

THE DEACON.

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“Look ye out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the Word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost,” etc.—ACTS vi. 3-5.

“Deacons, in like manner, must be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless.”—1 TIM. iii. 8-10.

In the last issue of the magazine it was suggested, that while it is of the very essence of Presbyterianism to magnify the office of ruling elder, yet there is the utmost confusion in the Presbyterian Churches as to the scope and functions of the office. It is otherwise in respect to the office of deacon. There is difference of practice. Some Presbyterian churches, especially those supported by the State, have suffered the office to drop out of their machinery, it having become atrophied through disuse. But there is little, or no difference among writers on Presbyterian polity as to the origin, nature and functions of the office.

1. *Its Origin.* This is described to us in the sixth chapter of Acts. The seven men there chosen by the multitude and ordained by the apostles were the first deacons. While the name is not given to them as an official title, there are considerations which justify the application of the title to them. Their ordination means the setting apart to some office. If this was not the office of deacon, then we have an office without any name. Again, we find later on that there was in the church the office of deacon. If this was not its origin, then we have an office with no account of its origin. There is the further consideration that the early church, with one consent, regarded the office of deacon as having its origin in the appointment of the seven. Touching

this point, there is such general agreement in all branches of the church of the present day that we need not discuss it further.

2. *Functions of the Office.* Agreeing on the origin of the office, it is strange that all branches of the church should not agree on its functions. These seem to be pointed out so plainly in the account of the appointment of the seven as to leave no room for difference of opinion. Nevertheless, there is a difference; in all Episcopal Churches, deacons are a third order in the ministry of the Word. In these churches, deacons are fledgling preachers, trying their wings, and looking forward to ordination to the priesthood, or eldership, at the end of their first year. This is the “good degree” of which the Apostle speaks, and which they “**purchase** to themselves” by using the office of a deacon well. All Episcopal Churches have inherited this perversion of the office from the papacy, the great mother of episcopacy. Looking at the narrative in Acts, we see that the seven, instead of being appointed to a preaching office, were appointed specifically to relieve the preaching office. They were set apart to the ministry of tables, in order that the apostles might give themselves more fully to the ministry of the Word. The emergency which gave birth to the **deaconate** was not owing to a scarcity of preachers, but to the necessity for an entirely different order of workers. It is noticeable, that in the qualifications for the office laid down by the Apostle, “aptness to teach” was omitted from the list. Could we account for such an omission, if teaching were a prime function of the office? Candid writers in the Episcopal Church, whose views are not obstructed by High Church pretensions, frankly allow that the deacons of apostolic appointment had no distinctly spiritual functions assigned them. Rev. G. A. Jacob, D. D., says, in his *Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament*, “There is no intimation of any such duties as these being discharged by deacons in the New Testament; but, in the absence of express injunctions of apostolic authority, it was competent for any church at any time to alter or add to the functions of these or any other officers in its service.” He quotes Hooker to the same effect, “Deacons were stewards of the church, unto whom at the first was committed the distribution of church goods, the care of providing therewith for the poor, and the charge to see that things of expense might be religiously and faithfully dealt in. . . . These only being the uses for which

deacons were first made, if the church have since then extended their ministry farther than the circuit of their labors at the first was drawn, we are not herein to think the ordinance of Scripture violated, except there appear some prohibition, which hath abridged the church of that liberty." The only way to square Episcopal practice with apostolic precedent is to apply the convenient maxim, "Whatever is not prohibited in Scripture, is allowable to the church." Genuine Protestantism utterly abhors this maxim. Presbyterians stick to the Scriptures and maintain a true "apostolic succession." Our bishops are apostolic bishops, and our deacons are apostolic deacons.

The diaconate had its origin in a twofold source. First, there were destitute persons in the church to be cared for; and second, the church made provision to care for them. The office of the deacon was created as an effective agency by which the church might minister to the necessities of its poor. "The poor ye have always with you, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good." Hence the permanence of the office.

