

II

“. . . HE DESIRES A NOBLE TASK” (1 Timothy 3:1)

PROFILE OF A PASTOR

Gifts of Christ

Among the offices which function in the Church of Jesus Christ, the office of the minister of God's Word takes an important place. It is an excellent start of the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of ministers of the Word* when first of all the congregation is referred to Christ Himself. I quote, “the exalted Christ gathers His church through His Word and Spirit, and in His grace uses the ministry of man.” Right from the beginning the office in the Church is placed in clear daylight. Christ did not *need* office-bearers as if He would be dependent on men. But in His grace He *gave* them to His Church. Hence the reference to Eph. 4:11,12, “And His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” It is Christ Himself who gave these gifts. First He humbled Himself, but after that He is exalted into the highest majesty. So we may say that the office-bearers are donations of victory, given by the highest Office-bearer Himself.

It is very important that this text from the letter to the Ephesians is placed in front. In the first place it is to be maintained that it is the exalted Christ Himself who gives these office-bearers to the Church. He who is only stressing that the offices rise from the congregation, is incorrect in this one-sidedness. At least it has to be added to this that the office-bearers are given by Christ Himself. Moreover, this text answers the question whether or not the present office-bearers might be placed on the same line with the apostles, as far as their origin and calling are concerned. Then one made the contrast: the apostles were appointed by God Himself, but ministers of the Church are chosen and appointed by men. It is true indeed, “they are not to be charged with an image of their task which is loaded in too sacred a way, set up in analogy to that of Paul” (Trimp, 1988: 39). But the apostle Paul places indeed “pastors and teachers” (mentioned as one group by the one article in Greek) on the same line with “apostles” and “prophets.” That does not mean that thereby all the differences are wiped out. But it is remarkable that about both groups we read that they are gifts of victory from Christ. I agree with S. Greijdanus, “Dealing here with the congregation he is using the word *gifts* in order to show that these offices and office-bearers are a gift of His goodness for the congregation. (. . .) Now he is going to mention some offices, and he is going to set forth the variety of the gifts. He does not want to give a complete enumeration. Then he could have mentioned many more persons and gifts. (. . .) He only gives some examples” (Greijdanus, 1925: 89). So generally speaking we may say that the office-bearers in the Church are gifts of Christ, but it is explicitly said about the ministers of the Word. These matters are important in connection with the question how the congregation has to consider the pastor. The LORD did not need him. That keeps the office-bearers humble and restrains them from over-estimation. At the same time the congregation must be restrained from glorifying man and mistaken adoration. On the other hand, the Church is also restrained from under-estimation of the office. One cannot dispose of an office-bearer as if he was a ‘quantité négligeable.’ Hence at the end of the first part of the Form the congregation is admonished, “Obey

your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account” (Heb. 13:17). The Church would have been spared many troubles, if the ministers would have been more faithful in their office. But also: if the congregation would have prayed more for the ministers instead of talking about them!

To minister and to proclaim

When first the idea is emphasized that the office-bearers, including the pastors and teachers, are gifts of the exalted Christ, the Form refers to Christ as the Chief Shepherd, who unceasingly cares for the flock and who appoints shepherds to take heed of the flock in His Name. With respect to this, 1 Pet. 5:4 is quoted. The shepherds are to take care of the sheep of Christ. I think it is nice that the new Dutch Form also points to some texts of the Old Testament with respect to this, namely Jer. 3:14 and 23:4. Also Ezek. 34 could have been quoted and I miss that in the Form.

In the old Form it is said: “The pasture with which His sheep are fed is nothing else but the proclamation of the divine Word, accompanied with the offering of prayer and the administration of the holy sacraments.” To that is added then in the old Form, “The same Word of God is also the staff with which the flock is guided and governed.” The new Form does not give an explicit explanation of the words “pasture” and “staff,” but says indeed that the shepherds are to take care of the sheep of Christ “by means of the proclamation of the Word, by the administration of the sacraments, and by prayers and pastoral supervision. In this way the flock is tended and led in the right paths.”

In my opinion this new formulation is an improvement, especially because here is given up that the Word of God is the “pasture” as well as the “staff.” It is important that the care of the sheep is primarily connected with the proclamation of God’s Word, especially over against all kinds of modern conceptions of “counseling.” In these conceptions the office-bearer is sometimes thrown over in favour of the psychiatrist, while on the other hand the whole matter of counseling is overdone over against the preaching of God’s Word.

It is the proclamation of God’s Word through which the congregation is fed and led in the right path in the first place.

The Form continues, “In the early Christian Church this task was fulfilled by the apostles.” When the ‘twelve’ (apostles) delegate a part of their task to the ‘seven,’ they say in Acts 6:4 to the congregation, “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.” The apostles devoted themselves to the public prayers and to the ‘deaconry’ of the Word. It appears from Acts 6 that the early Church was not a free charismatic communion without ecclesiastical offices. From the very beginning the apostles took the lead. They devoted themselves to prayer. They proclaimed the Word of God, and under their guidance the ‘seven’ were appointed. In Acts 11:30 we read that there were also elders in the Church of Jerusalem. The apostles appointed elders in every Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Form says. “According to 1 Timothy 5:17 (the edition of 1984 says wrongly 1 Tim. 3:17) there were elders who ruled the congregation. Some of them were also called to labour in preaching and teaching. The latter are now called ministers of the Word.” Be aware of this formulation. “There is not said, the latter *are* the ministers of the Word. But it is formulated more carefully and in a somewhat detached way: the latter are *now called* ministers of the Word” (Hendriks, 1981:6).

Then two literal quotations follow of two portions of the Scripture which deal with the proclamation and preaching of God’s Word.

In the first place 2 Cor. 5:18-20, where Paul presents himself as the ambassador

of Christ, who has received from God the ministry of reconciliation, and who is now beseeching on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Also in this case one said, that was a specific apostolic task, and it won't go to call the ministers of God's Word ambassadors, as if they should have received, like Paul, the ministry of reconciliation. But the Form says indeed, "They have received the ministry of reconciliation, of which Paul speaks." For how can men preach unless they are sent? So, unless they are ambassadors? The apostles have trusted to the congregations the apostolic word in a written way, and also orally. "That apostolic word asks for ministry and therefore for ministers of the Word. New revelations will not fall to the share of these ministers. But the given and entrusted word is there to be passed on to the congregation" (Trimp, 1988: 39).

It is, therefore, completely understandable that the Form mentions as the first task of the ministers of the Word that they must declare the whole counsel of God to His congregation. In connection with this, the other portion of the Scripture is quoted, namely, 2 Tim. 4:1 and 2, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the Word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching." While the preaching and proclamation of God's Word belonged to the task of the apostle Paul himself, it is remarkable that Timothy receives exactly the same assignment. It is even a very penetrating exhortation, which comes with serious oaths. It is an established fact that the preaching of God's Word has to go on continuously, even if it will not suit the hearers.

