

Excerpted from *What Is Presbyterian Law? As Defined by the Church Courts?*, by the Rev. J. Aspinwall Hodge (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1882), pp. 60-71.

CHAPTER VI. OF DEACONS.

What are Deacons ?

“The Scriptures clearly point out Deacons as distinct officers in the church, whose business it is to take care of the poor, and to distribute among them the collections which may be raised for their use. To them also may be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs of the church.”

When was this office introduced into the Church ?

There is no mention of Deacons under the Old Testament dispensation. The contributions of money were under the care of the Levites and Priests (Ex. 38 : 21; Num. 1 : 50, 53; Ezra. 8 : 24-30, 33). Special provisions were made under the law for the relief of the poor by individual, instead of official, contributions and care (Ex. 23 :11; Lev. 19: 9, 10; 25 : 25-55). Rev. James M. Wilson, D. D., in a pamphlet on “The Deacon” (p. 23), says: “In the language of Dr. McLeod, ‘There were several officers in the Jewish synagogue, and these were authorized to conduct the public worship, preserve order and manage the finances of the congregation’ (*Ecclesiastical Catechism*, Q. 51). This latter officer was the Chazan or Deacon of the synagogue (‘Prideaux’s Connections,’ part i., book vi.), and in the words of Prideaux, ‘the Chazanim—that is, Overseers—who were also fixed Ministers and under the Rulers of the synagogue, had charge and oversight of all things in it, kept the sacred books of the law and the prophets and other Holy Scriptures, as also the books of their public liturgies, and all other utensils belonging to the synagogue.’ The order of the synagogue was, as all Presbyterians hold, the model of that of the Church under the New-Testament dispensation. In the synagogue was an officer that attended to the poor, had oversight of the place of worship and managed the finances.” We have in Acts 6 : 1-6 the history of the introduction of this office into the Christian Church, the occasion, necessity of the office, the qualifications and duties of Deacons, their election and ordination.

Was this office designed to be permanent?

It is evident from Acts 6 : 1-6 that the office was not introduced because of a temporary emergency. The work committed to Deacons is a permanent one, for the poor we shall have with us always (Matt. 26 :11), the Church is enjoined to make provision for them (Gal. 2 : 10), and contributions always will be given for the relief of Christians and for the extension of the Church, as in the days of the Apostles. The qualifications—honesty, good report, being filled with the Holy Ghost and wisdom, being the husband of one wife, ruling his children and own house well (Acts 6 : 3; 1 Tim. 3 : 12)—are not those which indicate an extraordinary and temporary office. Deacons were recognized as regular officers of fully-organized churches (Phil. 1:1; Horn. 12 : 7 (“ministry,” διακονίαν); 1 Pet. 4 :11 (εἰ τις διακονεῖ)). The office has always continued in the Church in some form, was recognized by all the Reformers, and is continued in all branches of the Church.

It is “perpetual,” in the sense that “it cannot be laid aside at pleasure. No person can be divested of it but by deposition.” But under certain circumstances (see below) a Deacon may cease to exercise his office and to be an acting Deacon.¹

What are the duties of Deacons ?

“To take care of the poor, and to distribute among them the collections which may be raised for their use. To them also may be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs of the church.” This includes visitation of those in need, inquiring into their real wants, helping them to obtain work and

¹ *Form of Government*, ch. xiii.. sect. vi.; *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 348.

comforting them. Being church officers, they should always unite with temporal relief spiritual consolation, instruction and prayer. In many churches it is the duty of the Deacons to take charge of the communion set, and to bring it, with clean table-linen, to the church on the communion Sabbath, and from the poor fund, or some other designated fund, to provide the bread and wine for the Lord's table.

What funds are committed to their charge ?

