

Editorial

The Position of Deacons in Relation to the Consistory

This title is the one used by Prof. P. Deddens of the Theological University of Kampen, the Netherlands, on July 16, 1947. The occasion was a deacon conference held in Groningen. It appears that during that time a controversy had been raised about the inclusion of deacons into the consistory when such consistories were small. Prof. Deddens argues that such mixture of office is not Scripturally warranted and pleads for uniformity in adhering to the Scriptural norm of fulfilling the special office to which one is called. He shows the differences between the offices from Scripture and directs his listener/readers to be careful not to mix the two. We wonder if Prof. Deddens' words have been heeded or ignored.

The Canadian Reformed Churches continue to find within their federation Churches who have such a small number of elders that they include the deacon(s) in the consistory meet-ings. The present Church Order stipulates this practice in Article 39. This article adds that this shall invariably be done where the number of elders or the number of deacons is less than three. But we find that many Churches that have comparatively large consistories and deaconries are also meeting together. We increasingly read about meetings of the Consistory, of the Deacons, and of the Council. Although each Church will have its own local arrangements, one can imagine that matters of discipline are dealt with at the Consistory meetings, that matters of the ministry of mercy are dealt with at the meetings of the Deacons and that all other matters are dealt with by the Council. And, of course, there will be some discussions between the elders and deacons during a Council meeting about the discipline cases in so far as they touch the work of the deacons, and about the works of mercy as far as they touch upon discipline in the congregation.

However, Rev. W.W.J. Van Oene, in his book *With Common Consent* does not appear to suggest such an amalgamation of the offices as the formation of a Council would suggest. He says, "This article does not stipulate that thereby the elders become assistant-deacons or that the deacons become assistant-elders. At times it was stated that this was so, but this reveals a lack of making clear distinctions. When the deacons are added to the consistory, this does not mean that the deacons now accompany the elders when they bring family visits, or that now the elders assist the deacons when they visit the needy and provide them with the necessary assistance. How could one, by way of a "local arrangement" be (partially) put into an office to which he was not called by the Lord? This article speaks only of the deacons being added to the consistory, not of a mixing up of the distinct offices by local arrangement or of the one doing the work of the other."

Our sister Churches in Australia specify something similar within their article of the Church Order that covers this point. They say, "Where the number of elders and deacons is small the consistory can, on the basis of local rules, always meet together with the deacons. In that case, matters pertaining to supervision and discipline shall be handled with the advice of the deacons and matters pertaining to the office of deacons with the advice of the elders. This shall invariably be the rule if both the number of elders and the number of deacons is less than three."

It is clear, then, that both the Canadian/American Reformed Churches as well as their sister churches, the Free Reformed Churches in Australia are convinced that the offices of elders and deacons are and must remain distinct.

When we read the Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons, we will discover what the Churches have concluded the teaching of Scripture is about each of these offices. The Elders must have supervision over Christ's Church, they are to take care that in the congregation all things are done decently and in good order, and thirdly, they are to supervise and assist the ministers of the word, seeing to it that no strange teaching or wolves in sheep's clothing be condoned in the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. The Deacons, on the other hand, are assigned the ministry of mercy. They are to see to it that no one in the congregation of Christ lives uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty - in short, they are to serve. They are referred to in Scripture as servants or helpers (diakonos).

Prof. P. Deddens gave an overview of the history of Deacons in the Church in the speech we mentioned above. A short review of what he said may be interesting and helpful.

The degeneration of the office of deacon already began in the 2nd century, when the office of a teaching elder was raised to that of a single monarchistic episcopacy. The other elders, as well as the deacons, were relegated to being helpers. Later it was decided that deacons should stand at meetings while the others sat. They were also to denote their low status by the clothes they wore. The prevailing thought was that bishops replaced the Old Testament High Priest, the elders replaced the Priests and the deacons replaced the Levites.

As a result of a wrong interpretation of Acts 21:8 and 6:5, deacons were instructed to assist the bishop during the worship service and the altar service. They were also to be the ears and eyes of the bishop in the congregation. At many places they even performed the tasks of caretaker and messenger.

In the Middle Ages the situation became even worse. In almost all circumstances people depended on the government for support. Charles the Great introduced a welfare system combining Church and State. Charles the Fifth declared that all institutions that served the poor should form a common treasury. At the end of the Middle Ages the matter had reached critical proportions. Poverty was at scary levels. The poor and the sick complained bitterly about lack of care, poor food and lack of clothing. All the while monasteries flourished and Papacy lived from ill-begotten riches.