For 'preaching' Paul uses a characteristic word that actually means 'to give the message as a herald.' The word deals with the exclamation of an event, so it is a *proclamation*. It is the dramatic call of the herald and it also brings about what is proclaimed. The herald announced in former days the arrival of the king. When he appeared, people knew that the king was coming and that the feast started. Actually the herald was in his appearance the first point of the feast program. So we may say, the preaching as proclamation brings about what the people are waiting for. By means of this proclamation the kingdom of God is coming. In this way Timothy and in him also the succeeding preachers of God's Word have to take care that they are *present*, and that the proclamation of the king is given indeed, welcome or not.

To bring the message as a herald is translated differently in the New Testament. Usually the translation is: *to preach*, but often the word is also translated by: *to proclaim*. Sometimes other words are used, for instance in 1 Cor. 2:4 the translation of the proclamation or the preaching is simply: the *message*.

The proclamation is in the first place the announcement of the *grace* of the great King. But when the coming of the great King is announced, it can also contain an element of *judgment*. His coming can be to advantage, but also to disadvantage. In this way it is said of Noah, for instance, that he was a preacher of justice. But emphasis is put in the New Testament on the proclamation of God's salvation. In this way the herald stands antithetically over against the Stoic philosopher who, in Greece, was also a herald. This herald marched through the country with staff and knapsack and appeared as a preacher on the street. He showed himself moved by the wickedness of the people. But he was of the opinion that in each and every man a divine germ was hidden, which had to be developed. He is the example of the humanistic missionary who stimulates the good things in man. But the herald of the Scripture is different, as far as his *motive* for preaching is concerned, but also as far as the *contents* of his preaching is concerned. He brings the message to the people because God has sent him and because Jesus Christ wants to bring about His dominion. As far as the

contents of his preaching is concerned, he does not proclaim new morals or a new law, but conversion to forgiveness of sins and the coming of God's kingdom. He does not preach the way of deification of man, but the fact of salvation of God's Son becoming flesh, and the way to become a new man in His image. He does not try to bring to life a divine germ, but he is preaching the new life of Christ's resurrection.

The New Testament is full of this herald with his message of the great King. More than 60 times the words which are connected with this are used in the gospels, the Acts of the apostles, the Letters, and the Revelation to John.

Beside this word the Scripture uses another word, which means literally *to evangelize* and which is used even twice as often in the New Testament. The word means: to bring the good tidings, glad tidings. It is more than only to speak. It is a proclamation with authority and with power. Songs and miracles accompany this proclamation. This message of good tidings has effect. Where this message is brought, there is gladness. It brings salvation, it is also the way to salvation, it brings about regeneration. It is not a mere word of man, but God's eternal, living Word. I give some examples. In Romans 10 first the word is used that is connected with the herald. We read in verse 14, "But how are men to hear without a preacher?" Literally it says, "How are men to hear without someone who brings the message as a herald?" And verse 15 continues then, "And how can men bring the message as a herald unless they are sent?" But then follows in the same verse a quotation from Isaiah 52:7, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news." I quote now the whole verse of Isaiah: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament the word *to evangelize* is used twice: to bring good tidings. The situation in the time of Isaiah is that the prophet expects a great victory of the LORD, namely His ascension to the throne. His dominion as a King, the beginning of a new era. With respect to this the messenger of joy is very important. This man goes on ahead to the people that come back from Babylon to Jerusalem. Many people are waiting on mount Zion and expect the crowd of those who return. There one sees the messenger, the man who brings good tidings. He proclaims, "Peace, salvation, the LORD became King." The LORD Himself comes back to Jerusalem. The messenger proclaims that and at the same time the new era begins. He does not announce that it will happen once and that God's dominion is coming. No, he proclaims God's victory and with that this victory is reality. Salvation appears simultaneously with the proclaimed Word.

The Word is not mere wind and sound, but a power with effect. Those who are standing on the wall of the city hear that word, they pass it on with joy, it sounds through the city, the messengers carry it through the country, "The LORD is King." This idea of the proclamation of the gospel is also worked out and applied in the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of missionaries*. In that Form we are taught about the office of those ministers of the Word who are set apart for the preaching of the gospel to those who are outside. One of the texts which are quoted is John 10:16, where it says that the Good shepherd calls His sheep not only from Israel but also from all the nations and leads them to His fold. Also Acts 13:2 is quoted, from which text is concluded, "From the time of the apostles, the Holy Spirit has commanded the Church to set men apart for the work to which He has called them." Rightly we are pointed in this Form to Eph. 2:12 and 13 about those who were far off. But why not elaborate on the nature of preaching to those who were not God's people? That could have been done in connection with Rom. 9:24-26 and 1 Pet. 2:10 where Hos. 1:10 and

2:23 are quoted.

It is also important that in this Form reference is made to 2 Cor. 5:19 and 20, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." Then the Form continues, "He has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to men whom He made ambassadors of Christ. Therefore the missionary shall beseech men in the Name of Christ, *be reconciled to God.*"

Completely in accordance to the data from the Holy Scripture the Reformed confessions speak about the first task of the ministers of God's Word. So we read in the Belgic Confession, art. 30, "There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God. . . ." Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism gives the answer to the question (83), "What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?": "The preaching of the holy gospel. . ." So that is actually the main point of the keys of the kingdom and therefore it comes first. I quote also the Canons of Dort, ch. I, par. 3, "So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of His most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills."

I like to mention also some other confessions of Reformed origin. In the *Larger Catechism* which belongs to the *Westminster Standards* it is asked in question 35, "How is the covenant of grace administered under the New Testament?" The answer is: "Under the New Testament, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the same covenant of grace was, and still is to be, administered in the preaching of the Word (. . .) in which grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy to all nations." In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is spoken about "spiritual efficacy" and to "all nations" is added, "both Jews and Gentiles."

In ch. 18 of the *Second Helvetic Confession* is spoken in an extensive way about the ministers of the church, their institution and duties. This confession mentions first the Greek word for ministers (*huperetas*) "that means *rowers*, who have their eyes fixed on the coxswain, and so men who do not live for themselves or according to their own will, but for others — namely, their masters, upon whose command they altogether depend." Later on, this confession says, "The duties of ministers are various; yet for the most part they are restricted to two, in which all the rest are comprehended: to the teaching of the Gospel in Christ, and to the proper administration of the sacraments." Especially that first duty of the ministers is worked out: "For it is the duty of the ministers to gather together an assembly for worship in which to expound God's Word and to apply the whole doctrine to the care and use of the Church, so that what is taught may benefit the hearers and edify the faithful. It falls to ministers, I say, to teach the ignorant, and to exhort; and to urge the idlers and lingerers to make progress in the way of the Lord. Moreover, they are to comfort and to strengthen the faint-hearted, and to arm them against the manifold temptations of Satan; to rebuke offenders; to recall the erring into the way; to raise the fallen; to convince the gain-sayers to drive the wolf away from the sheepfold of the Lord; to rebuke wickedness and wicked men wisely and severely; not to wink at nor to pass over great wickedness." After that something is said about the second duty of the ministers, namely to administer the sacraments, and also something about to catechize the unlearned, to visit the sick and those afflicted with various temptations. Already earlier in the chapter is spoken about the combination of proclaiming the Word of God and administering the sacraments. Therefore reference is made to Eph. 3:3 and 9. I quote, "The apostle adds that ministers of the Church are administrators and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now in many passages, especially in Eph., ch. 3, Paul called the mysteries of God the Gospel of Christ. And the sacraments of Christ are also called mysteries by the ancient writers. Therefore for this purpose are the ministers of the Church called — namely,

to preach the Gospel to the faithful, and to administer the sacraments.”

