

REPORT ON THE DIACONATE

The Committee appointed "to prepare a paper on the doctrine of the Diaconate, with special reference to its relations to the agencies of the Church," beg leave to present to the General Assembly the following report:

It will be observed that the duty laid upon the Committee involves the consideration of the doctrine of the Diaconate only in its special relations to the agencies of the Church. By these must be understood those executive agencies which are appointed by the courts to discharge certain functions of a permanent character during their recess. The exact question, thus limited, but still a wide one, which it is the design of this paper to discuss, is this: Should deacons be appointed to discharge strictly temporal functions, when such functions fall to be performed by the executive agencies of the Church? Let it be noticed that the question is not, whether deacons ought to be substituted for the committees of Presbyters, which now form an element of our administrative policy. It is precisely what it has just been stated to be.

Now it is plain, that the establishment of all or either of the following positions would render this question gratuitous and unnecessary, to wit : the higher office includes the lower, and consequently the presbyter includes the deacon, and may, even in a regular condition of the church, legitimately perform diaconal functions ; the scope of the deacon's functions is restricted to the care of the poor ; the sphere of the deacon's operations is bounded by the limits of the particular congregations of which they are officers.

Believing the question, which has been stated, to be fair and important, and holding its affirmative to be true, the Committee is under the necessity of attempting to prove the untenableness of the foregoing position. The limits of a report to a body like this will warrant little more than a statement of the heads of argument.

First, then, the higher office of presbyter does not so include the lower office of deacon, as, in a regular condition of the church, to make it legitimate for presbyters to discharge the functions of deacons.

1. The first argument is grounded in the constitutionally defined relations between the officers of the church. [The design of this argument was to show that while, generically, the deacon as well as the preaching elder and the ruling elder is a church officer, he is specifically distinguished from them. And as one species, as such, cannot be included in another species, as such, the deacon, as distributor, is not included in the higher officers. The argument is here omitted, because its technicality has been objected to, and in order that the report may be compressed with the smallest possible limits.]

2. The second argument, against the position that the higher offices of minister of the Word and ruling elder include the lower office of deacon, is derived from the import of ordination. Neither the preaching nor the ruling elder is ordained to discharge the functions of the

deacon. As, in a regular condition of the church, in which all the offices are or may be filled, no officer can legitimately perform functions to the discharge of which he was not ordained, the preaching and the ruling elder are debarred from performing diaconal functions. If they undertake them, it is as usurpers. That these officers are not ordained to discharge the duties pertaining to the deacon, is proved by the terms of the ordaining acts. That unless so ordained they cannot warrantably perform those duties, is proved by the principles of our Constitution and the practice of our Church.

If it be contended, that the obligation of these officers to discharge diaconal functions is implicitly imposed in ordination, it is answered : that as our Constitution affirms that ordination is to the performance of a definite work, the higher officers are bound to do the definite work of the deacon as distributor. That would scarcely be maintained by any. If it be, it would follow that to the extent to which ministers and elders would do the deacon's work, they would displace the officer who is explicitly ordained to do it ; and so the deacon would be prevented, to that extent, from doing what he is called, ordained and obliged by his vows, to do.

If, further, it be said, that ordination confers the right, but does not impose the duty, upon the higher officers, to discharge diaconal functions, the reply is, that such a disjunction of official rights and official duties would be entirely unwarrantable. They are reciprocal and imply each other.

3. The third argument is, that, in a regular condition of the church in which all the offices are filled, the functions of preaching and ruling elders on the one hand, and of deacons on the other, are incompatible with each other, and therefore cannot be legitimately commingled in the same officer. For proof of this position reference is made to the sixth chapter of Acts. The Apostles said : "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables, wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word." The functions of prayer and preaching were common to the Apostles and all ministers of the Word. It is consequently unreasonable, and, as inspired authority pronounced it so, unscriptural, for ministers of the Word to discharge diaconal functions. This breaks down the principle that *every* higher officer includes *every* lower—the preacher does not include the deacon. As ruling elders are spiritual officers charged with spiritual functions, it is, although perhaps in a lower degree, unreasonable and unscriptural for them to serve tables—to leave their spiritual duties to perform temporal.

