

The Model Church by G.C. Brewer

CHAPTER VII.

The Diaconate.

If we confine our study of the diaconate to the English version of the New Testament, our information on that subject is likely to be rather fragmentary and unsatisfactory; for though we find the deacons distinctly mentioned as a special class of servants in the church and though there are some very strict requirements given for those who would serve as deacons, we are not given any undisputed history of their origin and but little information with regard to their functions. We are accustomed to gain a great deal of information from the sixth chapter of the Acts, but we must remember that those seven who were appointed to see that the Hellenistic widows were not deprived of their share in the "daily ministrations" are nowhere called "deacons" in the English Scriptures. The Greek word which designates them is *diakonos*, and it is afterwards employed to designate those who were appointed to the diaconate; but its primary meaning was simply "minister," "servant," or "attendant," and it is used many times in the New Testament to designate any servant--used without any technical or official signification whatever. It is even applied to the Christ in Rom. 15:8. Paul says Christ "was made the minister [*diakonos*] of circumcision." The same apostle several times calls himself a "minister" (*diakonos*) of God. (See 2 Cor. 6:4; Eph. 3:7.) It is difficult, therefore, to determine whether the seven were the same officers or servants, if you prefer it, mentioned by Paul in Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8. The word *diakonos* occurs some thirty times in the New Testament, and only about four times is it used as an official designation. In point of time the earliest mention of deacons as officers or appointed servants in the church is found in the salutation of the Epistle to the Philippians (unless we consider Phoebe an officer in the church, which is probable, but not certain). A little later in the history of the church we find Paul giving Timothy careful instructions as to the qualifications of the men who were to be appointed to the diaconate. It is certain, however, from these references, that the service of deacons was already established when these Epistles were written. How long it had been established, we cannot definitely determine.

It is pretty generally assumed that the ministry of deacons began with the appointment of the seven at Jerusalem, but this is not undisputed. Some very reputable scholars insist that an order of deacons had existed in the church even before that time. As the word *presbuteros* means more than simply elderly or aged, likewise the word *neoteris* means more than younger in years, or youthful. It is thought, therefore, that the elder and the younger in the infant church were the same class of servants who were afterwards called the "bishops" and the "deacons." The young men mentioned in Acts 5:6-10, who attended to the burying of Ananias and Sapphira, are by some supposed to be the deacons. It is also thought by some Bible scholars that the diaconate, like the eldership, was borrowed from the Jewish institutions. They claim

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that there was a class of servants or attendants in the synagogue that corresponded to the deacons in the Christian church. The twentieth verse of the fourth chapter of Luke is used to support this inference. The word for "attendant" in that verse is synonymous with *diakonos*, and, of course, may designate any servant or a special class of servants. Every man is left free to form his own opinion about the meaning of the word in this verse, and no one can say definitely that he is right and the other man is wrong.

We are practically shut up to one passage of scripture in the study of the service of deacons. Let us, therefore, quote it in full: "Deacons in like manner must be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless. Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have served well as deacons gain to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." (1 Tim. 3:8-13.)

From this passage we learn that those who would serve as deacons must possess the following qualifications:

1. They must be grave, or sober-minded.
2. Not double-tongued, or two-faced.
3. Not given to much wine.
4. Not greedy of filthy lucre--no lover of money.
5. They must hold the mystery of faith in a pure conscience.
6. The husband of one wife.
7. Ruling well their own houses.

From these requirements we would naturally suppose that the deacon's work is of some importance. They are not as numerous as those stipulated for the elders; but they embrace the most important ones, except the deacons are not required to be "apt to teach." It has been observed by some one that the deacons were to hold the mystery of faith, while the elders were to be able to impart it to others. They must be sound in the faith, but the elders must also have an aptitude for teaching. We rather think this qualification required the deacons conscientiously to remain sound in the faith, not to waver for fear or favor.

