 201].

[2] I am thankful for the increasing emphasis on the work of the diaconate among evangelical and Reformed people today. I am not convinced, however, that the “social service” orientation of most of these modern emphases actually lines up with the emphasis of the Scriptures. A brief examination of Acts 6:1ff. should confirm my point.

I presuppose at the outset that Acts 6:1-6 does present the origin of the diaconate as a distinct and uniquely New Testament office. The persistent use of the Greek term “deaconing” (serving) in verses 1,2 and by implication in verse 3, as well as the obvious inauguration of this work by the solemn act of ordination (vss. 5,6) provide, to my mind, sufficient proof that this is the case. Remember, too, that the qualifications for those set apart as “deacons” given in I Timothy 3:8-13 are like garments hung in mid-air if there has not been some previous introduction of a diaconal office. Where else would this be but in Acts 6?

The seven called out to serve as the initial deacons of the Christian church have a specific responsibility entrusted to them. They are “appointed over” or “given charge over” the work of making impartial provision for the basic needs of the widows (demonstrating the possession of official authority in a particular sphere). This social obligation has its roots in Old Covenant community standards (Ex. 22:22, Deut. 24:19-22; 26:12-15, etc.). It is this “social work” aspect of the diaconate which has received the emphasis today. Without for a moment questioning that they had responsibility for the poor of the congregation, I would question whether this was the heart-throb of their official role. “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables” (vs.2) was the Apostles’ reason for instituting this new office. Not “social ministry”, but ministry of the word of God (now carried on by teaching and ruling elders) was the paramount concern in adding to the official laborers of the Church (Exodus 18 provides a fascinating parallel). The diaconal commission, while clearly linked with ministry to the poor and needy, was primarily to relieve those entrusted with the ministry of the Word of God from necessary responsibilities which detracted from that most important work of the Church.

Such a perspective on the nature of the diaconate has, I believe, multiple practical implications for our church life. Foundationally, it should make us re-orient many of our popularly acquired views of the work of the diaconate. Granting that the Session of a local church has final responsibility for all of the church’s affairs (OPC FOG, XIII:7), why do we not regularly ask the question, “How are the Deacons functioning to relieve the church Elders of service works which detract from their time spent in prayer and in ministry of God’s Word?” Along with caring for the truly needy of our ranks, could not the Deacons also “take charge of” (cf. Acts 6:3) the church budget and matters connected with the church building? Many will answer, “Our Trustees do all of that!” But who are our Trustees? Why should not your Deacons serve in this capacity? Is this not a legitimate contemporary way of using that office? Perhaps this is why our own Form of Government clearly provides, “Other forms of service for the church may also be committed to the deacons” (XI:4).

Sadly, both teaching and ruling elders today are saddled with too many things which combine to detract from their primary work. Prayer time at Session meetings (and in the pastor’s study) is squeezed out, time for preparation for teaching and preaching is swallowed up, and needed evenings of “house to house” ministry of the Word (Acts 20:20) are eliminated because of social projects, committee meetings, church activities, assistance in job hunting, arranging for moving crews, and countless other things worthwhile in themselves but not the primary task of Elders. And then we wonder why our churches seem so limp in comparison with what we read in the pages of the New Testament. What are we doing with our Deacons? Perhaps we should all take another look at Acts 6 and the diaconate.

“But we must be careful,” someone will say. “If you press this view we will neglect the care of the poor and needy.” Indeed, we must be careful. It is easier to make detached decisions about budgetary items than to give time and sympathetic assistance to our needy. I would submit, however, that if our Elders were freed for their primary work of prayer and the ministry of the Word, and if they were using their new found time to best advantage we would have more poor and needy in our midst for our Deacons to really assist! In fact, we would have more people, period! The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16), and the freer course the Gospel has in the work of our churches, the more our churches will have the poor as well as the rich, the needy as well as those who can help supply that need. In fact, if we really make a full application of our perspective on Acts 6:1ff., I believe we will greatly expand the kind of ministry presented in II Corinthians 8, 9 as typical of the work of our deacons. We will also do it in such a way that the church-centered thrust of our diaconal work is enhanced.

But more about that in the next installment.

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