These were the circumstances that faced the Reformers during the Reformation. It will come as little surprise that they encountered heavy opposition when they began to steer the Church back to the road of independence. Luther wanted to direct the Church to I Timothy 3 and Acts 6 with respect to the diaconate, but as time progressed, he was increasingly influenced by the idea that circumstances might dictate the course to be followed. He allowed social and political matters to dominate the direction the diaconate should take. As a result, not much became of the restoration of the diaconate. Deacons in the Lutheran church became assistant preachers. Zwingli also directed the poor to the State.

The restoration of the diaconate does not properly begin until John Calvin expounds Scripture about the Church being independent from the State. In this connection he also taught a diaconate according to I Timothy 3. From Romans 12:8 he understands Paul to speak about two types of deacons. First are the ones who distribute liberally, as those who distribute the alms, and the second, those who do acts of mercy with cheerfulness, as those who deal with the sick and the lonely.

In the 19th century the “Afscheiding” and the “Doleantie” bring an even clearer scriptural view on the diaconate. Yet, Rev. J.C. Sikkel from the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, complained about the view of this office in that church when he says, “Where is the office of Christ Who fulfills all in all? It is as if on earth it must appear that the love of people still does something; that the love of “lovely” Christians still does a lot - but that the love of Christ does nothing.” He further laments the fact that everywhere collections are taken for the needy, bazaars are held, advertisements are read and heeded, but where is the understanding that only God should know the gift and the giver. Where is the deacon and his office? Does the deacon still understand his office? If he does, he must come to the conclusion that his church no longer understands it.

Throughout the centuries the office of deacon was questioned and altered. From history we can not learn what the office of deacon should be, nor how it should relate to the consistory. This matter must be found in Scripture. In the original language of Scripture we find two meanings for the word “diakonein” - a general as well as a specific meaning.

The actual meaning is to serve at table, as in Luke 17:3 and John 12:2. Further, the same term has been used in a more general way describing the service to all, as in Luke 8:3, Matth. 27:55 and Mark 15:41. In many other cases the words “diakonein” and “diakonia” give the meaning of someone who serves another out of love, as in Matth. 25:42-44, Acts 2:19 and 1 Cor. 16:15.

The chief deacon has been Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for the service of fallen man. He did not seek position or rank, but lowered Himself to the place of a servant. He took upon Himself the punishment of us all. As man He did not seek a crown, but a cross to serve His fellow man. That is serving, serving God. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and is exalted at the right hand of God, the Father. He has shown us that the road to the Father is by serving: serving God and our fellow man.

The apostles have received the task to proclaim the gospel as their foremost responsibility (Matth.28:19, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8; 5:20, 32). The task of preaching and teaching is an all-encompassing work, it demands total involvement of the individual; no distraction may deter the preacher from this task. John Calvin also stresses the point that the office of deacon, instituted to alleviate the apostles from the work of mercy, must stand independent from the preaching, so as to relieve the preachers from this extra burden. (Corp. Ref. Vol. LXXVI, page 120)

Since the institution of this office in Acts 6 the deacons and they alone, are responsible for the gathering and distribution of alms. This is clear from Timothy as well, where we are taught that the

needs for certain qualities and gifts are requisite for both deacons and elders, but that elders must additionally have the ability to teach and admonish according to the doctrine of Scripture (1 Tim. 3:2).

Three branches, then, stem from the one root. From the apostolic mandate the diaconate manifests especially the priestly concern, the teaching presbyter the prophetic wisdom, and the ruling presbyters the kingly power - all from the Mediator, Jesus Christ. Yet they are to be distinguished in their entitlements (competency). The diaconate must care for the poor; that is the only task that the Holy Scripture entrusts to them. For the presbyters everything that belongs to the ruling, leading, instructing and disciplining of the congregation is included in their mandate.

In their task as deacons, the diaconate is independent in their gathering and distributing of the alms. They are in no wise subordinates of the Consistory, nor helpers of the ministers of the Word. When the shepherds of the flock and the rulers of the House of God rule wisely, then they make up rules for the House and see to it that all things are done in a Scriptural manner. Then the deacons will have the freedom to do their task well.

PdB

Who Should Attend the Table of the Lord?

