

# THE PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY.

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## I. BABEL AND ITS LESSONS.

“ALL the languages of the earth,” says an eminent authority, “have affinities enough to indicate a common origin; but they have differences enough to show that some great dislocation has occurred in their history.” The Scriptures tell us when and how this dislocation occurred. It was a judgment of God inflicted upon men because of their rebellion against his will.

The descendants of Noah had greatly multiplied since the flood, and the earth was again filling with people. They had spread themselves out over the East until the centre of population seems to have been the plain of Shinar—that fertile region which lies between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. There, under the leadership probably of Nimrod, the Cushite, they devised and undertook the ambitious scheme of building a great city, with a tower whose top, in their hyperbolic speech, should reach unto heaven. Josephus says that their purpose was to secure themselves against destruction from another flood. If such was the animus of the movement it is easy to see why it should have been displeasing to God and deserving of his judgment. He had given his promise that the earth should never again be destroyed by a flood; he had set his bow in the cloud as a pledge of faithfulness to that covenant.

Now if, instead of resting on that divine promise as a sufficient and infallible guarantee of safety, they set themselves to provide a refuge of their own, they plainly betrayed the most

## VI. THE OFFICE OF DEACON.

As late as the time of Jerome, who is the author of the Latin translation of the Scriptures called the Vulgate, and who lived in the latter part of the fourth and the early part of the fifth centuries, the office of deacon remained substantially as constituted by the apostles, for he writes of them as "*ministers (or servants) of the tables, and of widows.*"

They came afterwards to assist in the administration of the Lord's Supper, their special duty being to serve the bread. The Roman Pontifical, or Directory for vestments and rites, prepared under direction of Pope Clement VIII., and published in 1596, declares that "to the deacon pertains to minister at the altar, to baptize, and to preach." This, of course, was an entire abrogation of the deacon's original office, and the substitution in place thereof of some of the functions of the priest, making it one of the grades of the Roman priesthood. We need, therefore, look no further in that direction for light on this subject.

In the Church of England, and Episcopal churches generally, the diaconate is merely a stepping-stone to the ministry, corresponding largely to our licentiate.

In the Lutheran Church the deacon is merely an assistant clergyman, or subordinate chaplain, though Luther desired that deacons should simply have care of the poor and of the church property.

In the Reformed (Presbyterian) churches the primitive diaconate was revived with various approximations towards the Scripture model. In the Reformed Church of Hessa it was ordered in 1526 that each pastor should have at least three deacons to assist in caring for the poor. The Church of Basle adopted the same rule in 1529. Calvin held that the diaconate was one of the fundamental offices of the church, and that the proper duty of these officers was the care of the poor. The French and Belgian confessions set forth the duties of a deacon according to Calvin's

view. In the German and Dutch Reformed churches of the United States the deacons are appointed to "collect and distribute alms and other contributions for the relief of the poor, or the necessities of the congregation, and to provide for the support of the ministry of the gospel."

In the Methodist churches, as in the Church of England, a deacon is merely a licentiate. In Congregational and Baptist churches he is substantially the same as our ruling elder.

In the Reformed Church (Dutch) in America the deacons are members, with the elders, of the consistory, or church session, and they and the elders vote together on temporal matters, the deacons having no vote on questions of purely spiritual import.

#### THE DEACONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

According to Lightfoot, the office of deacon had a precedent in the old synagogues before the Christian era, in each of which it was customary to have three men appointed to have special care of the poor. This officer in the synagogue is not to be confounded with the chazzan, who was properly a sexton, or beadle.

The office of deacon was instituted under the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts vi.) in order to relieve the apostles of the labor of distributing the alms of the church, especially to the widows. It grew out of a complaint on the part of the Hellenists that their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Moreover, judging from the names of the seven deacons elected by the people, and ordained by the apostles, they themselves were Hellenistic Jewish Christians. Though the deacons were appointed to minister to a particular class of poor, it seems logical to commit to them the care of any and all classes of indigent persons.

That the office of deacon was not intended to be confined to the church at Jerusalem is plain from the Apostle Paul's declaration in 1st Timothy iii. 8, of their qualifications for this function, for he was writing to the pastor of a church in another city and country.

The office of deacon was not primarily for the collection, but for the distribution, of alms, and this is clear from the fact that the offerings of the people were brought by the people themselves and

laid at the feet of the apostles ; and also that when Barnabas and Paul brought the alms of the Christians at Antioch for the poor saints at Jerusalem, they delivered them to the elders. (Acts xi. 30.)

It is also clear, from the whole history, from the meaning of the word *diakonos*, and from the passages just cited, that the deacons had no authority except to distribute alms under the direction of the elders.

But there is, strictly speaking, and can be, no purely temporal office in a spiritual commonwealth, so the deacons distributed alms as a religious act, and in connection therewith administered spiritual instruction and consolation. So we find Stephen and Philip expounding and defending the gospel to men, and in the particular cases recorded, not to the objects of charity, Stephen to the cultivated Hellenists, and the council of Jerusalem, and Philip to the minister of finance of the kingdom of Ethiopia. After Philip's work on the Ethiopian was completed, we read that he went on an evangelistic tour through all the cities, from Azotus to Cæsarea.