4. The fourth argument is, that, if the higher office includes the lower, the superior officer must possess all the qualifications of the inferior. Either this is held to be requisite or it is not. If it be held to be

requisite, the position is unscriptural and unconstitutional ; for both the Scriptures and the Constitution make the qualifications of presbyters and deacons, in important respects, different. If it be held not to be requisite, it follows that the higher officer is not necessarily qualified to perform the duties of the lower, and yet he is charged with their performance. The denial of this logical consequence from the doctrine involves the denial of the doctrine.

5. The fifth argument is, that the doctrine of the inclusion of the lower in the higher office grounds and legitimates the body known as the Deacon's Court. Now, either, first, in this body the session sits as a court of presbyters, and deacons are admitted to sit and vote with them in that capacity, which would be un-Presbyterian, since deacons would assume the function of joint rule ; and further, would involve the inversion of the theory under consideration, since, in that case, the lower office would include the higher ; or, secondly, the session would sit as a board of deacons, upon matters of a temporal nature which would be equally un-Presbyterian, since the session would give up, as such, its right and duty to exercise directive control over ecclesiastical things of a temporal character, and deacons would discharge these vacated functions of presbyters ; or, thirdly, the bench of elders would sit as such, and the board of deacons as such, with a joint right to vote as well as deliberate, which would also be un-Presbyterian, since we would have a composite court of presbyters and deacons, a mongrel unit, unknown to the Constitution, and by its weight of numbers threatening to overshadow the session itself. The fact, too, that the responsibility of such a body must, from the nature of the case, be to the Presbytery and not to the session, is proof of its abnormal and un-Presbyterian character. Again a logical consequence of the doctrine furnishes its refutation.

Let it be understood, that no opposition is here made to joint meetings of presbyters and deacons for purposes of information and advice.

6. The sixth argument is, that the doctrine of the inclusion of the lower in the higher office tends to the suppression of the deacon's office as superfluous. If the elder so includes the deacon that he may, in a regular condition of the church, discharge his duties, he is to all intents and purposes a deacon, and there would to common sense seem to be no reason why the deacon as a separate officer should exist. This is acknowledged by some of her writers to have been to a great extent the actual result of the doctrine in the history of the Scotch Church. At one time the existence of the diaconal office was threatened. It came nigh extinction. An inherent tendency in a theory to a contraction of the authority, wisdom and mercy of Christ, must powerfully react against its truth.

The arguments opposed to the doctrine under consideration having been presented, those employed in its favor will next be briefly noticed. They are mainly derived from passages in the New Testament, in

which the Apostles affirmed that they were elders, and appear to be represented as having performed diaconal functions.

1. That the Apostles were elders no one disputes. But that would not prove that the office of the Apostolate included the office of the presbyterate. As has already been shown, the preacher is an elder, but that does not prove that the office of preacher includes the office of elder. On the contrary our doctrine is that the preacher, as such, is not an elder ; and when he sits in a court he sits there as elder and not as preacher. The same person contains in himself two offices, but one office does not include the other.

Further, if the office of elder were included in that of the Apostle, the Apostles must have been contained as a species under the genus elders. Otherwise the essential attribute of the eldership could not have descended into the Apostle, and so have been included in him. But for such an hypothesis no one would contend.

2. The supposition that the sixth of Acts shows that the Apostles discharged diaconal functions, in distributing the supplies which were laid at their feet, is incapable of being proved. It will not therefore be further noticed.

The passages in Acts and in the Epistles, which represent the Apostle Paul and others as bearers of supplies from the Gentile churches to the needy saints at Jerusalem, furnish no proof that they discharged strictly diaconal functions. The record *does* prove that they neither collected nor distributed the offerings. That they carried them to Jerusalem no more proves that they acted as deacons, than the fact that one of our missionaries may carry money from our Committee in Baltimore to our brethren in China would prove that he performed strictly diaconal duty. Our churches do not employ their deacons to carry their offerings to the Executive Committees of the Assembly.

If the theory, that the higher offices of minister of the Word and ruling elder includes the lower office of deacon, has been shown to be untenable, the objection, grounded in it, against the employment of deacons to discharge diaconal functions in connection with the executive agencies of the Church, is deprived of force.

Let it be observed that the argument holds in reference to a regular condition of the Church. Where deacons do not exist, others must, of necessity, discharge their duties.

Secondly, The scope of the deacon's functions is not restricted to the care of the poor, but may legitimately be extended so as to embrace all the temporalities of the Church.