It is remarkable that in more than one confession and also in the forms the administration of the sacraments is immediately mentioned as the task of the ministers of the Church, after first is mentioned their task to proclaim the Word of God.

Two things are important. In the first place, with respect to the preaching of God’s Word no separation is made between the unique office of the apostles on the one hand and the permanent office of the pastors and teachers on the other hand. In the second place, time and again emphasis is put on the preaching, the proclamation, and not on the preacher, the minister. That has consequences to two sides. To the side of the pastor and teacher himself: he may never place himself on the foreground or presume on his knowledge and talents. But also to the side of the congregation. The hearers of this very joyful message have to accept the preaching as the Word of God, not as the word of man. No wonder that especially two texts are quoted in the part of the Form in which the congregation is addressed: 1 Thess. 2:13 and Heb. 13:17. Then is said, “Take heed to receive the Word of God, which you shall hear from him, and accept his words, spoken according to the Holy Scriptures, not as the word of man but as *what it really is, the Word of God.*”

In one breath follows then, “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. . . .”

Sacraments and prayers

We touched already on the administration of the sacraments, which is immediately connected in the Form with the proclamation of God’s Word. “Second, he is called to administer the sacraments, because Christ has joined this administration to the preaching of the gospel.”

In the text of the Form Matt. 28:19 and 1 Cor. 11:24 are quoted, in which texts the institution of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are mentioned. The Form for the ordination of missionaries elaborates a little bit on the administration of the sacraments, not only about Matt. 28:19, but also about 1 Cor. 10 and 11, about the Lord’s Supper.

The connection between the service of the Word and the service of the sacraments has to make the Church careful in giving a mandate to others than the ministers for administering the sacraments. We also have to bear in mind that the Church Order says in art. 56, “The sacraments shall be administered . . . by a minister of the Word. . . .”

Then follows in the Form the service of *prayers*. “Third, it is his duty as pastor and teacher of the congregation to call upon the name of the Lord in public worship.” With respect to this are mentioned four different public prayers according to 1 Tim. 2:1 and 2:

- “a. Supplications: requests concerning specific needs;
- b. Prayers: requests regarding needs that are always present;
- c. Intercessions: the believers are always received by God, the heavenly King, in audience, in order that they may submit a petition in the interest of others; and
- d. Thanksgiving: the expression of one’s gratitude for blessings received.

This has to be done ‘for all men,’ and not only for our fellow Christians” (Van Rongen, 1984: 13).

Especially are mentioned in this text “for kings and all who are in high positions.” For they bear great responsibility, not only for public order, but also for the “protection of the Church and its ministry,” just as we confess in art. 36 of the Belgic Confession. That is also the purpose of this public intercession: “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.” But in order to be a good in-

terpreter of the congregation, the minister has to know exactly the needs of God's congregation. How can he interpret this need before God, when he is not well posted in the subject? But he must also know the need of the world, what is going on in the world, in the whole development of the nation, which powers are rising against God and which conspiracies are set up against God's holy Word.

From the side of the congregation it is also very important that the brothers and sisters are able to pray together with the minister, that they do not simply undergo the prayers, but that they know themselves completely involved in all the public petitions.

To tend and to feed

We discussed already the image of the shepherd with respect to the preaching of God's Word. The pastoral work of the minister of God's Word is expressed in the first place by leading God's sheep in the green pastures of God's Word. But that collective part of the motive of the shepherd does not exclude the individual care for the flock. Hence the Form deals not only with the duty of the minister "*in public*," but also "*from house to house*." With respect to this is pointed to the farewell of the apostle Paul on the sand of Miletus. There the apostle reminds the elders of Ephesus how he did not shrink from declaring to them anything that was profitable, and teaching them in public and from house to house (Acts 20:20).

Also in the houses the sheep must be fed and tended. In the description of the fourth task of the ministers is therefore to be read that it is their duty, "with the elders as stewards of the house of God, to see to it that in the congregation all things are done in peace and good order. Together they shall supervise the doctrine and life of the membership and tend the flock of God, not as domineering over those in their charge but being examples to the flock." That reminds us of the first letter of the apostle Peter when he admonishes the pastors to tend the flock "not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly." At the end of this passage of the Form also verse 4 of that chapter 1 Pet. 5 is added, "When the Chief Shepherd is manifested they as faithful servants will obtain the unfading crown of glory."

The idea of *to feed* or *to tend* is an important datum of the Scripture with respect of the office of the shepherd. We meet it already in the Old Testament. When we think about the shepherd, we have in mind the image of a quiet and peaceful existence and we replace ourselves in our thoughts to a rural picture of the shepherd who is tending the flock and who has little more to do than to keep an eye on the flock. Yet the image of the Bible is quite different from such a rural picture. In the Bible the shepherd is rather the heroic figure. We meet him as a nomad who marched with his family through barren regions in order to discover somewhere any pasture for the flock. He lived in a tent, made from goat's hair. I remind you of the description of Jacob, given by himself to his uncle Laban: "These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your she-goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself; of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was, by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes" (Gen. 31:38-40). All kinds of things could happen to the flock. Some sheep were torn up, other sheep strayed off and perished. In the one case theft was committed, but it happened also that the flock was struck by lightning. The latter disaster took for instance place in the case of Job, "the fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them" (Job 1:16). In order to protect the sheep the shepherd bore rod and staff, which served for defense and sometimes for the at-

tack against rapacious gangs and ferocious animals. Hence a sling was not a superfluous attribute in the hand of the shepherd. It served for bringing back a sheep that strayed away from the flock. It is well-known that in 1947 a shepherd boy used the sling and that the stone hit a bottle in a cave. That was the beginning of the “Dead-Sea Scrolls.” The stone missed its proper goal, but the result was an enormous discovery.

Many times the motive of the shepherd is used in Scripture. It is important with respect to this what the prophet Ezekiel is writing, especially in chapter 34. The prophet receives the mandate to prophesy against the shepherds who have been feeding themselves. “Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill, My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them” (vs. 3-6).

“Behold, I am against the shepherds,” is said in the follow-up of this chapter. The LORD will set up over the sheep one shepherd, His servant David (vs. 23). The false shepherds will be punished, and there will come a true shepherd who will execute his office in the right way. So this chapter is also full of Messianic prophecy. It is also called the ‘magna charta’ about the care of the shepherds who are God’s office-bearers. (Magna charta is actually the name of the letter of liberty, given in 1215 to the British people). It appears that Ezekiel 34 functions as the background of many texts in the New Testament which deal with the pastoral work. In Hebrews the word *bakar* is used in Ezekiel 34, which can have the meaning of ‘to take care of’, ‘to look after’, ‘to feel sorry for’. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament the word is translated by *episkeptomai*, from which the English word *bishop* is derived. But this word has not the meaning of a ruler, a commander, but rather of someone who takes care of another one and who is moved by his situation.

