

THE DEACON :

AN

Inquiry into the Nature, Duties and Exercise

OF

THE OFFICE OF THE DEACON,

IN THE

CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

BY

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“ Let the deacons be grave,” etc.—I TIM. iii. 8.

“ Let all things be done decently, and in order.”—I Cor. xiv. 40.

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INTRODUCTION.

THIS Essay has for its object the illustration of a part of the Order of the Church of God, which has, in modern times, been remarkably overlooked. The office of the deacon is not, it is true, so important as either that of the pastor or the ruling elder, yet it is not without its importance as a distinct part of the building of God. The care of the church's poor, and the wise and faithful administration of the contributions of the saints for the promotion of Christ's cause, are matters that cannot, without injury to the church, be forgotten or neglected: and it is worth our serious inquiry, whether the manifest deficiency in the first of these, and the almost insuperable difficulties that often beset the church in regard to the last, may not be in part owing to the want of the deaconship as an actively executed function in the churches. For two other reasons, however, this subject should engage the most careful and solemn attention of the members of the Christian Church. 1st. If the deacon's office be, as it is generally admitted to be, a divinely instituted office, can the churches be guiltless in the neglect of it? And, 2dly, most of the churches explicitly recognise this office in their standards as of divine right, but how few have such an officer as the deacon! It should, at least, awaken the attention of Christians to the subject, when they look into the Scriptures, and find the deacon often mentioned there,—when they look into the standards of their churches, and find the deacon recognised there, but when they look round upon their congregations, they can find no deacons, or very few, there. That we may know Christ's will as King in Zion, and pay our own vows, we ought to examine this subject honestly and prayerfully; and not only examine, but act, by restoring this office to its original and proper position in the Christian church.

Such an examination has been attempted in the following Essay. The general, and yet not concerted action, in reference to the deacon's office, which has taken place and is now going on, in many churches in Scotland and Ireland, and in the United States, seems to indicate a providential movement, and to invite such an examination. Let not the reader reject at once propositions that may be new to him. Weigh the evidence.

Much obscurity may be expected to prevail upon a subject that has occupied so little attention for some generations, until a very late period. The writer is, in some respects, a pioneer on this subject. Dr. Miller, of Princeton, has, indeed, discussed the office of the deacon in his Essay upon the Ruling Elder, with his usual accuracy and research. It will be found, however, that this Essay embraces a larger field, and one which has for some time past been little cultivated. Owing to this circumstance, there may be some inaccuracies which might otherwise have been avoided; and that, notwithstanding much care has been taken to avoid the mis-stating either of facts or principles. Let the attention of the churches be directed to the subject in a proper spirit, and with an humble dependence upon the Spirit of Christ, for teaching and direction, and then mistakes will in due time be rectified,—errors removed, and the truth not only discovered, but reduced to practice. To furnish some assistance in bringing about these results, is the object of the following Essay.

Philadelphia, 1841.

THE DEACON.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEACON'S OFFICE IS ORDINARY AND PERPETUAL IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

DEACONS were ordained in the apostolic churches soon after the day of Pentecost. Of the election and ordination of seven deacons in the church at Jerusalem, we have the history in Acts vi. 1-6. When the epistle to the Philippians was written, there was a class of officers in the churches in Philippi, distinct from Bishops, and called deacons: for this epistle is addressed "to the saints, with the bishops and deacons." They are mentioned in 1 Tim. iii. 8, 12, 13, as standing officers of the church. This epistle contains directions for the right ordering of the house of God. Among the things to be set in order are the "bishops" and the "deacons:" ver. 8, "Likewise must the deacons be grave." The manner in which the deacons are referred to here, in a letter of instructions to an evangelist, whose duty it was to set in order in the churches the things that were wanting, is almost, if not altogether, equivalent to a command to all congregations to choose them and have them ordained. They must have been a known and established class of ecclesiastical officers at that time; as much so as "bishops;" for they are mentioned exactly in the same way. There are plain allusions to this office, as an established function in the church, in other epistles. In Rom. xii. 6, 7, Paul exhorts the deacon, with the other ecclesiastical officers: "having, then, gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, (*diaconian*, the deaconship,) let us wait on our ministering, (*en te diaconia*, on the deaconship.) Besides, the duties of the deacon are unequivocally referred to, in the eighth verse, in the expressions, "giving," and, "showing mercy,"* There can be no reasonable doubt, that, at this time, there was in the Roman church, as at Philippi, a board of deacons, whose official business it was, to distribute of the church's stock to the necessities of the poor, and for other demands.

