

Outline

Chapter 3 - 1

Study Societies

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BIBLE STUDY SOCIETIES

Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ lives from the Word of God. This Word equips God's people for every good work. Daily the members of the congregation have to submit to the Word and so let the Lord work in them through His Holy Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 38). "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work " (2 Tim 3:16-17). Bible study is a vital part of congregational life. This study takes place on a personal level, in the homes of the members, but also on a congregational level, by means of the study societies. This chapter deals with the Bible Study Societies.

1. Scripture

The Word of God is unique. It is unique because of its origin,-- it comes from God,-- and because of its contents, --it speaks of the gospel of salvation--. The apostles speak about the Word with many wonderful expressions. They call the Word:

- The Word of God - Rom. 9: 6
- The Word of promise - Rom. 9:9
- The Word of wisdom - 1 Cor. 12 : 8
- The Word of reconciliation - 2 Cor. 5 : 19
- The Word of truth - 2 Cor. 6 : 7
- The Word of life - Phil. 2 : 16
- The Word of Christ - Col.3:16
- The Word of the Lord - 1 Thess. 4:15
- The Word of righteousness - Heb.5:13
- The Word of prophecy - 2 Pet 1:19

The Word comes from God and thus has absolute authority. Believers are to forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against the will of God. They are to worship the Lord in no other manner than He has commanded in His Word.

Isa 30:8

Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness.

2 Pet 1:19-21

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

1Thes 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

2 Tim 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Rev 1:11

which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

The people of God need this Word in order to know God and live in the salvation He gives.

John 5:39

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,

John 8 : 51

I tell you the truth, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death.

Rom 15:4

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The gift of the Holy Spirit enables the members of the church to understand the Word of God. The Word of God is clear.

Ps. 119 : 105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

1 Cor 2:14

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

We believe that the Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length.

Deutr. 6 : 6, 8-9

These commandments that I give you this day are to be upon your hearts. ... Tie them as symbols on your hands, and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Deut 17:19

It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees

The Bible uses the word "meditate" in connection with God's Word. We must take time to learn how the law of God applies in our lives. To love the LORD is to love His Word.

Joshua 1:8

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything that is written in it.

Ps. 19:14

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Ps. 119:15

I meditate on your precepts, and consider your ways.

Ps.119:23

Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

Ps.119:27

Let me understand the teaching of your precepts, then I will meditate on your wonders.

Ps.119:48

I lift up my hands to your commandments, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees.

Ps.119:78

May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts.

Ps.119:148

My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.

God's Word addresses the people of God, and each child of God within this communion. The study of God's Word has to be done within the communion of the saints.

Eph. 3:17-19

so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love which surpasses knowledge, -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

2 Pet 1:20

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.

2. Confessions/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession begins with several articles in which we confess the authority, necessity, sufficiency and clarity of God's Word.

Art. 2

Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

Art. 3

We confess that this Word of God *did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*, as the apostle Peter says. Thereafter, in His special care for us and our salvation, God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law.

- Art. 5 We receive all these books, and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith.
- Art. 7 We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism refers indirectly to the need to study God's Word. The pertinent parts are underlined.

- Q/A19. From where do you know this?
From the holy gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise.
Later, He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets,
and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law.
Finally, He had it fulfilled through His only Son.
- Q/A 94. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?
That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee
all idolatry, witchcraft, superstition,
and prayer to saints or to other creatures.
Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God,
trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience,
expect all good from Him only,
and love, fear, and honour Him with all my heart.
In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against His will.
- Q/A 122. What is the first petition?
Hallowed be Thy Name. That is:
Grant us first of all that we may rightly know Thee,
and sanctify, glorify, and praise Thee in all Thy works, in which shine forth Thy almighty power,
wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth.
Grant us also that we may so direct our whole life -- our thoughts, words, and actions -
that Thy Name is not blasphemed because of us
but always honoured and praised.

2.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons teach us that we need to use the Word of God for it is the means by which the Lord works in us. The Canons also use the term "meditation." Again the pertinent parts are underlined.

- Chapter 1, Article 16
Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through Christ; nevertheless, they use the means through which God has promised to work these things in us. They ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned, nor to count themselves among the reprobate. Rather, they must diligently continue in the use of these means, fervently desire a time of more abundant grace, and expect it reverently and humbly.
- Chapter 1, Article 12
The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation. They attain this assurance, however, not by inquisitively prying into the hidden and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God -- such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness.
- Chapter 3/4, Article 17
The almighty working of God whereby He brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which He according to His infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise His power. So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or overthrows the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul.
- Chapter 5, Article 10
This assurance is not produced by a certain private revelation besides or outside the Word, but by faith in the promises of God, which He has most abundantly revealed in His Word for our comfort; by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit that we are children and heirs of God; and, finally, by the serious and holy

pursuit of a good conscience and of good works. And if the elect of God did not have in this world the solid comfort of obtaining the victory and this unfailing pledge of eternal glory, they would be of all men the most miserable.

Canons of Dort, 5, Art. 14

As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threatenings, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments.

2.4. Forms

Form for Public Profession of Faith

First, do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church? Do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word?

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

To do their work well as shepherds of God's flock, the overseers should train themselves in godliness and diligently search the Scriptures, which are profitable in every respect, that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.

3. Goals

The goal of congregational Bible study is:

- to know God and glorify Him;
- to grow in faith, love and hope;
- to be equipped to function as prophets, priests and kings;
- to strengthen the communion of saints.

As overseers our task is to encourage the congregation in this.

4. History

The history of the Bible study societies as we know them today can be traced back to the 18th century. In 1768 a young men's society was established in Basel, Switzerland. In the fifty years that followed many more were established, especially in Germany and Switzerland. The goal of these societies was to visit the sick and the poor, to evangelize and do Sunday school work. The first young men's society in the Netherlands was established in 1851 in Amsterdam, not by the Secession churches, but within the State Church. Many others were organized soon after.

Within the Secession churches there was unease with regard to these societies, because they were too much wrapped up in community work, rather than study the Bible. Yet they did not reject the idea that the members of the church come together to study. In 1888 a young minister, Rev. Vonkenberg, started an organization within the Reformed churches for young men with the aim to prepare them for their future task as member of the church and citizen of the country. Instead of reaching out, his set-up stressed building up and preparing for adulthood. This was a welcome and healthy change. Many young men and women received their training at these societies. An additional benefit of these societies was that they also provided an alternative to the growing attractions of worldly entertainment. These societies have been a blessing to the churches. It did not remain limited to young men and women, the organization of men and women societies followed.

However, over time the emphasis shifted more and more from biblical to societal and political issues. Study of the Bible and the Confessions went to the background. After the Liberation of 1944 when new organizations had to be set up, the need for and goal of Bible study societies was discussed as well. The task of preparing and equipping believers for their task in church, state and society was maintained, but the main focus was again placed on the study of God's Word. The goal of these societies was understood as studying the Word of God in view of the whole service which God demands from us (Art.7 B.C.). This explains our current practice of the study societies as we know them

5. Communion of Saints

Bible study must be done personally. It must be done within the family, but also within the congregation. These three do not exclude but rather complement each other. The one will support the other. Good personal Bible study will benefit the family and the study societies. The other way as well, good study societies will greatly benefit personal and family devotions. The opposite is true too. When there is a lack of participation in Bible study the question is in place how much time is dedicated to family or personal devotions. When the study of God's Word is important in someone's life, then this also shows in being a living member of the congregation.

At times the question is asked why Bible study societies are necessary. Isn't personal Bible study sufficient? In response to this we have to keep in mind that the Bible calls the congregation a body. We need one another. If that applies to material and social things, then certainly also to Bible study. Our mind set is not only, what do I get out of it, but also, what can I give to others. In addition, we have to realize that the Word is not a gift to individuals, but is given to the church. I receive it personally as part of the communion. Since we receive and learn about the Bible within this communion, we must also study the Word within this communion. In this way we can together with all the saints, grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ (Eph 3:17-19). In 1 Corinthians 12 we read about the many gifts which the Spirit works in the congregation.

- 8 To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit,
- 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,
- 10 to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,* and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

These gifts have all one source.

- 4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.
- 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.
- 6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.
- 11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

These gifts are to be used within the communion. We can help each other understanding the richness of God's revelation. We are also called to encourage one another

- 7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.
- 12 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.
- 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.
- 14 Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.
- 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.
- 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.
- 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?
- 18 But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.
- 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be?
- 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

In Romans 12 we come across the same teaching

- 3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.
- 4 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
- 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.
- 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach;
- 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

To be part of the communion shows the love we are called to show (Romans 12 : 9; 1 Cor. 13).

The communal element comes out in another way as well. We are not the first to read and search the Word of God. Previous generations have studied the Word as well. We may benefit from their work. We receive this benefit in the confessions. In them previous generations have summarized the doctrine of God's Word. They did this in situations in which they had to defend the truth against false teachings. We need the confessions in our Bible study. They can help us in the proper understanding of God's Word, they can also help us to detect and reject heresies.

6. What are we to study?

The history of the study societies shows that this question can be answered in different ways. Under influence of Pietism and Methodism the societies were formed to reach out and save unbelievers. In itself this is a wonderful goal, but the Reformed churches rightly saw that in "reaching out" the emphasis was less on "building up" the believers and the church. In the beginning of the 20th century the stress was on building up. The problem was, however, that theories and opinions of people as to how to build up our lives and live as believers became more important than the Bible itself. The Liberation of the 1940ies rightly redirected the societies to studying the Word of God.

To say that our goal is to study to Word of God needs further explanation. The complaint can be heard at times that the study societies are boring because questions are asked about details and words, whereas the larger picture is forgotten. "I get nothing out of it" is at times the excuse for not going. Should we not study in a different manner, or discuss contemporary topics? To approach the Word in a purely intellectual attitude is indeed not right. God's Word directs our daily lives. But it is equally wrong to reduce Bible study to only deal with those topics that we find interesting. We need to study the Word of God in order to live from this Word every day. The Catechism reminds us that faith is knowledge and confidence at the same time. To only look at the knowledge aspect or at the personal impact breaks apart what belongs together. The more we study God's Word the more we come to know our God and the more we come to know ourselves. That is part and parcel of loving and serving the Lord with heart, mind and soul.

We note is as we live in a time in which people evaluate things in terms of their function. Bible study is good and worth doing when it does something for me. If it doesn't do anything for me, it is not good. This is why some people quit going to study societies when they get nothing out of it. Thus, you arrive at a very pragmatic attitude towards Scripture. The result is that meetings deal with topics rather than Bible books. It may seem attractive initially, but after a while there are no topics left and the discussion tends to center around the opinions of the participants. In addition, this attitude goes against what we believe about the authority of Scripture. It is not whether I get something out of it that is the norm, but what God is telling to us. It may take effort and time to learn what He is saying. Systematically studying the Bible leads much further in this regard. We gain further knowledge about God and His Word and so are strengthened in our faith and equipped for service. This approach does require more work, but is much more rewarding.

There are many Bible Study booklets on the market. Many of these come from an evangelical background. They employ the interactive method of study. This means that the study guide leads one through the chapter and asks questions. In answering these questions one comes to understand the message of the chapter. In itself such a method is not wrong, and we can learn a lot from it. The problem can be in the kind of questions that are asked. The evangelical focus is regeneration and what makes a believer happy. Thus the questions tend to use the Bible stories as examples for us. Our feelings and experiences take centre stage, rather than the great deeds of the Lord in His covenant with His people.

In conclusion we see that it is to be recommended to study a Bible book. As we study we must not be too quick to look at how the believer can work with this, but first consider what God is saying in this passage. We study the Word to learn more about God and his Work. This in turn helps us to know ourselves, as His children and gives us direction as to how to serve and glorify Him.

7. The Discussion

Systematically working through a chapter or a passage is more helpful than random questions. Here are some steps to consider to stimulate a discussion. Some of these steps (1 - 3) can be done prior to the meeting, some of them (4 and 5) during the meeting.

Step 1

Read the passage as a whole.

Can be helpful to do it in different translations.

Formulate the main point in short .

Step 2

Look at the context

- within the whole Bible (e.g. Old or New, Where in history?)

- the book, letter

who wrote it, when, why

what is its literary character

use an outline of the book/letter (Study Bible)

Step 3

Divide the chapter in sections

Most translations/Study Bibles help you.

do not make these sections too long

do not make them too short. Look for:

change in thought, scenery, spokesman or address

This is an important step. In doing this you get a handle on the chapter. In discussing the individual verses do not lose sight of the overall picture. In the discussion it would be good to follow and discuss the sections one by one.

Step 4

Look at each section

Ask questions such as:.

- what does it say? Do I understand all the words, customs?

- what does it mean?

- are there other passages that connect to this one? (O.T⇒ N.T.)

- what about the confessions?

- how does this apply to us?

- how does this function?

- are there related topics?

Step 5

Formulate your thoughts, conclusions.

In your presentation follow the division

Conclude with look at:

How does the Lord use this chapter:

to know Him and His work, to know ourselves and to serve Him

8. Boards/Leadership

Leadership is an integral part of the functioning of a society. Involved and dedicated board members will stimulate a society. Such leadership shows in that the board is fulfilling its task according to the Constitution and in that the board upholds the Constitution. This implies that they must be aware of the contents of the Constitution. Boards must have regular meetings in which decisions can be made. Decisions about meetings and materials should not be made at the last minute. If a Board is sloppy and lacks commitment in its work the whole society will lack commitment.

Leadership is also important at the society meetings. The person who chairs must be well prepared and give good leadership to the discussion. It is the task of the chair to see to it that the discussion does not go in circles, that all speak in due order, that questions are answered by the members. A good meeting is one where members can listen to each other and help one another in understanding and applying the passage.

9. Preparatory study

An important requirement for a good meeting is preparatory study. This is where much is lacking. It is not unusual that quite a few members have not even read the passage that will be discussed, let alone have studied an outline. The result is a lack of questions, and a shallow discussion. This is part of a larger picture involving personal and family Bible study. We live in a society that wants to be entertained and demand instant results. Bible study requires input and learning to ask the right questions. As overseers we do well to pay attention to this because what will happen to the church when the study of God's Word recedes to the background. Especially the fathers carry a great responsibility in this regard, since it their task, according to the Bible, to instruct their children. This instruction is always geared to daily life, as the book of Proverbs shows clearly. To meditate is to study how the law of God concretely applies in our lives. The father has to teach his children to ask the proper questions of the text. See further section 1-9, Family Worship.

10. Consistory involvement

The Bible study societies are run by the members and not by the Consistory. Members of the congregation are free to organize a Bible study society. The overseers can stimulate it, encourage it, but it remains the responsibility of the members of the congregation. The link between the consistory and the study societies is the fact that the members of the society are under the supervision of the elders. This supervision is not to be seen in the sense that the Consistory is in charge of the societies, but rather that the Consistory must see to it that the members remain faithful to the promises made at public profession of faith. Besides supervision, the overseers must also encourage the societies. To fulfil its task the elders would do well to acquaint themselves with the work of the societies. Not only should elders attend Bible study societies, they should also be aware of what is happening in other societies. The home visits will benefit from this as well. If an elder visits a meeting of a Bible society he should not be afraid to be part of the discussion, though he has to realize that he is a guest.

Especially when it comes to the Young Peoples, the elders should be aware of what is happening. This shows the younger members that the elders take interest in their work and want to encourage them. Some consistories has one elder assigned as a liaison with the Young Peoples. The task of a liaison could include the following:

- to have contact (formal and informal) with the Boards;
- to report to the Consistory about the year's schedule;
- to report three times per year to the Consistory on the progress in the societies (in September, January and May);
- to report concerns of the Y.P. to the consistory and the other way around;
- to inform the ward elders (before home visits start) which young people are member (he receives a copy of the attendance list);
- to be available for help and advice;

The overseers can stimulate this work at the home visits. If the family or some of its members do not attend study societies the elders do well to find out what the reasons are. This will then also lead to a discussion on the need for Bible study, personally, as family and within the church. Interdenominational Bible study is to be rejected. The elders must also warn against study material that is not in harmony with the Reformed Confession (See Art. 27 Church Order). This is no minor detail in a time in which books and

videos of all kinds of religious stripes can be easily obtained and heresies can enter our homes by means of religious radio or tv stations.

