
THE SUPPOSED DEACONS.

ACTS vi. 1-6.

WERE the deacons secular or spiritual officers? Some affirm the first; others, that their functions were both secular and spiritual. What says the record? Up to this time, no such office as deacon, was known in the Christian Church. What occasioned it? Luke

informs us, that the increase of numbers in the Church, was not accompanied with a correspondent increase of spirituality. Amid the flame of prosperity, was seen the smoke of selfishness and discontent: amid the sound of rejoicing, arose "a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations." Communism had been introduced, under the influence of the warm feelings of the heart, without waiting to consider, to think, to reason, and they were now paying the penalty of their error. The human race is incapable of free love and a community of goods: family and property are indispensables, necessities. The first Christians did not, could not, fall into the error of free love; but they did have "all things in common," *Acts* ii. 44; and they were now experiencing the evil of that plan. It gave sore dissatisfaction, and led to a disturbance of their harmony.

Let us endeavor to discover why this murmuring disturbed the apostles. These had been selected by the Lord and empowered by the Holy Ghost, to testify that Jesus was the Christ, predicted in the Holy Oracles; as demonstrated by his dying for our sins, and rising for our righteousness. They were not lords, but brethren; as the hasty Peter indicates in his address, *ch.* i. 16, "Men and brethren:" men (*andres*) being merely an indication of respect, and having the force of an adjective, as though it had been translated "respected brethren." In that day, they were "all brethren;" until, after Pentecost, when the "eleven" (*ch.* ii. 14) commenced their testimony, and amid their amazing success, the crowds of converts seeing them prominent and the speakers, naturally mistook them for rulers; the awakened doubtless consulting them for needed items of instruction, precisely as in the case of awakened persons now, who invariably seek out the

instruments of their conviction, to aid them in their conversion. The apostles and their hearers were men; as the ministers of the gospel now and their hearers are men: but it really seems necessary that we be reminded of such facts occasionally now, as Peter thought it needful to call attention to well known matters then, stirring up their "pure minds by way of remembrance."

Looking then, in a common sense way, at the apostles as men, successful men, we trace them along the record, to *ch.* ii. 41-47, where surrounded by the one hundred and twenty, and the three thousand just converted, the fruits of their first testimony, "fear came upon every soul: and many signs and wonders were done by the apostles (which signs and wonders were by no means their exclusive function). And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, as every one had need. And they, (the apostles) * * * having favor with all the people." Soon occurs the miracle of healing the lame man, "at the gate of the temple which is called beautiful;" occasioning a large running together of the astonished people, to whom Peter preached the resurrection with the result, that many believed, "and the number of the men was about five thousand." *Ch.* iv. 4. "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace (*charis*, favor, and both divine and human: here, human, as in *ch.* ii. 47, where it is rendered "favor") was upon them all (the apostles). *Ch.* iv. 33. Then, "as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet," etc. At first, as we have seen, *ch.* ii. 45, when they sold their property, they distributed the proceeds with their own hands: now, every one is

anxious to exhibit his respect for the apostles ; who presently attained such popularity, that "of the rest durst no man join himself unto them : but the people magnified them." *Ch.* v. 13. No one dared to act as an associate, a peer, an equal, with the apostles ; not even one of the one hundred and twenty ; for the admiration of the people had now lifted the " witnesses," into something like lords ; and given them other powers, than those conferred on them by the Holy Ghost. Therefore it was, that this neglect of the Grecian widows, was murmured into their ears, as being a defect in their administration. They had allowed the money to be laid down at their feet ; and now they were paying for their mistake.

" Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren (not now *andres adelphoi*, " respected brethren, " as in *ch.* i. 16), 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. And the saying pleased the whole multitude : and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch : whom they set before the apostles : and when they had prayed they laid their hands upon them." *Acts* vi.

Here we have the whole transaction. As one result of their inordinate popularity, the apostles had been honored by having been made treasurers ; had discovered that the duties pertinent to this position interfered with their preaching ; proposed to the " multitude of the disciples " to resign those embarrassing functions, in favor of seven men of proper qualifications, chosen

from among, and by, themselves; to which the assent was unanimous; and the affair was so arranged.

