

Some Old Testament Roots and Their Continuing Significance

by Dr. C. Van Dam

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Questions about the task of the deacons continue to persist. What precisely does this office entail? Is it still as relevant today as it was in former times? Since you have asked me to speak on the Old Testament background of the diaconal task, we will consider these basic questions from the perspective of the Old Testament in the first place. Next

we will turn briefly to the New Testament and then look at some of the implications of all this for us today. Hopefully this introduction will provide a basis for discussion so that together we get further in thinking through the task of deacons, as well as our responsibilities as members of the congregation.

Attitude to the Poor and Needy

The Old Testament is full of concern for the poor, the oppressed, the widows and orphans, and others with special needs. Frequently the Lord impressed on Israel their obligations and duties over against these needy in their midst. He would not let Israel forget! The Lord also gave detailed social and economic legislation so that the poor and other needy people would be helped in concrete and effective ways. Indeed, the Lord promised that if Israel truly lived up to his good law, then the poor would cease to exist in Israel (Deut. 15:4ff.). However, due to disobedience, this could never be realized (Deut. 15:11).

Why did the Lord repeatedly express such great concern for the plight of the needy in Israel and warn Israel in no uncertain terms of his great wrath and vengeance to those who afflicted the needy and who did not help them (e.g. Ex. 22:22-24)? At the basis of the Lord's special interest and care for the needy and oppressed is the fact that he, the Lord, had once led Israel out of the bondage and oppression of Egypt and had claimed them as his own precious possession, his covenant people. And the Lord who saved them from that oppression and bondage no longer wanted to see any of his people bound in any way! Therefore God motivated his laws regarding the poor and needy by saying: "you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today" (Deut. 15:15; 16:12; 24:12,22; also see Lev. 25:38, 42, 55 for a similar justification for helping the poor). God had set them free, and they must stay free of all oppression be it the oppression and bondage of poverty, or of fear, or of loneliness. His people are a royal people, claimed by the Lord of heaven and earth, and they must therefore not suffer any kind of want! He, the Lord, will provide for them (Lev. 26:1-13), but his provision included that his people remember their past deliverance, and appreciate their freedom which they did not deserve but is of grace alone, and therefore obey his good law in joy and thankfulness (Lev. 26:1-13; Deut. 24:19-22; 28:1-14). Therefore, if an Israelite sold himself to pay debts, he was not to be treated harshly as a slave, but as a hired servant who would be released in the year of release (Deut. 15:12-18) or the year of jubilee (Lev. 25:39-43). And he was not to leave empty-handed (Deut. 15:13)! God did not want any of his people yoked to bondage! Everything must serve their freedom and joy, including the material things of life.

We will get a deeper appreciation of this freedom of the people of God and the proper use of possessions if we look briefly at the main implications of the Eighth Word of the covenant. Understanding this commandment is important for dealing with the care of the poor and maintaining oneself in the freedom of God's salvation.

God Shows the Way The Eighth Word of the Covenant

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall not steal.” In this basic covenant word, the Lord lays the groundwork and principles for freedom and the use of possessions in Israel, principles which the Lord later elaborated on.

In order to understand some of the implications of this word of the covenant, we can ask ourselves: “What was the worst sin imaginable against this command?” That was an Israelite stealing or kidnapping a fellow Israelite for gain (i.e. for sale abroad as a slave). That this was not unknown in Israel is clear from other passages that refer to this crime, for example, Exodus 21:16: “Whoever steals a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” (See also Deut. 24:7). Obviously what made this crime so terrible was that here one stole from the Lord God his most precious possession (Deut. 7:6; 32:6)! The fact that such a kidnapped person would for obvious reasons almost always be sold abroad and separated from the covenant community meant that he would be effectively separated from the Lord and his people. And so the Lord lost a most precious possession of his and the Israelite involved lost his place and freedom within the covenant community of God. But God’s people must not be bound in any way! Each Israelite’s place and freedom must be guaranteed within the covenant community! Therefore do not steal any of God’s people! That is the clear message of the eighth commandment.

However, for the purpose of this introduction, something else should be added. One could also paraphrase the meaning of the eighth word of the covenant this way: Do not rob yourself from the Lord and from the freedom in which God has placed you by being bound to your possessions and being a slave to them and therefore seeking out whatever means possible to increase them. That, too, brings terrible bondage; it will also bring hardship to widows, and the poor will be oppressed. (Think of the time of Micah and Isaiah.)

