

No. 94.

THE SCRIPTURAL OFFICE

OF

THE DEACON.

EVERY well organized association has a competent number of officers, wisely distributed according to the several duties which are to be discharged. The church under the Mosaic dispensation was a perfect model in this respect. Nor can we believe that amid the fulness of gifts, which she has received under the more excellent dispensation of the gospel, it was ever intended that she should present a less perfect aspect. The covenant under which she is formed is “well ordered in all things and sure;” and it would seem natural that the frame-work of her administration should correspond with the perfect and precise arrangements of this covenant. Hence we find that when our Lord “ascended up on high, and gave gifts to men,” he bestowed upon his church a perfect arrangement of functions and distribution of gifts. “And God hath set (or constituted) some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers; after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” These functions and gifts were many of them specially adapted to the peculiar circumstances of the church at the time when they were given. But some were intended for the nourishment and guidance of the

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church in all ages, at least until her membership shall be translated from their scenes of conflict to their triumphant reward.

Among the latter falls the office of the deaconship, which appears included in the above enumeration under the title of “ helps.” The same circumstances which demand the continuance of the offices of minister, pastor, and ruling elder, also require that of the deaconship, though with varied degrees of intensity according to the exigencies of the times.

During the first days of her existence the apostles were the only regularly appointed office-bearers in the church, and upon them fell the whole burden of all that was necessary for the preservation, increase, and comfort of its members. With single-hearted fidelity they gave themselves to their work, having the care of administering the word and ordinances, and providing for the temporal wants of the poor, among those thousands of disciples born in a day, by the power of the Spirit, who were cast by their prolonged stay in Jerusalem, upon the sympathy of their brethren for support.

It would seem probable that the apostles had not discharged the duty of distributing to the necessities of the poor disciples personally, but while maintaining the oversight, had committed the execution of the details to persons of their own selection, among the Jews of Palestine. We can scarcely suppose the disciples would have murmured against persons they revered so highly as they did the apostles; or that there would have been any ground for complaint, on account of partiality, had the apostles personally performed the duty. In the daily distributions from the common fund accruing from the gifts of the benevolent, the widows and destitute persons among the Hellenistic or Grecian Jews were neglected. This, or the supposition of such neglect, led to great complaints among them, against the Hebrews or Palestine Jews. This circumstance induced

the apostles to call an assembly of all the disciples and state to them as recorded in Acts vi. 2 : “ It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you, seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and the ministry of the word.” This proposition of the apostles was well received by the body of the disciples, who chose the *seven*, as it is conjectured from their names, from the Grecian Jews, with the exception of one, who was a proselyte of Antioch. These persons, thus selected, were set apart by the apostles to their office, with prayer and laying on of hands.

This is the simple and concise account which is given of the origin and institution of this office. It originated in a peculiar exigency in the history of the church. Having been once established, however, it seems evident that it was designed as a perpetual institution. The *gradual* adoption or moulding of the form, or external polity of the church by the apostles, was the most convenient mode of its establishment in their times. But when this form has been perfected through their instrumentality, it is most exactly adapted to the state of the church in every age of the world. Her wisdom will be found in giving it the whole form, which has been thus established. To say nothing of the *impropriety* of her omitting anything which her Lord has appointed, such an omission is evidently most unsafe. The least reprehensible description that can be given of it, is to call it an *irregularity*. If one irregularity be countenanced, especially in sacred things, the door is opened for numberless others, and the development of the principle, of which this is the germ, would most effectually sweep away all the bulwarks of the church. The ministers of the gospel in the present day are not clothed with apostolic authority, to form the church according to exigencies which may arise.

This work has been done for them. A form has been given to the church suitable for all circumstances and ages, and the business of her ministry is to mould the church in strict accordance with this divinely appointed model. Prudence, as well as faithfulness, requires that the particulars of this form be all adopted immediately upon the organization of a church, and if any of them have been delayed or neglected, that the defect should be remedied as speedily as possible. The sentiment of nearly the whole Christian world seems united upon this point, that the diaconship is a perpetual office. All the various denominations of Christendom, and the various sects calling themselves Christian, retain the office, at least in theory, though they may pervert the institution in practice.