By Rev. R. D. Anderson, Minister of the Churches in Valkenburg and Katwijk, The Netherlands

Some years ago I translated these comments from Joh. Jansen's *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening*. It was published in Kampen, the Netherlands, by Kok Publishing in 1923.

Art. 61 of the Church Order states: "Nobody shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper except those who according to the custom of the church to which they belong, have made profession of the Reformed religion, at the same time as having testimony of a pious walk, without which even those who come from other churches shall not be admitted."

Joh. Jansen's comments on this article are taken from page 270 ff. of the aforementioned book.

The question about who may be admitted to the Lord's Supper was already dealt with very early on. The Convent of Wezel, 1568, decided that "nobody shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper, unless he has made profession of faith and has submitted himself to church discipline". It also made several decisions regarding the visitation of adults and children relating to public profession in the midst of the congregation (Ch. 6:7-11). The Synod of Dordrecht, 1578, took these decisions over in other words (Art. 64). And the Synod of Middelburg, 1581, put this decision in the words as they are found above. Since that time they have not been changed.

This article deals with two distinct matters, namely the admission to the Lord's Supper by profession of faith in one's own church; and the admission of professing members that come from other churches.

1. The admission to the Lord's Supper in one's own church:

No one shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper except those who according to the custom of the church (of which he is a member) have made profession of the Reformed religion, together with testimony of a pious life. Thus right from the beginning the rule held that the admission to the Lord's Supper was not free, that the Lord's Supper itself did not stand open for every baptized member. The churches must watch that only believers take part. They must not admit any-one who does not belong there. On this point they came into conflict with Duifhuis, Erastus and the Remonstrants, who taught that you must leave it to each person's conscience whether they partake of the Supper or not. This thinking still lives in some areas, also among Reformed people. If men feel free enough, they go. If, in their own mind, they feel pressured to stay away, they do so.

In the Free Church of Waadland anyone may go to the Lord's Supper. But this is completely in conflict with the character of both the church and of the Lord's Supper. . . . (P.273)

2. The admission to the Lord's Supper of members from other Reformed churches: "...without which also those, who come from other churches, shall not be admitted." This form of admission, by proof of attestation, flows forth from the federation of the churches. The churches that have accepted the same confession and live by the same church order, accept each other's members and office bearers on testimony of doctrine and life. Such letters of testimony were in olden times, used in every circle of life. We find mention of them already in the apostolic churches. The disciples in Ephesus gave letters of recommendation to Apollos for the congregation in Achaia, in order that they may receive him. Acts 18:27 Paul recommended Phoebe to the congregation at Rome, Rom. 16:1. In the first period of the Reformation the acceptance of each other's members on proof of attestation was not yet regulated. Men were accept-ed by verbal testimony. A written clarification was dangerous as it might fall into the hands of the inquisition. But it did not take long before the misuse by beg-gars and tramps, who presented them-selves as persecuted believers and knew how to win the hearts of the pious in order to receive offerings, made it necessary for the churches to safeguard against deceit. The Synod of Emden, 1571 therefore also decided that in each church it should be announced, that those who move elsewhere shall henceforth only be accepted upon presentation of attestation. This attestation shall describe how they have conducted themselves in doctrine and life (Art. 44). Also the Particular Synod of Dordrecht, 1574, decided that only those who brought "a legal testimony" with them "should be admitted to the Lord's Supper". That testimony must, however, not be too old, but no time limit was specified. However, to avoid wronging refugees, a modification was added, that men should sooner be admitted than refused. The Synod of Middelburg, 1581 posited the redaction of this article for the first time as it now stands: "without which also those, who come from other churches, shall not be admitted" (Art. 43). This wording has remained in force up till now. Grammatically there is only spoken of a testimony of a pious life. But on the strength of the federation, a testimony of doctrine is also understood. Anyone who held to a heretical doctrine did not receive testimony of a pious walk, even if he lived a blameless life. The meaning was that anyone that brought an attestation that testified that he was sound in faith and blameless in walk may be admitted. The most used expressions were: that someone was sound in the faith and doctrine or not worthy of punishment or without blame in walk (of life).

With regard to admission by attestation, there is a series of questions to be proposed.

1) Some have asked whether the attestation ought to be sent on from one church to another, or handed over by the members themselves.