Members who do not go to study societies will have their excuses. Elders should not be afraid to question these. There can be valid reasons. It can also be that people will hide behind these excuses. Does this mean that Bible study is compulsory? Believers have to study the Word of God, yes. To do this in the setting of the Society is very helpful and important, but not mandatory. However, one who loves the Word and thus loves the church, would want to study the Bible within the communion of saints.

11. Visits to societies

If elders visit the study societies, the following points could be used to facilitate the reporting:

1. General information

- Which society did you visit?
- How many members were present and absent?
If quite a few are absent, ask the leader whether this happens more often.
- What was the topic?

2. Discussion

- What can you say about the essay? How did it function in the discussion?
- What can you say about the participation of the members?
- Can you notice that preparatory study had been made?
- What can you say about the discussion?
 - How did it deal with the main lines and the details?
 - How did it try to apply the passage to daily life?
 - How are other scripture passages used?
 - How are the confessions used?
 - Which other sources of information are used?
- If the discussion did not go very well, can you indicate how come?
- What can you say about the functioning of the leadership?
 - How does the chairman lead the meeting?
 - Is there opportunity for all to speak?
 - How does he conclude discussion?

3. Format

- What can you say about the order of the meeting?
- What can you say about the way the members dealt with each other?
- What can you say about the relationship between members and chair?
- Was the meeting properly opened and closed?

4. Contact

- Did you speak with the chairman or some members of the Board after the meeting?
- Are there special concerns which they want to bring to the Consistory?
- Are there special requests for the Consistory?

12. Evaluation

1. Part of evaluating is surveying the current situation.
 - How many study societies are there?
 - What percentage of the congregation is involved?
 - How often do the societies meet?
 - What are they studying this season?
2. Do we agree on the Scriptural basis and the goal of Bible study?
3. How do you evaluate the overall functioning of the societies? Is there commitment to the work of the societies? What can we do to improve participation? Try to be specific.
4. Does the Consistory show sufficient interest in this work? Explain. Is this matter addressed on home visits? How? What is the reaction? In which areas could we improve and how? Try to be specific.
5. Do we agree on the need and importance of Bible study? Are the office bearers attending Men's Society? If not, Why? What is the function of the study of God's Word in your life?
6. Are there items which need follow up? Why? How will we go about it?

Outline

Chapter 3 - 2

Finances

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FINANCES

Introduction

When King David wants to build an altar to the LORD and Araunah offers to give him the piece of land and the animals for the sacrifice, David replies: "No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing." (1 Chron.21:24) At the end of his life, when David oversees the gifts for building the temple he prays: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand." (1 Chron.29:14) Both elements are important when it comes to our finances. When we give, we give from what we have. This is not always easy, because we like to hold to what we have earned. At the same time we know that we give to the Lord only what He first gave to us. This chapter deals with the use of finances, a touchy subject. It can be easier for some to speak about their faith than to open their wallet. But also our money is to be ruled by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

1. Scripture

1.1. Old Testament

The Bible teaches us that God, as the Creator of all things, owns everything.

Ps 24:1-2

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.

Ps 50:10-11

for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine.

We receive all we have in trust, in order to use it in the service of the LORD. We are stewards.

Lev 25:23

"The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.

Ps 8:6-8

You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

Ps 115:16

The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man.

Eccl 2:24-25

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

To have property, yes, even to have wealth is not wrong in itself.

1 King 3:11-13

So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for-- both riches and honor-- so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.

The book of Deuteronomy often addresses the use of material possessions. Israel will receive the land Canaan as a gift of the LORD, but it remains His. He will give a blessing when they use this gift to serve Him. He will show the power of His curse when they do not respect Him as the Giver or misuse what He gives.

Deut 8:11-14

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Deut 8:17-18

You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

Deut 15:7-8

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.

No Israelite really owned land, he received it in trust. This is why each seventh year the land had to have rest (Lev. 25:1-7), and each fiftieth year all land returned to its original recipient (Lev. 25:8-55). Also in the feast of the first fruits the people were reminded of their stewardship before the LORD. The LORD demands the best and the first of the harvest.

Deut 26:1-4

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name and say to the priest in office at the time, "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us." The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God.

In other customs this came out as well.

Exod 30:12

"When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them.

Deut 26:12-13

When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. Then say to the LORD your God: "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them.

We have examples when the people were willing to give.

Exod 35 and 36

Moses said to the whole Israelite community, "This is what the LORD has commanded: From what you have, take an offering for the LORD. Everyone who is willing is to bring to the LORD an offering of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece. and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the LORD for the work on the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.

There were also times when the people did not use their possessions to the glory of God. Take for example the situation during the time of Amos.

Amos 2:6

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back [my wrath]. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Amos 5:11

You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine.

Amos 6:4-7

You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.

The Bible teaches that money is not evil in itself, but the people of God have to use it in the fear of the LORD. They may not rely on or live for money.

Prov 10:22

The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.

Prov 11:4

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.

Prov 11:28

Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

Prov 18:11

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall.

Prov 28:11

A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him.

Prov 30:7-9

"Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

Eccl 5:12-19

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger. Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him, for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work, this is a gift of God.

Without such wisdom believers can come in serious crises.

Ps 49:16-20

Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him. Though while he lived he counted himself blessed-- and men praise you when you prosper-- he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light [of life]. A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.

Ps 73:3-12

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"
This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth.

In the time of Haggai the people did not give to the LORD. The result was that their harvests failed. The LORD calls them to give to Him first again, then they will have enough food on their plates as well.

Hag 1:4-13

"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands." Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD. Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD.

In the days of Malachi the LORD regards not giving to Him as robbing Him.

Mal 3:9-10

You are under a curse-- the whole nation of you-- because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

1.2. New Testament

In the New Testament we read the warnings of the Lord Jesus with regard to the misuse of property.

Matt 6:24

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Matt 19:23-24

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Matt. 22 : 21

Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Matt.25:14-30

The Parable of the Talents

Luke 21:1-4

As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small coins. "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out her poverty put in all she had to live on."

In the parable of shrewd manager the Lord shows that we need to use our money for the benefit of our brothers and sisters. The Lord connects to this a blessing. Faithfulness in material things on this earth leads to eternal reward on the new earth.

Luke 16:10-12

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

The church after Pentecost put in practice the teachings of the Lord.

Acts 2:44-45

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Acts 4:32-37

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

The apostles were not opposed to possessions as such.

1 Tim 4:4-5

For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

The apostles had to warn against the misuse and danger of money.

Rom. 13 : 8

Owe no one anything except to love one another

1 Tim 6:7-11

For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

1 Tim 6:17-19

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

James 1:9-11

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

James 2:2-6

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

James 5:1-6

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

Office bearers should give the proper example and not be greedy

1 Tim 3:3

not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

1 Tim 3:8

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.

The apostles gave the example in encouraging the churches to contribute for the needy churches in Judea

Rom 15:26-27

For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

1 Cor 16:1-2

Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

2 Cor 8:7

But just as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us-- see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

2 Cor 8:13-15

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

2 Cor 9:6-7

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Cor 9:11

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

2. Confession/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Heidelberg Catechism

The fourth commandment mentions the giving of Christian offerings for the poor. The eighth commandment addresses the use of money in our lives of gratitude.

Q/A 103.

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor.

Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal sabbath.

Q/A 110.

What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

God forbids not only outright theft and robbery but also such wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, and usury;

we must not defraud our neighbour in any way, whether by force or by show of right.

In addition God forbids all greed and all abuse of squandering of His gifts.

Q/A 111.

What does God require of you in this eighth commandment?

I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

2.2. Church Order

The Church Order contains several articles that deal with finances

- Art. 10 The consistory with the deacons, as representing the congregation, shall be bound to provide for the proper support of its minister(s).
- Art. 13 If a minister of the Word, ... does retire ... he shall retain ... his official bond with the Church which he served last, and this Church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and/or other dependants.
- Art. 19 The Church shall maintain an institution for the training for the ministry
- Art. 20 The Churches shall endeavour that there be students of theology, extending financial aid to those who are in need of it.
- Art. 23 The specific duties of the office of deacon are to gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name according to need.

2.3. Liturgical Forms and Prayers

In the Form for Ordination, and then especially that part that deals with the deacons touches on the subject of finances and giving. Also the Form for Marriage refers to helping those in need. Among the Prayers, the opening prayer for the Meeting of the Deacons should be mentioned.

Form for Ordination

They [=deacons] shall gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name, according to need.

You, deacons, be faithful and diligent in the gathering of gifts and distribute them cheerfully to those who need assistance, especially to the widows and orphans

Take care that the deacons have sufficient means to fulfil their ministry. Be good stewards of all that the Lord has entrusted to you.

Form for Marriage

Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need.

Prayer # 15 An Opening Prayer for the Meeting of the Deacons

May He [=Holy Spirit] lead us to them [=those who are truly in need] and help us distribute the alms that have been collected as each one's need may render necessary, in a spirit of joy, fidelity, and liberality. Kindle fervent love in the hearts of Thy people, that they may generously contribute to the possessions entrusted to them as stewards. Grant us sufficient means to bring relief to the needy. May we discharge the duties of our office as Christ's ministers of mercy. Give us Thy grace to relieve want by means of material gifts and to instil the comfort of Thy Holy Word into the hearts of the afflicted, that they may put their trust in Thee alone. Bless, we pray Thee, our ministration and multiply the bread of the poor, that both they and we may praise and thank Thee, while we await the blessed appearance of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, who became poor for our sakes that He might enrich us with eternal treasures.

3. Goals

Since the Lord makes us stewards, our calling is to be good stewards. This applies to how we

- receive His gifts in thankfulness;
- use them in faithfulness;
- give in cheerfulness.

As overseers we have to instruct, help and supervise the congregation in being good stewards.

4. Deacons

See 2-2 The Service of Mercy.

See 3-8 The Deacons

5. Collections

In our worship services we may show our thankfulness in giving for the ministry of mercy according to the measure in which the Lord has blessed us. This means that the collection is an integral part of worshipping the Lord. The Catechism and Church Order indicate this as well.

The collection for the ministry of mercy is to be distinguished from the regular contributions for the church. When in Lord's Day 38, q/a 103 the Catechism lists the various parts of the worship service and also refers to the collection, then it speaks of giving "Christian offerings for the poor." The Church Order in Art. 23 mentions as one of the tasks of the deacons "to gather and manage the offerings and distribute them." As a separate item both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Church Order also speak of the need to take care of the church and its budget. Lord's Day 38 says that the ministry of the gospel be maintained, but the way the answer is formulated shows that this is not directly connected to the worship service. The Church Order speaks about financial obligation of the members, e.g. in Art. 10, 13, 19 and 20. Again this is not directly tied to the worship service. We see thus that the offerings for the poor are connected to the worship services, but the other financial obligations toward the church are not.

This is in line with the Word of God. Both the Old and New Testament teach the obligation to take care of the needy. Both also indicate that this care for the needy is part of the worship service. From the O.T. we learn that the meals connected to the sacrifices included the care for the needy (Deut. 26:12). Care for the needy flowed out of receiving the blessing from the LORD. In the N.T. we read about the care for the needy in the church soon after Pentecost. Acts 2:42-45 indicates that this care was related to the worship services. At the same time both the Old and New Testament speak of providing for those "employed" in the ministry of the Word. In the O.T. the people were supposed to bring their tithes, but this was not connected to the yearly feasts which celebrating redemption. In the N.T. Paul speaks about the "wages" and "honour" for those labouring in the gospel (1 Cor.9:9; 1 Tim.5:18), but this also was not connected to the worship service either.

The churches of the Reformation returned to the practice of collecting in the worship service for the needy. In the Middle Ages the collections and contributions had come to be regarded as gifts that should appease the Lord. It was part of our good works by which we could earn grace. The Reformed churches stressed that the gifts are tokens of thankfulness (Calvin, Institutes, IV, 17, 44). Although there was some difference among the early Reformed churches with regard to the place of the collection in the worship service (at the end of the service or earlier), there was agreement in that the collection was to be for the needy. Over the following centuries collections were introduced for causes other than the ministry of mercy. This was not in line with the Reformed heritage. We do well to stay in line with the Confessions and Church Order by limiting the collection to the ministry of mercy. The ministry of mercy is not limited to the needs within the congregation but could also include causes like Anchor or CRWRF or Coram Deo. They are all means by which we show mercy to those far away or closer by who are in need. Matters related to the ministry of the Word, such as Mission or Theological College should be part of the annual church budget.

It is the deacons office to gather, manage and distribute the gifts of the congregation. The distribution is done within the congregation. At times they may help the deacons of a sister church. They may also distribute the money to other worthwhile causes that fit within the ministry of mercy outside the congregation. They have to inform the congregation which causes they support. As a rule this is done with the statements in the bulletin.

6. Regular Voluntary Contribution

Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism states that "the ministry of the gospel be maintained." The Lord demands that we make sure that the gospel can be preached. This includes among other things the

financial contribution to meet the budget of the church. Under the Old Testament the people of Israel had to make sure that work of the priesthood could continue. So also under the New Testament the church is called to make sure that the ministry of the gospel can continue. To be responsible in the use of its money the council prepares a budget annually. It is published and discussed with the congregation. The congregation is allowed to give its input. After all the members are expected to contribute. Involving the congregation encourages the council to exercise proper stewardship.

For further info on the budget, see 3-7, Committee of Administration.

All wage earners in the congregation are expected to contribute on a regular basis according to their blessings. Also young people are stimulated to give their first fruits to the Lord. When a member makes public profession of faith, he promises to be a living member of the church. This involves financial obligations as well. All communicant members therefore receive a box of envelopes. A married couple receives one box of envelopes. The contributions are recorded by the treasurer and once per year a tax receipt is issued. Every three months the ward elders receive a list of contributions for their ward.

The contributions to meet the budget are called the Regular Voluntary Contributions (R.V.C.). It is important to distinguish these contributions from the gifts for the needy. We are called to provide for those in need and have to see to it that the deacons have sufficient funds. Besides this we have the obligation to maintain the ministry of the Word. At times members will object to using the envelopes because they feel that it should remain secret what they give. They use the words of the Bible that the right hand should know what the left is doing. However, that text applies to the gifts for the needy, not to the task to maintain the ministry of the gospel. There is nothing wrong with the overseers knowing how much a member is contributing. In the Old Testament the contribution was open to the priests as well.

We use the word contribute. This word means: to give together with others, or to give for a common purpose. The word contribute brings out that we do this together. The apostle Paul speaks about this in 2 Corinthians 9, referring to the ingathering of the manna. The R.V.C. is not an assessment, nor a membership due, but evidence of thankfulness towards the Lord. We use the word "regular" in connection with this contribution. The regularity of the contribution shows the commitment. It should not be that we pay whenever we feel like it. The council does not give the congregation a set time period, although it favours a weekly or monthly contribution. This contribution is also voluntary. The Lord loves the cheerful giver. This also means that we must give according to the measure in which the Lord has blessed us.

Each year Council indicates the average amount expected from a single member and from a married couple. This is a touchy and difficult matter. We do not want to give the impression that R.V.C. is an assessment. Members who legitimately cannot make this average should not feel that they are falling short when they are doing their best. On the other side, members who can do better, should not hesitate to give more. The average is in that sense a guideline. Monthly the income figures are published in the bulletin, to inform the congregation whether more is needed or not.

The ward elders receive the a report of the contributions in their ward every three months. Once a year the consistory goes over these figures. This is usually done in September, prior to the home visit season. In this way the consistory can decide whether this matter should be addressed with a particular member or family. This way the elders, when dealing with this at the home visit, have the backing of the whole consistory. The drawback of this set up is that if the time the home visit takes place several months later the decision of the consistory has faded to the background and the elders may even forget to address it. Nor is there much opportunity to follow up on it. The elders may contact the members whenever they receive the quarterly statement.

What is the duty of the elders in regard to the contributions? Some elements are:

- The elders have to follow up on promises of members to increase their contributions.
- The elders and deacons in their home visits have to speak about proper stewardship in concrete

- terms and with specific questions.
- Parents have to be instructed that they have to teach their children to give their first fruits. The matter of budgeting must be stressed in this respect.
 - The monthly income figures must be published and the elders receive their quarterly statements. The members receive semi-annual income figures.
 - Most of all, members who do not contribute must be admonished. Not contributing is often connected to other things in their lives, a lack of love for the Lord. Not contributing is sin before God.

