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Circular Letter.

For the Christian Messenger.

THE DIACONATE.

THE CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE NOVA SCOTIA WESTERN BAPTIST ASSOCIATION TO THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCHES OF WHICH IT IS COMPOSED.

Published by request of the Association.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,—

We address you on the subject of diaconal service in the churches. Our object is to suggest the enlargement of the sphere of that service in two directions. First, in regard to the duties to be discharged. Second, in respect to the persons to be chosen.

I. WITH REFERENCE TO THE DUTIES TO BE DISCHARGED.

The duties of deacons, as recognized at present, are to care for the church poor and to assist at the administration of the Lord's Supper. As the possessors of the best gifts, they are also sometimes accorded by the tacit consent or by the votes of their brethren leadership in the social exercises and executive work of the church. We suggest the choice, appointment and recognition of deacons for the express purpose of their overseeing as an additional service and by virtue of their office the financial affairs of the churches.

1. We assign as a fundamental reason for this suggestion its Scriptural character. From the account of the original institution of the diaconate, given in Acts, we learn that the partial and temporary communism of the church in its Pentecostal days caused its first financial cares. We find, also, that the office of deacon was at once provided by divine legislation to prevent these financial burdens from resting permanently upon the apostles. The reason assigned was that they might give themselves "wholly to prayer and to the ministry of the word" which it was not meet that they should leave. The diaconal office was, we thus see, instituted to exercise a needed and official care for the temporalities of the church in order that the apostles, freed from responsibility and labor in this department of church work, might devote themselves exclusively to their spiritual functions. The cause of this action was local and temporary, but the need provided for is universal and perpetual. The church always needs devoted and able financial managers,—always needs consecrated, efficient pastors. The Divine Legislator ordained the two offices (bishops and deacons) to perform distinct, equally needed, and correlative functions in the church. It follows, therefore, that as the diaconal office was designed to be as permanent as the pastoral, it was also intended to so adapt itself to the varying circumstances of the churches as to answer the purpose of its first institution throughout all time. It further follows that the churches should not only theoretically but practically so large the sphere of the diaconate as to embrace the general management of all the financial affairs of the churches, and that they should choose and ordain men thereto with a view to their fitness for this service. The duty is the more manifest, when it is considered that the official labors of the diaconate are now obviously inadequate to demand the high qualifications and solemn setting apart upon which the churches now insist, while onerous and important financial duties must be relegated to other special officers, or discharged by pastors to the detriment of their peculiar work.

These inferences are confirmed by a consideration of the qualifications which the New Testament requires of those chosen for the important and permanent office of deacon. The brethren were and are enjoined to seek out men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith. These were and are to be solemnly set apart to their work. Now, while admitting that high gifts are required for the right discharge of the present duties of the diaconate, it nevertheless follows that while the churches insist upon the scriptural standard of qualification being maintained, they should also require services of the kind and degree while such qualifications presuppose, such services as will secure the object of the original institution of the office. Men of pre-eminent sanctity, honesty and wisdom were then chosen to perform a laborious service for the purpose of meeting a pressing want of the church. By a parity of reasoning, the men of whom like spiritual and mental endowments are now required should perform as heavy a work and meet the like financial exigencies of the church of to-day. A great need of the churches now is the efficient management of their financial affairs by permanent officers, spiritually and experimentally qualified to perform the service for which they are chosen. Officers of this character and these qualifications are provided in the diaconate of the New Testament economy. The inference is obvious that these duties should be performed and these ends subserved by them.

The Manual of the churches, the New Testament, gives but little exact information as to the particular duties discharged by deacons in the later days of the Apostles. Nevertheless, we gather from Paul's pastoral epistles to Timothy, additional support for the view presented. The temporal circumstances of the church at Ephesus, Timothy's charge, were different from those of the church at Jerusalem. Neither large numbers, nor a "daily ministration," were there to burden, but it was necessary to meet other temporal responsibilities. Timothy was therefore exhorted to give himself wholly to a teacher's and a pastor's work, and that he might do so, was instructed to ordain men of christian truthfulness, sobriety, liberality and conscientiousness, qualities practically implied in the characteristics of deacons more spiritually delineated in the Acts, to perform diaconal duties. What conclusion more apparent than that they were to have oversight of the contributing and distributing of the churches, and relieve Timothy from this care. A fuller knowledge of the practice of apostolic churches would doubtless further confirm, by detailed and exhaustive examples, the fact which the spirit and object of New Testament legislation in the matter of the diaconate, so clearly indicates, that the office was designed to manage the temporalities of the churches. But we are given by inspiration and only the general organism for the churches, with the functions and the purposes to be fulfilled by each part of that organism stated in

general terms, in order doubtless, that the church following the spirit of the divine enactments without violating their letter, might adapt herself freely and well to her varying conditions in all ages.