We can gain but little information from this passage on the functions of the deacons. Some have supposed that the deacons were "sort of" junior elders; that those who serve well as deacons gain to themselves a good step or degree and may be promoted to the eldership; and it is true that the elders were chosen from among the

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deacons in the churches of the second century. This, however, seems to have been the hierarchy in embryo, and we suspect the idea was born after the apostolic day. The duties of the bishops and deacons were, no doubt, different; but the degrees of rank and the importance of work is just the estimation of men. Some things that God has said may appear to us to be more important than some other of his commands, but we do not know that we are privileged to pronounce them so. However much the functions of the deacons may differ from those of the elders, it is impossible, for them to please God and not perform their functions. Hence it is just as necessary that they serve faithfully as *deacons* as that the elders serve as *elders*. Let us notice the expression, "those who have served well as deacons." "Have served as deacons" is all one word in the Greek. It is *diakonesantes*, and it is translated by Dr. MacKnight, by Conybeare and Howson, by "Living Oracles," by Bloomfield, by George Ricker Berry, and by the King James translators thus: "Used the office of a deacon" or "performed the office of a deacon." Of course the rendering of the Revised Version does not differ from these in meaning, but it gives those whose righteous souls are vexed by the word "office" an opportunity to make a distinction where there is no difference. The expression, "those who serve well as deacons," must mean those who serve well in the position of deacons, or in the capacity of deacons, or in the office of deacons. The word might be translated "those who serve well as servants," but that would be but little better than Mr. William ("Billy") Sunday's "deacons who would not deac."

Whatever translation we use, we will get the idea that there were certain duties belonging to the deacons, and those who faithfully discharged them would be honored for it. Now the question that concerns us most is: What are those duties? It is generally agreed that it was the work of the deacons to look after the temporal affairs of the church, while the elders overlooked its spiritual affairs. It would be the duty of the deacons in the present-day congregation to see to the lighting, heating, cleaning up, and maintaining the church building; to usher the crowds auto ventilate the auditorium; to see that the emblems are prepared for the Lord's table; to always have a baptistery ready, whether indoors or out; and to care for the poor of the congregation--relieve their wants from the church treasury. All cases of need should be reported to the deacons. The care of the poor seems to have been the chief work of the deacons in the early church.

Of course it is doubtful whether the New Testament deacons did all the things named above, for they had no church houses to keep repaired or janitors to jog in those days. However, they looked after all the temporal affairs that were necessary. All the things mentioned above must be done to-day in order to have system, comfort, and decency; and it seems that the deacons should attend to such matters.

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It is a disputed point as to whether there was an order of deaconesses in the New Testament church, and there is probably no way definitely to decide the question. There is, however, some evidence in favor of the idea. But before we consider the evidence, let us remove any forebodings of heresy by observing that there is nothing in the work that belongs to the deacons that a woman cannot do consistently with the inhibitions laid upon her by the Scriptures. On the contrary, there is a part of the work that women seem eminently better adapted to than men. In our present-day congregations the good women do most of this work, whether we call them "deaconesses" or something else or nothing.

The strongest indication that there were deaconesses in the early church is the language of 1 Tim. 3:11. Right in the midst of his instructions concerning deacons the apostle says: "Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things." "Women!" What women? Why, those who are appointed to the diaconate. "In like manner"--the same as the men who are appointed. But we are reminded that the Authorized Version reads: "Even so must their wives, etc." But in the Greek there is simply the one word *gunaikos*, which may mean either wives or women. To translate it "*their* wives," and thus make it apply to the wives of the deacons only, is a mistake, evidently. If it is rendered "wives in like manner," etc., it would then either apply to all Christian wives or to the wives of both the bishops and deacons. But it would seem contrary to all reason to suppose that the apostle would insert a general remark concerning Christian wives in the midst of his instructions concerning church officers and it would seem strange that the apostle had omitted to say anything concerning the wives of the bishops both in this chapter and in his letter to Titus and yet require so much of a deacon's wife. Again, it would be rather awkward to place the qualifications of the wives of bishops and deacons right in the middle of the requirements of those who should be appointed to the diaconate. The Revised Version gives us the best translation, decidedly. "Women in like manner"--this might be understood to mean all Christian women, but the same reason for not making it apply to all wives would stand against that interpretation also. Why should the apostle throw in a general remark about women in his instructions about deacons?