This command reminds us that man is but a steward of the material possessions he has. He owns nothing in any absolute sense. It all belongs to God, and he has given it to his people of grace alone without their earning it. How clearly the Lord taught this to his people by leading them into a land which was ready and prepared for them. They could enter Canaan and simply receive it from God’s hand and take the fields, houses, vineyards (see Deut. 6:10,11; Josh. 24:13). Now the danger is always great that God’s people forget that they have earned nothing, but have received all the material things of grace alone, and that they are but stewards (Lev. 25, 23) whose aim in working is not to gather riches and ensure one’s food and drink, but whose aim in life must be the seeking of God’s kingdom and the laboring for the Lord and his precious possession; namely, his people, that they remain in the joy of their Lord, free from all bondage (see Matt. 6:31-33). The Heidelberg Catechism is to the point when it says concerning the eighth command: Q. What does God require of you in this commandment? A. That I further my neighbor’s profit wherever I can or may... and labor faithfully that I may be able to relieve the needy.) So the Lord in the Old Testament gave detailed legislation precisely regarding the material things of life. For God did not want to be robbed of his most precious possession by bondage to Mammon, but he wanted to keep them in the freedom in which he had set them free! (See Lev. 25:39-46.)

Provision for All

The detailed social and economic legislation in Israel, therefore, underlined and stressed in the first place that the Lord provides for his people’s needs and freedom! (Think, for example, of the Sabbatical years when no crops were to be grown and the Israelites had to leave the land fallow; or of the jubilee year when again the land was left fallow and when also property was returned to its original owners and the poor who had lost their freedom were released [Lev. 25:28,54].) All the resources God had given were to be used to keep all His people free, unburdened by poverty and want. God taught Israel as it were to put a distance

between themselves and their possessions.

There was another basic reason why God commanded the care for the poor and needy and others who were disadvantaged. This second reason is that everyone in Israel was to be able to do their office and calling in the fullness of life. By office I mean the God-given responsibility that God has given to each of his people (for example, the office of father and mother). The care for all those with special needs would enable everyone in Israel, the covenant people, to do what was expected of them and so also share in the joy of God's people.

When thinking through God's laws for the care of the poor and needy and their implications, two further points could be made. In the first place, the laws governing Israel's attitude to the poor amounted, so to speak, to a list of God-given rights for those who would benefit from these laws (cf. Is. 10:2). For example, the poor had a right to be paid their wages the same day they worked for them (Deut. 24:14f.); not to be charged interest on loans (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36; Deut. 15:7); not to be sold food at a profit (Lev. 25:37). The poor could present less costly sacrifices (Lev. 14:21f.; 27:8). Why all these special laws? So that the poor would at least have a chance to perform their offices, as for instance fathers and providers, or whatever they needed the money for. Similarly, so that the poor would have food, they had a right to the gleanings of the field, orchard and vineyard, including the corners of the field, forgotten sheaves or whatever grew on its own in the Sabbatical year (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; 25:5ff.; Deut. 24:19; Ex. 23:11). Also the tithe of the fields was to be used for the poor and the fatherless, etc., every third year rather than being sent to the sanctuary (Deut. 14:29; 26; also Neh. 8:10ff. and Esther 9:22). Furthermore, the poor had the right to a normal night's rest. Therefore no cloak given in pledge was to be kept overnight (Deut. 24:12). The poor also had the right to be encouraged and share in the joy of the covenant community. Thus the underprivileged were specifically invited to join in the festivities of the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 11:11,14). No one was to feel depressed or neglected outside the fellowship. All could share in the joy. And so, the poor were really to be part of it. As much as possible they were to be able to function like any other Israelite so they could fulfill their responsibilities and calling.

