

Discerning True Need in An Age of Entitlement

Current Challenge

One of the challenges facing deacons in our day is how to help people asking for assistance who may in fact not be needy. Or they may not be needy in the way they think they are. It was not that long ago that deacons faced the problem of people having a genuine need but refusing to call the deacons. Very likely there still are church members who would rather struggle through their financial difficulties on their own or suffer in silence rather than call the deacons – there’s too much shame in that. That was not and is not a good thing. That stunts the extension of mercy and compassion which Christ calls the church to give to the needy. It prevents grace from being shown or received which is not how the Lord would have it. The children in God’s family are to reflect the image of their Father in heaven. Preaching and pastoral care should encourage such members to let the congregation in to help, let the deacons in to help.

But it seems that there are less and less of such people and more and more people who are quick to call the deacons and quick to have their hand out. Such members do not have malicious intent – let me be clear about that. As a rule, I don’t think they are trying to abuse the system or get something they have no right to receive. With a clear conscience, they invite the deacons to come but then they have the full expectation that they will not only be heard but also helped with a cheque.

The point is, the new generation of needy church members does not have a sense of holding back; the concept of not “daring” to phone the deacons is increasingly foreign to them and they tend to feel quite confident not only to ask but to receive. There is a feeling from their side that this is how things work. *I run short in meeting my monthly budget, I call the deacons, the deacons supply my needs – and everyone is happy.* They do not believe they are *abusing* the system but they feel they are making *good use* of the system. What seems to have changed is the very idea of what deacons are called to do, the very concept of what defines a person in need.

Entitlement

And I think, brothers, this confidence and easiness to ask for financial help from the deacons comes out of an environment of entitlement, and we need to reckon with that. It’s no secret that our culture fosters the perspective of “rights” – everybody has rights. An employee has rights to certain benefits like sick leave or maternity or paternity leave or medical coverage – and it is the norm to ask for and receive such things, no questions asked. Workers don’t always think about whether they *need* them, but they take what is coming to them. They presume upon their “rights.”

This idea of taking what is owed you no matter whether you’ve really earned it or much less whether you *need* it or whether the party giving it to you can actually afford to give it, is a problem that has existed for years, for example, in the Federal Government of Canada. Cries have been heard about the “gold-plated” pension programs for MPs and the tremendous benefits

Senators receive, far and above what the private sector provides. This mentality of ensuring that you receive your benefits was made famous by former MP David Dingwall when he stated at a hearing into his expense claims as head of the Federal Mint, “I am entitled to my entitlements” (2005).

Our young people, the 20, 30 and even 40 somethings today have grown up in this kind of setting, and that perspective is starting to shape our thinking. We’re seeing a resistance to *sacrificial giving* and an insistence on *pleasure spending*. Parents in the 60s and 70s who began our schools more easily gave a portion of their much smaller incomes to support the schools, whether they had children or not in the schools, while parents today tend to put it off as long as they can. More than one set of parents in our time has said, after their last child has graduated from Guido de Brés High School, “*That’s it. I’m done. I’ve paid my share. Now I can spend that money how I really want!*” As a generation we feel entitled to our pleasures and perks – our vacations, our two vehicles, our kitchen renovation, our RRSP’s, etc.

And as we grow accustomed to this way of thinking, our sense of what is needy begins to shift. The line between need and extra, or need and luxury becomes blurred and before we know it, people are looking at all their present creature comforts as needs. Life can’t be lived without them. And so when money runs tight and the bills can’t be paid to keep up this lifestyle, the deacons are called in with the natural expectation that the deacons will provide for them to maintain the lifestyle they have grown accustomed to. In the minds of more and more of our people, that is the “need” of the 21st century.

And you can imagine how this can challenge the deacons. Instead of being asked to cover a temporary shortage in *groceries* (with first fruits having been given and all other bills covered), now they are being asked to cover a shortage in making the mortgage or school payment in part because the many other bills which sustain their lifestyle get paid first - usually on the credit card, which is often maxed out! And many times there’s been no giving of first fruits either. In those circumstances, it takes nothing for deacons to start writing cheques for hundreds of dollars one month only to come back to do it all over again next month – and one family can eat up 10s of thousands of dollars very quickly if the deacons don’t put their foot down and sort things out from a biblical perspective (let me hasten to add: with due care, concern and genuine love, of course).

Scripture on the Poor

For the Scriptures do teach us discernment in this matter. On the one hand – and I don’t have to convince you of this, I’m sure – but to be clear, the Lord in Scripture speaks very often about our obligation to help the poor and needy. Our Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons summarizes this well: we are to love the members of the church who have fallen into hard times and share with them of the good things God has given us. We are to imitate God’s love for His children and follow the example of Christ in showing mercy and compassion to the afflicted. In

short, deacons are to see to it that, “*No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty.*”¹

What is “*Needy*”?