In this way it is used in Luke 1:68 in the song of praise of Zechariah, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has *visited* and redeemed His people.” When later on in this gospel according to Luke the entry of Christ into Jerusalem is mentioned, this word comes back in the address to the city, “. . . the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your *visitation*” (19:43.44). That was the time that God looked after His people.

Usually the word *episkopos* (which is used many times in the New Testament) will be translated by *overseer*. But bear in mind that the meaning is rather: ‘to take care of’, or ‘to look after’. An excellent combination of the idea of the shepherd and the care for the flock is delivered in 1 Pet. 2:25, “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.” Here it could also be translated: “to Him who tends you and who takes care of you.”

It is said in the first place of Christ that He is the Good Shepherd. I remind you of John 10. But in the same gospel Christ also says to the apostle Peter, “Feed my lambs,” “Tend my sheep,” and “Feed my sheep” (21:15-17). It means that the apostle Peter (and in him also the other apostles) have to take care for the flock. But this care is not limited to the apostles. The apostle Paul uses on the sand of Miletus the same

word to the elders of the church of Ephesus, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which He obtained with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). This task of to take care for the flock is not only said of the apostles, but is also for the ministers of God's Word and for the whole consistory. It is the task of the care for the flock. The well and woe of the flock has to touch their heart. It is not a kind of inspection or control, much less a kind of service of espionage which trace the walks of the members of the congregation in order to look if there is something wrong with them. No, it is a matter of real interest, to offer help if necessary in order to bring and to keep them on the right way, to support them in the right choice, if necessary also to warn against the dangers which they perhaps had overlooked. In Paul's farewell speech on the sand of Miletus the element of *to guard* of the shepherds is especially emphasized and worked out. They have to take heed to themselves (they have to take care that they themselves stay on the right way), and to all the flock.

Immediately the apostle adds to that the warning, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (vs. 29). So there is a threat from outside through which the flock can be scattered. But there is also a threat from inside, which can also work in a destroying way: "From among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (vs. 30). There is not only the danger of fierce wolves from outside, but also the danger of false shepherds from inside. Especially to these two dangers the shepherds of the flock have to give attention. "Therefore be alert" is the apostolic command. The shepherd who takes heed of the flock in the right way may not sleep or slumber!

This does not mean for the sheep that they can doze off because the shepherd is on guard. Precisely the fact that the true shepherd takes care for the flock and looks after the sheep, must stimulate them to lay his admonition to heart and to be aware of the dangers. The warning of Paul to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20 is continued by his admonition in the letter to the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God, the spiritual armor, "... to keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18).

To lead and to suffer

There is strong emphasis on the care of the shepherd for the flock. Is not the element of supervision involved in that?

Sure, but not in the sense of *to reign, to rule*. It is rather the element of *to lead, to go in front*. In the same verse in which the apostle Paul admonishes the consistory of Ephesus to be alert (Acts 20:31), he reminds them that for three years he himself did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. In that word *to admonish* is also the element of warning, especially in the sense of to bring someone back from wrong paths. The same word is used by the apostle in 1 Thess. 5:12, together with the word *to be over*: "... we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who *labor among you* and *are over you* in the Lord and *admonish you*, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work." Those who are over the members of the congregation earn respect, not because of their formal authority, but because of the *work* that they do on behalf of the Lord. They are not leaders in the sense of rulers, who decide everything, so that everyone has to follow them without any further ado. No, they are the people who go in front, who show the way, who detain from wrong ways.

In this sense is also to be understood the prayer for the minister of the Word according to the Form: "Grant him wisdom and faithfulness to guide the flock in the right path and to keep them in Christian peace, that by his ministry and under his good

leadership Thy Church may be preserved and increased.” In this sense is also to be understood the prayer with regard to the congregation: “Grant that those entrusted to his pastoral care may acknowledge this servant as sent by Thee. Give that they may receive the instruction and admonition of Christ which this shepherd shall bring to them and that they may joyfully submit to his direction. Grant that through his ministry all may believe in Christ and thus inherit eternal life.”

When a minister is leading the congregation in this way, it does not mean that he meets no hinder or troubles. Hence in the Form is also applied the text of 2 Tim. 2:3 to the minister of God’s Word, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

A pastor has to give guidance, in the sense of to lead the way, but at the same time he must also be able to *follow*. As a good soldier he has to follow his Principal, his Commander Jesus Christ. Paul had already said to his spiritual son Timothy that the fulfillment of his calling would cause suffering from the side of the world: “. . . take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God” (1:8). In the second chapter the apostle comes back to that. Timothy has to know that suffering is inevitable when he as a good soldier is fighting in the army of Jesus Christ. “To suffer as a good soldier” deals with the nature of the task, but also with the mentality of a soldier. Suffering can come from different sides. There are enemies who attack. That brings about suffering. Adversaries can cause suffering to God’s servants.

There can be slander, also persecution and oppression. Violence and guile can also go together. Contradiction can also come from the side of enemies *in* the congregation. There can be jealousy, intrigues can be undertaken. Then God’s servants have to bear in mind that they may never suffer as a wrongdoer, just as Peter writes in his first letter (1 Pet. 4:15, cf. also 3:17). He writes also, “Even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed” (3:14). Then they may not have fear for the enemies, nor be troubled. Peter is writing that in general to those who are in the dispersion. It is the more in force for God’s ministers who can be placed so easily in a suspicious corner. Precisely then the point is that they persevere in the struggle and that they do not give up the fight!

To expose and to rebuke

A special expression in the Form is the verb to *expose*: “He shall expose all errors and heresies as unfruitful works of darkness, and exhort the membership to walk as children of the light.” These words are actually a kind of summary of what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians in ch. 5:8-14. This is also in the first place an admonition to the *congregation* of Ephesus. But this does not mean that office-bearers and especially ministers of the Word are excluded. The word that is used for to *expose* means in the first place to *rebuke*. In this way it is used in the Greek translation of Lev. 19:17: “. . . you shall *reason* with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him.” The word is used about fifteen times in the New Testament, also in the sense of to *rebuke*. So for instance in 1 Tim. 5:20, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” In the second letter to Timothy, Paul places the word on one line with the preaching of God’s Word: “Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). It is not sufficient that the people hold aloof from the unfruitful works of darkness. No, they must be shown up. That is very clear from the passage of Eph. 5, just mentioned. The unfruitful works of darkness must be exposed. What is darkness must be exposed by the light, that is here: the light of God’s Word. Hence the word comes back in verse 13: “. . . when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.” In connection with

this the apostle quotes what was probably a Christian hymn from the early Church: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light" (vs. 14). The masks must be ripped off. Hypocrisy must be uncovered. The works of darkness must be exposed. That contains the element of *to rebuke* also.