A second point that can be made is that not only the poor, but all Israelites, individually and collectively, would be fulfilling their calling by helping the poor. For in this way of obedience to God's demands regarding the poor, Israel showed herself as God's holy people. They showed themselves as God's people who showed God's image and did his will, for God's concern for the poor was well-known to Israel (e.g., Deut. 10:18, Prov. 14:31; Ps. 146, etc.). They showed themselves a holy people who by their care for the poor, stood apart and were separated from other nations. In the laws of other nations there is not such an elaborate concern for the poor. Furthermore, unlike other nations where any concern for the poor is the task of the rulers or the temple, in Israel, the nation as a whole and as individuals are directly addressed by God to take care of the poor! It is everyone's responsibility! The King's (Prov. 31:5, 8-9; Ps. 72) but also the people's! Now it is remarkable that there are no specific penalties for disobedience. That is, no human authority was according to the law specifically instructed about punishing neglect here. Why? It may well be intended to emphasize that obedience to this law, was to be a fruit of thankfulness and not the result of coercion. Think of the Lord's primary motive. Remember, you were once in bondage. Therefore, do not let others be so burdened! Now God made it clear that he would avenge those who trample the rights of the poor (Prov. 22:22-23; Ex. 22:23-24). The oppressed therefore knew that they could always turn to the Lord if they were wronged or neglected by men (e.g., Ps. 7:9; 26:1; 35:24; 43:1; 4:2; etc.).

Summary and Consequences

The Lord does not want any of his people bound or oppressed in any way! He does not want any to be handicapped in fulfilling his office and calling! When these two conditions are met,

there can be joy in the covenant community. I want to emphasize (as can be deduced from the examples) that although the poor and the orphans and widows appeared more often than not to have financial needs (the Lord reckoned with this; for example, Deut. 24:19-21; 14:29), yet this did not necessarily always have to be their first or most important need. The widows and orphans could be socially neglected and/or despised. They may need special protection. The Lord therefore says in Exodus 22:22ff.: “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry” The word “afflict” indicates “to humiliate” and includes not only unjust oppression, but every kind of cold and contemptuous treatment.

Also judicially they are not to be mistreated (Deut. 24:17, see Jer. 7:6). The Lord is their protector (Ps. 68:5; 146:9)! It is therefore the holy calling of the people of the Lord likewise to protect and see to their needs, that the widows and orphans may share in the joy of the Lord and may know that their place and freedom is secure within the covenant community. In this way they also can fulfill their calling and responsibility.

We have also mentioned that they were to share in the joy in the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths (Deut. 16:11,14). Again, money did not answer this particular need.

All were to share in the joy of redemption! Thus all were to be free from oppression and all were to be full, participating members of the covenant community who exercised their calling. Indeed, anyone who was prevented from sharing in this joy, and was in one way or another oppressed or wronged in the covenant community, or whoever therefore did not see his place free and secure was called “poor and needy.” (See, for example, Ps.40:17; Ps. 86:1; 109:22). So the Hebrew words for “poor”, while they can mean economic poverty are also terms colored by the other afflictions and forms of bondage that suffering children of God can experience within the covenant community. Over against all these poor and needy, of whatever origin their poverty, bondage, needs, and unhappiness was, the people of God as a whole had the holy calling to see to it that they shared in the joy of the covenant people of God. Yes, all had to share in that. As far as the covenant joy is concerned, this was to be shared even with the strangers in the midst of Israel.[\[1\]](#)

The Strangers

Because this sharing with strangers may have some bearing on the task of the diaconate today, let us briefly consider the position of strangers within the context of our topic. In Leviticus 19:34 we read: “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God”. The stranger, therefore, received virtually the same treatment as the Israelite poor. He was not to be oppressed (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33ff.). He is ranked with the fatherless and widows, and God is also his protector and defense (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 94:6; 146:9), although as a stranger he is not set free in the year of jubilee (Lev. 25:45ff.). (He is subordinate to Israel and in their service.) He can, however, share in the joyous eating from the festive tables of the tithes of the first fruits (Deut. 14:28 ff.) and the feasts of Weeks and Booths (Deut. 16:11,14; 26:11).

Although the sojourners were not really foreigners, they were distinct from Israel. But the Lord saw to it that Israel’s non-covenant neighbors could share in many of the benefits of the covenant and profit in a real way also from the service of covenant love and the economy of mercy which the Lord had instituted in Israel.