2. The second series of reasons for the suggestion that the recognized sphere of diaconal service be enlarged, in the actual practice of the churches, are found, as already implied, in the reciprocal needs and relations of the Churches and their officers or servants.

The first of these reasons is found in the mutual requirements of churches and their pastors. The churches ever need public teaching and pastoral care by those who shall bring to that work the highest possible, natural and acquired, spiritual and mental qualifications, and who shall have the fullest possible opportunities of devoting themselves exclusively to the labor of pastors and teachers. This requirement can only be met as ministers have set before them an open door to large spiritual and mental culture and to entire consecration to their special department of effort in the churches of Christ. To be "workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth," and to have in their measure, the Chief Shepherd's care of the flock of God they must "meditate on these things," and "give themselves wholly to them." This is a period of devotion to specialities, there is, consequently, a demand in every department of human activity and thought for that peculiar fitness for every chosen work which an exclusive attention thereto can alone bestow. The christian ministry can obtain the qualifications ensuring pulpit and pastoral success, and use the powers so acquired to such an extent as to meet the wants of the church in the world by no other means than "waiting on their ministry." To enable them to do this the burdens which now, in many cases, consume more or less of their time and power, such as the building of churches, paying church debts, raising monies for local expenses, Missions and Education, in fine, all and every responsibility in matters affecting the temporalities of the church must be laid on others. The same conclusion is reached when the growing tendency to secularize the pulpit is considered. This tendency, not so apparent in Provincial churches as among those of the United States, whose experience we may soon share, is to consider financial abilities and successes as chief or notable indexes of fitness for the ministerial office. Those popular or executive talents which achieve financial success for the individual church are allowed an influence in the choice, valuation, and service of a minister which should be given only to those which fit him to discharge his legitimate duties as a pastor and teacher. The false views and issues and pernicious complications which hence arise to prevent the ministry from fulfilling the Divinely ordained purposes of their office, sufficiently indicate that it is the will and the wisdom of their Great Head that the churches should lay these responsibilities upon other than the past. They should seek out, find and use the qualifications for the performance of such functions in another class of officers. If He has made any specific provision allowing pastors to devote themselves to their work, and at the same time providing for the necessary, and an efficient oversight and conduct of the financial affairs of the churches, and He has undoubtedly done so that provision is in the office of the diaconate.

The second reason for the extension of the deacon's sphere, is that the churches will thereby recognize that the divine lawgiver has made permanent provision for the efficient discharge of all their functions as churches, and that He has furnished them with all the necessary mechanism and offices. The churches find themselves with financial affairs, needing continued and wise management in the interests of the extension of the kingdom of Christ. They will go onward with confidence to assured success, guided by a "thus saith the Lord," when they see plainly that their Master has legislated or them in this important matter, and that he has taught them to search out the most fervent piety conjoined with the highest practical wisdom within the church, and solemnly consecrate it to this service. They will feel that they are perfect church organisms, fitted to discharge every temporal and spiritual function, and that especially in the matter of finances they have a standing, efficient committee of the Lord's own choice and appointment. Thus organized they will enter an era of more systematic effort, an era of fuller development and wiser direction of their financial resources in which they will have greater spiritual blessings and triumphs. Two great and increasing evils will then be avoided. The one is known as the church and society complication, where the world joins with the churches in the management of their finances and consequently controls their movements to a greater or lesser extent. This state of things cannot obtain, when the diaconate so manage the financial affairs of the churches, that the world cannot assume, nor the churches admit that outside intervention is necessary in order that the Church of Christ may have success in its temporal matters. A second evil which this recognition of the diaconate will go far to remove is that of regarding the financial duties and obligations of the church as having less importance than they really possess. When the churches choose and set apart to the financial departments of church work, the greatest spiritual gifts and highest temporal wisdom which they can furnish, they will consider those departments among the most important of its activities. They will no longer sever, to so great an extent, the worship of God in spirit and in truth from the worship of God with the substance, but what He hath joined together will be recognized as correlative services in their practical Church Polity.

The third reason for this suggestion, arising from the relations of the church to its officers, is found in the present aspect of the diaconal question. There is a growing disposition to undervalue the office, to maintain that it was not designed to be permanent and to advocate its abolition on the ground that it is not a peculiarly high, sacred and necessary office of the Christian church. To the honor of our deacons, be it said, that in the discharge of the duties at present asked of them by the churches, they purchase to themselves a good degree; but how conclusively would they vindicate their claims to be considered a vital necessity in the church were their sphere enlarged as has been indicated. Their office would thereby be shown to be imperatively necessary for the proper discharge of the spiritual and temporal work of the church. There could arise no proposal for its abolition; for its holders would perform important and

engrossing labors which would otherwise go undone, fall to pastors or be provided for by temporary appointments in either case to be permanent injury of the cause of Christ.

