

part, which implies that the part has a power. Compare the civil commonwealth. The Commonwealth of Virginia appears in all its parts or courts as a party and judge in every criminal cause, and as a judge only in every civil suit. This fact is the ground of the provisions for appeals, complaints (bills of exceptions), references (change of venue), etc. See the action of Assembly, 1879, on the overture of Atlanta Presbytery on worldly amusements (answer to third question).

XIX.

THE DEACON'S OFFICE.

The communion of saints is implied in the very notion of an organized church having its polity and its ordinances of worship. But this communion (*κοινωνία*) is most impressively exhibited in two ordinances, both of which are emphatically denominated by the word *communion*, to wit: the Lord's supper and contributions in money, or its equivalent. (Acts ii. 42-45; 1 Cor. x. 16 ; 2 Cor. viii. 4; Heb. xiii. 16; Rom. xv. 26, 27.) Both of these belong to the worship of God. No definition of worship can be framed which can be justly applied to the Lord's supper, that will not apply also to these contributions. There is no more glorious act of worship described in the Bible than that in the last chapter of the First Book of the Chronicles.

This view of contributions accounts for the importance ascribed to them in both Testaments. They are the tokens, and, in some respects, the most unexceptionable tokens of the reality of the communion of saints. Considering the power of the feeling of *mine*, who can read that the primitive Christians were not accustomed to say, "that aught of the things which they possessed was their own," but that "they had all things common," can doubt that a new principle was at work in their hearts, a principle not earth-born, but descended from heaven. Still more manifest did this

become when the Gentile Christians contributed to the relief of their Jewish brethren. Here there was no bond of blood to prompt the beneficence; rather was there the bitter prejudice of race. No wonder that the great apostle was willing to travel all the way to Jerusalem to *seal the gift* to the recipients; that is, to expound its comprehensive spiritual meaning, and to impress upon their hearts the reality and the glory of the communion of saints. (Acts xi. 29, 30 ; Rom. xv. 25-28; 1 Cor. xvi. 1-4; 2 Cor. chaps, viii. ix.)

It was in this form, “ in relieving each other in outward things according to their several abilities and necessities” (*Con. of Faith*, Ch. XXVI., Art. 2.), that the communion of saints was first and most conspicuously exhibited in the primitive church; and it was in connection with this form that the deacons first appeared, (Acts vi. 1-6.) They were the deacons of “tables,” as the apostles were deacons of “ the word.” The saints had communion with each other in the apostles’ teaching and in breaking of bread and in prayers (Acts ii. 42); but they had also communion with each other in “ outward things”; and this form of communion is that which the narrative enlarges upon in the succeeding verses (44, 45), and reverts to in ch. iv. 32-37. The prime aspect, then, of the office of deacon is that of a representative of the communion of saints. The word may be and is preached where there are no saints, and therefore no communion; it is conceivable also that ruling elders may exercise their authority in a dead church; but deacons have nothing to do, except in a church which has life enough to show itself in a ministry to the saints.

This circumstance demonstrates the dignity and spirituality of the deacon’s office. Albeit concerned mainly with “ outward things,” it is with the outward things of a spiritual body that the office is concerned, and spiritual qualifications are indispensable to a right administration of them. Hence we find Paul, in pre-

scribing the qualifications of church officers in the third chapter of his First Epistle to Timothy, saying as much of those of the deacon as of those of the elder, if not more. It is not a little remarkable that a deacon should have been chosen rather than an apostle to see that it was God's plan to abolish the Mosaic form of the true religion, and to establish one which should be spiritual and universal. The celebrated saying of Augustine, "If Stephen had not prayed, we should not have had Paul," was perhaps more comprehensive in its scope than the great thinker supposed. The prayer of the dying martyr was perhaps the means, not only of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, but of bringing him upon the scene as Paul the apostle of the *Gentiles*. Certain it is that the charges against Paul, by which the Jews thought themselves justified in seeking to kill him, were the very same as those which led to the murder of Stephen. (Compare Acts vi. 11-14 with xxi. 28; xxv. 8.) It is also not a little remarkable that while the account of the death of James, the brother of John, one of the three apostles who were admitted to special intimacy with the Lord, is dispatched in one short sentence (See Acts xii. 2), the account of the deacon's death is given in detail. A dozen verses would embrace all that is said of James in the New Testament; two chapters, one of them long, are occupied with Stephen, the deacon: and every reader of church history knows what a prominent part deacons have played in it. It is not a small office. Paul probably had Stephen in his mind when he wrote the sentence (1 Tim. iii. 13), "They that have served well as deacons gain to themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." But the same may be true now, if deacons will take the pains to understand their office, and seek grace from God to perform its duties and to improve its privileges.