Key Principles

To round off the Old Testament section and to bring to mind the key principles found, we could sum them up as follows. 1. There are two main motivations for the care of the poor: a) the Lord who had set His people free wanted this nation, His most precious possession, to

remain in the joy of their deliverance and free from all want and oppression, be it financial or otherwise. b) Everyone was to be able to execute his office and calling. Poverty cannot form impediments to that in the covenant community. 2. The poor and needy are all those who because of special needs cannot share in the joy of the covenant and cannot fulfill their task and responsibility in the covenant community. We must therefore never see the needs of the poor in too restricted a sense (for example, only financial). All the different needs of “the poor and needy” must be met by the covenant people as a whole. 3. The Lord never waited for extreme needs to develop before taking action. The detailed legislation shows how in many and various ways the poor and needy were constantly to be remembered and provided for. The extreme needs and hardships that did develop were due to disobedience to God’s law. 4. Man is but a steward of his material possessions, and must never be in bondage to them, but remain truly free as God’s possession and use his material possessions for the well-being and the freedom of the children of God. Israel’s wealth and possessions were entrusted to them for the benefit of all. 5. The Lord saw to it that Israel’s non-covenant neighbors shared in many of the material and nonmaterial benefits of the covenant.

The New Testament Developments

With this Old Testament background we can start to appreciate something of the situation in the early Christian church which was firmly rooted in the basic principles that have just been mentioned.

Joy and Freedom

The church was happy, and small wonder, for the deliverance had come in Christ! They who had received the Spirit knew themselves as those who had been set free from the bondage of sin and Satan and death in the great year of release and jubilee! (See Luke 4:18-21.) The Christ had come in the covenant service of love for the freedom of the children of God!

There was therefore joy in Jerusalem, and the church saw to it that this joy would stay! They loved each other and with the love of Christ made sure that no one was lacking anything (Acts 2:44ff.). Furthermore, they had meals together and “partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). So the joy and the gratitude for the salvation in Christ was expressed and strengthened. In the tradition of the Old Testament, festive meals with the brothers and sisters, including the needy, were held (See Deut. 14: 26,27,29). They took care of each other in loving service for the joy and the freedom of the children of God. No poverty or affliction must bind anyone and take that joy away!

Why Deacons Were Needed

And now one day that joy was not there as it should have been. Mutterings were heard in the rapidly growing church of the Lord. Some widows had been neglected in the daily distribution. The joy and therefore the freedom of God’s children was threatened. Deacons were appointed (Acts 6). The apostles could no longer oversee everything. But the matter of maintaining and providing for the fellowship in the joy of the Lord was of great importance, and therefore special office bearers were chosen. These deacons were to serve at the tables (and therefore also distribute gifts), the tables of fellowship, so that the joy of salvation might continue to be tasted and savored. Let us never forget this origin of the office of deacon. Deacons are those who protect the communal joy of the congregation, and who, therefore, see to it that the exercising of the communion of saints, with all that that implies, continues. Deacons are those who see to it that there are no forgotten or neglected people in the church of God, or that there be none who are so bound and oppressed that the joy of salvation and release from all bondage in Christ is no longer apparent. They make sure that everyone can fulfill his or her calling as parents or members of the church because they are not disadvantaged.

It is therefore never just a matter of seeing to it that no one is without food, but it is a matter of seeing to it that the joy in the Spirit, as free children of God (who have been set free by Christ), be realized in the communion of saints, a communion where the life of each and every member of the church has a place and so is safe and free from bondage and affliction and where everyone can function according to the responsibilities each has been given, yes, so that the joy of eating of the same Table of the Lord be always evident.

When this is seen as the key character of the task of the deacons, it is also immediately obvious that the deacons cannot and should not do everything. No, for just as in Israel, the service for the joy of the covenant people where none are poor and all can do their task, is a service in which all are to be involved (although the deacons are to give leadership and guidance).

Principles

What are some of the New Testament principles for the diaconal ministry of love and mercy which are to be stimulated, guided, and overseen by the deacons?

1. This ministry of mercy is service (diakonia, the Greek word from which “deacon” comes, already says it), a service of love. The Lord indicated its character when he washed the feet of his disciples and said: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14ff.). We must therefore be moved by his love, and so serve his people, that the joy of his redemption be maintained in the congregation by the ministration of his riches and the comfort of his salvation that so the God of our salvation be glorified.

2. The Lord who wants to keep us free in his salvation warns us of the cruel bondage of materialism and egoism (Luke 8:22-25, 12:13-21) and says in his Word that all the needs of the covenant community must be satisfied (2 OCR. 8:15). This does not, for example, mean that all must have an equal amount of money (the church is not a form of communism), but what is to be equal is the satisfaction of all the needs. The Lord illustrated this in his giving manna in the desert. Some could gather more than others, and yet the Lord saw to it that all were helped equally and all were adequately provided for (Ex. 16:17,18). This principle is referred to by Paul in connection with aiding the needy (II OCR. 8:15).