7. Managing the Finances of the Church

The church has a treasurer and a bookkeeper. The treasurer is member of the Consistory.

For the task of the treasurer:

See 3-7 Committee of Administration.

For the task of the bookkeeper is:

See 3-7 Committee of Administration.

Prior to presenting the new budget to the congregation the Council appoints several audit committees, to audit the books of the treasurer, of the deacons, and of other committees that use funds under the supervision of the Council. These audit committees report to the Council prior to the congregational meeting in writing. The congregation is informed of these reports and they are placed in the archives.

8. Minister's Honorarium

Maintaining the ministry of the gospel includes the support for the minister and his family. The Church Order gives several stipulations in this regard. In the Letter of Call the church promises to provide for the minister and his family. This is worked out in an agreement added to the letter of call. Twice a year the ward elders visit the minister and his wife to ask about the financial situation. They report to Council. The report is discussed without the minister present. He will be informed of Council's decision after re-entering the meeting.

9. Financial Education

The book of Proverbs shows that being able to handle money and possessions wisely requires wisdom. Often you notice that lack of funds is due to mismanagement. There is a task for the elders and deacons to instruct in such situations. This instruction requires wisdom as well. It is easy to hurt people in this regard. Not every one can do the same with the same amount of money. Yet, such education is important. We must also encourage parents and grandparents to instruct and help children and grandchildren. We live in a greedy society. We live in a wasteful society. This does not bypass our homes either. We want a certain standard of living and a certain amount of luxury and comfort, but at what costs does this come? It is necessary to teach contentment and frugality. We must also warn against the easy use of credit, and promote the use of a budget and saving. This instruction should start at an early age.

10. Work

The eighth commandment which requires that we are not to steal also implies the command to work faithfully. The Heidelberg Catechism then also states in Q/A 111 that we must work faithfully to be able to give to those in need. The Bible warns against stealing, and unfair practices, but also against laziness and calls us to be useful with our hands. Dealing with finances then also involves our attitude toward work.

Ex. 22:25-27

If you lend to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a money lender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am

- compassionate.
- Lev. 19:35-36
Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt.
- Lev. 25:35
If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you.
- Prov. 6:6
Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!
- Prov. 9:17
Stolen water is sweet, food eaten in secret is delicious
- Prov. 12:24
Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.
- Prov. 18:9
One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.
- Eph. 4:28
He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.
- 1 Thess 4:11-12
Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.
- 2 Thess 3:6-13
In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

We witness in our congregation an increase in the number of mothers who go out to work. Many explain that this needs to be done in order to make ends meet. This can be true, but it should not be forgotten either that this may be done not only to make the school payments but also out of a desire to maintain a certain lifestyle or to cover up a lack of financial management. We do well to talk about this with the family involved if we have concerns.

11. Evaluation

1. Do we agree on points Scriptural/Confessional basis and goals? Are elements overlooked?
2. Are the R.V.C.'s coming in so that the budget is met? If not, what must we do to stimulate this?
3. What are we doing on homevisits in this regard? Is this sufficient? Can we improve?
4. What can we do to encourage and improve financial education?
5. How can we involve the whole congregation in contributing?
6. What is the financial agreement with the minister? Are he and his wife regularly visited? That is done in light of art. 13 C.O.?
7. What is the protocol followed in counting and depositing money?
8. Do the audits work properly?
9. Are there items which need follow up? Why? How will we go about it?

Outline

Chapter 3 - 3

Congregation and Overseers

Introduction

1. Scripture
2. Confessions - Forms
3. Goals
4. An Spiritual Order
5. Church Order
 - 5.1. Office
 - 5.2. Ecclesiastical Matters
 - 5.3. Worship
 - 5.4. Discipline
6. Congregational Meetings
7. Committees
8. Bulletin
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CONGREGATION AND OVERSEERS

Introduction

The relationship between congregation and overseers is rooted in and sustained by the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He bought the congregation with His blood and makes the congregation share in his victory through the gift of overseers. Congregation and overseers may never take this relationship for granted. It is a tremendous blessing when it functions well. This can only continue when both congregation and council receive each other in recognition of the love of Christ, the Head of the Church (2 Cor 5:14). In this chapter we will reflect on the relationship between congregation and overseers.

1. Scripture

The Bible teaches that the church belongs to God. From the Old Testament we learn that Israel was His people.

Exod 5:1

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.'"

Exod 19:6

You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The same applies to the church of the New Testament.

1 Cor. 3:16

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

1 Cor. 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ

2 Cor 1:1

To the church of God in Corinth

1 Tim. 3:15

... God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

1 Pet 2:9

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,

God is the King of Israel, and the Lord Jesus rules the church. This rule involves the work of office-bearers. The Lord provides leaders, who are called to rule on behalf of God.

Exod 3:10

So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Num 11:16-17

The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

Josh 20:4

"When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them.

Deut 32:7

Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.

Ezek 33:7

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

Matt. 16:18

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Gal. 1:1

Paul, an apostle - sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Eph 4:10-12

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

The office-bearers are in the first place responsible to the LORD and must abide by His Word.

Deut 27:1

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today.

Gal. 1:8

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.

At the same time the office-bearers must realize that the people they are set over belong to the LORD

Deut. 17:18-20

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right and to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

1 Sam 2:12-17

Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD. ... This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt.

Jer 23:1-2

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD.

Ezek 34:1-24

John 21:15-17

Simon, son of John, do you love me? ... Jesus said "Feed my sheep"

1 Pet 5:2-3

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

The members of the congregation, in turn, have to respect the office-bearers as servants of the Lord.

Num 12:1-9

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this. (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you." So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words: "When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.

Num 16:1-3

Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites-- Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth-- became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"

Num 17:8

The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.

1Thes 5:12-13

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

1 Tim 5:17-19

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ... Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

2. Confession/Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession shows that the office-bearers are servants of the Lord. They must in that capacity serve the congregation. The bond between overseers and congregation is clear in Art. 30 and 31.

Art. 30

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

Art 31

We believe that ministers of God's Word, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order, as stipulated by the Word of God. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord. Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

Art 32

We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded. Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.

2.2. Forms

The Form for Ordination addresses the relationship between congregation and overseers. Prayers # 13 and 14 are instructive in this regard as well.

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

Charge

Tend the flock of God, that is in your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock ... On the other hand, beloved brothers and sisters, receive these men as servants of God.

Prayer # 13

Thou hast graciously called us to be office-bearers in Thy church and hast charged us to take heed to ourselves and to all the flock which Christ hast bought with His blood. ... May Thy Word be our only rule and standard, so that our work may be to the glory of Thy Name, serving the well-being of Thy churches and bringing peace to our consciences.

Prayer # 14

Give perseverance to the overseers and the deacons, that they may be a blessing to Thy people through the faithful administration of their offices.

3. Goal

The reflecting on the relationship between congregation and overseers our goal is that the spiritual rule of Christ continues. As Art 32 of the Belgic Confession states it, our goal is "to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God." For the overseers this means to be faithful servants of Christ in the congregation. For the congregation this means to receive the overseers as gifts of the Lord and submit to their instruction and discipline.

4. The Spiritual order

The Belgic Confession in Art.30 uses the word "Spiritual" in connection with the government of the church. What does this mean? It refers to the work of the Holy Spirit. This order is one of the means by which He

makes us willing and ready to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. The word "Spiritual" distinguishes church government from civil government and highlights that the Lord Jesus rules His Church by His Word and Spirit. The overseers come in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the sword of the Spirit, the Word. The purpose of this rule is to keep the church in the redemption which Christ obtained by his death. Both the overseers and the members of the congregation have to see their place within His work. The overseers must realize that they are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ in the congregation. They will have to give account of the way in which they have executed their office. The office bearers may never become an obstacle that prevents the grace of Christ from reaching the lives of God's people. The members of the congregation must realize that it is the Lord who uses the office-bearers to gather, defend and preserve the church. The overseers may not act as dictators, lording it over the congregation. The congregation may not treat the office bearers as their hired-hands. The overseers are servants of Christ given for the upbuilding of the church.

It is a gift of the Lord when congregation and overseers have a good relationship. But such a relationship can only continue when both sides live from the Word of God. Both sides have to see their places before the Head of the Church. Otherwise, it can easily happen that either side only sees its own perceived "rights". Then the overseers try to control the information which the congregation received, hiding behind their "call" and the authority that comes with it, or the congregation looks at the council with distrust as an old boys club, which protects its own interests at all costs. The result will be distrust or even animosity and lead to many misunderstandings. The relationship between congregation and overseers is not one of partisanship, the one side against the other, but one where in unity we bow under the gracious rule of our Lord and so receive His peace.

The spiritual character of the government of the church also means that both congregation and council have to realize that the first requirement is obedience to the Word of God. There is always a danger that the overseers try to please the members as much as possible, even to the point of compromising the proper exercise of the keys of the kingdom. There is also the danger that the congregation looks at the overseers as its representatives who have been elected to do the wishes of the voters. But then again Christ is not in the centre. Living in a time of consumerism and self-centeredness it is important to confess that the government of the church is of a spiritual nature. Our aim is to please the Lord in obeying Him. H. Bouwman, professor Church Polity in the early nineteen hundreds in Kampen, wrote that With every action of the church, the congregation must be able see that in word and deed the Name of Christ is being upheld. Where the Word rules, there we see the rule of Christ, there governs the freedom of God's children (Gereformeerd Kerkrecht, Vol.1, page 30).

5. Church Order

In obedience to the Word, the churches have established a Church Order. The Lord instructs that all things must be done decently and in good order. This, in turn will promote harmony and peace. Our Church Order has then also a wonderful and long history. After the break with the Rome and its hierarchy, the Reformed churches realized that an order is in place, but then one that reflects the rule of Christ as Head of the Church. The purpose of the Church Order is to maintain good order in the church of Christ (see Art. 1 C.O.). The peace of the congregation can flourish when good order is maintained. In order to determine what is good we need to listen to the Word of God. "We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God." (Belgic Confession, art. 32) In the Church Order the churches apply the Word of God to the life of the congregation.

The Reformed churches chose the term "order" rather than "law" when it came to the government of the church. We see the same in Art 30 of the Belgic Confession. The term "law" refers to an absolute rule, whereas the use of the term "order" shows that the aim is to promote harmony and unity. The order has to be used with that in mind. F.L Rutgers, a well known professor Church Polity in the churches after the Secession, remarks that the history of the Reformed churches shows that while they were very strict with

regard to maintaining sound doctrine as the foundation of church life, they allowed a measure of room when it comes to following the order of the churches. (F.L.Rutgers, *De geldigheid vand de oude kerkenordering der Nederlands gereformeerde kerken*, Ton Bolland, 1971. Page 41). The last article of the Church Order reflects this as well. The Church Order has to be observed in such a way that the church can function properly.

In terms of the relationship between congregation and overseers we note that the Reformed Church Order not only rejects hierarchy, -the lording it over the congregation by the overseers-, but also the populist view as if the overseers are elected representatives. It rejects hierarchy, but also independentism. The Church Order starts from the supremacy of Christ. This gives the congregation and the overseers their proper places. In this section we will follow the division of the Church Order and deal with the articles that address the relationship between congregation and overseers. (For a more detailed explanation of each article see the commentaries on the Church Order.)

5.1. Office

The articles in the Church Order that deal with the calling to office and the ordination and installation of Ministers (Art. 3, 5) outline the cooperation of congregation and council. Council asks the congregation for names for nominations. Then the council nominates and allows the congregation to elect. Following the election the council appoints. The appointments are announced so that the congregation can bring in objections if necessary. The last step is the ordination.

In Art. 11 the churches recognize that due to the brokenness of this life the relationship between a minister and a congregation can break down to the point that he can no longer serve the congregation fruitfully. It would be wrong to sacrifice the congregation for the sake of the minister. This article may only be used when there is no reason for discipline. Both sides must indicate that the relationship has broken down to the point that fruitful cooperation is no longer possible.

The articles 22, 23 and 27 deal with visits made to the homes of the members. See chapter 1 -2 Home Visits, and Diaconal visit.

5.2 Ecclesiastical Matters

Art. 31C.O. is crucial for the relationship between congregation and overseers. The overseers have the authority to make binding decisions, but the members have the right to appeal when they feel wronged by the overseers. The right to appeal protects the congregation from decisions of the overseers that go against Scripture, Confession or Church Order. This way may be used when it becomes clear that the two sides cannot agree. The members should not use it too quickly. They must try to convince the overseers of the wrong involved. On the other hand, the overseers may not block the road of appeal. If, for example, the member requests a written answer, the council or consistory must be prepared to do this. The overseers should never be afraid to have their actions judged by the major assembly. In fact, the overseers must be willing to help the member involved in presenting the case before the major assembly.

What should an appeal contain? It should contain the following elements:

- the decision or the actions of the overseers that has caused this disagreement;
- the text of the brother/sister's complaint, with its grounds;
- the decision made by the consistory regarding the objections of the appellant, together with its grounds;
- an explanation by the appellant why he cannot agree with the answer of the overseers;
- a clear request for the major assembly.

It is proper that the appellant submits a copy of the appeal to the consistory, prior to the Classis. The consistory has the opportunity to react in writing to this appeal. This is to be preferred above giving the delegates to Classis the task to defend the position of the consistory. When the consistory decides to submit a written reaction to the major assembly the appellant should receive a copy as well.

The congregation is involved in the major assemblies in that the dates for convening the assemblies are announced to the congregation. When the council submits a proposal to the major assembly or appeals a decision of a non-disciplinary matter, it would be good to inform the congregation of this. In matters that concern the churches in general the council can solicit the input of the congregation. Members can also request the council to present their concerns to the major assembly.

Members are allowed to attend council meetings, except when it concerns confidential matters. It is proper to ask the council ahead of time. A member can also ask to be heard by the council or consistory. The member should indicate ahead what he wants to address. The member can receive an answer right then, or council can discuss it without the person being present and inform him later.

5.3. Worship, sacrament and ceremonies

The council announces the dates and times of the worship services. This is done by means of the bulletin. The congregation is also informed of the Lord's Supper date two weeks prior to its celebration.

In order to receive an attestation a member must request this from the consistory. This request will be announced from the pulpit one week and published in the bulletin for two weeks. An attestation is to be signed by two members of the consistory. An attestation contains the name(s) of the person(s) involved, the church who will receive this attestation, a judgement by the consistory concerning the life of the person and the request to the receiving church to receive the member(s) in their care. The statistical information is added for the benefit of the receiving church. In case of discipline or if the consistory has concerns regarding a member, see 2-1 Discipline.

The church maintains two sets of membership records. The recording clerk maintains the one and the archivist the other.

The announcements take place before the Votum and Salutation. Prior to the service the council goes over the announcements. The announcements deal with:

- worship services, including Lord's Supper and special services
- collections
- membership, attestations, public profession of faith, deaths
- discipline
- homevisits
- wedding banns
- election and ordination
- council/consistory/deacons meetings
- convening of major assemblies

Information about meetings of societies, school matters etc. must be submitted to the bulletin. If so requested an announcement can be made on behalf of a society or school board.

5.4. Discipline

In the articles of the C.O. about Christian discipline we see again the close cooperation between congregation and consistory. The consistory can only deal with matters that pertain to public sins, or when members have followed the way of Matthew 18. When the consistory takes over the discipline the congregation is involved by means of the various announcements and by the request for prayers and visits.

6. Congregational Meetings

The council meets with the congregation for the purpose of electing office bearers. This is usually done after the afternoon worship service. Once a year council and congregation meet to discuss the finances of the church. The Treasurer presents an Annual Report and the Budget for the new year. The Recording

Clerk presents an Annual Report which deal with the life of the congregation. The annual congregational meeting can be used to discuss other matters as well. The question period at the end of this meeting gives the members the opportunity to bring matters to the attention of council. It must be kept in mind that the Congregational Meeting is a meeting of council with congregation. The members of the congregation cannot make motions unless the council asks for the input of the congregation. If a major decision is to be made the council as a rule seeks the input of the congregation by means of an additional congregational meeting.