* Henry, "ministry,"—the office of a deacon. Scott, "if a man were called to the office of a deacon." Guyse, "or if any of us be called to the office of deacons." Calvin, "he that giveth," "deacons who preside in distributing the public property of the church." Hodge, "those who were called to the office of deacons." Rutherford, "the distributor is the deacon also." Beza, "the bodily ministrations of the church." London Divines, Paisley Ed. 1799, p. 105, "he that giveth, that is, the deacon," p. 140, "so they are distinguished from all ordinary officers, reckoned up," Rom. xii. 7, 8, Renwick's work, quoted in the next note, p. 541, "him that showeth mercy, by whom is meant the deacon."

The same apostle, in 1 Cor. xii. 28, enumerates deacons, with the other officers "set in the church," under the denomination of "helps," for they were originally instituted, as we learn from the account of the choice of the first deacons, in Acts vi., to be helps, or assistants to the apostles in the work of distributing the church's stock.* The deacon's office is mentioned by the apostle Peter, as established, and exercised in the churches of Asia Minor: 1 Pet. iv. 10, 11, "as every man hath received the gift, (*charisma*, the office,†) even so minister the same to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, (*diaconei*, exercises the deacon's office,) let him do it as of the ability which God giveth (*choregei*, furnisheth.)" The last clause fixes the meaning of the word, "minister," and shows that it is used in a restricted sense, that it is the deacon who is exhorted to liberality to the full extent of the supply furnished him in the providence of God.‡ The Christians immediately addressed in this letter were dispersed throughout a large district of country on the west of Asia. The deacon must have been known as a church officer throughout that region.

In all the passages quoted, the word, "*diakonos*" is used as a designation of office. It is not, however, always thus employed; it sometimes signifies one who "serves" in any employment, or performs any "act of ministration." As in 2 Cor. iii. 6, Paul styles himself and Apollos, "*diaconous*." And in Rom. xv. 8, our Saviour himself is said to be "the minister (*diaconon*) of the circumcision." In this respect, *diakonos* corresponds with other words designating office-bearers. *Apostolos* signifies "a messenger;" and is so used, Phil. ii. 25, where Epaphroditus is called "your messenger, *umon apostolon*." Yet the "apostles" were extraordinary ecclesiastical officers. *Presbuteros* means "one elder in years;" and is used in that sense, 1 Tim. v. 1. But it is also an official designation. When Paul addresses "the deacons" at Philippi, there is no difficulty in distinguishing the specific sense of the word "*diaconous*." It is equally plain, that in 1 Tim. iii. "the deacon" is an officer of the church, distinct from the bishop or presbyter. When he that ministereth, is mentioned in Rom. xii., and 1 Pet. iv., as one who performs duties entirely different in their character from those of the exhorter, and the speaker, and these duties are "giving," and "showing mercy," we at once discover a distinct officer—the diaconate. In a word, a process of reasoning precisely similar to that which would resolve the deacon's office into a service of any kind, would strip the church of all her officers, ordinary and extraordinary.§

* Henry, "helps; or such as had compassion on the sick and weak, and ministered to them." Scott, "or, as some explain it, to help the pastors in the office of deacons." London Divines, same Ed., p. 110, "helps, there is the deacon;" p. 140, "deacons in the church are an ordinance of Jesus Christ. For, 1. They are found in Christ's catalogue of church officers, distinct from all other officers, both extraordinary and ordinary, helps, 1 Cor. xii. 28." James Renwick's Admission of Elders, p. 562, of collection of sermons, Glasgow, 1770, "helps, that is, the deacons." The same interpretation is given of this passage by Beza, Piscator, Dickson, Hammond, and many other critics.

† As in 1 Tim. iv. 14, and 2 Tim. i. 6.

‡ Scott, "and if any man acted as a deacon." Henry, "either as a deacon distributing the alms of the church." Grotius, "the duty of deacons." So Piscator and Calvin.

§ It would go farther, and abolish the presidents, judges, etc., of the state; the

Some, admitting the deacon's office to be distinct from that of the pastor and ruling elder, have supposed it, however, to be, after all, a mere expedient; that it is left to the will of the church to determine whether there shall be deacons ordained or not. It is supposed that the fact of the circumstances which gave rise to the appointment of "the seven," being mentioned in the narrative of that event, (Acts vi. 1—6,) warrants such an inference.