That special condition of the early church in Jerusalem which gave occasion to the appointment of

deacons was temporary and local, and was designed to be so. We know not how long it lasted, probably not long. It is easy to see that a permanent condition of that sort would have resulted in many and great evils, unless prevented by a continued miracle, and there is no trace of such a condition in any of the Gentile churches. Nevertheless, “the poor were not to cease out of the land” ; they were to have the gospel preached unto them ; and to the end of time the ministry to the necessities of the saints should continue to be needful. The office of deacon was therefore intended to be perpetual.

But it would be taking too narrow a view of the office to confine its exercise to this kind of ministry. The communion of saints “in outward things” is more extensive than can be adequately exhibited by the relief of the poor in a single congregation or in a single city. A single congregation, or all the congregations united in a single city, is not the church universal, or even the church of one state or country. The communion, therefore, “is to be extended as our Confession says, (Ch. XXVI., Art. 2) “unto all those in everyplace who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.” The rule holds still, that “by an equality the abundance of one part should be a supply for the want of another part.” (2 Cor. viii, 14.) “Our committees of Home Missions and Education are but great central deaconships of charitable ministrations, by which in these things the burdens of the church may be equalized; the richer provided with the means of helping the poorer, and the unity and union of the church at once manifested and strengthened. And it is but a slight variation of the same principle that is developed in the work of Foreign Missions, in which the church unites in supporting her sons and daughters whom she has sent forth to the nations, and in sustaining and enlarging the feeble churches established amid the wild wastes of heathenism.” (See Dr. Ramsay’s *Essay on the Deaconship*, p. 20.) [also in [SPR 12.1 \(April 1859\)](#), p. 18]

“To the deacons also may be properly committed,” says our *Form of Government* (Ch. IV., Art. 2), “the management of the temporal affairs of the church.” The church, like the individual Christian, has its “temporal affairs.” This phrase denotes specially the *property* of the congregation, the house in which it stately worships and the ground upon which it stands, as well as the expenses necessarily attendant upon the comfortable use of it. *

This brings up the question concerning the relation of the deacons to the trustees of the property—a relation which in many congregations, especially in the cities, is far from being satisfactorily settled. In some congregations, the trustees are allowed to determine the salary of the pastor, for the reason that the salary comes from the rent of the pews, and the pews belong to the house. If this inequitable method of raising the salary were abandoned, as it ought to be, there would be no plausible pretext left for the usurpation of the trustees. The officers who represent the property, it is argued, ought to regulate the disposal of the proceeds thereof. Now, when it is considered that these trustees are often not professing Christians, but men of the world, chosen because they are monied men and men of business, and sometimes because they have property in the neighborhood of the church building whose market value will be affected by the character of the vicinage, it needs no argument to prove that the trustees are not the persons who are most likely to seek the spiritual edification of the church in the choice of a pastor. Others propose to remedy or prevent this odious form of “patronage” by having the deacons incorporated as trustees. But the obvious objections to this scheme are, (1), That such trustees would have no more right to usurp, though there might be less temptation to usurp, the

* For the Scotch doctrine, see *Baird's Digest*, pp. 38, 39.

prerogative of the congregation as to the pastor's salary, than the trustees of the other sort; (2), That it would be contrary to the American theory of the relations of church and state to make ecclesiastical officers, as such, officers of the state.* The trustees, in the eye of the law, are not representatives of the church as such, but of a body of citizens who have a right to claim from the civil authority protection for their property. But deacons are ecclesiastical officers, and represent the church. The remedy of the evil is to be found in the principle that trustees of church property are intended to act only in cases of the purchase or sale of property, or of invasion of right, when litigation before the court becomes necessary. This is the principle acted upon almost invariably in the country congregations of the South. It is doubtful in most of such congregations if the trustees are known at all, or could be found in an emergency, or whether, in consequence of omission to fill vacancies, the board has not entirely expired.

That it is the official duty of the deacons to take charge of the pastor's salary would probably not have been questioned, if the salary had not been regarded as a pure affair of business, and not in any just sense as an expression of the communion of saints. In point of fact, it partakes of the nature of both; and this is enough to justify our church in inserting the article upon which the foregoing comments have been made, and to refute the notion that the pastor's salary is an affair of the civil officers called trustees. According to our constitution, the body that calls the pastor is the body that fixes the salary, and that body is the body of communicants. (See *Form of Government*,

* It cannot be denied, however, that our American theory is not consistently carried out. In Virginia, for example, whose traditions have been more decided and operative than perhaps those of any other state against the mingling of the two jurisdictions, a minister of the gospel is *ex officio* an officer of the state in the matter of celebrating a marriage.