“It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.” Then, to serve tables, the office of the seven, was incompatible with “the ministry of the word.” It was for this very reason, that the apostles refused such service, and proposed that others should be appointed “over this business,” that they might not be hindered in “the ministry of the word.” Indeed they spoke as though there were a necessity for leaving the word of God, if they should have to do what the seven were appointed to do. It is as plain as anything can be, that in this interesting passage, where we have the why and the how of the institution of the seven, there is not an item favoring the idea of the institution of an order of ministers of the word; but both particulars and sum decide distinctly, and unequivocally, that the one business over which the seven were appointed, was to “serve tables,” to attend to “the daily ministration,” in which the Grecian widows were said to have been “neglected.” No one can successfully dispute this. It is as plain a narrative of facts as can be produced. Dr. Clarke among his many excellent criticisms on the place, says, “At present, the office for which the seven deacons were appointed, is, in the church of England, filled by the church-wardens and overseers of the poor; in other churches and religious societies, by elders, stewards, etc., chosen by the people, and appointed by the minister.” The Dr. says “the seven deacons,” as if it were an expression of Luke: but he no where mentions “the seven deacons,” never going beyond “the seven:” and so far as that but once, *ch.* xxi. 8. The word *diakonos*, deacon, is never used by Luke, either in the Gospel or The Acts. It was by no means a favorite word with him, to whom alone we are indebted for our knowledge of the “seven

men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom," appointed over "this business," of serving tables, which the apostles declared incompatible with "the ministry of the word."

But it is said that the high qualifications required, are only consistent with an order of "the ministry of the word." It would seem unnecessary to do more, than to reiterate that the duties of the seven were incompatible with "the ministry of the word." But waving this sufficient reply, let us examine these qualifications. First, of "honest report," all this is expressed by the one Greek word *marturoumenous*, well spoken of, being of good reputation. This characteristic is really necessary, for so high an office as "the ministry of the word; but by no means exclusively: as it is an indispensable requisite for any social trust. Secondly, "full of the Holy Ghost," which we also admit to be a *sine qua non*, in a minister of the gospel; but, again, not exclusively: for when Paul exhorts the whole Church at Ephesus, to be "filled with the Spirit," (*Eph. v. 18.*) no one imagines that he is wishing them, men, women, and children, to apply for admission into the diaconate, the first, initial, order (as some suppose) of the Christian ministry. To appease and satisfy those Grecian murmurers, would require all the patient love of God and man, that the Holy Ghost sheds abroad in the believer's heart. *Rom. v. 5.* Thirdly, "wisdom:" required among the qualifications of a candidate for "the ministry of the word; but, yet, not for that exclusively. Surely, the duties to which these men were to be appointed, would require a great degree of wisdom. Thus then, as is clear, the seven with these high qualifications, good reputation, full of the Holy Ghost, full of wisdom, were by no means too well fitted, for the service to be assigned to them. To put an end to the existing dissatisfaction,

and to prevent its recurrence, would require great ability, rich mental and spiritual endowment. It should be noticed, too, that one of the oldest codices, the Codex Sinaiticus, omits the second qualification, reading instead of "full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom," "full of the spirit of wisdom;" i. e. full of a wise spirit. But we have argued upon the admission of the three qualifications; as we accept the common reading.

Again, it is urged that they did preach. Of two of them, this is said to be certain; and it is reasonable, to infer the same of the rest. Stephen is adduced as an instance of preaching by one of the seven. This holy, devout, gifted man was scarcely appointed, before his active goodness and abundant spiritual endowments, brought him into such prominence, that "there arose certain of the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen." *Ch.* vi. 9. Nothing is said here of preaching. This good man "did great wonders and miracles among the people;" and a considerable number of the Jews, belonging to various synagogues, probably Paul a Cilician Jew among them, "disputed" with him: though this dispute was not, likely, in the form of preaching. Unable to "resist the wisdom and the spirit" of Stephen's disputation; they excited a tumult; seized him, and brought him before the council; where the suborned witnesses delivered their false testimony against him. "Then said the High Priest, Are these things so? And he said, Respected brethren and fathers (not, men, brethren, and fathers; as though he were addressing three classes), hearken;" etc., defending his life in an appropriate speech. But his speech was of no avail. Their irritation increased to rage;" they gnashed on him with their teeth;" cast him out of the city; murdered him.

There is record of Stephen's disputing with the Libertines, Cyrenians, etc.; and of his earnest and proper defense of his life before the council: but no record of his having preached "the word." Yet we freely admit, that it may be inferred that he did so preach; not because he was one of the seven, though, for the only proper inference from that fact is, that he as a good and faithful officer attended to his duties "in the daily ministration," "serving tables."