The issue facing us today is: what constitutes poverty? At what point does a church member become financially needy so that it is good and proper for the deacons to provide financial relief for them? The passage we read in 1 Timothy 5 helps us find some answers. As Paul does in other letters toward the end, here too he begins to address specific groups of people within the congregation. At times he addresses family groupings – husbands, wives, children, but here he speaks to Timothy about more general groupings within the church: older and younger men as well as older and younger women. And then he comes to speak about widows, the lengthiest passage in all of Scripture on widows.

And what he says here about how widows are to be treated is instructive for us with respect to how all those in financial need are to be treated, because in Scripture the widow is normally one of the neediest people in Israel. A widow was a typical poor person. Let me give but one example from Exodus 22, “*Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.*” Yahweh has an eye for those in distress and genuine poverty or need – we sing of it too in Psalm 68:3, “*He, Father to the fatherless, defense of widows in distress.*”

Widows were often left in a very vulnerable position. In a society where the husband was the sole bread-winner and women did not normally enter the work-force outside of the home, a wife whose husband died was suddenly left without an income. The status of a woman was tied to her father or husband and if both were gone, she was often at the mercy of the community for day-to-day living. It was common for widows to be dirt-poor – think of the widow whom Jesus observed putting her last pennies in the temple treasury – and if she had small children to feed and care for, her plight would only be worse. This was the typical experience of a widow in Bible times, a person alone and poor, without provider or defender – and yet God cares for her! God defends the widows and if God protects and helps the widows, then His people must do the same!

Only, the church must be discerning about which widow has genuine need requiring help. That’s the point of Paul’s words in v.3, “*Honour widows who are truly widows...*” Or: *widows who are really in need*. Paul then breaks off into the duty of such a widow’s family members to care for her so that the church might not be burdened with her. We’ll come back to that in a moment, but from v.3 to v.16 Paul is sorting out the kinds of widows that warrant help from the church from the kind that do not. He speaks in v.9 of only enrolling widows on a list – and I take him to mean a list of widows to be cared for by the church² – only enroll them if they meet

¹ *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2010) p.613.

² I realize there is some debate as to the nature of this “list” since Paul does not spell it out in so many words. Since v.3-16 is clearly a distinct pericope with an *inclusio* in v.3 and v.16 indicating that the topic is discerning which widow is truly a widow in need whom the church is to care for, and since Paul feels no need to define the nature of

certain conditions: above the age of sixty, having a reputation for doing good works, showing hospitality, caring for fellow Christians, etc. Young widows or those with a poor reputation (i.e. for ungodly behaviour) were not to be put on such a list. Paul rounds off the discussion in v.16 by coming right back to where he started, “*If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are really widows.*”

There is a call here for the church to be discerning in helping those who ask for assistance and I think it applies right across the board. Surely if the church discern among the widows, the most obvious group of needy adults, then it must do so with single adults, single moms, and families who present themselves as being in need.

Two Criteria: First - All Alone

Paul mentions at least two criteria that we are to look for. The first comes in v.5, where the widow who is truly a widow is described as one “*who is left all alone...*” – no husband, no children, no family to look after her. That’s one major factor in determining people really in need of the church’s help and something you as deacons will need to look for and teach the people under your care. This passage makes it very clear that biological family members have the first duty to assist their needy relative. The closer the relation, the greater the obligation. V.8 lays it out plainly, “*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*”

Deacons are not called to be the first responders in a financial crisis, not when there is family about. You may face this more and more that church members would sooner call in the deacons than to approach family members because of a) their sense of entitlement, that’s how “the system” works, this is what they are “supposed” to do, and b) the comfort of confidentiality and anonymity. Deacons don’t usually know a person or couple and their circumstances in the same way that close blood relatives do, and some people are counting on that. There’s a certain distance or arms’-length approach and the deacons won’t tell anyone about it.

That’s what we all like about government aid, right? It is more or less anonymous and comes without personal questions or having to answer to anyone for how the money is spent. What I might *not* dare ask of my family because they know me, they see what I do with money and because they’ll ask too many questions, I may seek from the deacons who are one-step removed and easier to deal with.

Family Involvement

this “list” on which such widows are to be enrolled (v.9), I think it is simplest to understand him as referring to a list of truly needy widows whom the church will care for. Other widows are not to go on such a list but either have the means to look after themselves or should be looked after by their family members. Whether such a list of godly, needy widows implies that they in turn would serve the church in certain capacities (as some suggest) is not clear to me. This is not evident from the context and no duties for such widows are stated either. See George W. Knight III, *NIGTC: The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) p.222-223 for a good (but technical) discussion.

As deacons, if you encounter a person or couple that has not yet sought help from family, be aware that this may be their mindset and then set out to gently instruct them to do so. Be compassionate, be understanding. Listen carefully, always. Be patient. It may require one or two visits to sort out. You may even see fit to provide short-term relief on the spot because the need is urgent, but still you should direct them to seek help from family. You may even need to help them bridge that gap by setting up a meeting or perhaps going to speak separately with the family members or speaking on the phone if they are some distance away. Deacons have a role here to teach, if necessary, both the needy person/couple and their family members. If the people involved love the Lord and want to live out of His Word, they will respond favourably to your direction.