These elements are missed in the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of missionaries*. I regret that this is not referred to in that Form. For if anywhere the unfruitful works of darkness have to be exposed and rebuked, it is on the mission field!

Do not serve reluctantly

There is still one special point I want to mention in connection with the service of the ministers of the Word, namely, that they do not have to serve reluctantly.

"Not reluctantly" — the apostle Paul is using this expression to the church at Corinth in the framework of his admonition to offer to the saints abundantly. "For God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7).

"Not reluctantly" — that is also in force of the service of the ministers of the church. In the letter to the Hebrews the readers are admonished, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:17).

This text is also quoted in the Form. It is an admonition to the congregation. The members of the congregation have to obey the ministers and to submit to them. What does that mean? Is it a kind of slavish obedience, so that criticism, in whatever form, is contraband? In no way. Also the minister of God's Word is fallible and it is merciful to point out his faults to him.

But that may not be destructive but constructive criticism. The minister may not become the defenceless object of a merciless judgment of man. He himself has to know: he who judges me is God, but at the same time he has to give account of his work as an office-bearer. And especially that work as an office-bearer is important. The Form placed the admonition of the Letter to the Hebrews completely in the framework of the necessity that the congregation has to honour the minister because of his *work*.

Instead of needless criticism on his *person* the prayer must be made that he could fulfil his *task* as he ought to do. Not the person, but the office is important. If the person would be in force, the one could be praised abundantly while the other one could be despised completely. Deification of men and abuse of men are sometimes not far apart. It happened to Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. The one moment they were esteemed as gods, but the other moment the people stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city (Acts 14:11,12,19). But the people did not understand anything about the office and the message of Paul and Barnabas.

Obedience and submission in the sense of Heb. 13 are to be seen as obedience and submission to the Word of truth. On the one hand that forces the ministers to bind to nothing but the Word of God, which they may proclaim. On the other hand it compels the hearers to submit themselves completely to the Word that is preached. If the pastors understand their office in this way, and if the congregation is also living in this way, the ministers do not need to be bowed down by a heavy burden which they cannot lift up, but they can do their work with joy.

In this way we also have to understand the prayer that follows in the Form, "Grant that those entrusted to this pastoral care may acknowledge this servant as sent by Thee. Give that they may receive the instruction and admonition of Christ which this Shepherd shall bring to them and that they may joyfully submit to his direction."

If the congregation receives God's servant in this way, the end of the Form says according to Matt. 10:12 and 13, "the peace of God will come upon you, and you will inherit eternal life through Christ."

Conclusion

I come to a conclusion. I have four final remarks.

1. First of all: generally speaking the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of ministers of the Word*, and also the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of missionaries* (cf. p. 619-628 of the *Book of Praise*, ed. 1984) give an adequate description of the office of ministers of the Word and missionaries, and deliver a good profile of the pastor according to the Scriptures.

2. It is remarkable that — although many texts of the New testament are quoted or referred to — almost no texts of the Old Testament are mentioned in both Forms. In the new Dutch version of the Form reference is made, for instance, to Jeremiah 3:15 and Jeremiah 23:4, and I would have mentioned also the important chapter of Ezek. 34.

3. It is regrettable that in the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of the missionaries* no reference is made to Ephesians 5:8-14 in which passage also the important task of the missionaries is to be described as to expose all errors and heresies as unfruitful works of darkness."

4. Finally, the *Form for the ordination (or installation) of the missionaries* does not elaborate on the nature and character of preaching to those who were not God's people before. That could have been done in connection with Rom. 9:24-26 and 1 Pet. 2:10 in which texts Hos. 1:10 and 2:23 are quoted.

ARE ELDERS AND DEACONS OFFICE-BEARERS?

Importance

When we discuss the office of elders and deacons, we deal with a very *important topic*. Paul writes to his spiritual son, Timothy, about elders and deacons and he gives instructions which are apparently so important that they could not be *delayed*, not even for a short time. The apostle says, "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14, 15). Especially by pointing to the LORD of the house, the Apostle Paul emphasizes his command.

Therefore, the topic of elders and deacons is not a *temporary* matter, and also today we have to execute the rules of the household of God's Church, faithfully and precisely, being obedient to the assignment given by the LORD Himself. "For if we want to maintain the church," Calvin once said, "we must have that regiment which the LORD has established as an inviolate regiment" (compare 1 Timothy).

Confession and Church Order

In Article 31 of our *Belgic Confession* we profess this Scriptural importance of the offices of elders and deacons in the church. "We believe that . . . elders and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful elections of the church, with prayer and in good order as stipulated by the Word of God." In accordance with this confession, the *Church Order* starts, after the introductory Article 1, in the second Article as

follows: "The offices are those of the Minister of the Word, of the Elder and of the Deacon." Do we indeed profess and accept that?

Time and again we hear that these offices are not prescribed in the New Testament, and that it belongs to the freedom of every congregation, to extend or to minimize these offices. Are these offices indeed instituted? Were some of these offices only temporary, or were they all permanent? In other words are elders and deacons indeed officer-bearers, or not? Are they all at the same level or is there a kind of gradation between them? And what about women in the congregation? May they serve in a special office? We will try to answer these questions, especially in connection with contemporary publications in this respect.

Presbyters

It is a remarkable fact that the origin of the office of the elders is not mentioned in the Bible. The elders of the Church at Jerusalem suddenly appear on the scene. We read in Acts 11:29 and 30, "The disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." J. van Bruggen is of the opinion that these elders are not the elders in our sense of consistory members. He says it is remarkable that their election is not mentioned by Luke. And it is also remarkable that they appear in the picture so late. His conclusion is that these elders only had a temporary task and they were the same as the "disciples" from the gospel (van Bruggen, 1984: 78ff.).

But is it so strange that their election is not mentioned? Just three chapters after this story in Acts 11 we read, "When they [Paul and Barnabas, K.D.] had appointed elders for them *in every church*, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed" (Acts 14:23). J. van Bruggen argues that these elders were at another level than the elders of Chapter 11. But I do not believe that. We must not conclude too much from the fact that no election is mentioned for the first elders in Chapter 11. And besides that, already before Pentecost there were hundreds and hundreds of believers. Paul writes to the Corinthians that "Christ appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6). They were disciples, all of them. But it is quite impossible that all these disciples were involved with the relief mentioned in Acts 11. It is more reasonable that the office of the elders mentioned in Acts 11 and the office of the elders mentioned in Acts 14 are the same. And it is also very likely that there were elders in the New Testament church just as there were leaders in the synagogue. There were many house congregations, and probably elders played a role in them from the very beginning.

In any case, in the rest of the book of Acts we hear about elders time and again. They were involved in the decision of the meeting with the apostles according to Acts 15. They were present at the visit of Paul to James according to Acts 21. These elders are called by two names: presbyters and overseers.