7. Committees

Council can appoint committees for a specific purpose. It must provide the Committees with a clear mandate. Each Committee is appointed by the council. When members of committees retire or resign, the committee has to present suggested names to fill the vacancies. Council decides on this suggestion. Those appointed are informed by the a member of Council. The committees submit reports to the council on a regular basis. The committees and their members are published in the yearly Directory.

8. Bulletin

The publication of a bulletin facilitates the communication between the congregation and council. Council should have clear guidelines as to what is published.

9. Evaluation

1. Do we agree with the Scriptural and Confessional basis and goals?
2. Describe the current relationship between congregation and council. Are there elements that need to be improved, changed, added? Why? How?
3. Is the congregation properly informed? Is council open in its communication with the congregation? Are the press releases helpful?
4. How is the involvement of the congregation in the process of election? Are there concerns? How can we promote this involvement? Is the congregation aware of the Regulations for Election?
5. How do we involve the congregation in the work of the major assemblies?
6. Are the announcements sufficient and to the point?
7. Do the congregational meetings function well? Why? How is the attendance? What can we do to promote this?
8. Which committees do we have? Do the Committees function well? Are the committees clear on their mandates? Do we give them room to do their work? Is there periodic retirement?
9. Are we satisfied with the way the bulletin is used? Do we have clear guidelines about the contents of the bulletin? Who is responsible for the contents? Are there things we need to improve on? How can we do this?

Outline

Chapter 3 - 4

Counselling

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4. Pastoral Care and Counselling
5. Counselling Service Network
6. Abuse
 - 6.1. Abuse and Power
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 - 6.3. Sickness or Sin
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Appendix 1 - Policy for Child Abuse Prevention

Appendix 2 - Abuse

1. What it is
2. How does it start
3. How does it continue
4. How is destroys

COUNSELLING

Introduction

At the ordination of an office-bearer the congregation prays that the person(s) involved may receive wisdom in order to function as office bearer for the benefit of the congregation. This wisdom is necessary because we live in a broken world, which can make the lives of God's children difficult. When as servants of the Lord we have to deal with and help in these situations, we need wisdom. We receive this wisdom from the Holy Spirit and the Word. In this chapter we will reflect on this task to help those members who struggle with difficulties in their lives. The word "counselling," used in the title, is not used in a professional sense. The office-bearers are to watch over the "souls" of the members entrusted into their care. This care may involve giving counsel.

1. Scripture

The Bible uses the image of shepherd and sheep in connection with the care office-bearers have to show towards the congregation. This image brings us back to who our God is. The LORD God is the Shepherd of His people. He takes care of the needs of the sheep.

Ps 79:13

Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

Ps 95:7

for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Ps 121:7

The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life;

Ez 34 : 11

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them

1 Pet 2:25

For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

He counsels His people.

Ps 32:8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

Ps 73:24

You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Isa 11:2

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--

This care for His sheep shows most wonderfully in the sending of the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd

Matt 15:24

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

Matt 9:36

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

John 10:11

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Before his ascension Christ in turn appoints people to shepherd His flock.

Matt 9:36-38

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Matt 10:6

Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

Luke 22:32

But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

John 21:15

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

The apostles took care of the flock and appointed overseers to continue this task.

Acts 14:22

strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

Acts 15:32

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

Acts 18:23

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Acts 20:28

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

1Thes 2:12

encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

1Thes 5:11

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

This care is needed because God's children can go through difficult times.

1 Sam 1:10

In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD.

1 Sam 1:16

Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

2 Sam 19:2

And for the whole army the victory that day was turned into mourning, because on that day the troops heard it said, "The king is grieving for his son."

Ps 6:3

My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?

Ps 23:3-4

he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.

Ps 42:1, 11

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. ... Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Ps 88:9

my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.

Lam 3:20

I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

The Lord gives overseers to bring His comfort to His people in need. This will give rest in their lives.

Ps. 23 : 2, 6

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ... Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD, forever.

Ps 131:2

But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

2 Cor 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

1 Pet 5:10

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

The overseers need wisdom in order to give good pastoral care.

2 Chron 1:10

Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people,

2. Confession - Church Order - Forms

2.1. Heidelberg Catechism

The theme of the Heidelberg Catechism is formulated in Lord's Day 1, and summarized in the word "comfort." In using this theme the Catechism is aware of the hardship which we may face in life and the strength we receive in the promises of the Lord. The Catechism elaborates on this theme in more Lord's Days.

Q/A 1

What is your only comfort in life and death?

That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

Q/A 26.

What do you believe when you say: *I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?*

That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and all that is in them, and who still upholds and governs them by His eternal counsel and providence, is, for the sake of Christ His Son, my God and my Father.

In Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul, and will also turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow.

He is able to do so as almighty God, and willing also as a faithful Father.

Q/A 44

Why is there added: *He descended into hell?*

In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

Q/A 53.

What do you believe concerning *the Holy Spirit?*

First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God. Second, He is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever.

2.2. Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort openly address the fact that believers at times struggle with what they receive from the hand of the Lord. Assurance of faith is not to be gained by prying into ourselves, but by holding on to the Word of God.

Chapter 1, Article 16 - Responses To The Doctrine Of Reprobation

Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through Christ; nevertheless, they use the means through which God has promised to work these things in us. They ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned, nor to count themselves among the reprobate. Rather, they must diligently continue in the use of these means, fervently desire a time of more abundant grace, and expect it reverently and humbly. Others seriously desire to be converted to God, to please Him only, and to be delivered from the body of death. Yet they cannot reach that point on the way of godliness and faith which they would like. They should be even less terrified by the doctrine of reprobation, since a merciful God has promised not to quench the smoking flax nor to break the bruised reed. Still others disregard God and the Saviour Jesus Christ and have completely given themselves over to the cares of the world and the lusts of the flesh. For them this doctrine of reprobation is rightly fearsome as long as they are not seriously converted.

Chapter 5, Article 5 - The Effects Of Such Serious Sins

By such gross sins, however, they greatly offend God, incur deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, suspend the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God's favour — until they return to the right way through sincere repentance and God's fatherly face again shines upon them.

2.3. Church Order

According to the Church Order it is the task of the office bearers to help and encourage.

Art. 22 - The Office of Elder

The specific duties of the office of elder are faithfully to visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God

Art. 23 - The Office of Deacon

They shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love

2.4. Forms

The sacraments have been given to strengthen us, because the Lord is mindful of our questions and struggles.

Form for the Baptism of Infants

When we are baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.

Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper

But all this, beloved brothers and sisters is not meant to discourage broken and contrite hearts

By all this He has taken our curse upon Himself that He might fill us with His blessing

2.5. Prayer

Prayer # 9, A prayer for the sick and the spiritually distressed

Prayer # 10, A prayer for the sick and the spiritually distressed

3. Goal

The goal of counselling is that as servants of the Lord we show Christ's liberating rule over the lives of his people who are in danger of getting stuck in the brokenness of life.

4. Pastoral Care and Counselling

Historically the Reformed churches have connected the pastoral care to the use of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, the preaching of the gospel and the administration of discipline. In the proclamation of God's Word the free grace of God is administered to each and every one in the congregation. The administration of discipline is aimed at bringing sinners to repentance and so functions in the sanctification of life. In connecting the pastoral care to the keys of the Kingdom of heaven we confess that the greatest misery of mankind is the guilt we have before God and His wrath over our sin. Thus the greatest gift is the forgiveness of these sins for in this way our communion with the Lord and with each other is restored. The church is the gathering "of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit" (Art.27 Belgic Confession), not a club of people who all have overcome psychological problems.

It is all the more important to maintain this in light of modern approaches to counselling which are based on anthropological ideologies. These approaches usually place man in the centre and demand unconditional acceptance of the person. We have to accept each other as we are. Man is no longer seen as a sinner before God and has no guilt before God. As a result there is no place for the wrath of God, for discipline, for forgiveness, or even for the Bible. As Reformed believers we must continue to speak of our guilt before God and the brokenness of this life because of our fall into sin. Only then can we continue to administer the grace of God to "broken and contrite" hearts.

The fact that the Reformed Churches connected the pastoral care to the keys of the kingdom, also means that these keys include more than preaching and discipline, they also include the direct contact between the overseer and the members in the congregation. Human life is always in danger of getting stuck in the complications of sin and the brokenness of life. God's people can have the feeling that they are going through a valley "of the shadow of death". There may seem no way out to them. The overseers may help them in showing them the way, that is, in teaching wisdom. Christ's rule by His Word and Spirit sets people free. The Spirit who equips the overseers for their task is the Spirit of wisdom. The pastoral visit is a wonderful gift in this regard.

Knowing ourselves to be servants of the Lord teaches us that we must do our work with respect and humility before the face of God. This sets limits to our work. We do not know everything. There are times when we have to admit that we don't know why something is happening. There are situations when we

have to step back. The ultimate deliverance from sin is God's work, not ours. This implies that there can be situations in which an overseer cannot help and/or does not have to help, because professional help is in place. This brings in focus the relation between pastoral help and professional help. The pastoral help is not a replacement of professional help, nor does professional help have to be an attack on pastoral help. They should work hand in hand. As overseers we must be aware that we are not social workers, nor should we be ashamed of our calling. Christ has entrusted us with the keys of His Kingdom. This determines our relationship with the members and thus differs from a client and social worker relationship. Dr.C.Trimp points to three elements in this connection (Zorgen voor de Gemeente, chapter 7.)

1. The relationship between office bearer and member goes deeper. It touches the heart and the relationship with God. In the pastoral relationship the command of God and His promises are proclaimed for all of life.
2. The relationship between office bearer and member lasts longer, it continues for our whole life on earth, whereas the relationship between social worker and client is only for a time.
3. The relationship between office bearer and member is anchored in the communion of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is why a social worker only helps when asked, but office bearers will seek the members in order to find out whether they need help.

Because God's Word recognizes the reality of a broken human life, we should not be afraid to have professionals involved. A good professional should respect, or even direct his client to the help of the overseers.

5. Counselling Service Network

The Counselling Services Network Committee has as mandate to assist office bearers in directing members of the Canadian Reformed Churches in remediating and reconciling broken relationships, and to promote among members of the churches biblically sound and confessionally faithful approaches to the use of available counselling services. The committee is also mandated to publish and maintain a handbook for a counselling services network. All the office bearers should have a copy of this Handbook.

6 Abuse

The recent attention for abuse has its good sides and its bad sides. The good side is that we have become more aware of the way abuse operates and what it does to those affected by it. It helps us to detect it, to deal with it, to try to find a way out of it. The not so good side is that it becomes fashionable to deal with it which may lead to overreaction. This means that on the one hand we must be realistic, there is abuse, and it is terrible, but on the other hand we need not accept everything that is said by our society about abuse. We must be aware of our position as believers in all this, and without denying the reality the solutions can be totally different.

Two comments are in place here. In the first place we acknowledge that abuse happens also in our community. And, just like society, as a whole, is becoming more and more aware of it and trying to come to terms with it, so do we. There is no reason to believe that within our community the abuse is worse than in other circles. Secondly, we can only deal with abuse in this handbook in a general fashion. Every situation is different, every type of abuse is different. In Appendix 2 you will find a further explanation what abuse is and what it does.

6.1. Abuse and Power

"Abuse" is abuse of power. Power is misused in order to gain control over the other. Power is misused to keep the other in control. We will begin our evaluation then by looking at what the Bible says about power, or rather, authority. The Bible teaches us that all authority comes from God. This means that authority is never a purpose in itself and may never be used for selfish purposes. He who has authority has received it from the Lord and will have to give account to the Lord how he has used it.

In abusive situations this power is divorced from the Lord and seen as a tool to serve the abuser. Therefore abuse is in the first place an insult to God. The abusive husband who tells his wife that he is her head should first of all realize that he has Christ as Head. The parents who want to control their children should realize that their position is one given by the Lord. Ephesians 5 and 6 and Colossians 3 clearly speak of all relationships of authority as in the Lord.

Here we see then the difference between the way we look at abuse and the way this world does. This world operates from the idea that man is a power unto himself, man has rights which may not be infringed upon. Therefore the injustice and hurt of the victim stands in the centre, even runs the danger of being idolized. We acknowledge that all authority comes from God, is to be received from Him in faith and used in loving obedience to Him. His love, His justice and right stand in the centre. Both abuser and victim will find their help in the Lord, that is, in God's saving love in Christ.

It is remarkable that Paul stresses in Ephesians 5:22-33 that the position of authority of the husband is to be ruled by Christian love. This love reflects the self sacrificing love of Christ for His Bride. Therefore, the love of the Christian husband, his position of head of the family, may not be a matter of selfish domination. Rather, it is a matter of giving, sacrificing and caring love in which the wife and child is safe, can feel safe and is protected.

The same message we find in Colossians 3. The position of authority in the relations between husband and wife, between parents and children, and between masters and slaves, is placed under the theme of the loving and giving care of Christ. In the vss.12-17 we read: "Put on ...compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, ... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts; ... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." In this context children are admonished to "obey their parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." This context also leads to a warning for the fathers, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." Here is spoken of fathers who seek the spiritual, mental, and physical well-being of their children in the light of Christ's caring and self-sacrificing love.

6.2. Old and New

Is abuse something new of the 20th century? No, abuse is as old as sin is old. All through the centuries there has been abuse. For abuse is the abuse of power. Man has from the beginning rebelled against the authority of God. We all have abused His love. The consequences of this disobedience is also that human relationships can become abusive. Already in the O.T. we find references to and warnings against alcohol, abuse of power in marriage, sexual abuse and incest. The N.T. also warns against being filled with wine, instructs husbands to deal wisely with their wives, as their own body, and commands fathers not to provoke their children to anger. The Bible certainly warns for the abuse of power and also realizes that abuse can and does happen.

There is nothing new under the sun, also when it comes to abuse. What is new compared to 50 years ago, is our awareness of the effects of abuse, and that we are prepared to say that abuse cannot be tolerated. The husband who abuses his wife has broken his vows and his marriage, and the wife is justified to leave him if he makes it impossible for her to live a Christian life. The rule to be more obedient to God than to men also applies to marriage and the relationship parent-child.

Though this openness in itself is good, yet we should be aware of possible over-reaction as well. You see such an over-reaction in our society. In fact, because our society does not want to acknowledge that all authority comes from God it is unable to give the proper answer to abuse. This leads to contradictions and aberrations. For is not abortion a most terrible form of child abuse? Or, to give another example, a child can with one malicious allegation destroy the name and career of someone he does not like. And the media which highlight cases of abuse also feed society with violence, selfishness and sex. Similarly, our world wants to give the victim the feeling of self-worth. In doing this they replace the power of the 'other'

with the power of 'self'. But how can a person receive a proper selfworth, except before the face of God? In Father's eyes I am person, for He calls me by name.

This contradictory reaction of our 20th century society is a result of not wanting to accept the authority of God. Abuse can only be dealt with from the perspective of God's will and His claim on man.

6.3. Sickness or Sin

This brings us to a question we cannot escape, namely is abuse a matter of sickness or sin. Is the alcoholic, the wife beater, the sexual abuser a sick person, or do we regard his actions as sin? Some say it is a sickness, it is a condition not an act. Give medication and professional help and that should solve some of the problems, or perhaps it will never be solved. Others say no it is sin. Confess and repent from your selfishness and you will be healed.

Abuse is sin. Abuse involves a wrong use of power, thus the person who abuses wants to take the place of God. The abuser has in his own view absolute power and imposes this on the other. This is sin. The Bible shows that every relationship is in the Lord. All authority we receive is delegated to us, and must be used in submission to God. The Bible also indicates that the body, also the victim's body, is a temple of the Holy Spirit. There is no excuse for abuse. Both victim and abuser must know this.

To see the sinfulness of abuse we can refer to the Ten Words of the covenant, the law of God. The LORD introduces His law in proclaiming our redemption by His power. God's power is a power manifested in redemption. With regard to the first commandment we can say that the abuser has made power into an idol. The second commandment says that we must serve the LORD according to His will, not according to our own will. The abuser does it on his own terms. And does not God say in the fifth commandment that all authority comes from Him? In the sixth commandment the LORD forbids dishonouring and injuring others by thoughts, words, gestures much less by deed. Does not the seventh commandment say that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit? It is even remarkable that in the O.T. to steal, forbidden in the eighth commandment, also applies to stealing people. Dt 24:7 "If a man is found to have kidnapped a fellow Israelite, enslaving him or selling him, that kidnapper shall die; thus you will sweep out evil from your midst." (JPS transl.) See also Ex.21:16. Abuse is evil in the eyes of God.