It might be argued, as plausibly, that the Jewish Sanhedrim was not a permanent institution, because it originated in the wilderness, by the advice of Jethro, and was established for the purpose of relieving Moses from a burden too heavy for him. Or that the organization of the Christian church, by a regular gradation of courts from the session to the General Synod (or Assembly,) and the bringing up of appeals from the lower to the higher, are indifferent, or to be determined by circumstances, because the Synod at Jerusalem was held twenty years after the day of Pentecost, and was then held for a special business. The objection omits entirely some very important considerations. 1. We must "distinguish between an occasion, and a motive and cause."* The occasion of instituting the Sanhedrim was the pressure of judicial business upon Moses: the motive was the establishment of such a system as might always secure due attention to legislative and judicial business. Israel was not to wait until a recurrence of similar circumstances before electing their rulers: by electing them agreeably to God's appointment, they were prepared for business beforehand. 2. We are to receive from the Scriptures the order of the church in its completed form. Otherwise, the church might always be said to be in an inchoate or forming state. Ruling elders might be dropped for the very reason which is involved in the objection, because some time must have elapsed before their ordination after the day of Pentecost: even the pastoral office, for the same reason! The apostles were commissioned to erect the fabric of the church in her New Testament form. Are we at liberty to say, "This fabric was at a certain period incomplete; an uncommon concurrence of circumstances gave rise to a part of her form; therefore, this is not called for in any other circumstances?" Is not the perfect fabric, on the contrary, the model to which the church's structure should be conformed? Moreover, it is probable that a very short time elapsed previously to the ordination of deacons: perhaps not a month. 3. In the other passages where the deacon is mentioned, there is no intimation of any such principle applicable to the deacon's office. It is referred to as a standing and permanent office. And, 4. The objection comes to us liable to great suspicion, for it is brought forward by those who have neglected to ordain this scriptural officer, as an apology for this neglect. And, finally, the assumption that there is not a call for this office under ordinary circumstances, is entirely unfounded. For these reasons we do not admit the objection as having any force. And in this we follow the example of the church of God in all her purest and best times.

The epistles in which the notices of the deacon's office which have been referred to, occur, were sent to parts of the church very distant

generals of the army; and most other officers, for their titles have a general and common, as well as a specific and technical meaning.

* Due Right of Presbyteries, by Samuel Rutherford, p. 160.

from each other; indeed, it may be truly said, to all the apostolic churches. Rome, on the far west,—the Asiatic churches, addressed by Peter, on the east, and the Grecian churches lying between them. In all these, the deacon was a recognised and existing officer in the times of the apostles themselves, and by their direction.*

With regard to the existence of deacons as distinct officers in the church, from the apostolic age onward, there is, and can be, no doubt. Mosheim says,† that “all the other Christian churches followed the example of that of Jerusalem, in whatever related to the choice and office of the deacons.” In the apostolical canons,‡ the deacon is constantly mentioned in connexion with bishops and elders. These canons are not, it is true, as their title would intimate, the production of the apostles, but they, do, nevertheless, establish with great certainty the order existing in the church during the 2d and 3d centuries, or perhaps a little later. The epistles of Ignatius,§ who lived at the close of the first century, and the beginning of the second, are enough, even if we had no other evidence, to establish the fact of the presence, universally, of deacons in the churches before the death of the last of the apostles. He says to the Magnesians, “I exhort you that you study to do all things in a divine concord,—and your deacons, most dear to me, being intrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.” Again, to the Trallians; “Let all reverence the deacons.” Again, to the Philadelphians; “which also I salute, etc.,—especially if they are at unity with the bishop and elders, who are with him, and the deacons appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ.” Again, “one bishop, together with his eldership, and the deacons, my fellow-servants.” Again, “I speak with a loud voice; attend to the bishop, to the eldership, and to the deacons.” Again, to the Smyrneans; “and reverence the deacons as the command of God.” Again, “I salute your very worthy bishop; and your venerable eldership; and your deacons, my fellow-servants.” And, finally, in his epistle to Polycarp;|| “My soul be security for them who submit to their bishop,¶ with their elders and deacons.” Origen,** who lived in the beginning of the third century, a little more than one hundred years after the death of the apostle John, speaks of deacons as officers then in the church. “The deacons,” says he, “preside over the money tables of the church.” Cyprian, the distinguished bishop of Carthage, who was martyred in the year 259, directs his 29th epistle “to my brethren, the elders and deacons.”

* Dr. Owen, the distinguished English divine, remarks in the ix. chapter of his Treatise on Church Government, that “deacons were not only in the church at Jerusalem, but in all the churches of the Gentiles.”

† Ecclesiastical History, Cent. I., Chapter 2, § 10.

‡ These canons, although not composed by the apostles, nor even in their times, are unquestionably the production of a very early age. A few quotations will confirm the statement in the text. Canon 27th, “Episcopum, vel Presbyterum, vel diaconum verberantem fideles peccantes, etc.” Can. 42d, “Episcopus, aut Presbyter, aut diaconus, alea vacuus, etc.” Can. 44th, “Episcopus, aut Presbyter, aut diaconus usuras exigens, etc.”