Allowing for sufficient time to prepare one, they should be requested by the members themselves, of the consistory of the church they are leaving, and handed into the consistory of the church where they come to. According to the collegial system a person is a member of the greater whole. If he moves, he remains a member of it. Only his name should be removed from the part where he was, and enrolled in the region he is moving to, and that happens when he sends news of his movement to the chief board. His membership remains undisturbed. But this does not happen in the Reformed churches. Whenever someone moves from A to B, he is not automatically a member of B.

Inasmuch as he has received an attestation; he still formally is a member of A. Only when he has handed it in to B and is accepted there does he become a member there. That is why a member must first ask for an attestation, and then hand it over to the church where he is going to live. Only with visitation and consultation of the members may it be sent by the consistory.

2) Must a consistory per se accept each attestation from another Reformed congregation? No, if there are well grounded reasons for mistrusting it. Each local church is an independent church, and can say: I will allow no other to the Lord's Supper than those whom I have myself examined. But from the church federation, that is, from the unity of confession and church government, it follows that anyone who is admitted in another church, does not have to be examined anew, but may be admitted in good faith by an attestation that he is sound in the faith and blameless in walk. It is thus a matter of trust. But then it also follows that a consistory, having once received a surprise from another church, will not trust her attestations. If attestations are incomplete or untrustworthy, the new church will examine the new arrivals her-self. In the time of the Remonstrants disputes arose frequently, and attestations were refused. So, for example, the attestation from someone that came from Alkmaar, signed by a Remonstrant minister and elder, would be provisionally refused by an Amsterdam consistory "in order to take it into consideration and notify the classis." Likewise the attestation of the Remonstrant Simon Episcopius, who in 1611 came with a good attestation from Franeker and a couple of months later handed it into the commission for attestations in Amsterdam, was refused by the consistory. In similar cases there had to be a closer investigation or talk with the person.

3) How old may an attestation be? An attestation is no ecclesiastical ticket for moving, but a testimony in respect of profession and life. If someone neglects to hand it in then it loses its force and a consistory can no longer trust it. One cannot set a certain time as to how old it may be. The reasons for neglect can be very different. Each situation must be separately examined. In the 16th century it was decided that they should not be older than 3 months (Acts of the Particular Synod of Alkmaar, 1587, art.). This is in general a good rule. One month, as is sometimes suggested, is too short. A consistory should ask in each case that comes up for the reasons for delay; and if this does not satisfy, they should set a time for the person to prove himself, or a new examination.

4) May sailors be admitted to the Lord's Supper where they are at dock? To this question the Synod of Dordrecht 1893 answered (Art. 89): "For sailors, due to their roaming life, a proof of membership should be given out". This "proof of membership", or as it is sometimes called, a "sailors' attestation" is no ordinary attestation for moving to another place, but an explanation or testimony that he is member of the church where he has his home, and is not under censure, so that he can partake of the Lord's Supper wherever he lays at dock, and eventually should a child be born to him during his travels, it may be baptized. The custom is to hand out such an attestation not for longer than one year, and to mention this on it. At the same time it is requested that the consistories contacted [by the sailor en route] make notes on the reverse side of the attestation, whenever he partakes of Lord's Supper, or should he have a child baptized together with its name. Such at least provides some control over wandering members.

5) May attestations be accepted from churches that do not belong to the church federation, e.g. from Lutheran, Baptist, independent Reformed churches, Hervormde Kerk? In general the rule is that attestations are only accepted from churches that belong to the federation. Attestations from churches that are not one in the confession of the Reformed churches count as waste paper. Even attestations from churches that have a Reformed confession, but are not federated to the Reformed churches, cannot just be accepted. They may give an indication, that such persons only need to be examined if they agree with the Reformed confession and then after announcement before and assent from the congregation, may be enrolled [in the roll of the church].

Church News

Delegated to Synod Fergus, May 1998:

From Regional Synod East: Revs. P. Feenstra, W. Den Hollander, A. J. Pol, G. H. Visscher, and elders L. Jagt, B. Oostdyk, J. Schouten, W. Smouter. Alternates (in this order) Revs. D.G.J. Agema, J. de Gelder, K.A. Kok, J.E. Ludwig.

From Regional Synod West: Revs. R. Aasman, J. Moesker, R. Schouten, W. Slomp, and elders P. VanWoudenberg, T. Veenendaal, A. Van Leeuwen, W. Pleiter. Alternates (in this order) Revs. R. Eikelboom, E. Kampen, J. Huigen, W.M. Wielenga, and elders P. Lindhout, W. Gortemaker, H. de Leeuw, W. Van Assen.