

The Christian Messenger.

A RELIGIOUS AND GENERAL FAMILY NEWSPAPER.

NEW SERIES.
Vol. XXIII., No. 14.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Wednesday, April 6, 1878.

WHOLE SERIES.
Vol. XLII., No. 14.

Religious.

The office of a Deacon.

When our Lord ascended up into heaven, He bestowed upon His people certain spiritual gifts to qualify them for the discharge of special duties in connection with His church. "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some pastors and teachers," Eph. iv. 11. These varied qualifications, in so far as they were needful for the permanent work of the church, were gradually merged into two classes of church officers, or leaders, who are spoken of as bishops, and deacons. This is clear, from the fact that two only (Phil. i. 1); and more especially that in what are called the pastoral epistles—epistles written expressly to give direction as to the rule and conduct of the church—bishops and deacons are the only officers spoken of. To the latter of these we confine our attention in the present paper; and first, we propose to consider—

I. The origin, nature, and design, of a deacon.

The word deacon, like the word minister, signifies a servant. It is used in the first instance, in reference to any kind of service that may be rendered. In this sense, the angels are said to minister to believers. "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister [literally to act as deacons] for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" Heb. i. 14. From the idea of this passage we take an illustration of the general nature and purpose of the office of deacon. The ministry of angels is an individual ministry—they are God's deacons, acting personally, though unperceived, on the heart and life of every true Christian. So the office of a deacon was appointed to be a medium of individual communication with every member of the church, and for the discharge of those private and personal responsibilities, temporal and spiritual, which the church is under to all its members, but which would require too much of the time, or in other ways seriously interfere with the usefulness and efficiency of the public minister of the word. When, and by whom, the office was first appointed, we have no means of knowing—there is no evidence to lead to the conclusion that it either existed or was needed before the day of Pentecost. The way, however, in which it is subsequently spoken of, and the directions and precepts given concerning it, prove that it has the sanction of Divine appointment, and of apostolic authority. Some have thought that the origin of this office is to be found in the election of the Seven Grecians, for the distribution of the church's property, recorded in the sixth chapter of the Acts. But it is to be borne in mind that the duties they had to perform, were but of a temporary character, only lasting so long as the church maintained the custom of having a community of goods; and, that there were others before these Seven who must have been appointed to the office. For in the fourth chapter of Acts, and the thirty-fifth verse, we read of property being deposited with the apostles, and distribution being made to the individual members of the church. Now, it is not likely that the apostles themselves made this distribution, still less that they would be partial and neglectful in the ministrations. Moreover, the complaint was not made against the apostles, but against the Hebrews. Hence it seems likely that there were Hebrew deacons in the church, who distributed this property; perhaps deputed by the apostles so to do. These acted partially in the distribution, to the neglect of the Grecian widows, and murmuring arose in consequence. Whereupon the apostle called the whole church together, and cast upon them the responsibility of electing suitable men for the discharge of this important duty bidding them choose "Seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and of Wisdom." Now, whilst we may regard this incident as special in

its character, and temporary in its purpose, we may still gather from its general spirit, lessons to direct us in judging of the nature and design of the office of a deacon. The same principle which made such an arrangement necessary to meet the circumstances then existing, will apply to the office, as a permanent institution. Accordingly, we infer that the general purpose of the whole deaconal system was to release the public preacher of the Gospel from those private, personal and pecuniary duties and responsibilities which must ever arise where a number of people are banded together in an associate capacity (Acts. vi. 2-4). In the case just referred to, it would seem that the seven brethren were appointed solely for the management of "secular affairs." But the whole spirit of the record, confirmed by the practice of at least Stephen and Philip, teaches us that the office was not confined necessarily to these. Moreover, as the church became more perfectly organized, and developed into a permanent society, other matters of a private and personal nature would require constant attention. Matters of detail would have to be enquired into, concerning individual members, not only in reference to their temporal circumstances, but also in relation to their life, character and conduct. Business arrangements would have to be made, arising out of the associated work of the church; and various other minor matters would demand constant consideration, which if left to the public minister would, to say the least, often divert him from the more serious and important duties of his office. Again, subjects connected with church work, and church discipline, requiring perhaps to be discussed, need to be thought over and deliberated upon, before becoming questions of general conversation in a public meeting of the church; and without assuming any authority, or taking upon itself to form any decision, it is highly desirable that men elected by the church for the management of its general business, should form such a court or council, as may fitly consider and prepare any matter of business to be brought before the whole assembly. In doing so, being men of prudence and piety, they may often prevent questions of trifling import, or of personal character and conduct, from being raised, to the danger of the church's harmony, peace, and usefulness.