The poor fund, however this may be raised. The collection taken at the administration of the Lord's Supper is usually devoted to the poor fund, which is increased by other means. "Over charities collected for any other purpose than those specified (for the poor) their office gives them no control." The poor to be cared for are those outside of as well as in the church.² The Southern Presbyterian Church makes it part of the duty of the Deacons to collect and distribute "the offerings of the people for pious uses under the direction of the Session."³

"*The temporal affairs of the church*" would include all money raised for the support of the ordinances of the church, and for the erection and preservation of the buildings belonging to it. All this may properly be committed to the Deacons. The *First Book of Discipline of the Kirk of Scotland* says: "The Deacons should take up the whole rents of the Kirk, disposing of them to the ministry, the schools and poor within their bounds, according to the appointment of the Kirk." "Under the patrimony of the Kirk we comprehend all things given or to be given to the Kirk and service of God, as lands, buildings, possessions, annual rents, and all such-like wherewith the Kirk is doted, either by donations, foundations, mortifications, or any other lawful titles of kings, princes or any persons inferior to them, together with the continual oblations of the faithful." This patrimony should be distributed by the Deacons to the Pastor, the poor, the sick and strangers, and to the upholding of other affairs of the Kirk. "We add hereunto the schools "and schoolmasters." "To whom we join also Clerks of Assemblies. . . . syndics or procurators of the Kirk affairs, takers-up of psalms and such like other ordinary officers of the Kirk."⁴ It is usual in our Church to place all these temporal affairs in the charge of Trustees, and the Deacons have charge only of the poor fund. When the Deacons have the care of the property of the church, they are under the same limitations, etc. in their management thereof as the Trustees are in other churches.⁵

To whom are the other collections committed?

The Session of the church receive from the General Assembly and the other courts recommendations of various objects to be presented to the people for their benevolent contributions.⁶ The collections are sent by the Session to the Treasurers of the several Boards as the church may contribute to each. Sometimes monthly collections are received for all the Boards, and the sum-total is divided by the Session among the Boards according to the ratio recommended by the General Assembly.

Has the Session any direct control over the poor fund?

To the Deacons belongs the sole responsibility of its management and distribution. The Session "may advise the Deacons respecting the use of funds." So the Old School Assembly decided in 1857. The question does not seem to have come before the New School Church, or the Assembly since the reunion. But the language of the book seems plain that the poor fund is entirely in the hands of the Deacons.⁷ How do Deacons differ from Ministers ?

They are laymen. They labor chiefly for a certain class in the congregation. They have no seat in the church courts.⁸ They have no part in ordination, preaching the word, administering the sacraments, or participating in the government of the church.

² *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 118.

³ *Book of Church Order*, ch. iv., sect. ii.

⁴ *Assembly's Digest*, p. 64.

⁵ See Hodge, *What Is Presbyterian Law?*, pp. 38-41.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 109.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 70.

⁸ *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 118.

How do they differ from Ruling Elders?

The Elders have the spiritual oversight of the whole church; the Deacons have the care of the temporal wants of a part, and sometimes the charge of the property and revenue of the congregation.

Did not the Deacons ordained by the Apostles preach ?

Not as Deacons. The object of their appointment was that the Apostles and Ministers might be relieved from serving tables, and that they might give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6 : 2-4). The qualifications required are not aptness to teach, etc., but honest report, prudence, gravity, temperance, faith, consistency, being full of the Holy Ghost, and not greedy of lucre (Acts 6 : 3; 1 Tim. 3 : 8, 9,10). Stephen “did great wonders and miracles among the people,” and he did speak with wisdom and spirit, both in his daily intercourse with men and in his defence when accused of blasphemy before the Sanhedrim (Acts 7). It may be questioned whether his defence, speaking with wisdom and spirit, and disputationes, were of the nature of preaching, the official and authoritative proclamation of the gospel. But if so, there is no indication that he preached as a Deacon, for preaching is never elsewhere referred to the diaconate. Even in the Episcopal churches the Deacon is not permitted to preach by virtue of his office, but must receive a license to do so, from the Bishop after due examination. Stephen probably held two offices—that of Deacon and that of Evangelist, as did Philip, another of the seven (Acts 21 : 8).