In Philip's case there is express record, that he "preached Christ unto them," in a city of Samaria; and also, that he "preached Jesus" unto a high officer of Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who was puzzling himself over a passage in *Isaiah* liii. But he did not preach because he was one of the seven; but because he was a Christian; he had believed in Jesus as the Christ, and felt "the power of his resurrection:" therefore he could, as any Christian of his day could, "tell what great things had been done for him." He had not been ordained, in our sense of that word; but, "he believed, and therefore he spoke." After the death of Stephen, the Jews bent on exterminating the Nazarenes as they called the believers in Jesus, raised so great a persecution against them; that "they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." Jerusalem was clear of them, with this small exception: the apostles alone remained. "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching (*euaggelizomenoi*) the word." Now since the ascension, hands had been laid upon no one except "the seven," who had been especially selected for a work, that was unsuitable to those engaged in "the ministry of the word;" and yet here we have the record that "they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching (*euaggelizomenoi*) the word." "They" signifies all the thousands of Christians at Jerusalem,

except the apostles: all these were *evangelizing* everywhere: not remaining at any place, but continuing their flight from place to place; like David and his six hundred fleeing from their Saul and his forces; "they went whithersoever they could go:" thousands of evangelists swarming over the land, not one of whom carried with him any ecclesiastical authority to evangelize. Dr. Whedon, whose Commentary should have a place in every Christian's library, says, on the passage, "These dispersed Christians are, every man, an itinerant preacher! They wait for no 'holy orders' forsooth; ask no bishop's permit to hold prayer-meetings, and do not refuse to exhort or preach because they have received no license. Work is better than formal machinery."

No ordaining of preachers is in the record; but thousands of preachers; among those thousands, Philip is found: driven from Jerusalem and his "tables," he flees before the "great persecution," and, everywhere he goes, "preaches Christ unto them." It would seem very singular, if his having been set apart to "serve tables," gave him authority to preach; and yet the preaching of the thousands of his associates without the least semblance of hesitation, or hint of impropriety, or irregularity, demonstrating the utter uselessness of the laying on hands, as conveying authority to preach. At a later day, it needed a miracle, to get Peter into a gentile's house to preach the gospel there: but these thousands, fleeing for their lives, needed no miracle, laying on hands, Church authority for preaching the word to Jews; and they preached whithersoever they went. Philip did the same: and nearly thirty years afterward, as Luke writes, "we that were of Paul's company * * * came unto Cæsarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist (*euaggelistou*), which was (one) of the seven, and abode with him." *Ch. xxi. 8.* Philip

was one of "the seven," which fact gave him no authority to preach; but he was also one of "the evangelists" (*euaggelizomenoi*, *ch.* viii. 4), and had the same authority as they, which was universal in the company of believers: believing being the requisite for speaking, preaching; *II Cor.* iv. 13.

Still, there remains the question, If the seven were not intended to be a clerical order, why were they ordained? Here we have the assumption, that the laying on hands, was then, as now, an induction into a clerical order; of which there is no Scriptural proof whatever. According to the hypothesis that Matthias really was made an apostle, then, this being the first induction into an order, in the Christian Church, we look for the indispensable laying on hands, and see nothing of the kind. "Must one be ordained (*genesthai*, be, become):" "and they appointed (*esteesan*, stood them) two;" "and the lot fell upon Matthias:" "and he was numbered with (*sugkatepseephisthee*, reckoned among, numbered with, calculated with) the eleven apostles:" no eye, though keen as "the vulture's," can see or imagine any hand here, but that of Luke recording the incident in its entire clearness and simplicity. And, yet, if laying on hands is the induction to an order, as this was the first induction attempted, and needed every item of force that could be given it; it is not supposable that the apostles and the one hundred and twenty others would have omitted an essential ceremony; and equally is it unsupposable, that had the ceremony been performed, Luke would have omitted it from his detailed account. He mentions the advice of Peter, founded upon the Psalms, relative to the qualifications necessary, the appointing of two candidates, the giving forth of the lots, the falling of the lot on Matthias, his being numbered with the eleven apostles: but, not a word of laying on hands, the grand confirmatory act, as supposed:

indeed the word hand does not occur in the narration, occupying nearly half of the first chapter. No induction into this divinely constituted order by laying on hands: and, so, we may safely conclude, it was not considered a necessary ceremony; for if necessary at any time, it was chiefly so here.

In the case of Saul, "they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And Ananias putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost." And certain prophets and teachers, at Antioch, when they had fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, sent Saul and Barnabas away, separated unto the work to which "the Holy Ghost had called them:" but not one of these acts was induction into an order; either apostolic or any other. In the laying on hands in the last instance we see the formal authorizing of Saul, to go upon a mission: an old-fashioned Hebrew form of invoking a blessing, and inferring inferiority on the part of the one blessed; *Heb.* vii. 7. And why was not the laying on hands, in the case of the seven, a formal separation of them to the work unto which they had been chosen? It is by far the more likely view of the case. No easy task had been allotted them, and the apostles and brethren prayed, laid hands on them, and sent them to their work of serving tables.