However, it is probable that Philip had been promoted to the ministry before these events, and was no longer a deacon, because we read that he administered the sacrament of baptism to the Ethiopian. We are bound to suppose this, unless we concede that others than ministers of the word were authorized to administer the sacraments of the church. There is no special reason, however, to suppose that Stephen had been elevated to the ministry, nor do we read of his preaching, but of his "disputing" with certain opponents of the gospel, and his speech before the Sanhedrim was not so much a sermon as a defence made in the presence of a court which was trying him for an alleged capital offence against the Mosaic law.

Not to go beyond the word of God, we must define the original office of deacon to be that of a distributor of alms to the poor. Whether it is scripturally logical to go further and commit to them also the management of the temporal affairs of the church, or not, is a matter which may be debated. We think it is warrantable. And so our *Book of Church Order* states that

“to them also *may* properly be committed the management of the temporal affairs of the church.”

It is a question whether it would not have been better to have left the deacons unincumbered in the discharge of their original function of distributing alms to the poor. In point of fact, this great function has been largely abandoned by deacons, and has come to fall upon the session, or more frequently upon the pastor, or upon committees, or women's societies, of the church, or upon individuals who may devote themselves to works of charity. It is certain, however, that by whomsoever this work is done in the church now, it is not as well done as it should be, and pastors are harrassed beyond measure by the constant calls upon them by the poor, and, in fact, the usual method is for the pastors to be the first ones called upon. The poor have come to look to them, and rather than take the trouble to get the matters of this kind done by church officers, pastors give, out of their own resources, to supply the wants of the needy; or, if this is beyond their means, they frequently go about and collect the money to relieve suffering, or, in case of death, to bury the indigent person.

It is a fact worthy of mention, that in the management of the moneys given for the general work of the denomination, the deacons have never been called into service. The General Assembly's committees of home and foreign work always have been composed of elders, teaching and ruling, and the secretary is usually a preacher. Under the Bible and the *Book of Church Order* this is right, because the administration of these funds is a very important branch of the government of the church, and deacons have no power of government.

The further we go in this inquiry, the more we find ourselves driven to the position that deacons were intended purely and simply as distributors of the church's gifts to the poor, or some such office as is so efficiently discharged by the Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity. It is probable, too, that had the deacons been left to do this, and not been encumbered with all sorts of financial business, our church would have been helped in its work among the poor, as the Roman Church is by its Sisters and Brothers, and that the charities of the church would have been made a far

greater power in its life and work than they have been. I confess to a feeling of shame when, as is sometimes the case, our own poor go for shelter to the homes afforded by the Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity.

I would not suggest that the deaconess is an office in the church, for the sufficient reason that whereas we have a distinct account of the election and ordination of deacons, we have no such warrant for deaconesses. No woman holds office in the regular government of the New Testament church. Our *Book of Church Order* puts that matter where the Scripture does, when it states that the session may appoint godly women to care for the sick, for prisoners and poor widows and orphans. The word deacon, used in the New Testament in connection with women helpers, does not seem to imply an office, for no account is given of the institution of such an office, but simply to mean servant or helper in the work of caring for the poor. There is a peculiar propriety in the gentle ministrations of woman being called into requisition by the church in behalf of the suffering and distressed.

Friction and misunderstanding between the deacons and the session are now not uncommon in our churches; and they usually arise from a misunderstanding of the provinces of these officers, and hence a confusion of jurisdiction and conflict of action.

It is clear that there cannot be two governing bodies in one church without conflict; and it is also clear that it is impossible to separate, in all cases, matters temporal from spiritual matters; as, for example, in the election of an organist and the fixing of his salary, and as in many other things.

Dr. Peck, in his *Ecclesiology*, says: "In reference to all funds other than those contributed for specific purposes, as for Home and Foreign Missions, they are under the direction and control of the session." "To give the deacons, who are not rulers, power to dispose of the revenues as against the elders, would virtually be to create an *imperium in imperio*; for the power goes with the purse. Hence, we find the contributions in the primitive church laid 'at the feet of the apostles.'"

Hence, we conclude that the whole power of the government of the individual church is vested in the session. The minister, of course, has an authority of his own in the preaching of the

gospel, and is responsible for the proper discharge of it to the Presbytery which ordains and installs him. So the deacons are responsible to the session which ordains and installs them, for a deacon is not ordained and installed by the laying on of the hands of deacons, but of elders.

Unless some fuller statement of authority and duty shall be made by our highest court, or, better still, be imbedded in the constitution itself, we shall, from time to time, hear of friction between sessions and deacons.

The session is the only governing body in the individual church, and has a right to elect all choir members, sexton, etc., and to fix their salaries, though they ought to consult the deacons and to ascertain whether the treasury does at any particular time contain the money needed for these and other purposes.

The session has control of the church building, and to it must be referred all questions as to what purposes it may be used for. If any extension of the church building be contemplated, or any unusual and very extensive repairs, the proper method is for the session to direct the deacons to inquire into the feasibility and cost of what is proposed, or, if the matter originate with the deacons, for them to ask permission of the session, laying their plans before that body; and if the changes proposed be of a very important or expensive character, the session ought to ask the consent of the congregation in which they rule as representatives.

The General Assembly of 1877, in reply to an overture from the Synod of Alabama, adopted the following: "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 church session." It is plain that the *Book of Church Order* and the decision of the General Assembly, whether right or wrong, lay the whole responsibility of the executive government of the church upon the session.

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