While maintaining that abuse is sin, we should not close our eyes either for the fact that the abuser himself has a distorted view on reality, or the possibility that the one who abuses has certain things in his life that may prevent him from seeing his sin clearly. There can be trouble or even abuse in childhood, there can be an inferiority complex, there can be many different things. Abusive behaviour has a pattern and a history. This is important in dealing with the victim because the victim has put on the blame on himself. The victim supposedly could have prevented the abuse. This is also of importance in dealing with the perpetrator. It may take much to make him see his sin.

We say this not to excuse the sin but to be able to focus on the repentance. The abuser must repent, but that repentance must not be outward or superficial. When you see that abusive behaviour as sickness, then part of the responsibility goes away. Can he help it that he is sick? The solution is then professional help, and as elders we can perhaps function as helpers who stand by the sideline. But if it is a sin for which repentance must be shown, then we have a function as elders. For then also the use of the keys of the kingdom comes into the picture.

How should we use these keys? They must be administered so that the sinner, by the power of the Holy Spirit, comes to repentance. He has to acknowledge his wrong and do his utmost to seek help. Not forgetting that the goal of all discipline is to reconcile the sinner to God.

6.4. Abuse and Faith

Within our community the effects of abuse can be deepened by a misuse of what Scripture teaches us about authority. The abusive husband will point to the command that women must be submissive, and abusive parents often use the commandment "Honour your father and your mother." The Bible is read with a view to what the other has to do. The name of the LORD is used to gain or maintain control over the life, the emotions or the body of someone else. Such use of the name of the LORD is abuse of His name. For it is used to condone or cover up sinful practices. In addition a tremendous burden is placed on the shoulders of the victim. For in the mind of the victim to oppose the abuse becomes equal to opposing God. In such circumstances we may tell the victim that God is a loving Father, who forbids abuse. The life of the victim is in His hand.

God reveals Himself to us as a Father. He uses a title that we are all familiar with. For this reason, abuse in the earthly relationship, e.g. of father and child, can have consequences for the victim's relationship with the LORD. If the earthly father is unpredictable and abusive, then it can become difficult to address God as Father. It is therefore important to keep in mind what we confess in Lord's Day 9, namely that the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is for His sake my God and Father. God's fatherhood cannot be separated from the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. This shows that Father in heaven is not a tyrant, but a loving Father who gives what is most dear to Him in His love for us. When the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5 says that the relationship between parents and children is one in the Lord then this element is certainly included. The calling of parents with regard to their children is to show this love. They may instill in them the understanding that their mutual relationship is one in the Lord. Not the parents give the children their place, nor do children give their parents a place, but both receive their place from the Father in heaven through the Lord Jesus Christ. Abusive parents by their controlling attitude tend to obscure this grace of God and can thus seriously hurt the relationship of the victim with the heavenly Father.

At times Scriptural concepts are used to reinforce abuse or to ignore its effects. The abusive husband will tell his wife that she must be submissive to her husband, and an abusive parent will tell the child that children must honour their parents and have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings. These statements are indeed true, only the situation in which they are used and the purpose for which they are used make them so "poisonous". For in the eye of the victim to go for help or even to go against the abusive husband and parent is nothing less but disobedience to God's command. It puts a tremendous burden of guilt of the victim and undermines a proper understanding of what forgiveness is. For in this use of God's law repentance means to be forced to do what the abuser wants you to do. This is a total caricature of the biblical understanding of repentance and forgiveness.

The relationship between abuse and faith comes to the fore also in other ways. Many victims ask themselves the question, Where was God when this happened? If this is wrong why did He not stop it? These questions are already difficult to deal with. It becomes, however, more difficult yet when the abuser comes to the victim to ask for forgiveness while the abuse continues. Not only can this lead to a warped understanding of the Lord forgiving our sins, it can even bring about hatred against the Lord. In addition, the feeling of guilt makes that the victim feels that he or she has no "right" to the promises of God. There are victims who were able to endure much because of their faith, this is true, but it is equally true that abuse can distort one's view on the promises of God and destroy the certainty of faith.

6.5. Help and Healing

Helping, of both the victim and the abuser, begins with taking abuse seriously. Helping begins with listening and being open for the thoughts and fears of the other. But it will not stay there. It must progress from there, though that may take a lot of time. For all the defences which we mentioned above must first be broken down. The denial, the guilt the fear need to be addressed. That can take a long time. For the victim these defences give a measure of security. What they don't realize is how these defences do not help but rather make it more difficult for the person. These defences have also covered the main issue. Therefore what you will see once the defences come down that the pain and the hurt comes up. That is to

be expected. But it will make the victim say, "Why did I do this? Not telling and living with the lie was nicer than dealing with this pain." This is not true. To live with a lie is not life. The victim must become aware of what has to happen in him or her. Help is possible.

Who can help? Do you need to be an expert in order to help? There are two things we need to stress. In the first place we have to know our own limitations. Abuse runs deep and is cunning. Wife abuse is not just a marital disagreement, child abuse is not just a minor incident. Therefore we should not reject professional help off hand. Such help can be instrumental in dealing with the abuse. In the second place we should not think little of what we can do in being a hand a foot to each other in the congregation. With the word of God we can be of help also in these situations. The grace of God is sufficient also for situations of abuse. A professional counsellor has only 1 hour in the three weeks, but we can deal with each other on a much more frequent basis. Certain scars may never go away, but we can help each other to live from the grace of God.

That brings us also to the question what task the office bearers in the church have. The officebearer is not a professional counsellor. I would say he is more, he is charged to take care of the souls of congregation. The minister is not a professional counsellor either. His task is to be pastor and teacher. As pastor he has to deal with the difficulties in the flock, including abuse. Officebearers also have to know their limitations and not be afraid to make use of professional services. On the other hand they should not relinquish their task to counsellors. For the officebearers have something what the counsellor do not have, the keys of the kingdom of God. Abuse is sin against God, it is God who forgives sins, who also heals and helps. He has given us His servants, the office-bearers, who, with all shortcomings, are called to take care of the members. They may do this with the Word of God and the help of the Holy Spirit.

It is here that the difference in approach to abuse is very significant. I said this society puts man in the centre and his hurts. In order to solve that you need experts. We place the justice of God in the centre, and that gives the office bearers a place. The grace of God and the mercy of Christ comes to us through them. Both victim and abuser must see their place before God, only then healing is possible. God's grace and Spirit are more powerful than the forces of darkness. And in this life that is seen in part, after this life it will be completed, for we are on the way to a kingdom without abuse.

7. Reporting

The information for the following two paragraphs is gleaned from A Handbook for the Prevention of Family Violence published by the Community Child Abuse Council of Hamilton-Wentworth (page 1.18).

The Child and Family Services Act of Ontario (1984) charges the Ministry of Community and Social Services with the responsibility of defining and legislating procedures for the handling of all child abuse cases, whether suspected or confirmed. These services are administered by the Children's Aid Societies, also known as Family and Children's Services. The Child and Family Services Act is intended to ensure professional, consistent and effective practices in serving abused children and their families. Its paramount objective is to promote the best interests, protection and well being of children. The Child and Family Services Act also recognizes a family's culture, heritage, tradition and the concept of extended family.

It is the duty of the general public to report to the Children's Aid Society a belief "on reasonable grounds that a child is or may be in need of protection." A person acting in their professional capacity is mandated to report if they have reasonable grounds to suspect child abuse. It is the direct responsibility of the individual who suspects abuse to make the report. Even if other protocol exists in a place of employment it is still the responsibility of the person with the initial information to ensure that such a report has actually been made. This portion of the Child and Family Services Act applies to every person in Ontario. Failure to report a suspicion of child abuse is an offense under the Child and Family Services Act.

The implication of this is that if an overseer believes "on reasonable grounds that a child is or may be in need of protection" he has to report this to the authorities. The decision to inform the family involved should be made in consultation with the Child and Family Services. If an overseer is told that a child is being abused he has the obligation to report this to Child and Family Services or the police. If the victim involved is 16 years or older there is no obligation to report. The person involved has to make this decision. A Policy for Child Abuse Prevention is added to this chapter.

In reporting the matter to the civil authorities there is no need for the overseers to investigate or to judge whether the accusation is credible. They can instead focus on the pastoral care for victim and/or perpetrator and if possible on reconciliation. If the accused admits to wrongdoing, the elders have to look for willingness to admit guilt and show true repentance.

8. Literature

- Allender, Dan B., *The Wounded Heart*, NavPress, 1990
- J.R.Sittema, *With a Shepherd's Heart*, Granville, MI, 1996
- C.Trimp, *Zorgen voor de Gemeente*, van den Berg, Kampen, 1982
- J.Visscher, "Child Abuse and the Duty to Report", in *Diakonia*, Vol. V, No. 1 (September, 1991)
- A Handbook for a Counselling Services Network, by The Counselling Services Network Committee of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 1998

9. Evaluation

1. Do we agree with the Scriptural and Confessional basis and goal?
2. Do we agree on the difference between office bearer and social worker? Is there good cooperation with local professionals?
3. Are we clear on our duties with respect to the civil governments?
4. Do we have a Policy for Child Abuse Prevention? If not, should we look for one. If we do, is it functioning well?
5. Are there items that need follow up? Why? How will we do this?

MARANATHA CANADIAN REFORMED CHURCH AT FERGUS

Child Abuse Prevention

Whereas we acknowledge that the abuse of children (sexual, physical, and emotional) can happen anywhere, including in the Church or in other facilities used by the Church in children's and youth programs;

And whereas we understand that the effects of such abuse have a profound short-term and long-term impact on the victim;

And whereas we understand that, as members of this Church, we must seek to ensure that our children and youth who participate in any programs offered through the Church, may do so without fear of abuse;

And whereas we acknowledge that a person who would prey upon children may see the Church as a place where he/she may have access to children or youth;

And whereas we understand that any abuse, or allegation of abuse, can seriously compromise our witness for Christ within our community and beyond;

We, the Council of the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church at Fergus, solemnly agree to adopt the following Policy for Child Abuse Prevention, this day of .

Policy for Child Abuse Prevention

1. All persons desiring to work with children/youth through programs (current or future) of this Church must first meet the following qualifications:
 - Be a member in good standing of the Canadian Reformed Church for at least 6 months;
 - Upon request submit a copy of a recent criminal reference check. A record involving any abuse of children will, in all cases, disqualify the individual from working with the children or youth through this Church.
2. At no time will young children be left alone in an individual's care behind closed door or in an isolated and private location.
3. When teens are involved in children's or youth programs, they will be supervised or will always meet with children in a classroom or area equipped with a window or open door.
4. All classrooms will be modified so that, if there is no other way to view the room easily, a window will be installed in the classroom door.
5. Individuals who work with children or youth will be reminded of the importance of avoiding potentially compromising situations in which an allegation of abuse could be made.
6. We will strive to ensure that parents are aware of the precautions being taken to protect their children. Parental consent forms will be used for all special activities or events, and for any event, which requires an overnight stay.
7. In the event that any allegation of abuse of a child or youth is made, it will be reported immediately to the appropriate police authorities and to the minister. The process will be carefully documented, including dates, times, and content of all conversations pertaining to the alleged abuse. If the minister is accused of abuse, the consistory will be notified and deal with the complaint forthwith, in accordance with Art. 71 of the Church Order.
8. Any incident in which there is a concern for the safety or well being of a child under the care and supervision of our Church will be taken seriously and may be investigated.

Adopted:

Appendix 2

ABUSE**1. What is abuse?**

The term abuse is used in different circumstances and situations. We speak about

- substance abuse, alcoholism and drug addictions;
- physical abuse, physically hurting someone, a child, a spouse, or an elderly person;
- sexual abuse, then we are dealing with an abuse of sexuality, incest, date rape;
- emotional abuse, then the scars are inside, in belittling and ridiculing a person.

They are all different, and yet they have many things in common, the way the abuse starts, what it does to both the abuser and the victim, how it is maintained and how it destroys relationships. We will look at three types of abuse, alcohol, wife and child abuse. There are more types of abuse but we use these three to show the patterns and consequences of abuse.

The best way to start is to look at a very general definition of abuse. "Abuse is any behaviour that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation and verbal or physical assaults." To put it very shortly, abuse is abuse of power. Someone misuses a position of power, and doing this gives the abuser a good feeling and/or an excuse to continue in the abuse. It starts small, but has to grow in order to be satisfactory for the abuser. There is a process, a cycle.

2. How it starts**2.1. Alcohol abuse**

When we then look at alcohol abuse, as an example of substance abuse, then we can say that at one point in time, for whatever reason, this person cannot stop going back to the alcohol. An alcoholic is not one who is always drunk. Some alcoholics are hardly ever drunk. But an alcoholic feels the need to go back to the alcohol because of what it can do for him. He may try to hide the use of alcohol, but cannot do without it. The alcohol puts him on top of the world. It makes that he forgets all the tensions, difficulties or his own mistakes. That feeling justifies for him the act of taking the alcohol. It was worth it. However, in sobering up the alcoholic is confronted with reality and the results of his behaviour. Often he is confronted with the blame. This is where the people who live around him come in the picture, they also see and feel the results of his behaviour. They can cover up, do as if nothing was the matter, and the alcoholic thinks everything is perfectly alright. Or the people around him by their angry reactions give him an excuse for further drinking. The alcoholic can manipulate the situation, and use his power and/or anger to make the others angry so that he has a reason to drink again. In all this the alcoholic does not see the real problem.

2.2. Wife Abuse

The terms "wife abuse" and "wife assault" are used when a man hurts or threatens a woman he is in relationship with. Today, in our society that means they may be married, living together, dating or former partners. Wife assault includes:

- Physical assault: hitting, slapping, shoving;
- Sexual assault: forcing a woman to have sex against her wishes, making her do sexual acts she doesn't like;
- Emotional abuse: threatening to hurt her, threatening her badly in front of others, controlling where she goes and what she does, degrading her. (From a pamphlet produced by The Haldimand-Norfolk Coordinating Committee to End Violence Against Women)

Wife abuse starts already at the very beginning of the relationship (from: Forward, Men who hate Women). Already in their dating and engagement times there were incidents which point in this direction.

To give some examples:

- he thinks she must do what he says and will not tolerate that she has a different opinion,
- he can buy her and her love and thus she belongs to him.
- he makes her to be perfect with the result that she is bound to fail. Every failure is a reason that she deserves to be hurt
- Often there was no meaningful communication.

These symptoms were ignored. The girl is so flattered by his behaviour, or is afraid she will end up without husband that she decided to push certain bad symptoms to the background, whereas, the positive things she over-emphasized. Thus you end up with an unrealistic picture. Or, if she sees the negative element, she sees it as her mission to rescue him. She feels sorry for him. She fools herself and does not see him as he is.

An added element is that in such a relationship the physical aspect plays an important role. It is not unusual that already from quite early in the relationship there is a sexual relationship and the marriage is not based on mutual respect and trust.

A related topic is dating violence or, date rape. The teenager who takes a girl out on a date demands sexual favours, physically hurts or threatens. Often alcohol or drugs are involved as well. The girl is intimidated and afraid to talk about it.

2.3. Child Abuse

"Generally speaking, child abuse (which also implies serious neglect) encompasses those non-accidental situations in which a child suffers physical trauma, deprivation of basic physical and developmental needs, or mental injury, as a result of an act or omission by a parent, caretaker or legal guardian." (Child Abuse, A handbook for Social Workers in Ontario, 1983, page 4) It is usual to distinguish between three categories:

- Physical maltreatment: beating, wounding, burning and poisoning; actions which result in non-accidental injuries such as fractures, bites, bruises, cuts, burns and internal injury.
- Emotional/mental maltreatment: results from psychological aggressive actions, this includes overt rejection, repeated belittling, open 'disowning' of the child, unreasonable demands for competence, repeated threatening.
- Sexual maltreatment: the use of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult, or the allowing of such use of a child by a parent, caretaker, or legal guardian, exploitation of the child for pornographic purposes. This last category also includes what is called incest. The criminal code defines this as "intercourse with a blood relative". Today it is used for any sexual contact with a relative, or even any sexual contact that has to be kept secret.