§ Ignatius was martyred during the reign of Trajan; of course, before A. D. 117.

|| Martyred in the reign of Marcus Antoninus, Trajan’s successor.

¶ The reader should understand that these early writers did not use the word “bishop” in the sense of “diocesan bishop:” they meant the bishop of a congregation. See Mosheim, 1st Century.

** One of the most intelligent of all the early writers, though in many things unsound. He died about the middle of Century III.

Epiphanius, a writer of the fourth century, says, "originally, all offices of the church were performed by bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and, therefore, no church was without a deacon."

These citations bring us to the Nicene period. They furnish ample evidence that from the earliest periods the church had deacons, to assist the pastors and eldership in the right ordering of ecclesiastical affairs. Indeed, to those who are at all familiar with the history of the first three centuries of the Christian era, even these brief statements on the subject may have seemed unnecessary. The deacon is mentioned by all the early writers who have occasion to refer to the organization of the church, as freely, and almost as frequently as the pastor, or the ruling elder. Any one who has read the letters and commentaries of the fathers, (as they are called,) knows this to be so. Let us come down to a later period.

The witnesses, who continued to keep the truth, and testified for it in the valleys of Savoy and Piedmont, while the corruptions of popery and the delusions of Mohammedanism were quenching its light over the whole of the old Roman Empire, had their congregations organized with deacons. Their Confession of Faith, inserted in the "addition" to the history of the Waldenses by M. Gillis, one of their pastors, makes the following declaration on this subject: "It is necessary for the church to have pastors, to preach God's word, to administer sacraments, and to watch over the sheep of Jesus Christ; and also elders and deacons, according to the rules of good and holy church discipline, and the practice of the primitive church." This confession is said by the historian to have been the confession of the ancient Waldensian church, and still received.*

The Reformers in the 16th century, both upon the continent and in the British Isles, who organized their churches upon Presbyterian principles, all had deacons in their congregations: they all held the doctrine that the deacon's office is ordinary and perpetual; and "here the only labour is to select from the mass of testimony presented, that which is most brief and forcible. Let us begin with Geneva and Calvin. In his 24th sermon, on the 1st Epistle to Timothy, Calvin says, "and it is certain that God will have this rule to be observed and kept in his church; that is to say, that the poor be cared for; and not only that every private man, etc., but that there be a public office, and men, appointed to have care of them that are in necessity, that things may be ordered as they ought." What follows is expressed in strong language, and shows what this eminent divine thought of the omission to ordain deacons. "And, if it be not so, it is certain, that we cannot brag that we have a well ordered church, and after the doctrine of the gospel, but a confused thing and a hotch-potch."

Francis Junius, who was Professor of Theology in the church of Holland in the beginning of the reformation, maintains in his "Ecclesiastics," that "pastors, elders, and deacons, are the only three scriptural orders of church officers;" that "these three orders are set forth in scripture, and existed in the primitive church." Pareus, a German reformer of great eminence, who lived at the same time, in his commentary on Romans xii. 8, explains the "giving," and "showing mercy,"

* This statement is taken from "Miller on the Ruling Elder," p. 109.

as “standing ecclesiastical deaconships,” or functions of the deacon’s office. Jerome Zanchius, an Italian divine of the 16th century, and a very distinguished reformer, says, “The whole ministry of the Christian church may be divided into three classes.—The third is of those to whom is committed the care of the poor, etc., who were called deacons, Acts vi., Romans xii., 1st Timothy iii.”*

The sentiments of these very distinguished continental divines were in strict accordance with the doctrines on the subject of the deacon’s office **imbodied** in the standards of nearly all the reformed churches upon the continent. The Geneva book of common order, chapter iii., says, “The deacons must be men of good estimation, etc.” This book of common order contains the rules of discipline adopted by the Scottish congregation of Geneva, and agrees, in all important particulars, with the discipline of the churches of Geneva. The French church was very explicit. Confession of Faith, Art. xxix.: “we believe that this true church ought to be governed by that discipline which our Lord Jesus hath established; so that there should be in the church pastors, elders, and deacons.”† That the French churches had deacons in all their congregations is a fact so notorious as to require no proof. They went farther, however, and required of noblemen “to constitute in their families a consistory, composed of the minister, and of the best approved persons for godliness in their said family, who shall be chosen elders and deacons.”‡

The principles of Knox and his co-labourers, and successors in the work of reformation in Scotland in reference to the deacon, are most readily ascertained, and with the greatest certainty from the 1st and 2d books of discipline, of the Scottish church.§ In that church there was

* Zanchii Opera, Vol. iv., 4th præcept, p. 737.

† Quick’s Synodicon, Vol. I., London, 1690.