Among Methodists, in this country, the duties of "the seven" are performed by the Stewards: by far more important officers, too, than they are generally esteemed to be. Stewards of good report, filled with the Holy Ghost and with wisdom, are a choice blessing to any congregation, and are worthy of high esteem and grateful love. Few congregations, if any, prosper without competent Stewards. Where the pastor is required "to serve tables," like the apostles, he must "leave the word of

God ;" at the risk, too, of being rated as "a money preacher ;" using the pulpit as a financial agency or convenience. But, whether the Stewards should be called Deacons, is not so clear ; for in all the New Testament, church officers called deacons are mentioned but three times, and by no writer except Paul. These few instances are—1, *Phil.* i. 1, " Paul * * * to all the saints * * * with the bishops and deacons," etc. ; 2, *I Tim.* iii. 8, " Likewise the deacons grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre ; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience." Then the 3, at the 12th verse, " Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife," etc. This is the sum total of the mentioning of these church officers in the New Testament. In The Acts, the only inspired Church History, the word deacon does not occur. The Greek word *diakonos* is used twenty-nine times, including the just mentioned three instances ; and except in these, it is never rendered " deacon," but always " servant," or " minister," which latter is an anglicized Latin word meaning " servant ;" so that, in fact, " servant " is the invariable rendering of the word, except in three out of the twenty-nine cases. This fact is of great weight. Our translators, to whom we are all so much indebted, and of whom any one speaking lightly but betrays the scantiness of his own information ; were favorable enough to hierarchy, and were not likely to be biased against it in their rendering. Yet here are the facts : *diakonos* occurs in all the N. T. twenty-nine times ; and in only three of these do they render it " deacon ;" while in every other instance they render it " servant " or " minister ;" and both these words we get from the Latin, differing not at all, except in the scales of acute criticism. Within this citation from *I Tim.* iii. 8-13, we have the rendering " And let these also first be proved ; then let them use the office of a deacon," etc. The whole latter

clause, "let them use the office of a deacon," is the rendering of a single Greek verb, *diakoneitoosan*, signifying "let them serve." And so, at *ver.* 13, "For they that have used the office of a deacon well, purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." Here, also, a large phrase, "that have used the office of a deacon," is the rendering of a participle, *diakoneesantes*, from the same verb as above, the participle signifying "having served." These examples show, that our translators were not averse to bringing in deacons when at all allowable; while their integrity held them to a general accuracy of rendering the word under examination.

The corresponding verb, *diakoneoo*, is used thirty-four times, always rendered by one of the synonymous words "minister," "serve," "administer," except in the two instances above cited from *I Tim.* iii. 10, 13. The related noun, *diakonia*, signifying the *state*, or *function*, of the *diakonos*, is to be found in the N. T. thirty-three times, and rendered also by synonymous words, such as "serving," "ministry," "ministration," "administration," "ministering," "service;" except in two cases, *Acts* xi. 29, where it is rendered "relief;" *Rom.* xi. 13, "office." In the former a ministration, a service of supply "unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea," was determined on by the Antiochian Christians; and the ministration, the service, the *diakonia*, was rendered, *relief*. In the latter, the citation, *Rom.* xi. 13, "— inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify (*doxazoo*) mine office, *teen diakonian mou*." This is all plain enough, if "ministry," "service," or some such word be substituted for "office:" and plain enough as it is, if we give to "office" the sense of one of the synonyms, as above: but what could we do with "diaconate," here, as the meaning of *diakonian*? Was the apostolate, after all, nothing more than a diaconate, the office

of an inferior, the most inferior order of the clergy? Those inclining to High Church principles, as well as all N. T. students, will be in favor of our rendering "ministry," "service," as a substitute for "office," or "diaconate." It is evident, that "deacons" make but little show in N. T. affairs, or history. They do better in the post-apostolic ages and writings; increasing as they come down through the centuries, like a river, which starting from some small spring at the foot of a mountain, enlarges from the influx of numerous tributaries; retaining its name as it flows on in its proud magnitude. Could the mountain get down there where the river has widened out as far as its very wide apart banks will allow, and swollen into a grand channel of commerce; the wondering mass of earth, rock and forest would identify, in all that prodigious volume of water, but the quantum of a thin rivulet that came from the obscure opening at its own base. A handful of snow rolled along, gathers to itself a great bulk; and the original little ball is soon lost out of sight. Could its identity be preserved, and the mass could be unrolled; it would be amusing to look upon the insignificant particle, around which such a showy mass had been collected.

The word "Steward" makes a better exhibit. As the rendering of *epitropos*, it appears twice in our Eng. Ver. of the N. T.; and of *oikonomos*, eight times. But in no instance does it appear as the title of a church officer. So that deacon, after all, is at least more churchly in sound, but not sufficiently so to change the title of our Stewards. Would they but efficiently occupy their very important position, they would be such a blessing to the Church, that they might well be allowed to assume the title of Cardinal, if they desired so to do. They would be of much more value to us than the gentlemen with red hats.