Has the Presbyterian Church enlarged the scope of the deacon's office? Yes, but has not changed the nature of its functions. It was instituted to relieve those charged with the spiritual interests of the church from duties which had primary reference to temporal and external interests. In the development of the church other temporal and external interests, besides the necessities of the poor, emerged, and it was in a line with the purpose of the office to commit these interests into the hands of the deacons. "We are not herein to think the ordinance of Scripture violated, if the church extend their ministry further than the circuit of their labors was at first drawn," so long as the church assigns to the office only duties pertaining to temporal and external interests.

3. *Importance of the Office.* The discrimination between the spiritual and the temporal interests of the church may easily make the impression that these are separable, and that the spiritual are immeasurably the more important. This impression will give rise to the view that the office of deacon is quite unimportant, and that almost any kind of a Christian man is good enough to fill it. Let us, then, emphasize this truth, that the discrimination between the spiritual and temporal interests of the church does not necessarily imply that these interests are

separable. We may discriminate between soul and body, but it is a fatal thing to separate soul and body. They are so wedded that separation means death. Now, we affirm that the same intimate and vital relation exists between the spiritual and temporal interests of the church. The spiritual cannot exist without the temporal, nor the temporal without the spiritual. The apostles ministered to the spiritual. By the blessing of God, their ministry awakened the sense of brotherhood, quickened the sentiments of sympathy and compassion, and thus created the provision for the temporal. The spiritual and temporal sustain the relation of cause and effect. All charities, all ministrations to physical suffering, all provisions for bettering the temporal condition of humanity, which owe their existence to the church, are the fruits of the Spirit. They are the products of the ministry of the Word. They are the visible expression of the effect of the Word on the invisible soul of man. They are the efflorescence of the new spiritual life. Ultimately, they are **tracable** to Christ. They are a standing declaration to the world, in language that it can appreciate, of the benevolent nature of Christ's life and mission. Those, therefore, who have charge of the temporal interests of the church are as truly ministers of Christ as those who preach the gospel. The one administers Christ's bounty to the soul, the other administers Christ's bounty to the body. Preacher and deacon are coworkers, and their ministries act and react on each other. An effective ministry of the Word will increase the benevolences of the church; an effective administration of the benevolences will render still more effective the ministry of the Word. Following immediately on the appointment of the seven, we read that "the Word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." Putting good and wise men over the work of distribution brought order out of confusion, and made this side of church life an element of power. It is very evident that a tender concern for the "necessity of the saints" was a marked characteristic of the apostolic church. The only injunction which the other apostles felt at liberty to lay on Paul was that he "should remember the poor," and he pauses in his narrative to add, "which very thing I was also zealous to do." He devotes considerable space in some of his letters to the specific

matter of securing contributions for the poor saints in Judea, and even sends delegates to plead in person. He set no little store by the effect which was to be produced on the minds of his Jewish brethren by this tangible expression of love from the Gentile churches. Such expression was demonstrative proof that so far as the Gentiles were concerned, the "middle wall" was broken down, the long-standing, inherited, hitherto invincible prejudice was gone. This community in carnal things, growing out of community in spiritual things, was one of the marvels produced by the gospel. It told with startling effect on the outside world. Hence in the church of that day, the office charged with the administration of the church's bounty was an office of great importance. He who occupied it had a position of vast influence and of commanding power.

In Christian countries, where the state looks after the poor, the church has suffered this branch of service to decline. But this is not excusable, for the reason that state charity is based on taxes. It expresses no love, and carries no spiritual message to the poor. The household of faith should never suffer one of its members to become dependent on the "cold charities" of the world. Now as ever, the church should care for her poor with such delicate tenderness as to exhibit in this way the beauty of Christ.