The care of the poor appears to have been the direct object of their appointment, having been originally selected for this office, that they might relieve the apostles of this additional burden. This is by some regarded as their great or only business. Hence they consider the deacons as equivalent to *overseers* of the poor, and think the office unnecessary in the church, in countries where the community makes provision for the support of the poor. The influence of Christianity is strikingly seen in the attention paid to the poor in Christian lands. Where the influence of the gospel does not reach, the poor have no friends. Love to our neighbour, shown in acts of well-doing, is the direct effect of the Christian spirit. The prevalence of this benevolence throughout communities is a subject for thanksgiving on the part of the church, showing the wide-spread influence of the principles she professes.

The supposition that the church has, in this matter, left too much to the community, to our apprehension becomes a fact. She has shown herself too willing to be eased of her proper burdens, and to throw them upon the shoulders of the state. The example of the apostolic church, and the prac-

tice of the early Christians, clearly show the fact that the primitive church always supported their own poor. And those churches which adhere most strictly to the apostolic practice are particularly careful not to allow their poor members to be dependent upon “ the cold charities of the world.” The aid which is given by brethren, by partakers of the same Spirit, faith, love and hopes, will surely be more acceptable to the impoverished and suffering Christian, than that which is wrung from the unwilling hands of town-overseers, whose very position too often leads them to favour grudgingly and give sparingly. Aid from the former quarter, becomes not only a testimony of interest, but a strong bond of affection. The Christian feels that he is one beloved and remembered in his distress by his brethren, and his gratitude is excited both to them and their common Lord.

Picture to yourself one of the early Christians deprived of his property, if he had any, and confined within the damp walls of a gloomy dungeon, for his adherence to the faith of Christ. Subjected to cruelty and pining want, he feels that all earthly blessings are fled, and the tie which binds him to his Saviour is the only solace of his soul in the hour of its deep distress. He is startled from these and similar meditations by the fearful tread of the jailer. The dismal creak of the lock, and harsh grating of the door as it turns upon its hinges, awaken fearful forebodings of the object of this dread visit. Now he must again confront his malignant accusers, be condemned by a cruel and unjust judge, be scourged and tortured, and perhaps speedily be consigned to a violent death. But these fears are dissipated by the appearance of a familiar friend in the person of one of the deacons of the church to which he was attached, who comes bringing to the sufferer tokens of the kind remembrance of his brethren, and supplies for his wants. His heart leaps up in gratitude to God. The bond of love which binds him to the household of faith is strengthened, and when words

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of encouragement, and assurances of earnest prayer being made for him by the church, are given, he feels willing to suffer the will of the Master, and glorify God thereby. The persecutions which the primitive Christians endured rendered this office an efficient instrument in ministering to the wants of the poor and suffering. Let it be remembered, however, that it was established at a time when the church was free from persecutions, and enjoyed comparative ease and prosperity.

Although particularly appropriate to the dark and suffering periods of the church, like all the other divine institutions it is equally adapted to all the circumstances which may arise in this imperfect world. This adaptation evidences that it is an expedient of divine wisdom. The poor we have always with us; to them the gospel is preached, and from their ranks are taken the great majority of its converts. The same obligation rests upon the church to take care of her poor that did in her early history. There is the same propriety in her use of the divinely appointed instrumentality for this end. God has made a division of labour in sustaining and up-building the church, and this division is most wise and happily adapted to accomplish the end in all ages and circumstances. We may go farther, and safely say, that it is better adapted than any human expedient or substitute to accomplish the design. But aside from this adaptation, it becomes not us to sit in judgment upon the divine arrangements, and decide upon the expediency of their adoption. God has decided that matter for us; and our proper business is to carry out this decision, and perfect these arrangements. Have we any more right to omit this agency, or substitute another in its place, than we have to neglect the preaching of the gospel, or to substitute the circulation of Bibles and evangelical books in place of the oral teachings of the pulpit? Some may suppose that the press might perform the work as well, if not better

than the established agency. But God has determined "by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." God regards the poor, intends that his people shall care for them, and has appointed the deaconship as a proper agency to carry this intention into effect.