We must therefore see to it that all needs in the congregation are met, so that all are equally satisfied, and all can fully function according to their responsibility and so all can fully share in the joy of the Lord! This is possible if it be realized that everything in the church is in a very real way owned communally for the benefit of the Body of Christ. (Think of the attitude in Acts 2:45: They shared “as anyone might have need”; see also Acts 4:34). No one in the communion of saints must or can enjoy the freedom and joy of the Lord individually and selfishly. The Lord places at the festive tables of joy also the poor, the needy, and the orphans, etc. (Deut. 16, 24).

3. The ministering service of love not only includes taking care of the financially poor, but also sees to the relieving of other forms of oppression and affliction so that these “needy” can function in the covenant community and so also enjoy as fully as possible the joy and salvation of the Lord. Matt. 25:31-46 speaks of the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, and the imprisoned. James 1:27 speaks of the necessity of visiting “the fatherless and widows in their affliction,” and serving unselfishly wherever possible (John 13:14).

If the deacons are to serve properly, these areas also need their attention. Christ says: “As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt. 25:40). Indeed, for these are dear to Christ. They are his most precious possession, set free from the bondage of sin and Satan, and therefore they must not be left to suffer a renewed bondage of loneliness and sense of not belonging but must share in the full joy of their Lord and truly function in the communion of saints.

4. Scripture teaches that the immediate family has the first responsibility to minister this service of love (see Lev. 25 25; 1 Tim. 5). Children must help their parents and grandparents as much as possible. The church must not be needlessly burdened (1 Tim. 5:16). Indeed, the deacons should keep diaconal matters decentralized as much as possible. For they are to activate and equip the congregation “for the work of service (diakonia), for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). 5. According to the New Testament we have responsibilities to those “without.” As we read in Galatians 6:10: “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (See also 1 Thess. 5:15b; 2Pet. 1:7). We must therefore not exclude deacons from a supportive role in projects such as Mission Aid and the Canadian Reformed World Relief Fund (CRWRF). Also, there may be other opportunities closer to home.

Implications for Today

Let us draw some conclusion on the basis of what we have seen in Scripture, and, where necessary, reckon with what has taken place in history, so that we can come to a concrete understanding of what all this means for our task as deacons, here and now.

A Double Service

If the deacon focuses on maintaining the freedom of God’s precious possession, his children, and to enable all the poor and needy to have means to function according to their responsibilities so that their joy be full in the covenant community, then their ministry of mercy is to be done with a view, not only to the needs of those financially oppressed, but also to the needs of those burdened by sickness, loneliness, or the like. After all, both types of hardships can take the joy of salvation and freedom away and can give difficulty in the realization of their covenant responsibilities. Deacons are therefore to do more than handle money. Calvin even had two kinds of deacons; one for the poor and another for the sick. The Convent of Wezel in 1568 likewise spoke of two kinds of deacons. In the French Huguenot churches, the deacons visited not only the poor, but also the sick. It is, therefore, noteworthy that in contrast to the old form for the ordination of deacons, the new form (adopted by Synod Cloverdale 1983) specifically mentions the needs of the sick and lonely. The deacons are to do what they can that these needs of the congregation are met and to stimulate the congregation in the service of love, so that the joy of God’s children in the communion of saints becomes a daily reality. This two-fold concern has brought this form more in line with Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession which also recognizes both financial and non-financial needs.

Family Visits

How can the deacons best fulfill this task? The new Dutch form (adopted by Synod Kampen 1975) explicitly mentions a new element which answers this question; namely, the family visit. The diaconate must, as it were, go on the offensive and visit all the families of the church. There is great merit in this, precisely in these times of rush and busyness when we do not always know what lives among the people... because there is no time to visit (contrast the assumed situation in Israel).

An objection can be raised. Is this not a duplication of the family visits by the ministers and elders? No. The purpose of their visits is different. The family visits by the elder and minister have in view, first of all, spiritual oversight and supervision, so that the congregation be watched over and encouraged in a life of holiness. (See the form for the ordination of elders.) The purpose of a diaconal visit, however, is first to see and to ask if there are any needs, financial or otherwise (for example, loneliness), and to see to it that those needs are met. The second purpose of a diaconal family visit is to encourage and stimulate the congregation in the service of love. One must not only ask: “Are there needs here?” but also: “What are you

doing, or what do you think you should be doing, for the well-being and joy of the communion of saints? What is your service for the upbuilding of the body in love?" (Think of Ephesians 4:12.) In this way the talents and energies of love and compassion can be discovered and put into circulation, talents and energies which otherwise, without the stimulus and encouragement of the deacons, might never be used.