As already mentioned, the scope of the deacon's office has been enlarged. The function of caring for the poor has been largely relegated to good women, while the chief work of the deacons consists in collecting the pastor's salary, employing a janitor, and looking after the church property. This is regarded as the business side of the church, and it is frequently insisted that what is especially needed is that the business of the church should be conducted in a business-like way. According to this view the prime qualifications for a deacon are the qualifications that mark a successful business man. There is just enough of truth in this view of the deacon's office to make it a dangerous sort of lie. The preacher is not a hireling. His salary is not a *quid pro quo*, an equivalent for so much service rendered. He is an ambassador of Christ. His support should be a service rendered to Christ, a free, voluntary, worshipful service. All funds for church property, and for current expenses should be contributed as an expression of homage to

Christ. They are a tribute levied by him to meet the financial needs of his kingdom. No doubt there should be business methods employed in the collection and distribution of all these dues. But there should be nothing of the business spirit—that spirit which finds expression in the maxim, “Business is business.” This means that business is pitiless, exacting, heartless. But this aspect of the subject will come up more properly under our next head.

4. *Qualifications for the Office.* For a full description of these qualifications, look back at the texts which stand at the head of this article. “Men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” If such men did not represent the highest type of Christian character, we fail to understand the force of terms. The multitude were instructed to look over their membership, and elect the very best men they could find for deacons. They obeyed instructions, and chose men who were brim-full of spiritual gifts. “Would not a modern church feel like it was a waste of piety to use such men for deacons? What will the church do for elders, if it uses up piety in this reckless manner? The apostles seem not to have thought of this. Of one thing we may speak with confidence, if that church in Jerusalem was already supplied with elders, these were no better men than the deacons that were here and now elected. If it was not already supplied, it never succeeded in finding any better men for the office than those which it had already put in the diaconate. Here, then, was one church, the first Christian church, the mother of us all, that had a board of deacons who could not be excelled by any set of men for deep and fervent and outspoken piety, for whole-souled consecration to Christ. And this was by the direct injunction of the apostles. Were they men of high social standing? There is no intimation of it. Were they men of ample means? There is no statement to this effect. Successful business men? It is not so “nominated in the bond.” “Wisdom” if specified, and probably this means sanctified common sense. But social, intellectual and business qualities are all subordinated to spiritual qualities. Apostles thought that deacons ought, above all else, to be eminently good and devout men. Are not the reasons on the surface of the narrative? Here was the promising beginning of a church quarrel, of all quarrels the meanest. Suspicion was growing up between heterogeneous elements in

the church. Some, who were new-comers to the community, said that they were being slighted, their widows were neglected in the daily distribution of alms. The situation was a delicate one. Strangers and poor widows need careful handling. A pig-headed deacon, with ever so much hard business sense, but with no sympathy in his heart, no tenderness in his nature, would have made a mess of it. He would have demanded that every poor, cringing widow should prove her claim, and wait her turn. The occasion demanded men who loved the poor, who loved the once poor Nazarene, and who were so Christ-like that their hearts were delicately sensitive to every shade and form of distress. The men who were chosen exactly fitted the occasion. At once the murmurs died away, confidence was completely restored, and the bond of brotherly love was drawn more tightly around all hearts. The church of our day has grown wiser than the apostles. Many congregations use the office to compliment, and conciliate the favour of prominent families. If they look for any qualifications, these are only such as give promise of a business-like administration of the office. A deacon once said to the writer, "If I did not think you were a better man than I am, I should never hear you preach again." This was not an expression of humility, much less of penitent confession. It was merely an incidental statement of what he regarded as an unimportant truth, with which he had no special concern. He was by no means good enough for a preacher; but amply good enough for a deacon. Being a sprightly young lawyer, he probably represented a very general sentiment. It is doubtful whether, in some congregations, the deacons measure up to the average piety of the membership. One congregation can be recalled in which four out of six deacons persistently refused to attend public worship in their own church. One had been insulted by a former pastor; the singing of another had been criticised unfavorably; another was in the dumps over financial reverses, and the fourth had a kink in his head on the subject of baptism. They would never have been elected deacons, if the congregation had not totally misconceived the nature of the office. They bore no more spiritual resemblance to the "seven" than a tin soldier to a martial hero.