What we have thus inferred as to the nature and design of the office of a deacon, from the spirit of the narrative in the sixth chapter of the Acts, and from the subsequent history of the church, is still further confirmed by the qualifications for the office laid down by the apostle Paul, in his epistle to Timothy; some of which would be altogether unnecessary, if the office were only instituted for mere secular purposes. It by no means invalidates the general principle, if each deacon should take a distinct department of work. Hence, every man who serves the church by her appointment, in any of her agencies, becomes practically a deacon. It may be added, in concluding this part of the subject, that whatever necessity for this office existed in the early days of the church's history, is greatly increased as the church progresses. Her more complete organization, and her more extended sphere of operation, devolve upon her greater and more varied labour and responsibility. The many institutions and societies, which call for the sympathy and active support of Christian churches, necessitates the laying of plans and making arrangements, which can only be done through some such instrumentality as that of the deaconate. And we may not unfairly ask, if inspired apostles needed such auxiliary to their labours, when their work was mainly to go from place to place, proclaiming the elementary facts and truths of the Gospel; how much more do uninspired ministers in the present day, who are expected to bring forth continually out of the treasury of the gospel things new as well as old, and to illustrate and enforce the whole order of divine truth, need the help, sym-

pathy and encouragement, which come from a well sustained deaconate. And if the church, in its infancy, when possessed of miraculous powers and apostolic authority, was incomplete without this office, how much more dependent is she upon it now that her mission is more elaborate, and her work more extensive; and now that she is left alone to the development and growth of those resources and powers which, from within herself, must be called forth, under the guidance of the Divine Spirit, for her own progress and establishment, and for the conversion of the world to Christ.—*Scottish Baptist Magazine.*

For the Christian Messenger.
Church Discipline.

BY REV. H. BOOL.

Read at the Ministerial Conference of Colchester and Cumberland, and published by special request.

The importance of this subject inspires the wish that its consideration had been entrusted to an able hand. That I have undertaken to write on so difficult and delicate a matter, arises from my anxiety to serve the interests of religion, and meet the wishes of my brethren. It has been said that a physician should have an eagle's eye, a lion's heart, and a lady's hand. Such are the qualifications of all who would touch the subject of Christian discipline. We need a clear perception of the wounds which sometimes rankle in the professing church; with a combination of courage and tenderness to enable us to trust them properly.

It is remarkable that this subject is constantly agitating peoples' minds; and it is curious that in churches where discipline seems to have died out, the ghost of the thing haunts the minds of many a day and night.

Consistent and inconsistent members of our churches, alike, know that discipline should be exercised; and in many instances conscience makes more trouble within the breast than the cutting off a right hand or the plucking out a right eye. Beside this, it is as clear as possible that the Great Husbandman is carrying on the work of discipline, whether we will or not. Many members of our churches are as manifestly under chastisement as any wayward child in the hands of a careful earthly parent. Others, through impenitence, are as distinctly cut off from the enjoyment of religious privileges as though they had been excommunicated by a process, as imposing as the thunders of the Vatican of Rome. Church discipline is thought to be something terrible, but can anything be more alarming than to allow men to die in their sins, without using the means which God has placed in our hands for their recovery? Christian discipline properly understood consists chiefly of efforts to restore wanderers and bring them back to the fold of Christ: it is the means which our Heavenly Father has appointed to bring us all nearer to himself in peace, purity and faithful service. None are to be excluded from the church but those who, by a constant perversity of heart, show that they are not in her fellowship.

The teachings of Holy Scripture on the subject may be stated thus:—

Members of Churches, in their individual and collective capacity, are required to do all they can in the kindest manner, and by direction of the word of God, to restore backsliders; but after all effort to reclaim them has failed, it is the duty of the church to exclude from her honours and privileges such persons as remain impenitent, and who do not renounce their evil practices, and return to the service of God.

From this view of the subject we proceed to notice—

I. THE DUTY OF CHURCHES TO SEEK THE RESTORATION OF BACKSLIDERS.

Christian discipline will be cleared of much of the terror by which it is often regarded, if we consider that it consists, principally, of the means which the tender Shepherd employs to bring

the stray sheep back to his fold. In it we may see Jesus, by means of his church, seeking the wanderer in the by-paths of sin and error, showing him his danger and assuring him of the constancy of a Father's love, and the freeness of pardoning mercy. All that is dreadful, in this subject, arises from the perversity and impenitence of the transgressor.

Christian churches should not sit in judgement on backsliders, condemn, and execute the sentence of excommunication, until they have exhausted the means which God has given for restoration. Perhaps much of the reluctance and difficulty by which churches attempt to clear themselves from unworthy members, arises from their undertaking the judicial process, before they have sought the restoration of the erring one. The apostle Paul, when writing to the Galatians, (vi. 1.) makes our duty very plain. He says, "Brethren if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one, in the spirit of meekness." No slight offence is supposed here, but such as would be a trouble to the church like the dislocation of an arm in the human body.