Those churches which care for the poor, increase in numbers and strength. This fact is understood even by the adherents of a pseudo-Christianity. One great cause of the strong hold which the church of Rome has upon the minds of her votaries, is found in her benevolent provisions for the poor, and in her charities. These are often more specious than real, yet they gain for her a reputation for benevolence ; and has she not preserved herein the germ of the principle of the apostolic appointment of deacons, though she has obscured it by human inventions? The church of Christ should be eminently benevolent, not only to the souls, but also to the bodies of men, herein following the example of her Founder and Head, who went about doing good. The missionary of the cross, who with a competent knowledge of medicine, gives a portion of his time to healing physical diseases, is doing his Master's work, by which a door will be opened for his benefiting the souls of men. Why should not the church in all her branches cultivate a similar spirit, and keep constantly on hand a fund to be expended in relieving through her appointed officers the distresses of the poor and suffering ? In doing this work, she might attend to the needy within her own bounds first, and then extend her beneficence according to her ability to others in her neighbourhood. An opportunity would thus be afforded the deacons as almoners of this bounty to speak a word in season which should be blessed, and many recipients of this bounty might be induced to turn their steps to the house of God, hear his word, and secure the life of their souls. The amount of influence which is lost to the church in leaving the care of the poor to the community or to

uncertain benevolence is incalculable. The church should be foremost in every good work, and lead therein in such a way as reflects honour, through her, upon the Master, instead of causing a revenue of praise to accrue, through her supineness, to some irresponsible association. The neglect of the church in this benevolence of which we are now speaking, has probably *accelerated*, if not *occasioned*, the growth of those mutual assurance associations which now exert a wide-spread influence throughout our land, whose whole tendency will be, we fear, to draw men away from Christ and his gospel. They will at least weaken the hold which the proper benevolent spirit of the church naturally possesses both over the giver and the receiver. In a day when it is sought to take from the church her proper office and glory, and present her before the world as a cold philosophic association, busied in religious abstractions, with not a chord of sympathy beating in unison with a suffering humanity, it becomes her to shake off her lethargy, gird on her armour, and boldly and faithfully assert her true position and character.

The morality derived, and too often *abstracted* from Christianity, will secure a general attention to a portion, at least, of the wants of the poor. But can the church discharge her duty to her Master and the world, while neglecting this important means of influence ? She is better fitted to perform these acts than any other agency, as she has qualifications and facilities which are not possessed by others. While she gives meat to nourish the body, she proffers “ the living bread ” which nourishes unto eternal life. While giving drink to the thirsty, she invites them to the fountain of living waters. When giving raiment to cover the naked, she exhorts them to seek to be clothed with the unfailing robe of our Redeemer’s righteousness; and when providing a house for the homeless, she points them to everlasting mansions. The almoners of her bounty offer the richest

blessings of the gospel under circumstances peculiarly favourable for their reception. And can the church afford to do without these advantages and turn them over to the hands of those, who either cannot, or will not use them aright ? Such opportunities are golden seasons which she should seize with avidity and faithfully employ. She cannot let them slip without declining most appropriate and promising labour for her Lord. The commendation which is represented as bestowed upon the righteous at the day of judgment indicates not only their duty as individuals, but also that of the church in its collective capacity. Matt. xxv. 34—40.

When the question of the permanency of the deaconship was agitated in the Westminster Assembly, it was decided almost unanimously in the affirmative, Dr. Lightfoot being the only one who voted in the negative. The existence of a *civil poor-law*, instituted in the reign of Elizabeth was the great stumbling-block in the minds of many, previous to the debate, some thinking this rendered the deacon's office unnecessary, and others that it would interfere with the state arrangement. In the course of the discussion it was well remarked by Mr. Vines :—" The provision of civil officers made by the civil state for the poor, should rather slip into the office of a deacon, than the reverse, because the latter bears the badge of the Lord," (*Hetherington's Hist. of West. Assembly* page 143.) The people in Scotland have always acted in accordance with this view, the government having always assigned the care of the poor to the officers of the church.

Many urge as an apology for the disuse of this apostolic institution, that the circumstances of the church are very different in Christian countries at the present time, from what they were in the apostolic age; that our churches have very few, if any poor attached to them, and the duties appropriate to the deaconship may very well be performed by

the ruling elders and members of the church without creating an additional office. The circumstances of the church have varied since the establishment of this office, but more in the detail, than the general aspect. During the first *thirty years* of the ministry of the apostles she enjoyed toleration. Now she receives protection. The difference between a mild toleration, and a bare protection, which is all she receives in our land, is not very great. It may be enough to produce a greater degree of present security, but does not demand a change in the organization of the church. One of the great excellencies of the Christian system in its doctrines, worship and government, is that while it is most simple, it is at the same time most effective, and is susceptible of being transferred unchanged to all times and ages. There is no need of change. That will mar and weaken, rather than strengthen, and there should be none, unless directed by the same authority which gave being and form to the system.