If it is true that the churches had deaconesses in them, we would most naturally understand Phoebe to be a deaconess and not simply a servant. Indeed, the language concerning her seems to sustain the idea. She was a servant or deaconess of the *church* at Cenchrea, and not a servant of Paul or of the church at Rome in carrying the letter from him to them, as some have supposed. She had succored many, and that is the very work that deacons are appointed to do.

We need women now to do such service. Frequently women and girls who are to be baptized do not know how to prepare for the ordinance. Some mothers who seem to have more sentiment than judgment want their daughters to be dressed in white,

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which color is all right if the material is proper; but it is usually muslin or some other sort of filmy, clinging material. A good, sensible, motherly woman could be of great service in helping such persons prepare for baptism. Again, the greater number of cases of needy poor are among the widows and orphans; and when they are self-respecting and inclined to be proud, they would much more readily and with less embarrassment tell their needs to a good, kind, motherly woman than they would to a man. Furthermore, if a man manifests too great interest in such cases, the evil minds and long tongues of the community may seize the opportunity to damage the church. Let not your good be evil spoken of and do not give place to the devil. To pure minded persons what is suggested may seem utterly unthinkable, but experience will teach them. "We are not ignorant of his [the devil's] devices."

Whether women are called "deaconesses" or "servants," and whether they are appointed or not appointed, there is much for them to do in the Lord's cause, and there is greater need for women to be "teachers of that which is good" in the present day than ever before in the history of our country. O, how the young women of this age need to be taught the very things Paul tells the elderly women to teach! (Tit. 2:3, 4.)

It is not necessary to say that the deacons were appointed in the same way that elders were. If we understand that Stephen and his six companions were appointed to the diaconate, we have an apostolic example of how the appointing was done. From Paul we learn that the deacons must first be proved and then appointed.

If there were deaconesses, we would suppose they were appointed in the same way. We see no reason for thinking they would not be so appointed. If the laying on of hands was for the purpose of imparting a spiritual gift, the women, no doubt, received the gifts also. There were women in the New Testament who had spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of prophecy.

It has been said that the fact that Paul said, "Let deacons be husbands of one wife," shows that there were no women in the diaconate; but that is fallacious. The word that designates a deaconess is of different form and gender in the Greek as in the English. What is said, therefore, about a deacon would not always apply to a deaconess. No Jew ever had a husband, but that doesn't mean that no Jewess ever had a husband. So the question cannot be settled by that point.

So far as any objection we have ever heard applies, there is no wrong in supposing that there were deaconesses in the early church, though there is no definite proof for the claim.

However this may all be, we know the qualifications of a deacon and we know what his work is. We also know the importance of such work. Let not the disputed

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points hinder the work, therefore. Learn all you can and *do all you learn*, but leave that which is not clear to the Lord.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. When do we first read of deacons?
2. Do you think this order of servants was borrowed from the synagogue?
3. What are the qualifications of deacons?
4. What is the work of deacons?
5. If it is the duty of the deacons to look after the temporal affairs of the church, make a list of the things that they should attend to. Do your deacons do these things?
6. Can women scripturally do the things you have listed?
7. Name some things that women can do and should do.
8. Why can women care for the poor better than men can?
9. Can you name any women who are mentioned in the New Testament as faithful servants of God and worthy laborers in his cause? (See Acts 21:9; Rom. 16:1-7, 12, 15; Phil. 4:2, 3.)
10. Debate: "Resolved, That the New Testament churches had women appointed as deaconesses in their membership."

AFFIRMATIVE.

NEGATIVE.

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NOTE.--Let the teacher select four of the best-informed members of the class, whether men or boys, and let them discuss this question. It will quicken the interest of the whole class, and will cause the disputants to study the whole subject of the diaconate more diligently. Suggest that they should consult the Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, etc., freely; but impress them with the fact that these are not infallible. They will see that also from the lack of agreement.