The dislocated member is not to be suddenly amputated, nor is it to be left dangling at the side of the body, but reset, as the meaning is: "Ye that are spiritual restore such an one." Equally clear is the direction of Jesus, recorded in Matt. xviii. 15-17. In the case of personal trespass, the offended is exhorted to go to his brother and tell him his fault in private, in the hope of reconciliation. Even a slight offence may breed malice, if it be allowed to rankle in the mind, like a thorn in the flesh; while the cause of ill feeling may be readily removed by a grave and gentle admonition. If this first step be taken, in a proper spirit, further action will often be unnecessary, and our churches saved from much trouble and sorrow. Such a method is in keeping with all the attributes of true manhood. We are to tell it to the church if it must be told, only when all other means of reconciliation have failed.

In dealing with disorderly members of our churches, we should consider that they may be still children of God, though wanderers; and that the temptations into which they may have fallen may attack us also. We should seek to convince them of the forgiving love of the Heavenly Father, and of his willingness to restore them to favour. We may rest assured there is some way to reach the hearts of all who are Christ's. As Nathan brought David to conviction of his great sin, after a year of impenitency, and as one look from Jesus pierced Peter's heart, so that he wept bitterly; in the same manner, the Holy Spirit may employ us in the recovery of those who go astray from the fold of God. Brethren if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know that he which converteth a sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death and hide a multitude of sins.

II. HOLY SCRIPTURE REQUIRES CHURCHES TO EXCLUDE SINFUL AND IMPENITENT PERSONS.

In the case of trespass, mentioned in Matt. xviii., to which reference has been made, the person offended, after all other means of reconciliation have failed, is directed to bring the matter before the church. Here the transgressor may be admonished, before the members, according to the direction of Paul to Timothy (iv. 20), "Them that sin, rebuke before all." If this bring him to penitence, he stands; but if he neglect to hear the church, he is to be regarded, as a heathen man or publican.

The New Testament, in many places brings to our notice the persons subject to this discipline. In Revelation, ii. 14, a serious charge was brought against the church at Pergamos, because she had those who held the doctrine of Balaam; and also the heresy of the Nicolaitanes. Titus is instructed to reject an heretic after the first and second admonition (Ch. iii. 10). Paul exhorts the church at Rome to mark those which cause divisions and offences con-

trary to sound doctrine, and avoid them. In 1 Tim. i. 19, 20, we read of Hymeneus and Alexander who, having made shipwreck of faith, were delivered unto satan. From these references, it will be seen that serious error is a matter of discipline, and from the determined teachers of heresy, Christians are exhorted to withdraw.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians (iv. 11.) that they should not keep company with any man, called a brother, who was a fornicator, or covetous, or an drunkard, or an extortioner. In second Thessalonians and third chapter, Christians are commanded to withdraw from every brother that walketh disorderly, and have no company with such, or with those who work not at all, but are busy-bodies. It will not be necessary to enter into any description of the characters here given. The words of scripture hold them up in their true colours and the duty of the church regarding them is plain. "Purge out the old leaven that ye may be a new lump, for even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us." 1 Cor. v. 7.

It will be observed that comparatively little is said in the scriptures on the discipline of those who are simply negligent in their christian duties. The word of God is very plain in denunciation of such persons; but the attitude of the church toward them is scarcely indicated. This may be explained by the fact that those who are willfully negligent of christian duty will, eventually in nearly every case, come under the discipline of the church for actual transgression. In a text quoted before, we read of those "who work not at all, but are busy bodies." This, at first sight, seems a contradiction in terms; but it is aptly explained even to the understanding of a child, in those well known lines of Dr. Watts:—

"Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do."

Matthew Henry expressed the experience of many an indolent professor when he said, "Idleness is the devil's anvil on which he hammers out many temptations." The human mind, and the whole man, is naturally active; and if we are not about the Father's business, satan will keep us in his employment, where we shall soon come under the discipline of the church.

There are many who neglect the Lord's supper, from a sense of their unworthiness. This may be through the weakness of faith or ignorance of divine things. Others do not contribute to their means to the carrying on of the cause of the Redeemer; and they fail to exercise the talents entrusted to them. These sins of omission are not to be lightly regarded; but, by prayer and effort, the Lord in providence and grace working with us, much may be done to restore these wanderers to the privileges and labours of the church.

2. In the scripture texts already cited churches are commanded to put away, reject, avoid, withdraw from, the persons referred to. These terms express what is known as *excommunication*, or exclusion from the honours and privileges of the Christian Church. Excommunication is sometimes declared in public; but it often consists simply in the declaration of the vote of the church, by which the exclusion is affirmed, before the members, at a private church meeting. According to Scripture, the disapprobation of the church should become as public as the transgression of the offender but with as little formality as possible.

3. Great difference of opinion prevails regarding the persons by whom the discipline of the church is to be administered. This difference accords with the various forms of government known in professing churches, throughout the world. As we are concerned only with the testimony of God's Word, it will not be necessary to make further reference to the opinions of men. In Matt. xviii. our Saviour directs that (other means failing) the matter of trespass be told to the church. The church decides on the same, and it appears its decision was final. In 1 Cor. v. the Apostle gives us a very definite direction for