Overseers

Is there any difference between presbyters and overseers? When we translate the Greek words literally, we get the words presbyters and bishops, or, priests and bishops. All of you know that these words have been claimed by the Roman Catholics, and also that these words do not have exactly the same meaning. But I am of the opinion that these words point to the same office-bearers. I ask you to compare, for instance, Acts

20:17 with 20:28. Paul called the elders of Ephesus, and he said to these same elders, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Compare also the first letter of Peter, Chapter 5:1 with verse 2. Peter calls himself a fellow elder, and he exhorts the elders, "Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly." Compare also Titus 1:5 with verse 7. Paul writes to Titus, "This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you." And then, in verse 7, writing about the same office-bearers, he says, "For a bishop, as God's steward must be blameless"

Why, then, are two words used, pointing to the same persons? The name presbyter has been copied from the Jews, and usually this word was used by the Jewish Christian congregations. Also the synagogues had their "elders," their presbyters — as I mentioned already — and these presbyters made decisions in all kinds of matters, also concerning church discipline. But the name overseer is especially used by the Christian churches of Gentile origin. Probably under the influence of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where this word is used for instance in 2 Kings 11:19, 2 Chronicles 34:12, Isaiah 60:17 and Nehemiah 11:9.

We can conclude that many names are used to designate the special office-bearers of the New Testament, whom we call elders or overseers.

Disappearance

In the beginning of the apostolic church, the elders played an important role. But in the course of time, the episkopoi (also called "bishops") became increasingly dominant, and slowly but surely the elders disappeared. There were still "priests" as a general name, but they did not form a board or consistory. The bishop was the regional ruler and the other priests had to listen to and obey him. So we may say that the rank of elder sank away below that of the bishops, who ruled the church.

It took a long time before the office of elder was rediscovered: It was during the Reformation and it was especially Calvin who put the elder on the stage again. It has once been said, "Calvin checkmated the Pope of Rome with the pawn of the Reformed elder." Everywhere in the Reformed churches the elders were recognized and honoured again. Unfortunately, after the Reformation the elder disappeared again in several regions.

In September 1979, Prof. D. Deddens presented his inaugural address on the topic: "*The disappearing elder,*" about the omission of the office of elders in the congregational churches in Massachusetts. This omission occurred already in the seventeenth century! How did that come about? The main reason was that especially the ministers of the church let the elders disappear. Dominocracy went hand in hand with independentism, and the result was that there was no work anymore for the Reformed elder.

Rehabilitation

It is very important to keep the elders in honour. For also today there is a danger that we underestimate the elders over against the ministers of the church. If the position of ministers were to become central, and if one would consider the elders only as the assistants of the minister, then there would be something wrong. It happened in the past, and it happens today, especially in the U.S.A., that one sees the elder as the ruler, but the minister as ruler and counsellor. If there are problems and difficulties, people pass by the elders and go directly to the pastor.

Maybe the old “*Form for the ordination of elders and deacons*” gave some rise to that. In that old form the government of the elders is stressed, while in the “Form for the ordination (or installation) of Ministers of God’s Word” the task of the shepherd is extensively mentioned. But let us bear in mind that the elders are also pastors. Paul said to the elders of Ephesus, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which He obtained with the blood of His own Son.”

I think the new forms are better. Both of them point to the important pastoral task of the elders and ministers. I remind you for instance of these two passages concerning the elders: “Together they tend the flock of God which is in their charge” (in the margin reference is made to 1 Peter 5:1-4) and also: “To do their work well as shepherds of God’s flock, the overseers should train themselves in godliness. . .” (with reference to 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

So let us not underestimate the important office of the elders. Let us bear in mind what the letter to the Hebrews prescribes: “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Deacons

More than the office of elders, the office of *deacons* is in danger today. That is not only the case in our days for we can say that none of the special offices in the church experienced so much alteration of assignment and change of duty as the office of deacons. One said, “Just as Laban dealt with Jacob’s wages, so they dealt with the office of the deacon: they changed it ten times!”

Already in the second half of the second century the deformation began; deacons slowly but surely became no more than helpers, the *adjutants* of the bishop. They could not do anything without his order or permission. Besides that, one placed between the bishops and the deacons the presbyters, and this hierarchical order was maintained very strictly. Also archdeacons and subdeacons appeared, and it looked like the order in the Old Testament — the bishops being compared to the high priest, the presbyters to the priests and the deacons to the Levites. As a rule the deacons had to stand, while the higher clergy might sit.

In the Middle Ages the image is even more sombre. There is nothing left of the care of the diaconry for the poor. There is begging everywhere, and that is not discouraged by the clergy, but rather promoted. The poor complain that nobody takes care of them. Meanwhile there is great luxury and wealth in the monasteries, as well as the costly splendour and lustre of the higher clergy, especially at the papal court, attained by exploitation of the people. But from the beginning it was not so.

Therefore, the Reformers had the enormous task, of looking back to the beginning and restoring the office of deacons completely. Luther discovered from Scripture what the office of deacons actually was, but time and again he let himself be ruled by the spirit of his time. So in the Lutheran church the deacon received the function of assistant preacher. Zwingli recommended the care of the poor to the government, so he did not restore the office of deacons. But Bucer first, and after him Calvin, rediscovered the beauty of the office of deacons, and they read again the Scriptures in order to reform this office.

Diakonein

It is also our task, to read the Scriptures again in order to understand what the

task of the deacon is. In the New Testament the verb *diakonein* (and also the noun *diakonos*) has a general and a special meaning. According to its proper significance, *diakonein* means “to serve at the table” (namely, for food and drink), according to Luke 17:8 and John 12:2). Hence the word is used for all “provision” (see Luke 8:3, Matthew 27:6, Mark 15:41), while the personal provision with love is stressed (see Matthew 25:42-44, Acts 2:19 and 1 Corinthians 16:15).

The *diakonos* is he who practices *diakonein*, and our Lord Jesus Christ continues to practice it as no one else. He experienced in this world the call from His Father as a service, endlessly great, immeasurably deep, totally unique in its appearance. Although He is the Son of God Himself, He did not come into this world in order to be served, but to serve. He completely breaks the idea of the old world that to serve is something less worthy. He turns around all human ideas of greatness and rank. He tells His disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Matthew 20:25-28, see also Mark 10:42-45). So Jesus Christ did Himself. He did not seek a *crowns*, but the *cross*.

When Jesus Christ, the great *diakonos*, ascended into heaven, He continued this office in the first place by His apostles. They have the task, to glorify God’s Name on earth, to proclaim His great deeds. They have to serve God by serving their brethren, also with material goods. That was an enormous task! No wonder that when the number of believers increased that much, this enormous task excelled the powers of the twelve. After a short time, there were problems with the care of the poor. The apostles had received and taken charge of the money given by the people of the church. The whole task had become a large one, and the care for the poor did not function as it ought to have. We read in Acts 6 that the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

Widows neglected

What does that mean, that the Hellenists’ widows were neglected in the daily distribution? J. van Bruggen is of the opinion that this means that those widows were neglected, not as *objects*, but as *subjects*. In other words: they were not neglected in *receiving* support, but in *giving* support (van Bruggen, 1984: 65ff.). He appeals to Acts 9, where we read that Dorcas was also one of the women who was full of good works and acts of charity. And Dorcas was one of the leaders of the widows, who made clothes for the poor. But I do not think that van Bruggen is right. In the first place, we do not read that Dorcas was a leader of a group, but we only read that the people very much regretted that with her death the charity of making clothes had stopped. In the second place, turning back to Acts 6, if the negligence had been in the fact that no women were involved in the distribution of the goods and money, then we might expect that this would be rectified by appointing *women* now. But that did not happen. Neither did the seven brothers receive the assignment to *enlist women* in the future as a kind of help to the sisters. No, seven brothers were installed. They were appointed to that duty (verse 3), namely, to serve tables (verse 2).