In a country where there are poor people, we should regret to discover a church without any in her pale. Such a circumstance would be a most unfortunate indication of the spiritual state of that church. There are those in straitened circumstances, if not in absolute want, in or near all our churches. Many of God's people are among the poor of this world, and *he* has appointed the deaconship to care for them in every time and country.

The fact that the minister, ruling elders and members may individually discharge this and other duties appropriate to the deaconship is no reason why this apostolic office should be discontinued. Any one of these persons may properly perform these duties in an emergency, and they should all be encouraged to abound in such acts according to their leisure and means. But all these persons have appropriate duties connected with their respective offices, and experience proves that when the duties of various call-

ings are heaped upon one person, they are seldom all well performed. The practical effect of the disuse of the deaconship is seen among all those churches among whom it obtains. Few ruling elders take time to discharge the duties belonging to their own office, to say nothing of their going into the high-ways and hedges to look after the poor, the suffering, and the degraded, and induce them by kindness to come to the gospel feast. Were the deaconship filled and its duties faithfully performed, there would still remain enough to do to employ the time and energies of our ruling elders.

But why should they perform, in the ordinary circumstances of the church, the duties of the deaconship? As members of the church, professed followers of their benevolent Master, they may and should visit and relieve the poor; but what authority have they for doing these as the official acts of the deaconship, or how can their private actions atone for the neglect of the church in her collective and organized capacity, to become a minister of mercy?

To remedy this oversight, and meet and rebut the charge of neglecting an apostolic institution, we are referred to the principle that the greater includes the less; the inferior office is comprehended in the superior. Ruling elders possess the powers of deacons as ministers possess those of ruling elders. (See Dick's Theology, vol. 2d, p. 499.)

This principle is a most excellent expedient to rid us of a difficulty in an *extreme emergency*. But we conceive it is utterly at fault, when applied to the ordinary state of the church. If the superior office includes the inferior, the eldership the powers of the deaconship, so that there is no need of the latter, then why may not the ministry include the eldership, and this office be discontinued as useless? Our system would then indeed be simplified, and ecclesiastical power, upon the principle of absorption, be concentrated in the ministry, and the monarchical principle, against

which it is the peculiar vocation of Presbyterianism to contend, become fully developed in the church. Try this principle in its application to civil government. How soon would power be absorbed from the lower and more numerous officers, and, retreating to the highest civil functionary, concentrate in his hands an arbitrary despotism? The principle is a dangerous one, and should be regarded with extreme jealousy by the church. Order is heaven's first law, and its first development should be seen in the church, which should be a type of heaven in all that is lovely and of good report.

We have dwelt thus long upon this duty of the deaconship, because it was directly established for this end, and on account of its important bearing upon the permanency of the office, and the obligation of the church to maintain it inviolable.

In addition to this our form of government declares, chap, vi:—"To them (the deacons) also may be *properly* committed the management of the temporal affairs of the church." The more the subject is considered, the more thoroughly shall we become convinced of the propriety of emphasizing the word "*properly*," and grounding our ecclesiastical practice upon such a construction. The original intention of the appointment of deacons was to free the apostles from temporal cares. To them was committed the business of the church. This directly involved everything necessary for taking care of the poor, including the reception, safe-keeping, and disbursement of the donations made to the common fund for their support. In our day this may naturally include taking up all the collections of the people for the objects of benevolence and the welfare of the church. The collections for the poor, for the boards of the church, the offerings for the support of the pastor, and the gifts for the building and maintenance of the sanctuary, and the preservation and disbursement of these, all fall properly

within the scope of the deaconship. The words of the apostle in 1 Cor. xvi. 2, "upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come," clearly intimate that the practice of the church was to take up a weekly collection for the poor, and for the peculiar exigencies of the divers parts of the church, upon the first day of the week, or the Christian Sabbath. They followed in this the practice of the synagogue, in which the Jews took up a collection for the poor every Sabbath. This practice is still continued in many parts of the church, we believe in all branches of the church in Great Britain and Europe; and one may be pardoned for expressing an opinion, that our benevolent operations would be in a higher state of prosperity, were this primitive practice universally followed. It may well be doubted whether that disposition is orthodox, which regards with cold indifference, or positive dislike, the collections in the church for benevolent and religious objects.