Of Great Benefit

It seems to me that much could be gained by considering and preparing ourselves for a similar practice of diaconal family visits in our own circles. Especially in today's world, much profit could be realized by periodic visits by the deacons to all the families of the congregation.

We live in a time of much individualism and loneliness. We also live in a time when, in spite of the cry of love and the heat of eroticism, the world is growing colder and colder. As the Lord himself said: "Most men's love will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12). In the same discourse in Matthew 24 and 25 the Lord stresses the serving love that must characterize the church going out and visiting those in need and seeing to their needs (Matt. 25:31-46). Deacons who see it as their task periodically to visit and stimulate this service of love will do much to ensure that the joy and warmth of the mutual love and communion will continue to characterize the church in a loveless and cold world. In this way the church will also be more and more a light of hope and a joy in a world of sin, a community of love that repels Satan and attracts the elect children of God!

There is also something else. We live in a time of great prosperity in which the dollar has become known as the "Almighty Buck," a god to be reckoned with and to which many are bound. Good periodic visits of a deacon alone will heighten the awareness that our possessions are not ours in any absolute way. It will make us realize all the more that everything which believers have, they hold in a real sense communally for the welfare of the covenant joy and freedom of the liberated people of God. In no way must anyone in the church be bound to his riches, for that is possessiveness! (Think of the implications of the eighth word of the covenant again.) Our riches must be used for the equal satisfying of all the needs in the church.

Related to this is another point the bondage of secularization. We struggle against that enemy by, for example, sending our children to Christian schools. That is a need today, that is a responsibility parents have. Every one must have equal opportunity for that education: otherwise one is "poor and needy" in the Old Testament sense of the term and unable to fully execute one's responsibility to their children. Then children are afflicted unnecessarily by secular forces. Then there is an unnecessary dimming of the joy of the liberation we have in Christ. And yet it may be that, while the children may go to Christian schools and the sun may now shine in that area of our life, there is darkness and affliction of new sorts, and a bondage of another kind, back home where it can be truly difficult to make ends meet, and where parents in order to exercise their responsibility regarding Christian education now need both to leave home to work leaving little time and opportunity for a normal, joyous, Christian family life. So the fulfilling of one need and responsibility can create an even greater need: Where parents can no longer truly fulfill their first office and calling with regard to their children in the home! With the disintegration of the normal functioning of the family unit all around us, how vitally that Christian family life is needed today. That remains their first calling! Periodic visits by deacons will bring genuine cases of need such as these (the above was but an example) to light more readily than now is often the case. Need and poverty are relative concepts, and we must not say too quickly there is no need. The communal riches of the congregation must be used so that all needs for normal, Christian living in the joy and freedom of our King's salvation can be equally satisfied. That is the principle of 2 Corinthians 8:15 as the early Christian church also acted on in its own way (Acts 2,4). In church everyone must feel that they fully belong. There is to be no room for people to feel as though they are second class because genuine financial concerns prevent them from fulfilling their normal covenantal obligations. Many more examples can be thought of. Think of the shut-ins, the ill

and the depressed. The point is that the office of deacon can and must retain its full relevance for the church. The diaconal task must not be seen in too narrow a way!

The Heart of the Matter

The needs are different today, but needs are there, and probably in greater number than we often think, in the first place, in our own congregations; but, there are to be no “poor and needy” in any sense of the term, for the congregation of God is a redeemed, liberated people, a royal people, in whom and through whom God wants to see evidence of His great work of salvation and so wants to be glorified!

It is the office of the deacons to have as their specific concern the needs of God’s children and to mobilize the entire congregation so that all the needs be met in the concrete service of the love of Christ, in order that all may know themselves free from want and equipped to do their part in the covenant people of God. May so the joy of the congregation and the praise of God’s name be served by deacons and by all of us.

Endnote

[1] After all, the law of Levirate marriage gave the widow considerable security (Deut. 25:5-10; see Gen. 38:11) and a childless widow could return to her father’s house (see Lev. 22:13; Ruth 1:8). The orphans, too, were not without security. Their rights of inheritance were to be protected, and many would be aided by family and friends (see Job 29:12; 31:17).

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