1. The first argument in support of this position is, that the ordinary method of instruction pursued in the Scriptures is to give a special case illustrating a principle or duty, and leave the principle or duty to be collected from that instance as a specimen. Hence it is a legitimate inference from the fact that one temporal function—and that of chief importance—was assigned to the deacon, that all other

functions of a temporal kind, and of less consequence, were included within the scope of his office.

2. The second argument is, that if deacons have no scriptural warrant to act beyond the care of the poor, the Head of the Church appointed no officers to take charge of her temporal interests. But this ought not to be admitted.

3. The third argument is, that the reason assigned by the Apostles why they should not attend to the distribution of relief to the poor, held equally against their performance of any other temporal function. That reason was, that temporal ministration would hinder their discharge of spiritual duties. The same reason applies to all spiritual officers, in a regular condition of the Church. Now, it is plain, that the same result would follow from the engagement of spiritual officers in any other ecclesiastical duty of a temporal kind. Either, then, no officer was appointed to take charge of the Church's temporalities apart from the provisions for the poor, or deacons were assigned to that duty.

4. The fourth argument is, that, while it is usually assumed that the record in the sixth of Acts shows that all the deacons did was to distributed supplies to the poor, the record there and elsewhere appears to prove the contrary. There was a common sustentation fund which was daily distributed to the whole multitude of believers. "They had all things in common." Now, the Apostles declined to attend to this distribution, and declined on grounds which also excluded other spiritual officers. Who then attended to this vast distribution? The answer must be : either deacons, or persons appointed without reference to ecclesiastical office. If the seven were deacons—and such has always been the general judgment of the Church—the presumption is well-nigh irresistible, that the whole work of this distribution was imposed upon deacons.

5. The fifth argument is derived from the express terms of our Constitution. In the first place, it declares that "the duties of this office, [that is, of deacon] especially relate to the care of the poor, and to the collection and distribution of the offerings of the people for pious uses, under the direction of the session." Here certain functions of the deacon are expressly contradistinguished from his care of the poor. He cannot therefore be constitutionally restricted to the distribution of supplies to the poor. And it deserves notice, that were he made a general agent of the Church, his duties in that relation would, in great measure, fall within the purview of this provision. In the second place, the Constitution declares : "To the deacons also may be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs of the Church." It is manifest, then, if the Constitution approves the committal of the temporalities of the Church to the care of the deacon, he cannot, in consistency with the Constitution, be confined to the care of the poor. And, on the contrary, it may be fairly argued, that if it be proper to

commit the management of the temporal affairs of the church specifically to the deacon, as contradistinguished from other ecclesiastical officers, it must be because the very nature of his office more adapts him to this duty than does theirs. Still further, the ground may well be taken, that if this duty is properly assignable to an ecclesiastical officer as such, it can only be done in consequence of a clear warrant of Scripture for the procedure. To say that a function may be properly discharged by the deacon, as deacon, is to say, substantially, that it belongs to his office.

6. The sixth argument is, that the doctrine that deacons are not confined to the care of the poor, but may be charged with the management of all the temporalities of the Church, has been generally maintained by the churches of the Reformed faith.

7. The seventh argument is, that there are Poor Funds which are under the control of the general agencies of our Church—namely, the Invalid Fund, and that for the education of needy candidates for the ministry. Upon every hypothesis in regard to the scope of the deacon's functions, the management of these funds should be committed to him. Those only could object, who inconsistently maintain that the functions of the deacon are confined within congregational limits—inconsistently, for they hold that the distribution of poor funds ought to be intrusted to the deacon.

The objection against the employment of the deacon in relation to the general interests of the Church, which is derived from the position that he is confined to the care of the poor, has thus been proved to be untenable.

Thirdly, The functions of the deacon are not restricted within the limits of the congregation of which he is an officer.

1. The first argument in support of this proposition is, that, according to the record in the sixth chapter of Acts, the deacons at Jerusalem were elected by the people and appointed by the Apostles, as distributors of a common fund to all the congregations in that city. They therefore held a catholic relation to the whole body of believers there, who could not have been comprised in one congregation. We have, therefore, apostolic authority for the appointment of deacons to act with reference to the general interests of the Church.

2. The second argument is, that, according to the same inspired record, the deacons at Jerusalem held a catholic relation to the whole college of Apostles ; and as they were under its supervision and acted in co-operation with it, the relations of the two bodies must have been equally catholic—of the one in the spiritual, of the other in the temporal, sphere.