In our country, the management of the temporal affairs of the church, has very extensively passed into the hands of trustees appointed by the particular congregation they serve.* This ecclesiastical trusteeship, so far as we have been able to learn, is peculiar to portions of the Presbyterian Church in this country, being unknown in that of Scotland, and in the Reformed churches on the Continent. It is a congregational element which has been imported into the Presbyterian church from New England. It would be an interesting and curious object of inquiry, to ascertain and follow the rise and progress of this substitution for the deaconship ! We say substitution, for is it not in reality a

* As there is a difference of opinion in reference to the propriety and expediency of such secular boards in the church, the views of the writer are submitted without any direct endorsement by the Board of Publication.

human expedient, by which a class of church officers are excluded from the house of God, and another ostensibly appointed for another purpose are really substituted in their room and discharge their functions? If this custom has been introduced inadvertently it should be subjected to the most rigid and careful scrutiny. Is the human expedient better fitted for the discharge of these duties than one which God has appointed, and is it more fitting or proper that it should be used? Neither of these will certainly be maintained. There is, therefore, no reason why we should step out of the way, and not be contented to have these duties discharged according to the apostolic plan, which has the sanction of the Head of the church. Such a practice inadvertently throws contempt upon the institution which he has established. The character requisite for the deacons, as given in 1 Tim. i. 3, seems to refer to their being entrusted with large funds, and thus being in danger of yielding to covetousness. A deacon must “not be greedy of filthy lucre,” else the temptations of his station may prove too strong for him, and his sin inflict a sad wound upon the church. This, together, with the accounts given in the Acts, of the large donations made to the apostles, for the purposes which the deaconship was established to effect, render it in the highest degree probable, if not morally certain, that the practice of the primitive church, together with that of the Reformed Churches in Europe, and a goodly portion of the Presbyterian bodies in this country, in investing deacons with the care of church temporalities, is *apostolic* and *binding*. Unless their collections for the poor were larger than those taken up in the *most* of our modern churches, at any rate, there would scarcely be any need of the apostolic caution, for these alone would tempt none very strongly. But when we recollect they were invested with the care of church temporalities, we see the pertinency and force of the direction, and these will continue so long as the proper

functions are appended to the office. There is a propriety in the church having her property under her own control, which highly commends the primitive office of the deaconship. Many difficulties are avoided by this, which arise under the other system. The action of the church is made more simple, easy and harmonious, and one of the principal elements of dissension, which now so often distracts congregations, would be removed.

Some have added to the primitive office of the deaconship, and exalted it into an order of the ministry of the word. The deacons were made ministers of the *sanctuary*, but not ministers of *the word*. This is a distinction which we may properly remember when we hear men talk of the different orders of the ministry, and one which they would do well to bear in mind. This clothing the deacons with the powers of ministers of the word, arose from the fact that some of the deacons, as Stephen, are presented to us in the additional character of evangelists. "These having used the office of a deacon well, purchased to themselves a good degree (*i.e.* honour and advancement) and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." May not these words of the apostle refer to the faithfulness of Stephen, and his associates in their office as deacons, and their subsequent advancement as ministers of the word? There is at least a resemblance between their character and success in their ecclesiastical career, and the "*beau ideal*," which he holds up in respect to the deaconship.

We have dwelt thus fully upon the arguments in favour of the permanency of this office, because doubts upon this subject seem to lie at the foundation of that neglect of the office, which unfortunately prevails among so many of our churches. This point might have been assumed upon the authority of our form of government which places this among the ordinary and perpetual offices in the house of God. The truth of this position is evidenced not only by

the original institution of the office, and the circumstances of the church, but also by the fact that Paul, in writing to Timothy more than *thirty* years after this event, speaks of it as highly important, and gives as full a description of the qualifications of character requisite in those who fill it, as he does in respect to those who should fill the bishopric. He places the two offices side by side, and gives no intimation that one is of inferior obligation to the other. We may fairly infer from this circumstance, that this office is as important and binding as any other, and that we have no more right to neglect the deaconship than we have to allow the bishopric to fall into disuse. The notices of the deaconship given in the New Testament are as full as those respecting the ruling eldership, and convey an equal idea of the permanent character of the office, and the duty of the church to maintain it inviolate.

When the Scriptures and our church standards, as interpreting them, both coincide in enforcing upon the church the permanent obligation of the deaconship, the neglect of it on the part of our churches is certainly most unwise. Nor can we consider ourselves innocent while continuing in this neglect. Apostolic and permanent institutions should always be maintained. The church is thus fully armed and prepared for any emergency. Her wisdom and safety will always be found in maintaining inviolate the institutions of her Lord as she received them; for if she does not maintain them, she will certainly lose efficiency and influence, and in some way receive the rebuke of her Lord.