‡ French Church Discipline. Sect. xii., Chapter I., Can. xxi. The “Confession” of the French churches was drawn up in 1590. Their discipline was subjected to revision in twenty-three synods, and finally passed about 1575.

§ A brief history of these documents may not be unacceptable to the reader. They are commonly referred to by the title, “Books of Policy.” The 1st book was compiled by John Knox, upon the basis of the Geneva “Book of Common Order,” and was adopted by the church of Scotland, A. D. 1561. It never became the law of the land, the Parliament being unwilling to sanction its principles on the subject of the property of the church, and the deacon’s office. The 2d book was an improvement, in some respects, upon the first. It was finally adopted by the General Assembly in 1578, having been carefully prepared by a committee appointed for that purpose, of which Andrew Melville was a member. The Parliament, however, refused to ratify the 3d Book of Discipline until 1592. In that year they passed, though not without a great deal of opposition, the principal parts, and, among them, those most obnoxious to the court party. M’Crie has the following foot-note in reference to this event, in his “Life of Andrew Melville”, page 235, Oxford, (Ohio,) edition:—“The heads of patronage, divorce, and the office of deacons, were the most offensive to the court, and consequently were made the subject of longest discussion. The ground of objection to the last of these heads was, that it gave the management of the patrimony of the church to the deacons.” The last remark is worth remembering; for it shows that the principles of the Scottish church, on the subject to which it refers, were adopted deliberately, after careful examination, and long and elaborate discussion; by such men, too, as Andrew Melville. It is entitled, “The Second Book of Discipline, or Heads and Conclusions of the Policy of the Kirk; agreed upon in the General Assembly, 1578; inserted in the registers of assembly 1581; sworn to in the National Covenant; revived and ratified by the Assembly 1638, and by many other acts of assembly; and according to which, the church government is established by law. Anno 1592, and 1640.”

never any diversity of opinion on the subject; the perpetuity of the deacon's office was maintained as fully and as plainly as of the pastoral office, or that of the ruling elder. First Book of Discipline, chapter vii.: "Men of the best knowledge, judgment, and conversation, shall be chosen for elders and deacons. Their election shall be yearly, where it may be conveniently observed."* Second Book of Discipline, chapter ii.: "Again, the whole policy of the kirk consisteth in three things, namely, in doctrine, discipline and distribution: with doctrine is annexed the administration of sacraments; and, according to the parts of this division, ariseth a threefold sort of officers in the kirk, to wit, of ministers or preachers, elders or governors, and deacons or distributors: and all these may be called by a general word, ministers of the kirk." Again, in the same chapter; "In the New Testament, and time of the Evangel, be hath used the ministry of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and doctors, in administration of the word; the eldership for good order, and administration of discipline; the deaconship to have the care of the ecclesiastical goods. Some of these ecclesiastical functions are ordinary, and some extraordinary, or temporary. Here are four ordinary functions or officers in the kirk of God; the office of the pastor, minister or bishop; the doctor, the presbyter, or elder, and the deacon. These offices are ordinary, and ought to continue perpetually in the kirk, as necessary for the government and policy thereof: and no more officers ought to be received or suffered in the true kirk of God, established according to his word."

These doctrines were no dead letter in that church, and in the hands of Knox and Melville. They ordained deacons in all their organized congregations. The first reformed congregation in Scotland, was organized in Edinburgh in the year 1556, or 7, by the election and ordination of elders and deacons.† M'Crie, in his *Life of Knox*,‡ says, that after the establishment of protestantism, and the adoption of the 1st Book of Policy, in the year 1560, "the affairs of each congregation were managed by the minister, elders, and deacons, who constituted the kirk session, which met regularly once a week, and oftener if business required." In the same work, page 126, there is a circumstance related which proves that, until Knox's death, in 1572, this order was observed in the church in Edinburgh. A few days before his death, this great reformer was very anxious to meet once more with the session of his church,—his colleague, the elders, and deacons, assembled in his room," etc. The same excellent historian states, in his *Life of Andrew Melville*,§ that "the town and parish of St. Andrew's|| was di-

* This arrangement, (the yearly election of elders and deacons,) was rejected as unscriptural in the Second Book of Discipline; and with evident propriety, as there is no intimation in any part of scripture that offices can be vacated in this way by a system of rotation. This plan has been all along retained by the Holland churches; and is, unquestionably, a chief cause of that imbecility of the ecclesiastical government which enabled the state to despoil the church of many of her privileges.

† M'Crie's *Life of Knox*, Oxford edition, page 65. In a note on page 95, he states that "the number of elders in the session of Edinburgh in 1560 was twelve, and of deacons, sixteen."

‡ Same edition, page 87.