3. The third argument is, that the principle affirmed by the Apostles, that spiritual officers should not leave the Word of God to serve tables, is one which ought to be applied in every case in which tables are to be served—that is, in which temporal functions are to be discharged. Wherever the tables are, in a regular condition of the

church, there it is unreasonable for spiritual officers to serve them. Deacons ought to be appointed to that service. But the church, as a whole, has tables as well as the particular church. Deacons, therefore, ought to be appointed to serve them. If not, the Apostles being judges, the spiritual officers who serve them do an unreasonable thing. Consequently, deacons cannot be legitimately confined to congregational limits.

4. The fourth argument is, that the fundamental principle of the unity of the Church justifies and requires the employment of deacons beyond the limits of particular churches. Our Church is one body, not as made up of an aggregation of independent units, but as an organic whole of which particular churches are special parts—it is not a collection of churches ; it is a Church. The constituent elements of a particular church are constituent elements of the whole church. Consequently, all the members and officers of the particular church are members and officers of the whole church. True, they sustain a special relation to the particular churches to which they belong, but it is also true, that they sustain a general relation to the whole church of which those churches are integral elements. The Minister of the Word is an officer of the whole church ; so is the ruling elder ; and the deacon cannot be excluded from the scope of this principle. He also is an officer of the whole church. Consequently, he may be employed in connection with its general interests of a temporal nature. He is not, like the presbyter, a representative, strictly speaking. There is no series of diaconal courts, nor even a gradation of diaconal boards rising one above another. But the courts may call the deacon to discharge purely temporal functions which spring up in connection with them, and from which they are, on scriptural grounds debarred.

5. The fifth argument is, that, in the actual practice of our Church, the deacon ordinarily discharges functions which reach beyond the limits of the particular church of which he is an officer. He officially collects money from persons who are members of other particular Presbyterian churches, from persons belonging to other denominations, and from persons belonging to no denomination. He takes collections, some of which do not terminate on congregational objects, but on those of the church at large ; and in making these collections he is, mediately through the session, which in raising them obeys the Supreme Court, the agent of the whole Church.

6. The sixth argument is, that when the membership of a deacon is transferred from one particular church to another, he is not re-ordained. This shows our doctrine to be, that the deacon sustains a catholic relation to the church at large. While *in transitu* he is still a deacon. His office, like that of the ruling elder, goes with him from church to church. His special relation ceases, his general, continues.

7. The seventh argument is, that our own church has distinctly assumed the principle that deacons are not merely local officers, confined

to congregational bounds ; for it has deliberately and formally expressed its judgment, that they may act in connection with the Executive Committees appointed by the General Assembly. This is done in every one of the Constitutions of those Committees adopted by its first Assembly, held in the City of Augusta in 1861. Until, therefore, this precedent is set aside, the doctrine of our Church is settled upon this point.

8. It may be added, that this doctrine was expressly maintained by those able and thorough-going Presbyterians, Dr. Robert J. Breckinridge and Dr. Thornwell, as, did space permit, could be shown from their writings.

It may be objected, that the courts cannot appoint deacons as committeemen, because deacons cannot be members of them. It is enough to say in answer to this, that the same principle upon which a session may commit certain duties to deacons, although not capable of membership in it, must run through all the courts.

It may also be objected, that it is unwarrantable to divert deacons from the service of the particular churches to which they are bound by their ordination vows. To this it is answered, that upon the same principle pastors, both ministers and ruling elders, must be absolutely restricted to the service of particular churches.

If the foregoing arguments are valid, it has been proved that deacons are not confined to congregational limits, but may be employed in connection with the general work of the Church.

It ought to be added, that as the Treasurers of the Assembly are under direct official responsibility to it, they cannot rightly be regarded in the light of any trustworthy secular agents, such as banks or similar depositories of money, which have no such responsibility to it, but should be deacons, as the temporal officers whom as a court of the Church it is warranted by the Scriptures to appoint.

The conclusion reached through this discussion is, that wherever, in the administrative policy of our Church, strictly temporal functions require to be discharged, deacons should be appointed for their performance ; and that the Assembly should modify that policy to the extent demanded by this principle.

It would be idle to indicate the special modes in which the principle should be applied, before the Assembly expresses its judgment as to the principle itself. The Committee would therefore recommend :

That the Assembly formally approve the principle, that wherever, in its administrative policy, strictly temporal functions require to be discharged, deacons should be appointed by it for their performance.

It is proper to add that the Committee are unanimous in the presentation of this report.

Respectfully submitted,

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