The seven

Time and again, the objection has been made that the word “deacons” is not mentioned in Acts 6. But I am of the opinion that this does not at all prove that this chapter does not deal with deacons. I think we have here the *prototype* of the later deacons,

in the special sense of those who have to *diakonein*.

Repeatedly people have tried to deny and to dispute the ecclesiastical office of the deacons. For instance, one pointed to the fact that in the rest of the book of Acts no deacons are mentioned. In Acts 14:23 we read about election of presbyters, but not of election of deacons. In Chapter 11:27-30 we read that the relief to the brethren of Judea was sent to the elders, so not to the deacons. But we cannot see that this poses a great difficulty. For in Acts 8:1 we read that a great persecution arose against the Church at Jerusalem. So it already happened very soon that the office of deacons could not function any more in the Church at Jerusalem. And also later on, when the persecution grew less, it appeared that the office of deacon was not necessary in Jerusalem, for we read in Acts 21:8 that Philip, one of the seven, lived in Caesarea.

Another objection was that what is said about the seven does not have anything to do with the care of the poor. Philip goes to work as an evangelist, Stephen delivers sermons and does great wonders and signs among the people. Also this objection does not hold water. It is explicable that the work of the deacons is not mentioned in Acts 6, because the reason for the trouble had been solved. The measure was undoubtedly effective. In addition, the "seven" could have received the charisma of *didaskalia*, the special gift of teaching, just as it happened often in the beginning of the New Testament church. Neither is it excluded that, for instance, Philip started preaching when it was impossible to function as deacon.

There are also the objections that the "seven" had no office at all, that they had the same office as the presbyters, that they had a special status between presbyters and deacons, or that they had a temporary task in order to solve specific problems. These are all arguments against the permanent office of deacons. But I am of the opinion that Acts 6 deals with the service of deacons as a *permanent, special, independent* and *proper* office.

Office

It is an *office*. The seven were not appointed by the apostles or by the presbyters as "helpers." The whole, broad, solemn course of facts shows us that this is more than a kind of subordinate, less important function; the calling together of the congregation, the exposition of the necessity and the requirements of the service of mercy by the apostles, the election by the congregation, the approval of the apostles, their prayer and laying on of hands — all that is an indication of the institution of a certain office.

It is also a *permanent* office and not a temporary service. Of course there were in that time temporary services. We should not consider the organization of the Christian church in the very beginning as if everything concerning the offices was finalized. But we may say: the more the extraordinary offices disappeared, the more the normal offices came to the foreground. The distinction in Acts 6 between *diakonia tou logou* (preaching the Word of God) and *diakonein trapedzais* (to serve tables) is rather sharp. What was united for the apostles in their service, is now split into two services: the preaching of the Word of God, and the service of mercy.

It is also a *special* office, distinguished from the extraordinary office of the apostles and the prophets of the New Testament. It is a special service in the local church. We do not read that the seven executed their office outside Jerusalem.

It is also an *independent* office. That independence is strongly expressed by the apostles when they say "whom we may appoint to this duty." The word that is used here points to the ordination to an office. The apostles leave the whole matter of the care for the widows to the deacons because this whole care became too heavy for them. It appeared that the preaching of the Word required all their energy. They had

to hand over the care of the poor to others in an independent office. Therefore the seven were given the responsibility for caring for the needy.

Finally, it is also a *proper* office. In former Latin publications we can read the term *proprius*, from which the English word “proper” is derived. That means: this is an office with its own task, not to be shared with others. That also means that the deacons may not claim what belongs to the duties of other office-bearers. Neither is the office of the deacons to be equalled with the function of government officers. What the deacons exercise is Christian mercy, according to Christ’s mandate, to the honour of the Name of the LORD and to the well-being of the poor and lonely members of Christ’s body.

This permanent, special, independent proper office is not less holy or worthy than the office of minister of God’s Word or the office of elder.

No female deacons

It is clear that the office of Acts 6 was instituted as an office of *men*, so there were no *female deacons*. I agree with J. van Bruggen that according to the New Testament the sisters of the congregation cannot become office-bearers. I also agree with him that there are many tasks for the sisters. We can read in the New Testament that women played an important role, and so, also today women may help in all kinds of ways.

But the thesis of van Bruggen is now, over against all kinds of emancipation theories, that the deacons have no special office in the church either. He says, “the deacon, as we know him, is a kind of colleague-office-bearer of the elder and he has his own place. But the Biblical deacon is not an office-bearer, and he is only a help for the overseers.” His conclusion is that it would be better if the deacon left his place in the pew of deacons beside the pulpit and that he went to the pew beside his wife. So he could, together with the female deacons, execute help-services in the church. He also concludes that it would be better not to install the deacons, because they have no special office. The best would be that they were appointed by the elders (van Bruggen, 1984: 117ff.).

I am of the opinion that van Bruggen is wrong here. Of course the deacon has a general title, deacon, that means, servant. But I am convinced, just as I said before, that the deacon has a permanent, special, independent and proper office in the church. I think there are more texts in the New Testament besides Acts 6, pointing to that.

Philippians

Van Bruggen says that the deacons are not mentioned very often, because they stand beyond the elders and overseers and they do not fulfill an independent service besides them. In this respect I want to point to the letter of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians. Paul and Timothy directed their letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Phillippi, with the bishops and deacons.” But S. Greijdanus argued that we have to consider the words “overseer” and “deacon” in their official, technical sense. And he adds to that, “There is nothing that points to the idea that the deacons would be helpers of the overseers in the material, financial things” (Greijdanus, 1937: 55ff.).

Timothy

In the second place, I would like to point to the first letter of Paul to Timothy, Chapter 3, the verses 1-13. There we read about the requirements of overseers, deacons

and women. It may not escape our attention that many conditions are required of the elders, more than of the deacons, and also more than of the women. We may also note that the female helpers are here clearly distinguished from the overseers and the deacons. And the female deacons are absolutely not the same as the deacons, who apparently have their own, special, official task in the congregation.

I am of the opinion that the development is very clear. In Acts 6 we have what we called the prototype of the deacons, but in the letter to the Philippians and in the first letter to Timothy, the offices are already more established and Paul then writes down the requirements for the office-bearers.