Who may be chosen Deacons?

“In all cases the persons elected must be male members in full communion in the church in which they are to exercise their office.”⁹ A Minister, therefore, though without charge, not being a member of a particular church, cannot be elected Deacon. This was reaffirmed by the New School Assembly in 1865 and 1869;¹⁰ and the principle is stated (the application, however, is to the eligibility to the office of Ruling Elder) by the General Assembly of 1874.¹¹

May a woman be elected ?

“In all cases the persons elected must be male members.”⁸ Rev. Charles Hodge, D.D., says: “In addition to Deacons, we know that Deaconesses were in some instances appointed” (in the apostolic Church), “but we have no evidence that it was the universal practice.”¹² Phoebe is called by Paul “a servant of the Church” (*διακονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας*). Tryphoena, Tryphosa and the beloved Persis, “who labor in the Lord,” are supposed by some to be Deaconesses in the same church (Rom. 16 : 1 and 12). In 1 Tim. 3:11 it is required that the wives (*γυναικας*) of the Deacons “must be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things” and some suppose that they held official relations to the church as Deaconesses. In 1 Tim. 5 : 9 the expression, “Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old,” is understood by some as those poor women who should be assisted by the church, but others hold that it refers to those women who may be chosen Deaconesses, to have charge of the female part of the congregation. Such women officers are considered to have been specially necessary among the Gentile converts, whose women were held in greater seclusion than among the Jews.¹³ Tabitha or Dorcas is also by some regarded as holding this office (Acts 9 : 36). In the early Church there were Deaconesses who had charge of the poor and sick of their own sex, but the office was abolished in the Latin Church in the eleventh century, and in the Greek Church in the twelfth century.¹⁴

There is no evidence that the Deaconesses, or those women who had care of the poor in the apostolic Church, were formally elected or ordained as officers in the church. Many women ministered of their

⁹ *Form of Government*, ch. xiii., sect. ii.

¹⁰ *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 340.

¹¹ *Minutes General Assembly 1874*, p. 84.

¹² *Church Polity*, p. 278.

¹³ See *History of Apostolic Church*, p. 535.

¹⁴ *American Cyclopædia*.

substance, as did those of Galilee unto Christ (Luke 8 : 3), and devoted much time and labor to the poor, and were, with the wives of the Deacons, regarded as helpers in this work, but probably without official position. The Southern Presbyterian Church formally states what has always been the usage in Presbyterian churches: “Where it shall appear needful, the church Session may select and appoint godly women for the care of the sick, of prisoners, of poor widows and orphans, and in general for the relief of distress.”¹⁵

By whom are Deacons to be elected ?

“Every congregation shall elect persons to the office of Ruling Elder, and to the office of Deacon, or either of them, in the mode most approved and in use in that congregation.”¹⁶ Those who vote for Elders may vote for Deacons.¹⁷

Must they be ordained and installed ?

The same rules apply to them as to Ruling Elders as to ordination, installation, resignation, deposition, removal, dismissal, return, ceasing to act, effect of suspension and restoration.¹⁸

May a person be at once Elder and Deacon ?

The Old School Assembly in 1840 declared that while it is desirable that these offices should be kept distinct, “yet in the opinion of this Assembly it is not inconsistent with the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, nor with the precedent furnished in filling the office of Deacon in its first institution, that where a necessity exists the same individual should sustain both offices.”¹⁹ The New School Assembly took no action on this question, but the wording of the *Form of Government* ch. xiii., sect. ii., seems to imply that persons may be elected to both offices or to either of them. In 1880 the Assembly was asked, “When a Deacon in any church is elected and installed a Ruling Elder in the same church, does he cease to exercise the functions of his office as a Deacon ?” and answered, “Not necessarily.”²⁰

When there are no Deacons the Session usually, as a body, take the oversight of the poor or appoint one or more of the Elders to act as Deacons.