Getting the family involved has at least a few benefits. First, it makes them active in the service of mercy and charity and they will be blessed in following in Christ’s footsteps. Second, it will also make the needy person able to discern what he or she should be requesting help with, knowing that their own blood relatives will be sacrificing for them. If my brother-in-law or my father-in-law is going to provide two hundred dollars each per month so that my children can stay in John Calvin or in Guido, am I really going to keep my Satellite TV? Or my membership down at the Y? Individuals or couples may think nothing of asking for the deacons to help while they keep these things which are not truly needs but it will be different when they know that close relatives are sacrificing to help them. Family involvement will help the needy couple become more focused in deciding what are needs and what are wants, what they should give up and what is a must, and therefore will become more careful in trying to live within their means.

Second: The Devoted Needy

For that ties in with the second criteria Paul gives here in v.5, where the widow who is truly in need is she who, “*puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*” That’s quite a statement and quite a contrast! There are two kinds of widows, two kinds of people in need. Simply because a woman has lost a husband – and that could apply also to a woman whose husband has abandoned her, divorced her or otherwise left her on her own – as grievous as that is, that in itself does not qualify her for the church’s financial support. The important question is: whom does she trust? Is the needy person looking to serve the Lord, to walk with the Lord or to walk her own way? Is it personal pleasure she’s after or God’s honour? She not only must be truly in need but in her difficult circumstances, she must also be diligently looking to the Lord for help!

Strange as it may sound to us, Paul knew of widows who used their new-found singleness to seek their own pleasure. Some of them may have had their own inheritance, their own independent wealth which they were then using for themselves. In v.11, Paul speaks of some younger widows being overcome by sensual desire – apparently to the point of wanting to marry outside the Lord. That’s what he means in v.12 when he speaks of these widows bringing judgment on themselves by breaking their first pledge – more literally, their former faith! (See

ESV). Others were acting like busy-bodies and gossips, going from house to house and stirring up trouble in the church. Such widows were not to be enrolled on the list of the needy for deaconal assistance – they needed, rather, to be visited by the elders and admonished! The widow who is truly in need of aid is the one who not only has little or no financial capability of her own but who nevertheless is dedicated from the heart to the service of the Lord – exactly like that widow whom the Lord Jesus observed throwing her last penny into the temple treasury.

So the widow whom the church is to be primarily busy with is the one who is alone and without means to provide for herself – not able to put food on her plate and no money to pay rent. There is no way for her to earn an income. This is a desperate woman. She is on the edge of *not* making it! This is not someone who has the cupboards full of food, keeps paying for a cell phone, internet access, satellite TV, but has long ago stopped giving anything to the church and now needs help making a school payment or mortgage payment and comes with her hand out to the deacons!

Educating the “Needy”

Brothers, when you meet a family or person with this mindset, you must again set out to educate. Not in a tight-fisted manner, but in a spirit of generosity and love you need to instruct them about the love we are called to have for God and how like that widow in the temple, we are to direct even our tiniest resources to His service, trusting Him to provide. That widow didn’t keep anything back from God but instead put her very life into His hands.

You will need wisdom and tact for this, so be sure to pray before you go on your visits. People often call you in an emergency and so you may need to assist with the emergency, but have an eye for the bigger picture and the longer term. Where is this couple at? Where is this sister going to be in 2 or 3 months or a year? What is the husband’s outlook and perspective? How do they look at their own money and the money given them by the deacons? What is their plan to get back on their feet and be in a position where they can not only meet their own needs but also be able to give to help others in need?

Teach them about stewardship. Take the long view and lead them to see it for themselves, out of the Scriptures. They need to understand the difference between pleasures and needs, between desirable extras and what is necessary to keep them from living, as the Form says, “uncomforted under the pressure of...poverty.” As deacons, you have been entrusted with the financial gifts of the brothers and sisters in the congregation. They gave of their love to help those truly in need. They sacrificed something of their income, perhaps giving up certain of their own pleasures, so that those who are really in need may be helped. As deacons you may not dispense those gifts carelessly or wastefully for you will have to give an account to the Lord for your management of these resources. You also would not be helping such people in the long run for the true need they have is to get the right, biblical perspective on financial resources, on God’s blessings and our service to God. You should make the people you are trying to help

aware of all these things and put it to them: how can you receive the sacrifices of your brothers and sisters and not be willing to sacrifice anything yourself?

In short, God did not give deacons to allow church members to “keep up with the Jones” or to maintain their chosen standard of living. Deacons are given the church to show the mercy of Christ by helping to keep God’s people out of the misery of poverty. It’s that gap between true poverty and desired life-style that you brothers will increasingly encounter in our age of entitlement and which you will need wisdom to bridge through careful aid and gentle but persistent instruction, born out of love for Christ and His church. Thank-you!

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