Ch. VI., Sec. 3, Arts. 4 and 6.) The deacon, therefore, is the proper officer to take charge of the pastor's salary, and the trustees as such have nothing to do with it.

Another question to which importance has been given by discussions in the church is concerning the relation of the deacon to the session. How far is the deacon responsible to the session in the performance of his official duties? It is, of course, conceded on all hands that in the case of criminal conduct he is responsible to the session—the court to which, according to the constitution, all original jurisdiction, except in the trial of ministers, belongs. It must be conceded also, that money contributed for a specific purpose, say Home or Foreign Missions, cannot, in good faith, be diverted from that purpose, by either session or deacons, without the consent of the contributors. In reference to all other funds, it would seem that they are under the direction and control of the session. The public purse must be under the control of the government. In free civil commonwealths, the government is distributed into different branches; and the power of the purse, for obvious reasons, is lodged with that branch which more immediately represents the people from whom the money is derived by taxation. But it belongs to the government. So in the church. The government is not, indeed, distributed into branches as it is in the state, neither is there any taxation ; but the rulers are the representatives of the people as chosen by them, and the people consent that their voluntary offerings shall be controlled by them. To give the deacons, who are not rulers, power to dispose of the revenues as against the elders, would be virtually to create an *imperium in imperio* ; for the power goes with the purse. Hence we find the contributions of the primitive church laid “ at the feet of the apostles.” (Acts iv. 35, 37 ; v. 2.) It is in accordance with this view that our Form of Government

provides (Ch. IV., Sec. 4, Art. 4), that “ a complete account of collections and distributions, and a full record of proceedings, shall be kept by the deacons, and submitted to the session for examination and approval at least once a year.”

Another question which has been debated in our church concerns the relation of the deacon to the courts above the session. Is he exclusively a congregational officer? Or, may he be employed also by the presbytery, the synod, and the general assembly? Is there anything, either in the nature of the office or its relation to the congregation, to forbid the management by it of the Foreign Missionary or any other of the schemes of the Assembly? If not, why not commit such of these schemes to a board of deacons, and set free the ministers of the word for their high calling? Did not the apostles insist upon the appointment of deacons “ to serve tables,” in order that they might give themselves to the “ service of the word”? The answer to these questions may be given in a series of propositions :

1. It is plain that the original deacons were not confined in their ministrations to a single congregation (Acts vi.), unless we suppose with the Independents that there was but one congregation in Jerusalem.

2. If a deacon may extend his ministrations beyond the bounds of his own congregation, the principle is settled, and it becomes a question merely of expediency how many congregations may be embraced within their scope. Their scope may embrace all the congregations represented by a general assembly.

3. There may be cases in which the collection and disbursement of the people’s offerings demand, for their full effect, the accompaniment of instruction which can be best given only by ministers of the word. In such cases ministers may be associated with, or even take the place of, deacons. Instances of this sort we find in Acts i. 29, 80 ; xxx. 4, compared with

xxiv. 17; Rom. xv. 25-28; 2 Cor. viii. 16-24; and Paley's *Horæ Paulinæ*, Ch. II., No. 3. Paul seems to have attached so much importance to the contributions mentioned in these passages as to justify his leaving his work among the Gentiles and his taking laborious journeys to Jerusalem, in order to expound their spiritual significance and to seal to the recipients the precious fruit. How far these principles apply to any or all of the Assembly's schemes, it is for the wisdom of the church to decide; but it is the author's conviction that the tendency is now to excess in the employment of ministers of the word, and to a return to plans which the church, many years ago, formally repudiated as wrong in principle and injurious in results.

Touching the qualifications for the deacon's office, two places of Scripture may be compared : Acts vi. 3, 5; 1 Tim. iii. 8, 9. The differences here may be explained by the difference between a temporary condition of the church, in which gifts of the Spirit were prodigally and generally bestowed, and a condition of the church designed to be permanent, in which gifts are conferred with a more sparing hand. The proportion between the gifts generally bestowed and the special gifts for the exercise of office is in both conditions about the same. The rule for the guidance of the church in all time is, no doubt, that given in the third chapter of the First Epistle to Timothy.