§ Same edition, page 278.

|| Melville was rector of the University of St. Andrew's, after his return in 1574 from France.

vided into districts, and over each of these a certain number of elders and deacons were appointed as inspectors and visitors.” In a note to this work (G G) there is an extract in the following words, from the sessional records of Glasgow: “November 14, 1583, the session appoint an inquest to be taken of men who are neither elders nor deacons for this year, out of several parts of the town.” And another, of the sessional records of St. Andrew’s, March 2, 1596, containing a minute of a meeting of session, “appointed to try the life and conversation of the whole members of the session, as well ministers as elders and deacons.” These facts are enough to establish the practice of the Scottish church; and they show, conclusively, that her practice accorded with her principles. The first reformed congregation in that kingdom had deacons in 1556, and from that time until she reached the highest point of that reformation, to which she attained in the 16th century, deacons were never wanting in the Scottish churches.

That the doctrines and practice of this church during the second reformation, from 1638 to 1649, were the same with those of Knox and Melville, can be very readily shown. The 2nd Bouk of Discipline was revived and ratified by the assembly 1638. Its doctrines in regard to deacons which we have already quoted, were, of course received as the declared principles of the Scottish church at that time. In the year 1645 the form of church government, compiled by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, was adopted. This document is remarkably explicit on the subject of the perpetuity of the deacon’s office. Deacons are mentioned among the “ordinary and perpetual officers of the church.” They are said to be “distinct officers in the church, whose office is perpetual.” Again, “It is requisite that there be others, (officers of a particular congregation,) to take special care for the relief of the poor.” It should be observed, that the same phraseology is used with regard to the ruling elder: “It is requisite that there be some to join in government ;” * plainly showing that they considered deacons to be as requisite as ruling elders.

As has been remarked respecting the opinions of the Scottish Reformers of the preceding century, these sentiments were carefully and deliberately formed. Many volumes were published during this period on the government of the church. In these we find elaborate discussions on the office of the deacon. All advocate the doctrines of the Book of Policy. Among these, Samuel Rutherford’s † elaborate work, entitled, “The Due Right of Presbyteries,” is distinguished for ability and research. In this volume he takes up and answers fourteen objections to the office of the deacon; eight of these respect it as ordinary and perpetual. To do his argument justice, it would be necessary to quote very largely. A few extracts must suffice. He replies to the objection that “circumstances gave rise to the institution of this office, and that, consequently, it is not permanent,” as follows: “The occasion of the multiplying of disciples, and the neglecting of the widows, doth not prove that deacons are a prudential and temporary institution; for here I distinguish between an occasion, and a motive and cause: divers ordinances of God have both these.” Again, he answers the objection

* Confession of Faith, Edinb. Ed. 1830; and Philad. Ed. 1838, p. 574.

† Professor of Divinity at St. Andrew’s. This volume was published in London, 1644; we quote from pages 160, 163.

which is so often brought forward now, that deacons are not necessary, “because their duties can be, and are, performed by other ecclesiastical officers,” in the following terms; “I cannot well deny, but it is apparent from Acts vi. 4, that the apostles themselves were once those who cared for the poor, but I deny that hence it follows in the case of fewer poor, that the office can return to the pastor as to the first subject,* except you suppose the intervention of a divine institution to place it again in the pastors,—and considering the afflictions of the churches, the object of the deacons ‘giving’ and ‘showing mercy,’ as it is Rom. xii. 8, cannot be wanting, as that the church’s fabric be kept in good frame,† the poor, the captives of Christian churches, etc., be relieved.”

To multiply quotations, when those already made, though few, are so explicit and full, would be burdensome. It remains only to show that these principles were reduced to practice. This might be inferred, indeed, from the character of the Scottish church at that brightest period of her reformation. However, there is direct and ample testimony that, during the second reformation, the church of Scotland had deacons in all her congregations. This we find in the laws enacted during that period: the most certain kind of historical evidence. The following clause of the law respecting the election of ruling elders was passed, as its date shows, in 1642, “and the fittest and most experienced of them (heads of families) may be supposed to be among the deacons. Act of Assem., Aug. 1st, 1642.‡ Could such a clause have been inserted in a law, if there had been no deacons in their congregations? Again, in the law regulating the meetings of the Kirk-Session, is the following clause: “The deacons are always present, not for discipline, but for what relates to their own office. Act of Assem., Aug. 10th, 1648.”§ Could the presence of the deacons at all the meetings of Session have been stated by the General Assembly, both as a fact and as a part of their ecclesiastical order, unless there had been such officers in the church, and well known too? Again, in the year 1645, “the elders and deacons in landward parishes were authorized (by parliament) to name collectors of the excise.”|| Certainly an act hard to account for, and explain, had there been no deacons at that time in the parishes of the Scottish Church!