5. *Possibilities of the Office.* Next to the minister of the Word, the deacon has the finest field of service for Christ. The

elder, if a good man, may be an active and useful man, but he is not constrained thereto by his office. He can be a mere “knot on a stick,” and still be officially creditable. But the deacon, if a good man, is brought by his office into such relations with the people as to make his influence powerfully felt for good. He comes into close touch with the whole congregation, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the well-fed and the destitute. If filled with the Spirit of his Master, he can do much to stimulate the sympathy, and draw forth the liberality of the rich, and equally much to comfort and cheer the poor. He has to do with the finances of the church, and here is the danger point. If he is tactful and gracious, he can keep the machinery running smoothly, the pastor’s salary will be promptly paid, the current expenses met, and all worry and wrangling over arrearages will be avoided. “What a difference it makes as to the way in which those are dealt with whose giving should not be “grudgingly, or of necessity,” but as a matter of bounty! One man can draw money from a miser in such a way as to make him feel good; another man will make a saint reluctant to pay an honest debt. To avoid friction between members, to promote happy pastorates, and to develop the grace of liberality, nothing is more important than a good deacon, one who can be patient, who can smile at unreasonable people, and speak a soft word to turn away wrath, one who is willing to give time and take trouble on himself, and make himself “all things to all men” in order to promote the interests of his Master’s cause. A good deacon is the pastor’s most valuable ally. Officially he is worth two good elders. The one trouble about a good deacon is that the church, desiring to compliment him, will very soon elect him an elder, and thus place him on the retired list. His splendid gifts will at once fall into **inoxuous** desuetude. “For they that have served well as deacons, gain to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Happy is that church which has such deacons, and whose deacons decline to give up that “good standing” for another office in which their talents will probably not be so usefully employed.

6. *Relation of Deacon to the Session.* Some deacons will insist on having full control of the finances of the church. They say, “Let the session attend to the spiritual interests of the

church, and we will attend to the financial interests. If the work of collecting and disbursing devolves on us, it is only fair that we should control the whole financial policy." This is business, but it is not religion. It proceeds on the false supposition already considered, namely, that it is possible to divorce the spiritual from the temporal. Recently the session of an important city church wished to establish a mission. To do so, with facilities for effective work, would require the expenditure of some money. The deacons demurred. They said, "If you drain the congregation of their resources for such a purpose, we shall be unable to raise the necessary money for congregational purposes." This illustrates the fact that those who control the purse-strings set a limit to the spiritual activities of the church. As in the state, so in the church, "finances are the sinews of war." In vain does the pastor proclaim war, in vain does the session order an advance, if they cannot command the "sinews." No session, composed of reasonable men, will fail to consult with the deacons over every matter calling for an enlargement of expenditure. But if the session cannot say the final word, then its "occupation is gone." Wisely has our Assembly spoken on this point, "The duties of the deacons, as servants (ministers) of the church, are to execute the orders of the session (or parochial presbytery) as rulers of the church. Therefore, it is the duty of the deacons to collect and appropriate all funds for church purposes, whether for local purposes, support of a pastor, aid to the poor, and expenses of the church, or for objects of Christian benevolence recognized in the action of the courts of the church, under the direction of the session." This may bear pretty hard at times on deacons who are wiser than the members of the session. But let them take comfort from the Master's words, "Whosoever will become great among you, let him be your servant." The position of honor in the Master's kingdom is not that of rule, but of service. This decision of the Assembly will bear hard upon those deacons who merely think they are wiser than the members of the session. But it will save painful friction, if they will bear patiently the folly of those who have a right to be foolish. Anything is better than to handicap those charged with the spiritual interests of the church by putting the resources for prosecuting their work beyond their reach. Any

thing is better than an organization with two heads, which are liable to butt against each other at any time, to the serious detriment of the body.

The writer believes in deacons. Some of the best and most useful men he has ever known have served in this office. "When they are good, they are very good, and when they are bad"—which they need never be, and should never be.