Child abuse is a difficult subject to address. If it is for, how much more is it difficult for those who were or are abused to speak about it. Child abuse usually provokes in the victim a horrible sense of shame, therefore the best thing to do is to leave it covered and deny it. The typical response of a victim is, "Why would I tell about it?" Why suffer again all the pain and shame? How is that going to help? It will only hurt others. The abused child does not realize that to deny the past leads to a life of denial, which is no life.

In explaining this type of abuse it might be helpful to begin with a question which invariably comes to mind when dealing with physical and emotional abuse, Where does the boundary lie between proper discipline and abuse? How do you know that you are dealing with a situation in which a child is rightly punished or a situation where abuse is taking place? Some say that physical punishment should never be used. As soon as the parent spans the child we can call Children's Aid. We would not agree. There is a place for punishment. But the punishment must be within bounds, not out of proportion with the offence. And the punishment should also be accompanied with speaking to the child, explaining why certain actions or words are unacceptable.

Abuse occurs when parents or those who take care of children use their position to control the child and in the process inflict harm. Every parent at times punishes a child, that does not have to be abuse, nor does this have to cause lasting wounds in the life of the child. Every parent makes mistakes too, also that does not have to lead to abuse.

"All parents are deficient from time to time ... No parents can be emotionally available all the time. It is perfectly normal for parents to yell at their children once in a while. All parents occasionally become too controlling. And most parents spank their children, even if rarely. Do these lapses make them cruel and unsuitable parents? Of course not. Parents are only human and have plenty of problems of their own. And most children can deal with occasional outbursts of anger as long as they have plenty of love and understanding to counter it. But toxic parents inflict ongoing trauma." (Forward, *Toxic Parents*, page 5)

Abusive parents want to control their children completely and any indication of independence, be it as baby or teenager is seen as rebellion and a personal attack on the power of the parent. Therefore what do you do? You squash that rebellion and make sure they do not challenge you. With the help of physical force, humiliation or intimidation the parent wants to control the child. The punishment is not at all in proportion to the offense is unpredictable. Though the child knows the abuse will come, he doesn't know when and what will trigger it. In trying to control, the parent takes away every feeling of self-worth in the child.

Child abuse therefore can be done physically, as well as emotionally or verbally. Just because we see no bruises, the hurting is no less and the damage is just as serious. Words can be just as destructive as deeds. Insulting names, degrading comments, belittling criticism will have consequences for the well-being of the child when done frequently and systematically. The child can only survive in constantly denying its own will or opinion. The child is not allowed to have his own personality.

Sexual abuse and incest is the most destructive and bewildering category of abuse. Sexual abuse most often happens between a child and someone he knows or trusts, a family member or trusted friend. At times the child is confronted with the abuser. The abuser has a face, a voice and a smell, which when met, even in totally different circumstances, trigger off the painful memories of the abuse. This leads to a unbearable tension in the child's life. There is this terrible secret the child does not dare to speak about.

Sexual abuse is an event or a series of events that occur in a context. There are several stages. Though in each case the time and situation is different, yet it all works basically the same way. There is first of all the stage in which intimacy and a sense of being appreciated is created. The victim is made to feel special, for example, she is the only one who really understands him. This is followed by repeated violations of the child's boundaries. It is in this climate that abuse occurs. Next the abuser subtly changes the child's feelings and reactions. They are not right, or non-existent. The final stage is that the abuse is maintained by means of threats and blackmail.

3. How it continues

Why is it that the cycle of abuse is so hard to break? Why is it that people who live in abusive situations seem to be unable to walk away from it? One answer given is:

"Alcoholism is like a dinosaur in the living room. To an outsider the dinosaur is impossible to ignore, but for those within the home, the hopelessness of evicting the beast forces them to pretend it isn't there. That's the only way they can coexist." (Forward, *Toxic Parents*, p.73)

If you cannot change the problem, then change your perception of it. Say to yourself it does not exist, or that it has a reason, or it is not that bad. The victim begins to rationalize and minimize the existence and effects of the abuse.

Some of the things that play a role in the lives of those who live with abuse which prevent them from dealing with it are (from Murray, *Loving an Alcoholic*, part I):

- There is shame: for a long time you think it is only a little problem, but as time goes on you become aware that it is much greater. You feel ashamed of it. You feel the condemnation of the whole community.
- There is anger: you realize the situation and the frustration makes you angry. Usually the anger is deflected. There is anger at self, because you made a mistake; anger at the abuser, if he really loves me he would quit; and anger at others, such as the parents of alcoholic.
- There is the feeling of guilt: I have caused the whole thing. This ingredient is one of the most powerful things to keep a person in a situation of abuse. The abuser puts initially the blame on the victim. After some time the victim comes to believe it as well: "It is my own fault, I deserve it, if only I had been better it would not have happened." And because the victim fails to solve the problem the only way she can carry the burden of guilt is by seeing it as the punishment she deserves. The abuser knows how to control this guilt feeling very cunningly. He will use the guilt feeling to manipulate the victim and remain in control.
- There is denial: you tell yourself, he had a reason to do this, or it is only temporary, and he is really trying to quit the drinking. The victims easily fall for false promises and hopes. Denial is one of the most basic defence systems of a person. The denial can become so great that all other problems in the relationship are subjected to it, e.g. that all the other problems will go away if only the drinking problems will be over. This is not so, for, once the substance is gone then the other problems will rear their heads even more painfully. The abuse has hidden all these relationship problems.
- Last but not least there is fear: fear of being discovered, of taking actions, of reprisal from your family, and friends, being afraid of the future, ending up alone, or making the same mistakes again.

In making up excuses the victim accepts the abuse. Therefore these excuses do not help on the contrary they make the abuse worse, for they convey to the abuser, it works and he goes on.

3.1. Alcohol Abuse

The alcoholic so manipulates and controls the situation by his drinking that all involved in his life have to serve him. At the same time he uses their service as an excuse to continue his drinking. He has two mighty weapons to maintain his power. He can arouse the anger of the others, which in turn justifies his drinking, and he can arouse the anxiety of the others. Thus the family members become his slaves. As long as they give in and make up excuses for the alcoholic, the family reinforces the alcoholic's conviction. In his point of view it works.

3.2. Wife Abuse

When the first warnings of abuse come, then it may be a seemingly insignificant incident which sets off a fit of anger and the victim is subjected for no reason at all to an unreasonable attack on her character. The anger is not at all in proportion to the mistake made. At that time the victim often chooses to rationalize his behaviour. He could not help it, because he had a busy day, or, he is right the house is a mess, I should have cooked a better supper etc.

There are certain factors that help this rationalization, for instance the unpredictability of his behaviour. Between bouts of anger he is liable to be as charming as in the beginning. To the outside world the abuser can be a very friendly and considerate person. Such change makes her think that the bad is only a dream, not the real him.

Another factor in rationalizing the situation is that the victim blames herself. If he can be so wonderful at times, then his anger must be her fault. Thus she accepts responsibility for what he does. She has stepped into his system of thinking.

A woman stays in such a relationship for several reasons:

- She has come to think that by not questioning his behaviour she loves him. For her to love him means to do as he tells her.
- Because of psychological abuse: scare tactics, insults, yelling temper tantrums, constant criticism, implied threats, verbal attacks, unrelenting criticism. In addition, subtle manipulation: I don't remember it, or denial: no that is not how it happened, rewriting history and shifting the blame, it was you who did it. If that is kept up she will believe this in the end.
- Because of physical abuse: usually the result of extreme jealousy and possessiveness. Such an attitude spells danger and should be taken seriously.
- There is the hope that one day it will change.
- There is the fear, and the guilt, she believes she deserves it, and she believes his version of reality. He is only doing it for her improvement.

In explaining the abuse she accepts these attacks the door is open for more and more serious ones.

3.3. Child Abuse

What keeps a child hooked to such a situation and what prevents it from speaking about it? In answering these questions we come upon the same symptoms as in the previous points. The child has come to rationalize and minimize the abuse.

There is, in the first place, the blame, I deserved it. Once a child has accepted the view that the parent is always right, the situation deteriorates. For if the parents is right, then the child can only blame the abuse on itself. The child believes it deserved the abuse. The abuse is explained accepted as normal. "My parents do it for my good."

Next, is the fact that a child has a great sense of family honour, you do not betray your family. Often this type of abuse occurs in families where there are more problems, where there is no communication. The children are afraid of what talking about the abuse because of what this may do to their own family. They will be blamed for the possible break-up of their family.

Further, there is distrust for all grown-ups and the question of credibility. Who will take the word of the child when it comes to his word over against the word of the parent? And do not underestimate what the unpredictability or ambiguity does. There are good times between the bad. These good times cause uncertainty. Abuse and love is a bewildering combination.

The abuse is maintained by threats and blackmail. These threats can be that the abuser will take the life of the victim, or that the abuser will take its own live, or that the family will fall apart. To the child, to talk about its pain will cause pain for others.

4. How it destroys

All these elements we just mentioned tend to become a vicious circle, or a downward spiral. The abuser must more and more abuse his power in order to get satisfied, the victim must more and more live in the defense systems. This makes that neither abuser nor victim can see the real issues. What both sides do not realize is that in the long run this destroys the family, the relationships.

4.1. Alcohol Abuse

The family allows the abuser to be the "little god" he wants to be, and so the situation gets worse. The alcoholic has placed the guilt on the other side, the people living in that situation must accept that guilt and accept the abuser's system of thinking or life will become impossible. The victims do not realize that in accepting this blame they open themselves up for more and worse abuse. There is here yet another

element. It is a recognized fact that mood altering substances as e.g. alcohol and drugs will in the long run do physical damage to the person. It effects the brain and can also lead to death.

4.2. Wife Abuse

Once the abuser has control he will systematically curb her life and make her dependent on himself, destroying her self-esteem in the process. He criticizes and belittles her abilities as a housewife or mother. He criticizes her behaviour, her dress and physical appearance, often in front of others. He may use his earning power as a weapon to control his partner, she gets only so much and if she spends it in a way he does not approve of she will be punished, or, she must beg and beg for a bit of money. She is only allowed to have certain friends of which he approves. He will make social contact so unpleasant that you prefer to stay home rather than go out and get hurt again. He will also control contact with family. He takes her personality away. She has to renounce her own feelings if she wants to have any peace at all, thus opening up herself to more and worse abuse again. Keep in mind that 85% of domestic murders is men against women.

4.3. Child Abuse

Also with regard to this type of abuse we see how in the long run the personality of the child is destroyed. It is not allowed to have its own personality.

Sexual abuse is even more destructive. We can point to two elements. It is the betrayal of trust between a child and an adult and it makes use of legitimate feelings. The first one will be obvious. A child trusts an adult, it depends on an adult, and therefore when the adult slowly but surely does what causes pain and confusion and the child is told not to tell anyone, the child's world is turned upside down.

The other element is that sexual abuse involves legitimate physical feelings and reactions. The Lord has so made our bodies that we have sexual feelings that can be stimulated and enjoyed. In situations of sexual abuse these feelings are misused. The child cannot stop its own feelings and is confronted with emotions it cannot handle, thus it starts to distrust its own body. For the women and men abused the enemy is certainly the abuser, but the greatest enemy is the longings of their bodies. Their bodies betrayed them.

We can now see some of the damage done by this abuse:

- There is the feeling of powerlessness: The sexual contact was never wanted or invited. It seems impossible to stop what has begun. This in turn leads to doubts and despair.
- There is the sense of betrayal: the one who was betrayed assumes that she could have prevented the betrayal if she was less needy and naive. In her opinion nobody can be trusted, especially not herself. It leads to loss of hope and intimacy. A relationship can neither be enjoyed, trusted nor expected to last.
- There is the sense of ambivalence, that is, feeling two contradictory emotions at the same time. How is it possible to experience pleasure in the midst of agonizing physical pain and crushing relational betrayal. The very thing that was despised also brought some degree of pleasure. As a consequence the child makes pleasure suspect and dangerous, and develops a hatred towards longing and passion. They can begin to have contempt for the body.

This damage makes it extremely difficult for a child to speak about it. The child does not trust its own feelings, even denies it has happened. The safest thing is to hide it all. The child has been told all along that its feelings are wrong and nonexistent, so why tell someone else? In addition, who believes a child, when his word stands over against the word of the abuser? To minimize what the child says can mean for the child to be send back to an abusive situation which in turn can lead to suicide.

There is no excuse for sexual abuse. In God's eyes it is a terrible sin.

5. Summary

In summary we note two things. In the first place, abuse runs deep, and in the second place, abuse is cunning. The first, that abuse runs deep forces us to take it seriously. Abuse is not just a disagreement between a husband and his wife, or between a parent and a child. Simple solutions, such as, "she is not an easy woman to live with," or, "the child must have deserved it," do not solve the problem but only harm the situation. It is better first to listen and try to understand the situation before coming with our answers and solutions. Abuse is cunning. It can remain hidden for many years. In opening up the victim takes a tremendous risk. If the abuser finds out, worse abuse will follow. The abuser can present himself as a very pleasant person to others, but as soon as the others are gone things are different.

Note: Material for this Appendix is taken from:

Allender, Dan B., *The Wounded Heart*, NavPress, 1990

Forward, Susan, *Men Who Hate Women & The Women Who Love Them*, Bantam Books, 1987

Forward, Susan, *Toxic Parents, Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*, Bantam Book, 1990

A Handbook For the Prevention of Family Violence, Developed by the Family Violence Prevention Project of the Community Church Abuse Council of Hamilton-Wentworth, eds. Suzanne Mulligan

More information is easily available from public agencies as e.g. Addiction Research Foundation.

Outline

Chapter 3 - 5

Council / Consistory

Introduction

1. Scripture
2. Confessions - Church Order - Forms
3. Goal
4. Place of the Deacons
5. What belongs to Consistory and what to Council
6. Meetings
 - 6.1. Ecclesiastical Matters
 - 6.2. Proceedings
 - 6.2.1. Opening / Closing
 - 6.2.2. Agenda
 - 6.2.3. President
 - 6.2.4. Recording
 - 6.2.5. Proposals
 - 6.2.6. Moderamen
7. Archives and Records
8. Nominations
9. Tasks within Council / Consistory
10. Christian Censure - Art. 73 C.O.
11. Evaluation

COUNCIL AND CONSISTORY

Introduction

In his commentary on 1 Tim.3:15 Calvin writes "pastors may be regarded as stewards, to whom God has committed the charge of governing his house." He then adds the following: "If any person has the superintendence of a large house, he labours night and day with earnest solicitude, that nothing may go wrong through his neglect, or ignorance, or carelessness. If only for men this is done, how much more should it be done for God?" It is important that the minister, elders and deacons do their work well. This serves the honour of the Lord, and will benefit the congregation. In this chapter we will focus on the work that is done within the council and/or consistory.

The term "council" refers to the elders (including the minister) and the deacons. The term "consistory" refers to the elders (including the minister).

1. Scripture

The scriptural basis for the office in general, and the specific offices, is part of other chapters.

See:	The Office of the Minister of the Word	1-8
	The Office of the Elder	2-8
	The Office of the Deacon	3-8
	Congregation and Council	3-3

In this chapter we want to consider how the teachings of God's Word determine the internal activities of the council/consistory.

Christ is the Head of the Church.

Mat. 28:1

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Eph. 1 : 22-23

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Col. 1:18

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the first born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

He gives to each office its own mandate.

Acts 6:2-4

It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Rom. 12:6-8

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him encourage;

1 Cor. 12: 28

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

Phil.1:1

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi together with the overseers and deacons.

1 Tim. 3

The tasks of elders and deacons

1 Tim.5:17

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those who work in preaching and teaching.

He forbids lording it over each other.

Mat.18:4

Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Mat.23:8

But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.

- John 13:14
Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet.
- 1 Cor.4:1
So then, men ought to regard us a servants of Christ,
- 1 Pet.5:1
To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder,...
- 1 Pet. 5:4
And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

2. Confession/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession maintains that church is to be ruled by the Word of God. In this way it shows that Christ is the Head.

Art. 29 - The Marks Of The True And The False Church

In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true Church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.