It has now been shown that the suggestion made is in accordance with the direct and implied meaning of New Testament legislation on this subject,—further, that there are strong reasons for its adoption in the present state and exigencies of the church and its officers. Other confirmatory lines of thought might be followed and possible objections met; our aim however is to suggest rather than to discuss.

II. SECOND WITH REFERENCE TO THE PERSONS TO BE CHOSEN. The second matter with reference to the diaconate, to which your attention is directed is the extension of its sphere with respect to the persons chosen. Now, only male members of the churches are put into this service. We suggest the desirability of choosing suitable females as deaconesses to perform certain diaconal duties.

1. As first and chief reasons for this suggestion, we adduce Scriptural warrant in the practice of the New Testament churches. In 1 Tim. iii. 11. Paul, having previously stated the necessary qualifications of bishops and deacons, proceeds to designate those of deaconesses as well, saying "In like manner women must be grave, not slanderers faithful in all things" True, our version interpreting rather than translating the passage, renders the general term for women, *gunaikas* by "wives" and thus applies it to the wives of deacons. But there are logical and insuperable objections to this; besides, the fact thereby implied that the wives of deacons are mentioned, while those of the more important officer,—the bishop, are not, is conclusive evidence against it. Leading exegetes therefore reject this interpretation and consider the passage as teaching the qualifications and authorizing the appointment of females to an office in the church which they already filled.

Not so decisive, yet strong as collateral evidence is the passage in 1 Tim. v. 3-10, which legislates in regard to the support of widows. The "taking into the number" or choice and enrollment, spoken of in the 9th verse of that chapter, is considered to have been ordered that those so enrolled might perform special services in the church for which the attached characteristics fitted them and which their support obligated them to render. Certainly those qualifications were not demanded of all widows needing help as the condition of its bestowment, while they are peculiarly fitting for deaconesses and accord with those required of them in 1 Tim. iii. 11. Eminent expositors plead this passage as indicating a phase of apostolic practice in the matter of choosing deaconesses.

Still more decisive confirmatory evidence is found in Rom. xvi. 1, 2. There, Phoebe is mentioned as the servant or deaconess of the church at Cenchræ. Paul's commendation of her in sister accord with a character and was performing a service. The fact of her appointment by a *parthenos*—a virgin—disargues the general enrollment of deaconesses at that day.

2. The second reason for suggesting this appointment of females is found in the practice of the churches of earlier and later times. From the earlier and better portions of the apostolic Constitutions in which the term deaconess often occurs, we have in connection with a passage which gives instructions as to the choice qualifications and number of deacons the following words "Let the women be diligent in serving the women both in things belonging to messages, journeys, aids and service." This gives a view of the opinion and practice of the churches in a time immediately succeeding that of the apostles. A little later in Church History comes the letter of Pliny to Trajan in which he mentions two female servants, or deaconesses of the church which he put to torture.

At later periods the Fathers constantly refer to women as "chosen persons" who like the women who assisted Paul, labored together with others in the gospel. The social habits and requirements of the times, as do those of the East to-day, necessitated the setting apart of females to a ministry in things spiritual and temporal, among the sick, poor and strangers of the female portion of the churches and communities,—a ministry which did not conflict with Paul's teaching in Corinthians as to the legitimate sphere of women in the churches. The propriety and scripturalness of having a female diaconate for the discharge of such duties is unquestioned in early church history. The office continued far into the middle ages. At a later day it was recognized in the Congregational Churches of England and the Continent. The Constitution of the earliest churches of that faith and order on this Continent, declared the office to be of New Testament origin and authority and provided therefor.

3. The present needs of the churches seem to indicate that this apostolic institution should be resuscitated in all, but especially in our larger and city churches, there are opportunities for christian usefulness in ministering to the sick and poor, in teaching and general missionary work for which many christian females are pre-eminently fitted. Were this recognized as their sphere and they specially set apart thereto by the church, as regular church-officers their usefulness and power would be increased, while this needed service would be always secured and perpetuated. The Roman Catholic church has found a great need in its religious propagandism and met it by the organization of its sisterhoods, a perversion of the office of the female diaconate,—we may thereby learn a lesson and employ females in the manner that our Lord has directed in christian evangelism. In all the churches, much greatly needed work which it is impossible or burdensome for a pastor to perform, and much even of the work now assigned to deacons, might be done by one or more deaconesses chosen for this service and receiving the moral and, if necessary, the pecuniary support of the church therein.

This matter, also, is commended to the prayerful consideration of the churches. Both suggestions win their attention inasmuch as they relate to the increase and efficiency of the Churches, and because they have for their basis reasons drawn from present experience, and above all from the word of God.

Not the oaks of intellect but the blooms of the heart are twisted into the wreath of fame.

The delicacy of ordinary friendship is such that it cannot endure an impecunious or ragged associate.

Fame is perfume, notoriety is effluvia.