Clemens

We also want to point to a writing that does not belong to the Bible, but that gives us insight into the situation of the church right after the time of the apostles. It is the first letter of *Clemens*, on behalf of the Church at Rome, directed to the Church at Corinth, and presumably originating in the year 96 A.D., that is only a few years after the death of the Apostle John. We read in that letter: "So preaching everywhere in country and town, they [the apostles, K.D.], appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be overseers and deacons unto them that should believe. And this they did in no new fashion; for indeed it had been written concerning overseers and deacons from very ancient times; for thus said the Scripture in a certain place: 'I will appoint their overseers in righteousness and their deacons in faith.'" (42,1; cf. Kirch, 1947: 11 ff.; cf. also Lightfoot, 1976: 31.) Clemens quotes here the prophecies of *Isaiah*, Chapter 60:17, and he tries to prove that the Old Testament already delivered a basis for the New Testament offices. In this respect I think Clemens was not right. *Isaiah* 60:17 (second part) says: "I will make your overseers peace and your taskmasters righteous." I am of the opinion that this prophecy points to the future luxury and riches of Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, it is very clear that at the end of the first century the Church at Rome had elders and deacons, and it is also clear that one was convinced at the time that these two offices were instituted by the apostles as independent offices.

Pastor Hermae

There is a second source, originating from the early part of the second century, called *Pastor Hermae*. Hermas was not an office-bearer, but a businessman in Rome. His book is written in the form of visions. He shows in these visions how an angel lays bare the sins and deviations of the church and summons to do penance and to convert. He writes that there are, besides the former apostles, overseers, teachers and deacons as office-bearers in the church. I quote now the passage of the vision concerning deacons who did not execute their office as they ought to have: "And from the ninth mountain, which was desert, which had reptiles and wild beasts in it which destroy mankind, they that believed are such as these; they that have the spots are deacons that exercised their office ill and plundered the livelihood of widows and orphans, and made gain for themselves from the ministrations which they had received to perform. If then they abide in the same evil desire, they are dead and there is no hope of life for them; but if they turn again and fulfill their ministrations in purity, it shall be possible for them to live."

There are also faithful office-bearers. "The stones that are squared and white, and that fit together in their joints, these are the apostles and overseers and teachers and deacons, who walked after the holiness of God, and exercised their office of overseers

and teacher and deacon in purity and sanctity for the elect of God, some of them already fallen in sleep, and others still living.” (Vision III, 5, cf. Lightfoot, 1976:173.)

This book, just as *Clemens* had great authority in the church of the second century. Of course they did not have the authority of the Bible books but the church regarded them very highly. It appears from the *Pastor Hermae* that the office of the deacons was to take care of the poor. It also appears that they distributed the goods rather independently.

Didachè

The third and last witness of that time (also in the first part of the second century) is the so-called *Didachè*, or *Teaching of the Apostles to the Gentiles*. It was of course not written by the apostles themselves, but it is based on the doctrine of the apostles and it also had great authority. It originated in Palestine and Syria, and it delivers clear insight into the preaching and life of the old church.

Also in this book we read about the deacons as office-bearers. We read: “Appoint for yourselves therefore overseers and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money, and true and approved; for unto you they also perform the service of the prophets and teachers. Therefore despise them not: for they are your honourable men along with the prophets and teachers.” (XV, 1,2; cf. Kirch, 1947: 6; cf. also Lightfoot, 1976: 128.) The *Didachè* says: “They perform the service.” The word used for service is one which always refers to an *ecclesiastical service*. So also the *Didachè* recognizes the deacons as office-bearers in the church.

Reformation

It would be possible to quote more writings from this time, but I think these quotations are sufficient. They show us very clearly that in the time just after the apostles the deacons were honoured as office-bearers, just as in the time of the apostles themselves, as Paul wrote in *Philippians* and *Timothy*.

I already said that *deformation* came very soon, and it would take a long time before *Reformation* came. It was Bucer who restored the office of the deacons, and he said they had special tasks, for instance at the Lord’s Supper. To Bucer the deacons have a permanent office and within the consortium of servants of the church they have their own place, characterized by the original meaning of New Testament *Diakonia*. Calvin took that over and he said in his *Institutes* that the deacon’s office was not only to take care of the poor, but also to look after the sick people.

I do not want to follow the whole history. I only want to stress that the Reformers went back to the early church, just as Calvin always said that he aimed to do.

Disappearing?

We saw that after the Reformation the elder disappeared in some regions quite quickly. What about the deacon? Time and again attempts were made to change this office or make it disappear altogether. On the one side there was the effort to separate it from the local congregation, by saying we have to look for a *world-deaconry*, thereby charging the deacons with the task of looking after the needs of the whole world rather than leaving it to the initiative of all individual believers. On the other hand there is the opinion of van Bruggen (and he is not the first one in history) that the deacon could better leave the chair of the office-bearers and take his place in the pew.

Over against both efforts I want to stress the *importance* of the office of the deacon in the church, but then connected with the local church and taking care of the needy,

the poor, the sick, and the old people in that local congregation. Let the deacons keep their own office! Let the deacons keep that beautiful office! Let the deacons maintain that office in the church and persevere in it! There are many tasks for everybody in the church, for men and women, for old and young people. But let us continue to preserve the offices in the church for the ministers, the elders and the deacons.

High office

It is very good that the “Forms for the ordination of elders and deacons” (especially the new form) shows that the offices, including the office of deacons must be held in high regard. After having quoted several texts from the Old and New Testament, we read in the form: “Also today the Lord calls us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God’s people. No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty. For the sake of this service of love Christ has given deacons to His Church. When the apostles realized that they would have to give up preaching the Word of God if they had to devote their full attention to the daily support of the needy, they assigned this duty to seven brothers chosen by the congregation. It is therefore the responsibility of the deacons to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church.”

We may conclude that it is an office, and even a high office, that the deacons received. I want to stress that offices in the church are *Gifts* of the exalted Christ Himself, just as we for instance can read in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. And we may not neglect this element! No doubt it is good to say, what for instance C. Trimp says, that the office-bearers are to be discovered and recognized by the congregation in respect of their *charismata* (Trimp, 1978: 50ff.). So we may say indeed that the special office in the church is not to be separated from the service of the believers.

But there is more. This is only one element. The other one is that office-bearers are gifts from heaven. The “highness” of the offices in the church is that there is a divine assignment, and connected with that assignment there is also a divine qualification. Each and every office-bearer will ask time and again, “Who is *sufficient* for these things?” (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:16). So also the Apostle Paul himself asked that question. But he knew the answer: “He who *calls* you is *faithful*, and He will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24). Therefore, I emphasize that he who is an office-bearer in the church does not receive only a *calling*, but also *capability* for it. I miss that often in publications concerning the offices in the church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I come back to the question I posed at the beginning: “Are elders and deacons really office-bearers?” My answer is: Yes, without any doubt. Their offices are different from one another, but both offices are true offices. Both of them are also “high” offices, not to be separated from the congregation by whom they are elected, neither to be separated from the exalted Lord Jesus Christ who granted them as gifts from heaven. So let us honour the office-bearers in the church. Let us pray for them, in order that they may exercise their office joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to the congregation. In this way we may be sure that God will grant the office-bearers the gifts they need: wisdom, courage, discretion and mercy, so that each of them may fulfill his office as it is pleasing to our heavenly Father.