May a Deacon sit in the church courts?

He is neither a Minister nor a representative of the people, and has therefore no judicial power.²¹

To what court is he responsible?

He is a communicant of a particular church, and therefore he is responsible to the Session. The Deacons should seek the advice of the Session in regard to the discharge of their duties as Deacons.²² Their records and accounts should be presented at least once a year to the congregation or to the Session (the representatives of the people) for review and approval. The *Second Book of Discipline of the Church of Scotland* says: “They ought to do according to the judgment and appointment of the Presbyteries or Elderships (of which the Deacons are not members), that the patrimony of the Kirk and poor be not converted to private men’s uses nor wrongfully distributed.”²³ The Southern Presbyterian Church requires 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.”²⁴

¹⁵ *Book of Church Order*, ch. iv., sect. iv., sub-sect. vi.

¹⁶ *Form of Government*, ch. xiii., sect. ii.

¹⁷ See Hodge, *Presbyterian Law*, p. 56.

¹⁸ See Hodge, *Presbyterian Law*, pp. 57-60.

¹⁹ *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 119.

²⁰ *Minutes G.A. 1880*, p. 56.

²¹ *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 118.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²³ *Assembly's Digest*, p. 64.

²⁴ *Book of Church Order*, ch. iv., sect. iv., sub-sect. iv.

May Deacons assist the Elders at the Lord's table ?

The New School Assembly referred the matter to the discretion of the Sessions in 1867.²⁵ This was affirmed by the Assembly of the reunited Church.²⁶

May a Deacon be elected for a term of years ?

No action has been taken by the Assembly. But since rotary or term eldership is permitted, there seems no reason why the Deacons may not be elected in the same manner, as the two offices are considered together in ch. xiii. of the *Form of Government*.

What is the Board of Deacons ?

The Deacons cannot act on individual responsibility, but must meet together and organize as a Board of Deacons. They should appoint a Moderator, a Clerk and a Treasurer, attend to their business in an orderly way, determine methods for searching out the poor, visiting the sick, obtaining work and relieving the distressed. They should consider the cases brought before them, and determine how to answer their applications. They should keep full records and accounts of money received and distributed, and at certain times present them to Session for approval. If the management of the temporal affairs is also committed to them, they should keep a separate account of property and moneys of the congregation.

Often the members of Session are expected to be present at the Deacons' meeting, to advise, but not to vote.²⁷ The Southern Presbyterian Church declares that one of the duties of the Session is "to examine the records of the proceedings of the Deacons."²⁸

What are Deacons in other churches ?

In the Episcopal Church, Deacons are Ministers in the lowest order.²⁹

In the Congregational Church they are spiritual officers. They have no care of the poor; they are elected by the church, but are not ordained; they, with the Pastor, form the Prudential Committee, who take the oversight of the communicants, and report to the church whatever may require their action; they assist the Pastor in the sacrament.

In the Baptist Church, which is Congregational in polity, they are sometimes ordained with the laying on of hands.

In the Methodist Church the Deacons hold much the same office as in the Episcopal Church.

In the Reformed (Dutch) Church the Deacons do not differ from ours.

In the Lutheran Church they correspond to our Deacons, except that they assist the Pastor at the Lord's table, render all necessary service at public worship, see that the Pastor receives proper salary and administer the temporal affairs of the church.³⁰

²⁵ *Presbyterian Digest*, p. 119.

²⁶ *Assembly's Minutes 1874*, p. 84, and *1877*, p. 516.

²⁷ See above. *Form of Government*, ch. ix., sect. viii.; cli. x., sect. ix.; ch. xi., sect. vi.; chs. xix. and xx.

²⁸ *Book of Church Order*, ch. v., sect. iii., sub-sect, v.

²⁹ See Hodge, *Presbyterian Law*, p. 358.

³⁰ *Formula of Government*, ch. iii., sect. vi.