The attainments of this church in regard to her government and order, were retained with fidelity; cherished with affection; and, as far as their trying circumstances admitted, carefully and conscientiously applied, by the covenanters, long after the mad and cruel policy of Charles II., and the violence of persecution, had broken down the

* “As to the first subject.” Rutherford does not deny that it is the duty of the “pastor to take care of the poor,” for to this part of the form of church government he gave his assent. By “the first subject” of office power, he means those whose special duty it is to perform any official function: as the ruling elder rules as his special charge, the pastor ministers at the altar, as his special work. Yet the pastor rules. The pastor and elders “take care of the poor;” not as the “first subjects” of this official duty, but as intrusted with the whole oversight of the affairs of the house of God. To perform this duty, there must be deacons who are the “first subjects” of it, then the pastor and elders act with them, as the pastor rules, not alone, but with elders ordained to that special charge.

† Rutherford does not restrict this office to the care of the poor only.

‡ Stewart’s Coll., Book I., Title. vii., Sect. 2.

§ Do. Book I., Title. xi., Sect. 2.

|| Stevenson’s History of the Church and State of Scotland, Edin. 1753, p. 1129.

carved work of the sanctuary in those lands. Renwick and his suffering brethren declare most solemnly, in the very darkest hour of Scotland's night of persecution, their steadfast adherence to "the ordinary and perpetual officers of the church by Christ's own appointment; such as pastors, doctors, elders, and deacons."* This profession was renewed by the scattered societies of Covenanters, in their declaration emitted at Sanquahar in 1692.† Renwick writes to Sir Robert Hamilton, in the year 1685, or 6, that he "was about to ordain some more elders and some deacons."‡

The reformation attained its greatest height in Scotland. Whatever refers to the government of the church, as well as to doctrine and worship, was better known and more generally practised in Scotland than in England. A brief notice of the southern portion of the British isles, in connexion with the subject of the deacon's office, will, therefore, suffice. It is well known that the reformation in the 16th century, brought about through the instrumentality of Henry VIII., was lamentably imperfect. However, many of the ministry and members of the English establishment looked, with a favourable eye, from the first, upon the endeavours of their brethren in other countries, particularly in Scotland, after a more scriptural and thorough reformation. As early as the reign of Edward VI.§ some foreigners who had taken refuge in that country from troubles on account of religion in their own, formed themselves into congregations, organized chiefly according to the Presbyterian model.|| M'Crie says,¶ that "the affairs of each congregation were managed by a minister, ruling elders, and deacons; and each of these offices was considered as of divine institution." Cranmer, and other eminent Englishmen, treated them with great kindness, and were well inclined to their form of government. Nothing was accomplished towards a better reformation until the following century. In the year 1616 the Independents formed their first congregation by the "ordination of ruling elders and deacons."** The opinions of the Independents of that century are expressed by the very celebrated Dr. Owen,†† in his treatise on church government. He says, speaking of Acts vi.1-6, "it was the institution of a new office, and not a present supply in a work or business, which they designed." And again; "Nor was this a temporary institution for that season, and so the officers appointed extraordinary; but was to abide in the church throughout all generations." He speaks of the deacon, in the same connexion, as a known and existing officer, remarking, that "the original institution, nature, and use of the office of deacons in the church were so well known" that it "was not necessary to insist much on them."

At a later period, when the principles of the Scottish reformation had

* In the year 1687. See *Informatory Vindication*, N.Y. Ed., 1834, p. 197.

† Do. p. 318.

‡ Renwick's *Letters*, Let. LII., p 184, Edin., 1714. See Note A. for some observations on the dropping of the deacon's office in the Scottish church.

§ He reigned from 1547 to 1553.

|| They had superintendents: in this they departed from strict Presbyterianism.

¶ Note xviii. to the *Life of Knox*.

** Neal's *Hist. of the Puritans*, Vol. I., p. 462.

†† Owen was not a Congregationalist, as that appellation is now understood. He was much nearer to Presbyterianism in his sentiments on church government, than any other form subsisting in our times.

taken root in England, the views of the English reformers upon the deacon's office, are very decidedly expressed in that form of church government compiled by the Westminster Assembly, from which quotations have already been made.* These views were ably advocated by several divines of Zion's College, London, in a work entitled "The Divine Right of Church Government." In this essay they say† that "deacons are ordinary officers in the church of God, of which she will have constant use in all ages, and which, at first, were divinely appointed, and after, frequently mentioned in the New Testament."