Art. 31 - The Officers Of The Church

We believe that ministers of God's Word, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order, as stipulated by the Word of God. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord. Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

2.2. Church Order

The Church Order contains several stipulations which address the relationships within council and consistory. Each office-bearer is responsible to the council and has to be willing to cooperate with the others. Equality has to be maintained with regard to their authority and their duties. The Church Order stipulates which way to deal with difficulties in this regard.

Art. 2

The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.

Art. 6

No one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain church

Art. 17

Among the ministers of the Word equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office and in other matters as far as possible, according to the judgement of the consistory and, if necessary, of classis.

Art. 22

Finally, it is the duty of elders to assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

Art. 25

Among the elders as well as among the deacons equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office, and also, as far as possible, in other matters, of which the consistory shall judge.

Art. 73

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.

Art. 74

No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearers over other office-bearers.

2.4. Forms

The Form for Ordination mentions the cooperation between office bearers as well.

Form For the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

Mandate of the Elders

Third, it is their duty to assist the ministers of the Word with good counsel and advice. They are also charged with the supervision over the doctrine and conduct of these fellow servants.

Charge

Be all with one accord faithful in your offices.

3. Goal

As office bearers we have to be all with one accord faithful in our offices, work together in good harmony and so serve the glory of our Master as well as the upbuilding of the congregation.

4. Place of the Deacons

The terms “council” and “consistory” have been explained in the introduction of this chapter. This distinction is rather new. For many decades it distinction was between “consistory” and “consistory with deacons.” This is in line with the Church Order. In Art. 38 we read: “in all churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders who, as a rule, shall meet at least once a month.” The term “council” is not used in the Church Order. It is used in the Belgic Confession. In Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession we read: “There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church.” Whereas the Belgic Confession includes the deacons in the council of the church, the Church Order does not. This difference has been a matter of much debate. Some are adamant that deacons belong to the council, others are equally adamant in the opposite position.

The question can be asked whether the difference is a significant one so that a choice has to be made. Can the difference not be explained from the situation in which each document was composed? The Belgic Confession is defending the truth of the gospel against the Romanist Church. In the Romanist church the deacon had become nothing more than a helper for the bishop. The Reformation restored the office of deacon, and thus focusses on the nature of the office. The deacon is no less an office-bearer than the elder. This would explain the formulation of the Belgic Confession. The Church Order was made later in time, to regulate the life within the churches and is more specific about the place of the deacon. The Church Order’s focus is thus more on the tasks of the respective offices.

Whatever the case, it is remarkable that when the churches adopted the Church Order they saw no need to change the Belgic Confession. During all the centuries these documents have functioned next to each other, and neither one of them was changed in this matter. In addition, it is noteworthy that the churches have only one Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons. The beginning of his Form, which speaks about the character of the office, applies to both elders and deacons. Both offices have much in common. It is the same Lord who calls elders and deacons to office. Elders and deacons have the same goal, namely to build up the congregation. This also shows in that when the number of elders is small the deacon may be added to the consistory, Art. 39 C.O. Within this common framework elders and deacons have their own tasks, the elders in the supervision of the church, the deacons within the ministry of mercy. We conclude that on the one hand we must guard against a separation of the two offices, and on the other guard against a mixing together of the offices. In working this out we note with thankfulness that the Church Order indicates which matters pertain to elders or deacons, and what belongs to deacons and elders together.

5. What belongs to Consistory or Council?

According to the Church Order the council (elders and deacons) deal with the following matters:

- Art. 3 - nomination/appointment to office
- Art. 9 - leaving of minister
- Art. 10 - support of minister
- Art. 11 - dismissal of minister
- Art. 12 - a minister is bound to the service of the Church for life
- Art. 13 - retirement of minister
- Art. 14 - term of office
- Art. 26 - signing of Form for Subscription

- Art. 28 - civil authorities
- Art. 71 - supervision
- Art. 73 - censure

According to the Church Order the consistory (elders) deal with:

- Art. 15 - preaching in other churches
- Art. 17 - equality between ministers
- Art. 22 - supervise the doctrine and conduct of the minister
- Art. 25 - equality among office bearers
- Art. 27 - warning against false doctrine
- Art. 52 - worship
- Art. 53 - special services
- Art. 56 - sacraments
- Art. 57 - baptism
- Art. 58 - schools
- Art. 61 - admission to Lord's Supper
- Art. 63 - marriage
- Art. 64 - records
- Art. 67 - discipline
- Art. 76 - change in C.O.

According to the Church order the deacons deal with

- Art. 23 - the service of charity (see also Art. 42)

We may conclude that the consistory deals with matters of oversight and discipline. This includes reports on home visits, catechism instruction, visits to study societies, admission to sacraments, marriage, public profession of faith, attestations, discipline, preaching, financial contributions by the members. The deacons deal with matters related to the ministry of mercy. This includes helping those in need, visits to handicapped, elderly and those ill for a long time, and reports on the diaconal visits. Most other matters are dealt with by council. This includes, the nomination, election, appointment and ordination to office, the calling of a minister, finances of the church, liturgy, matters involving the federation, classis and synods, division of task in council, ward division, institution of new church.

Though each office has its own mandate, elders and deacons work with the same members. It will be helpful that there is ongoing consultation between elders and deacons. This can be done in different ways. The elder(s) and deacon(s) of a ward can exchange information which may be helpful to the other. It can also be done as an item on the Agenda for the Council meeting. This allows the deacons to bring matters to the attention of the elders and vice versa.

6. Meetings

The council meets, as a rule, once per month, and more if necessary. The consistory meets once a month as well. The meetings of council and consistory are announced to the congregation. A member of council or consistory may request a special meeting. He has to bring this request to the attention of the chair and vice-chairman. All members are expected to be present at each meeting. If there are lawful reasons for being absent this must be made known to the meeting and will be recorded in the Minutes. The Press Release will indicate who were absent.

6.1. Ecclesiastical matters

Art. 30 of the Church Order requires that the ecclesiastical assemblies shall deal with no other than ecclesiastical matters and that in an ecclesiastical manner. Ecclesiastical matters are matters pertaining

to the government and administration of the church. The council/consistory is not called to make political or social statements, but must govern the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The matters that legitimately come on the agenda must be dealt with in accordance with Scripture and Confession and in a way consistent with the Church Order. Council/consistory judges what is ecclesiastical or not. This is not up to the chairman, clerk or the moderamen.

6.2. Proceedings

6.2.1. Opening/Closing

Art. 34 C.O. states that the proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with calling upon the Name of the Lord. The chairman calls the meeting to order. If the chairman is absent the vice-chairman shall take his place. After the opening the attendance is reviewed, special situations in the congregation are mentioned and the agenda is established. At the end of the meeting one of the elders or deacons leads in prayer and the meeting is closed by the chair.

6.2.2. Agenda

The Agenda of a regular Council meeting contains the following items:

1. Opening and Welcome
2. Agenda
3. Minutes
4. Matter from the Minutes
5. Matters for Mutual Concern
6. Reports
7. Unfinished Business
8. Mail Incoming/ Outgoing
9. New Business
10. Question Period
11. Christian Censure
12. Press Release
13. Next Meeting
14. Closing

The Agenda of a regular Consistory meeting contains the following items:

1. Opening and Welcome
2. Agenda
3. Minutes
4. Matter from the Minutes
5. Reports
 - home visits
 - special visits
 - minister's
6. Pastoral Care
7. Unfinished Business
8. Mail Incoming / Outgoing
9. New Business
10. Question Period
11. Christian Censure
12. Press Release
13. Next Meeting
14. Closing

The Agenda is agreed upon by the meeting. If a member of consistory/council would like to see an item on the agenda he may mention this when the agenda is adopted. He can also request at the end of the meeting that it be placed on the agenda for the following meeting. This second possibility would give the other office-bearers time to prepare. The first possibility may be necessary because the matter is urgent or cannot be postponed.

6.2.3. President

The task of the president or chairman is

- to present and clearly explain the matters to be dealt with;
- to ensure that every one observes due order in speaking;
- to deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their strong emotions. (Art. 35 C.O.)

Although we do not follow a set order in the council/consistory meetings as e.g. in the major assemblies, the members can only speak when given the floor by the chairman. The more tense a discussion, the more important it is to speak through the chair. If any member feels that the chair makes a wrong judgement he is allowed to challenge the chair. This is then judged by the meeting.

6.2.4. Recording

Art. 36 C.O. stipulates that a clerk be appointed whose task it shall be to keep an accurate record of all things worthy to be recorded. There is a recording clerk, who takes care of the Minutes. There is also a corresponding clerk, who takes care of the outgoing mail. In recording the minutes the clerk has to make sure to record what has been decided by the meeting. The Minutes are read the next meeting and after opportunity is given to amend them, adopted by the meeting. To indicate that they have been adopted they are signed by the chairman and the clerk. In the past Minutes were hand written in a Minute Book which has numbered pages. This was to prevent that pages would be taken out of the Minutes. Now a days the minutes are typed into a computer. This means that files can get lost, or others can open files. It is important to maintain confidentiality.

6.2.5. Proposals

Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds. Once a matter is properly before the meeting, it must be discussed in an orderly manner. It is best to come to a consensus in a matter. If it is difficult to reach a consensus it may be necessary to vote. Whatever is agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order. In public a member of council/consistory has to as much as possible defend the decision which was reached. It is improper to air a dissenting voice within the congregation. Each office bearer has the right to appeal a decision to the major assembly, but he must make this first known to the council/consistory.

6.2.6. Moderamen

The chairman, vice chairman and two clerks form the moderamen. This moderamen only has a function with regard to preparing and facilitating the meeting. It does not have a separate function besides the consistory/council. These functions are chosen by secret ballot, except for the minister who is chairman according to Art. 38 C.O..

7. Archives and Records

The consistory shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives. (Art. 43 C.O.) The Corresponding clerk is responsible for filing the material. All incoming mail that become part of the Agenda will be filed, as well a copies of outgoing letters. Due to the change over of clerks the archives are not always up to date. Appointing a member to take care of the archives could eliminate this. If this person is not a member of council he will have to promise to keep confidentiality. It would be helpful if council would audit the archives on a regular basis.

The consistory shall also maintain church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded. (C.O. Art. 64) There is a double set of records. The recording clerk has one set and the archivist a second.

8. Nominations

Each year a proportionate number of elders and deacons retire from office. The Council gives the congregation the opportunity to nominate brothers deemed fit for these offices (see Regulations for Election). The nomination process within the council begins with Scripture reading, either 1 Timothy 3:1-13 or Titus 1 : 5 - 9. Then the letters received from the congregation are read and those nominated placed on a list. Following this the chairman reads the list of all male communicant members and the office-bearers may indicate which brother they would like to see on the list for either elder or deacon. Once the list has been established it is discussed. The elders and deacons may endorse the nomination or voice concerns. The nomination meeting is a confidential meeting. Office-bearers should be able to speak freely, at the same time they must do their utmost to maintain and promote the reputation of others. The goal is to be able to present to the congregation a list of brothers of whom council can say in full confidence that they can serve well. If more names are left on the list that need to be presented to the congregation, the council will vote by secret ballot. If there are not enough then Council must re-open the discussion regarding the nomination or come to the conclusion that it can not present twice as many names as there are vacancies. The latter should only happen for weighty reasons. The brothers who are nominated should be notified by their ward elders prior to the worship service in which their names will be announced.

9. Tasks within Council / Consistory

Article 25 of the Church Order says that among the elders as well as among the deacons equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office. It should not be that some do all the work whereas others take it easy. You can have people who too easily volunteer, you can also have people who refuse to volunteer. It is the task of the assembly to make sure there is equality. This applies to the number of addresses in a ward, but also to extra work within council, such as being clerk or liaison to committees.

10. Christian Censure - Art. 73 C.O.

Article 73 allows the office-bearers to exercise Christian censure, so that, if necessary, they may exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office. This article is to be distinguished from Christian Discipline (art. 66 and 71). If an office-bearer is aware of a sin in the life of a fellow office-bearer, he must follow the rule of Matthew 18. If the sin falls under Art. 72, Council has to deal with it according to Art. 71. Article 73 deals with censure with regard to the execution of the offices. Are the minister, elders and deacon obeying the charge given to them? If not, or if there is lack of faithfulness then they ought to be exhorted and admonished by the others. In a hierarchical system a bishop or super-intendant is usually charged with this task. The Reformed Churches want nothing to do with hierarchy, yet realize that an office-bearer can be negligent in his task. It allows for fraternal censure. Certainly article 73 includes helping and giving advice, but can also include admonishing. Our aim is that the work given to the office-bearers by the Lord is done as faithfully as possible. These matters must be discussed in an open and brotherly manner in the presence of the person involved. In removing this obstacle the council or consistory can work in good harmony.

It can happen that things are said during a meeting which are out of place. In Art. 34 of the Church Order we read that censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof. This article speaks about the major assemblies. But if this applies to the major assemblies, it would also apply to the council and consistory. If a member in the meeting has done something worthy of reproof this should be dealt with in an open and brotherly manner before the close of that meeting.

Grievances over past words or actions can easily spoil the harmony. Open and brotherly discussion can make that the harmony among the brothers will flourish.

11. Evaluation

1. Do we agree on the Scriptural basis and goal?
2. Characterize the atmosphere of our meetings.
3. About the meetings:
 - Do we have enough? Too many? Not enough?
 - Is sufficient information given before the meeting?
 - Do we prepare sufficiently for the meeting?
 - Are we consistent in dealing only with ecclesiastical matters?
 - Do we finish off the agenda?
 - Are we satisfied with the set-up of the agenda?
 - Is the intermission sufficient?
 - Do we give enough time to matters that need attention?
 - Do we give too much time to insignificant matters?
4. About the chairman or vice-chairman:
 - Does he clearly present the matters to be dealt with?
 - Does he ensure that everyone observes due order?
 - Do all feel that they can speak?
5. About the work of the clerks:
 - Are we satisfied with the manner of recording?
 - Is the work load evenly divided between the two clerks?
6. How does the moderamen function?
7. Make a list of all the duties within the Council. Is there equality? Are all who have extra duties clear on their mandate? Do they report regularly?
8. How does Art. 73 function?
9. What is the state of the archives?
10. Are there items that need our attention? Why? How should we deal with them?

Outline

Chapter 3 - 6

Mission

Introduction

1. Scripture
2. Confessions - Church Order - Forms
3. Goal
4. Our Missionary Task
5. Mission and Mission Aid
6. Evaluation

MISSION

Introduction

Before the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven He entrusted the church with the task to preach, teach and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19,20). Each church has a missionary task. In this chapter we will reflect on this task and how we are fulfilling it.

1. Scripture

The Form for the Ordination (or Installation) of Missionaries gives a good overview of the Scriptural basis for the missionary task of the church and lists many proof texts.

The Bible from the beginning till the end speaks about missions. The LORD created the earth and everything in it. This whole world is under His domain. Thus after we fell into sin, His word of redemption is for the whole world as well. He wants all nations to come to know the gospel of redemption. It is true that under the Old Testament this gospel was connected to one family and one nation, but not to the exclusion of the other nations. The LORD uses this one nation to preserve the gospel so it can reach all the nations. The LORD said to Abraham that in him all nations would be blessed.

Gen. 12:1-3

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Moses reminded the LORD of what the nations would think of His deeds with Israel.

Exodus 32:11-14

But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.' " Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Num 14:15,16

If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 'The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.'

The LORD gave foreigners a place in Israel.

Num. 15:13-16

" 'Everyone who is native-born must do these things in this way when he brings an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD. For the generations to come, whenever an alien or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, he must do exactly as you do. The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.' "

There are two well known examples of foreigners who received a place in Israel, Rahab and Ruth. Both received a place upon their confession of faith.

Joshua 2:8-11

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea* for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

Joshua 6:22-24

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her." So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel. Then they burned the whole city and

everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD's house. But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho--and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

Ruth 1:16-17

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

Ruth 4:13-17

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

In the Psalms Israel is to praise the LORD as the God who rules the nations, and the nations are called the praise the LORD who rules in Zion.

Ps. 47:1-4

Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth! He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet. He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.

Ps 99:1-3

The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake. Great is the LORD in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations. Let them praise your great and awesome name-- he is holy.

In the prophets we hear of a wonderful future that includes all the nations.

Isa 2:1-4

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

Isa 19:23-25

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."