This brings to a close our historical review of the purer periods of the Reformed churches. Many of the descendants of the British reformers have dropped the office of deacon, although they still retain, in their published creeds and confessions, the principles of the scriptures, and of their fathers, in reference to this office. In France and Holland they still have deacons: they have never ceased to have them since the reformation. The Scottish establishment, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, both in Britain and America; the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster, in Ireland; the Associate Presbyterian Church; the Associate Reformed and the General Assembly Presbyterian Church, in the United States, and some other denominations, still retain in their standards the substance, and most of them, the very language of the Westminster divines on this subject. Of course, all these bodies, how different so ever their practice, profess to believe, as their fathers in the time of the Reformation did, that "the deacon's office is ordinary and perpetual." And, although these denominations have dropped in part, or altogether, this office, we yet find writers of eminence expressing themselves with great explicitness on the subject. The language of John Brown of Haddington is peculiarly strong and decided. He says,‡ "There is no hint in scripture that the offices of ruling elder and deacon were designed to be temporary;—no congregation can, therefore, answer to Jesus Christ for the dropping of deacons, any more than for the dropping of ruling elders." Similar sentiments are found in other authors. Indeed, almost without exception, those who have noticed the subject at all, (and they are not few,) have expressed their regret that the churches have so often departed, with respect to the deacon's office, from both the scriptures and their own professed principles.

Now, why have they so departed? Can there be any good reason assigned why all congregations should not have deacons, as the Christian congregations had in Jerusalem, in Greece, in Asia Minor, in the whole Christian world in the apostolic times, and in all the Reformed churches? Can any apology be offered for neglecting this part of the organization given to the church by her blessed Head? Will it be said that there is no need of deacons; that there are no labours for the deacon to perform? Perhaps it may be found that more than one mistaken notion is contained in such a view. "The poor," says Christ, "ye

* Page 12.

† P. 140. This work was written by these eminent divines in the year 1645, during the sessions of the Westminster Assembly, to defend the Presbyterian principles of the English Covenanters against the Erastians and Independents, who were making very decided opposition to their introduction into that kingdom. It contains, perhaps, the most complete defence of the Divine Right of Presbyterianism ever issued.

‡ Body of Divinity, Book VII., Chap. II., and Dictionary of the Bible, under the word "Deacon."

have always with you.” Therefore, were it so that the deacon’s office embraces no more extended range of duties than those involved in the taking care of the poor, (a great mistake, however, as will be soon shown,) we have the authority of Christ himself for affirming that the deacon should always be reckoned among the church’s officers. And, assuredly, if it be the duty of the Christian church to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and promote the comfort of the destitute, it is hard to believe that she may dispense with that very office, which the gracious King of Zion has instituted to attend continually to this very thing.

Perhaps it may be found, that human wisdom has contrived to distribute the duties of the deacon’s office; assigning some to other ecclesiastical officers, some to civil officers, and some to individuals, while some may be neglected altogether; so as to render this officer of Christ’s appointment apparently unnecessary. What right have men in this manner to re-arrange any part of the church’s order, and then pronounce a part of it to be unnecessary? For example, what right and warrant have the pastor and elders of a congregation to set aside the deacon, and undertake to perform his duties? Would not the same process of reasoning be equally available to set aside the ruling elder? All Presbyterians maintain that the pastor is to rule in the congregation. Would it be right to supersede the elder, by coolly asserting, that, as the power of government belongs to the ministry, it is unnecessary to ordain ruling elders? Would any Presbyterian grant this? Yet the steps in the argument are precisely the same. It is granted—it is maintained, that the ruling elder’s office embraces within it that of the deacon; but this no more warrants the neglect to appoint deacons, than the fact that the pastor’s office embraces that of the ruling elder, warrants the church to commit her government entirely to the ministry.* Moreover, as will appear in the sequel, to dispense with the deacon, throws too heavy a burden upon those who would undertake his duties, in addition to their own.

Perhaps, it may be asked, “Have our fathers been in the wrong in this matter? Have they not lived usefully, been edified, and died in faith, without recognising either the validity or importance of this office?” All this is not our business. The question is not, whether has the church been more or less guilty, but what does Jesus Christ require of us? Besides, our fathers of the reformation had deacons, all the Reformed churches had them. In neglecting to ordain them, we have forsaken their footsteps: and the longer we have strayed, the greater need to turn and reform. “They have been edified without this office in their congregations.” True, and many a soul has gone to heaven from congregations where they never had a ruling elder. The great and good President Edwards, during the greater part of his life, belonged to a church that had no ruling elders. This has nothing to do with the subject. The question is not, whether the deacon is essential to the organization of a congregation, or not. This is not affirmed. But is it not the will,—the command of the church’s Head, that this class of officers be ordained in the church? This has been proved from scripture, and confirmed by the “footsteps of the flock.” The deacon is a standing ecclesiastical officer. What are his duties?

* See quotation from Rutherford’s *Due Right of Presbyteries*, pp. 12, 13.