Joel 2:28-32

"And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

The coming of Christ shows God love for this world.

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,* that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Lord Jesus reminds the people of this as well. They should not think that the gospel is only for Jews. In fact, the Lord will take it away from them and give it to others.

Mat 22:1-10

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come." Then he sent some more servants and said, "Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet." "But they paid no attention and went off--one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

When Israel reject the Messiah, the Lord appoints twelve apostles to be the foundation of the church and charges them with the duty to be witnesses of God's grace in this world.

Mat 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Acts 1:6-8

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit marks the point where the church has to go and preach also to the Gentiles. It took some convincing. Peter had to receive a vision in order to understand it.

Acts 10:34-5

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

The Holy Spirit also had to instruct the Church to sent out missionaries.

Acts 13:1-5

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

Paul then begins his missionary journeys. Often he would first go to the Jews, but when they reject it work among the Gentiles.

Acts 13:42-48

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: " 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' " When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

In his letters Paul speaks about the purpose of the preaching for all people.

Rom 1:16-17

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Rom. 10:12-17

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

2 Cor 5:17-21

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Eph. 2:11-22

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)-- remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Through faith in the Word preached by the apostles, also Gentiles may have communion with Christ and in Christ with God.

1John 1:1-4

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

The Bible ends with the prospect of a multitude of many nations which surrounds the throne of God.

Rev. 5:9-10

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

2. Confessions/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession does not mention the task of the church to send out missionaries, but this duty is implied in the confession that the church is build on the apostolic preaching and finds its unity in the Word of God.

Art. 27

This Church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects.

Moreover, this holy Church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The petition Thy Kingdom come has implications for the work of mission.

Q/A 123

What is the second petition?

Thy kingdom come. That is: So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee.

Preserve and increase Thy church. Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against Thee, and every conspiracy against Thy holy Word. Do all this until the fulness of Thy kingdom comes, wherein Thou shalt be all in all.

2.3. Canons of Dort

In the Canons of Dort the churches confess that the doctrine of election does not make preaching superfluous. On the contrary, it is through the preaching that the Lord realizes His decree of election (see chapter 3/4, art. 17)

Chapter 1, Article 3 The Preaching Of The Gospel

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For *how are*

they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?

Chapter 2, Article 5 The Universal Proclamation Of The Gospel

The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

Chapter 2, Article 6 Why Some Do Not Believe

That, however, many who have been called by the gospel neither repent nor believe in Christ but perish in unbelief does not happen because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross, but through their own fault.

Chapter 2, Article 7 Why Others Do Believe

But to those who truly believe and are by the death of Christ freed from their sins and saved from perdition, this benefit comes only through God's grace, given to them from eternity in Christ. God owes this grace to no one.

Chapter 3/4, Article 8 The Earnest Call By The Gospel

But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.

2.4. Church Order

The Church Order outlines the tasks of missionary, council and churches in regard to the work of missions.

Art. 18

When ministers of the Word are sent out as missionaries, they shall be and remain subject to the Church Order. They shall report and give account of their labours to the church which sent them and shall at all times remain subject to its calling.

It shall be their task, in the specific region assigned to them or chosen by them in consultation with the church that sent them, to proclaim the Word of God, to administer the sacraments to those who have come to the profession of their faith, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded His church, and to ordain elders and deacons when this appears feasible, according to the rules given in the Word of God.

Art. 51

The churches shall endeavour to fulfil their missionary task

When churches cooperate in this matter, they shall, as much as possible, observe the division into classes and regional synods.

2.5. Forms

The Form for Ordination or Installation of missionaries speaks extensively about the missionary task of the church. The execution of this task is also part of the prayers of the church.

Form for Ordination (or installation) of missionaries

Prayer # 2

We pray for the mission among the Jews, Moslems, and heathen, who live without hope and without Thee in the world. Grant Thy blessing upon the propagation of the gospel among those who still call themselves Christians but have deviated from Thy truth in doctrine and life.

Prayer # 11 A Morning Prayer

Bless Thou the proclamation of Thy divine Word here and in the mission fields, and frustrate all the worlds of the devil.

3. Goal

The Lord calls the church to proclaim the gospel to all the peoples of the earth and so call them to repentance and faith in Christ. The aim of mission to serve the glory of God in the conversion of heathens and the establishing of churches.

4. Our Missionary Task

Although each church has a missionary task, it is not always possible for each church to have its own missionary. For this reason we cooperate with other churches. There are sending churches and supporting churches. Appendix 1 contains the Agreement of Cooperation. Our support for the work of mission comes out in praying for the work of mission on a regular basis, supporting it financially and

attending meetings organized for the co-operating churches. The sending churches inform the cooperating churches by means of Press Releases which are published in the bulletin, and by means of a monthly Newsletter. The sending churches together publish Mission News and it is distributed among the members as well. Some churches have Mission Committees which deal with delegating to meetings of cooperating churches, other churches do this via the Council. Either way, it is important to keep all the elders and deacons well informed.

5. Mission and Mission Aid

The Lord teaches His people to be merciful. Under the Old Testament the sojourner enjoyed the care of the people of Israel. Also today we not only bring the gospel but are also called to help those in need. The connection between mission and material help has seen its changes over the years. Sometimes they were closely connected together, with the danger that the missionaries became too involved in handing out material help. There was also the danger that people would join the church in order to receive such help. On the other hand, work of mercy should not be disconnected from the preaching of the Gospel. The reason for helping is the work of Christ. The members of the churches on the mission field certainly have a calling to help those in need among themselves, but so do we, as we are united by the bond of the true faith.

6. Evaluation

1. Are we in agreement with the Scriptural basis and goal?
2. Does the work of mission receive sufficient attention in worship, church life, council? Are there areas in which we need to improve? Why? How?
3. How is the relationship with the sending church?
4. Is there opportunity for additional mission projects?

For the Agreement of Cooperation, see Mandates and Regulations

Maintaining the Property

In order to maintain its property, the church has delegated this task to a committee, or committees. Part of maintaining the ministry of the gospel includes taking care of a building and the grounds. It is important that the church has Regulations or Mandates that govern the work of these committees. These regulations or mandates should spell out the mandate of the committees and involved, the place of the council, and the way the reporting is done. In this chapter we will review these regulations or mandates.

The copy of the Mandate for this church can be found in the section Mandates and Regulations.

Evaluation

1. Is the mandate sufficient? Do we need to change, add or delete?
2. Are we satisfied with the work of the committee/ subcommittees?
3. Are the committee/subcommittees satisfied with the way the council works with their reports and recommendations?
4. Are there areas where improvement is necessary? Why? How?

Outline

Chapter 3 - 8

The Deacon

Introduction

1. Office
2. Scripture
3. Confession - Church Order - Forms
4. The Office of the Deacons
5. Deacon and Congregation
6. The Task of the Deacons
7. The Meetings of the Deacons
8. Give account
9. Contact with Minister
10. Literature
11. Evaluation

THE DEACON

Introduction

“The Lord Jesus Christ, who has shown us the Father, came into the world to serve. In His mercy He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and showed compassion to the afflicted. Thus He gave an example, that His Church should do likewise. The ministry of mercy, as assigned to the deacons, proceeds, therefore, from this love of our Saviour.” (Form for Ordination).

1. The Office

The Lord as the Head of the church has entrusted the care for His congregation in the hands of the overseers. The office is thus an official charge received from the Lord through his congregation, with a view to building up the congregation. It has three components: a legitimate calling, authority coming from the Lord and a specific charge to serve the congregation of the Lord. Because the office comes from the Lord all office-bearers are duty bound to fulfil their office in obedience to the Lord. It is a comfort to know that the office comes from the Lord. One need not campaign for it. The Lord will open the way when He so decides. In addition, since the office comes from the Lord, He will also provide his servants with the necessary strength to do their work.

2. Scripture

Deacons are entrusted with the Ministry of Mercy. This mercy is necessary because mankind fell into sin. The LORD shows His mercy to His people and wants His people to show mercy to each other. We see this clearly in the O.T. The LORD calls Himself a merciful God.

Ex. 34 : 6

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

He hears the cries of His people and is willing to help because of His promises.

Exodus 2:23-25

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

Deut. 4:31

For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath

Jer. 4: 12

" 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever.

The LORD wanted His people to show mercy as well. In this way Israel could show that life is well protected in the covenant with God. With Him life is healed.

Deut 14:28-29

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deut 24:19-22

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Micah 6:8

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

The Lord Jesus is the visible proof of God's mercy. He taught that in His Kingdom life is restored and thus His kingdom is characterized by mercy.

Luke 6:36

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

He gave the example of mercy in His deeds and in His death.

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

John 13:12-17

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

The early church followed this example.

Acts 2 : 46-47

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-35

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

We do not read in the Bible the institution of the office of deacon. In Acts 6 several brothers are ordained to serve the tables and their task have elements which the deacons have as part of their mandate. We cannot say that these Seven were deacons, but the office of the deacon certainly flows from their work. Twice is the word deacon used in the New Testament. In the letter to the Philippians they seem to be part of the council.

Phil 1:1-2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

In 1 Timothy we meet the deacon as an existing office as well. The fact that Paul mentions the requirements for deacons shows that they had an office as well.

1Tim 3:8-13

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

For further texts see:

The Diaconal Visit

The Service of mercy

The Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons

3. Confessions/Church Order/Forms

3.1. Belgic Confession

The office of deacon is mentioned in the article that deals with the government of the church.

Article 30

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

3.2. Church Order

There are several articles in the Church Order which require the involvement of the deacons.

See 3-5 Council/Consistory

Two articles deal with the task of the deacons

Art. 23

The specific duties of the office of deacon are to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; and further, to gather and manage the offerings and distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. They shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

Art. 42

When the deacons meet separately, as a rule once a month, to deal with the matters pertaining to their office, they shall do so with calling upon the Name of God. They shall give account of their labours to the consistory. The ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy and, if need be, may visit these meetings.

3.3. Forms

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

Prayer # 15 - An Opening Prayer for the Meeting of the Deacons

4. The Office of the Deacon

The Lord assigns to the deacons the Ministry of Mercy. The word "ministry" shows that we are dealing here with a task, a service, given by the Lord for the benefit of the congregation. The task of the congregation is the service of charity, but the deacons' calling is the Ministry of Mercy. In the Great Reformation of the 16th century this was rediscovered. Whereas in the Middle Ages the task of the deacon has changed into being a helper of the bishop, in the Reformation the churches learned again from the Word of God the proper place and task of the ministry of mercy. The deacon is not any less an office-bearer than the elder. A correct view on the work of the deacons is based on a proper understanding of what the church is. The history of the church shows this. Reformations had consequences for preaching and discipline, but also for the ministry of mercy. This is reflected in the Form for Ordination in that we have one Form for both Elders and Deacons. Although the Form distinguishes between the task of the elders and deacons, the first part of the Form which deals with the institution of the office applies to both elder and deacons. This shows that the office of deacon is no less than the office of elder. Both are ministries given by the Lord. In both we see the care of the Lord for His flock. As the church cannot do without elders, so the church cannot do without deacons. Deacons are not a luxury but a necessity for the church. Without the ministry of mercy the church dies. To be church is evident in being merciful. In this context we see the wonderful task of the deacons.

5. Deacons and Congregation

The deacons have been assigned the Ministry of Mercy. The congregation is called to the service of charity. This distinction comes from the Form of Ordination and helps us see the task of the deacons with regard to the congregation. On the one hand there is a clear connection. Mercy and charity are closely connected. At the same time this distinction highlights that the tasks of the deacons and congregation are to be distinguished. Deacons are not called to do all the work of charity in the congregation, they are to encourage the congregation to serve each other. In their work as deacons they also have to give an example to the congregation. There has to be a good cooperation between deacons and congregation. The faithful ministry of mercy will stimulate and direct the service of charity. The willing service of charity will greatly help the ministry of mercy.

6. The task of the Deacon

See Service of Mercy (2-2) and Diaconal Visit (1-2)

The Form for Ordination states that it is the responsibility of the deacons to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church. The Form works this out as follows

- a. acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties;
- b. exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy;
- c. gather and manage the offerings;
- d. distribute the offerings in Christ's name according to need;
- e. encourage and comfort with the Word those who receive the gifts of Christ's love;
- f. promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit.

The first two (a. and b.) point to a more general task. The deacons have to acquaint themselves with existing needs and exhort the members of the church to show mercy. This shows that the deacons should not do all the work of mercy, but allow the congregation to do its work as well. One could say that the deacons try to make their involvement superfluous as soon as feasible. The acquainting with existing needs takes place through the visits by the deacons (see 1-1), through information from elders, congregational members, or family members. Confidentiality is very important in this regard.

The points c., d., and e. address the specific task of the deacons. They have to gather and manage the offerings. The deacons are to collect the money during the worship service. Each year the deacons inform the congregation how much has come in and how much has gone out. If the income is too low the deacons usually make the congregation aware of this. As a rule the congregation responds well. To manage the funds also means that the deaconry should have some money for unforeseen circumstances. It is not the goal of the deaconry to build up a surplus, but to keep extra in the bank in cases of emergency. If it happens that more comes in than goes out, the deacons can look for others causes connected to the service of mercy.

Next to gathering and managing comes the distribution of the gifts. This distribution is the work of the deaconry as a whole. It is not up to the individual deacon to decide what to give. As the deacons evaluate the need they must also see whether the family is able to help. Other aspect is the question whether the need is a legitimate need. The deacons may have to look at the cause. In order to establish this the deacons should not be afraid to ask for figures. It would not be responsible to give money while not knowing the figures. Financial advice can at times be more in place than financial help.

It can happen that financial problems are connected to spiritual problems. There are situations in which members feel bad about asking for help. There can also be the case that members are too quick in asking for help. Then also it is the task of the deacons to establish whether a member has a legitimate request. The Bible teaches that those who refuse to work should not be supported by the church. That is not a financial matter, but rather a disciplinary one. In such cases the elders can be involved as well. When the need is related to the tuition for education, see 1-7, the elders are usually involved as well.

The distribution must be done in the name of the Lord. The members who are helped may know and feel the love of Christ for them. To show this the deacons must also come with the Word of God. In this way they encourage and comfort the members who need help.

The last element mentioned in the Form (f.) is again of a more general nature. The deacons are called to promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit. See 1-4 about the collection at the Lord's Table. This determines the way in which the congregation is exhorted, helped and comforted. To show this by deed the deacons visit all the elderly, handicapped and lonely in the congregation on a yearly basis.

7. Meeting of Deacons

The deacons meet at least once per month. These meetings are opened in the required manner and minutes are kept. All correspondence is put in the archives of the deacons. Minute books and archives that are outdated will be placed in the church archives. If decisions have to be made between meetings, e.g. after the worship service, these must be written into the minutes of the next meeting. If there are matters which the deacons want to bring to the attention of the elders this can be done in two ways, the ward elders are informed of a particular situation, or the matter is brought to the council meeting as a matter of mutual concern.

8. Give account

The Church Order requires that the deacons give account of their labours to the consistory (Art. 45). The consistory is the ruling body and thus also the decisions of the deacons fall under their jurisdiction. This does not mean that the consistory has to make the decisions for the deacons, but they may at any time ask who is being helped and how much help is given. The deacons have their own task, yet in fulfilling it they are subject to the oversight of the elders. Part of this giving account is that the income and expense is published on a regular basis and that the books of the deacons are audited by two elders.

9. Minister

Article 42 of the Church Order states that the ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy and, if need be, also may visit these meetings. The connection with the minister is of an advisory nature. The minister will benefit in his work from the input of the deacons. The deacons may also ask advice from the minister.

10. Literature

See chapters about Ministry of Mercy and Homevisits
Huizinga, W., Diaconal Visits, in *Diakonia*, Vol. XVI No.3, December 2002
Lodder, Th.B. The Ministry of Deacons in Calvin's Institutes, in *Diakonia* Vol. XVII, No.2, September 2003

11. Evaluation

1. Do we agree on the Biblical basis?
2. Do the deacons fulfil their calling faithfully?
3. Is the congregation diligent in the service of charity?
4. Is there good cooperation between deacons and elders, between deacons and minister?
5. Are we satisfied with the way in which the deacons give account?
6. Are there items that need to be followed up? Why? How will we do this?