

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEACONS OF YESTERDAY

Since the Scripture does not list specific duties that a deacon should perform, only qualifications, it will serve well to study the duties of deacons in the early Christian church. The deacons in the early New Testament church demonstrated a willingness to work in many different areas relating to charity, administration, education, and worship. These men made such a tremendous impact on their world that they helped develop the concept of the "priesthood of the believer" which is so pronounced in the twentieth century.

To begin with, deacons did pastoral work through the church organizations. They visited martyrs who were in prison, clothed and buried the dead, looked after the excommunicated with the hope of restoring them, provided for the needs of the sick and those who were otherwise in distress.¹

Those early deacons exemplified the psalmist who cried, "I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a

¹ Charles W. Dweese, The Emerging Role of Deacons (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 12.

broken vessel" (Ps 3.12). The deacons stood out in that first-century church as peacemakers, restorers, and comforters. Through their ministry and visitation, spiritual fires remain bright and new fires of evangelism were kindled. Their ministry refreshed the soul and renewed one's spiritual strength. As one thinks of the ministry of those early deacons, he cannot but think of the words of Jesus, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me" (Matt 25.40). Jesus Christ came to be the servant to all people. He said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people" (Mark 10.45).

As Jesus commissioned the disciples as partners in his caring ministry, deacons can be partners with their individual fellowships. Deacons will naturally feel inadequate, but that inadequacy leads to a healthy dependence on God's strength. Jesus promised, "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever" (John 14.12-16 RSV). With the power of the presence of God's Spirit deacons can be effective partners with God in caring for the fellowship.¹

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Henry Webb, Deacons: Servant Models in the Church (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), 90.

Deacons of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

In the early church, the deacons performed many important duties for both the bishop and the church membership. They not only waited tables in the community by attending to the needs of the widows; but, they were also instrumental in assisting the bishop in administrative assignments. What are the evidences in the early church that deacons helped in the administration of the church duties?

- (1) They assembled daily to receive instructions from the bishop for the day's business.
- (2) They kept order in the church services.
- (3) They cared for the altar and its utensils.
- (4) They delivered the messages for the bishop.
- (5) They administered the church fund as the executive agents of the bishop.¹

The evidence is clear that deacons also performed a vital function in the teaching ministry of the early church. This may be true because of the great influx of converts entering the church as a result of the rule of Emperor Constantine who's decree to make all men in his time Christian. However, this policy of religious toleration and a desire that men become followers of Christ

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Dix, p. 60; Connolly, p. 120 Apostolic Constitutions, VIII.ii.xii in ANF, 7:486; Ignatius, Epistle to the Philadelphians, X in ANF, 1:85; Adolf Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, trans. and ed. James Moffatt (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 157.

was politically motivated. Constantine believed the Christians would play a large role in helping unify his kingdom. Edward M. Burns clarifies the political aspirations of Constantine.

Contrary to common belief, he did not make Christianity the official religion of the Empire; his various edicts issued in 313 simply gave Christianity an equality of status with the pagan cults, thereby terminating the policy of persecution. Later in his reign he bestowed upon the Christian clergy certain special privileges and caused his sons to be brought up in the new faith, but he continued to maintain the imperial cult.¹

Because of this policy, the early Christian church felt the influx of Romanism. To counter and rectify the error made by Emperor Constantine, the church, consequently, thrust deacons into the teaching of Christianity to new converts in order to assimilate them into the church.

Another of the major duties of the early deacons was helping administer the Lord's Supper.

In the second century deacons distributed the bread and wine and carried some away to the Christians who were absent. In order that all participants might examine themselves before receiving the supper, third-century deacons asked the congregation, "Is there any man that keepeth aught against his fellow?"²

¹ Edward M. Burns, Western Civilizations (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1963), 239.

² Charles W. Deweese, The Emerging Role of Deacons (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 14.

During communion the deacon prayed publicly, read the Bible, called for the praying of the Lord's Prayer, and concluded the service by inviting the people to go forth in peace.¹ Apparently, it was in the fourth century that the deacon acquired the prerogative of reading the Bible at the Eucharist, though it was not exclusive.

At the beginning of the third century, one discovers evidence of deacons being on an equal with the presbyter in officiating the baptismal service. Tertullian's treatise reveals much of this information as he writes:

The supreme right of giving (baptism) belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop; after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the Church's dignity; for when this is safe, peace is safe.²

One quickly sees this to mean that deacons had the ordinary right of baptizing in such churches over which they presided. Jerome, in his Against Luciferians, writes:

I do not deny that it is the practice of the Churches in the case of those who living far from the greater towns have been baptized by presbyters and deacons, for the bishop to visit them, and by the laying on of hands to

¹ Hugh R. Connolly and Gregory Dix, Apostolic Constitution (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 11-12.

² Tertullian, Tertullian's Homily on Baptism, ed. with intro., and comm. Ernest Evans (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 35.

invoke the Holy Ghost upon them....It is that without ordination and the bishop's license neither presbyter nor deacon has the power to baptize.¹

One may rightly include baptism as a function of the deacon by virtue of his office, though with authorization by the bishop, at this time.

Finally, the deacon performed many pastoral ministries in association with the bishop's desires. The basic tasks of the church's pastoral ministries are:

- (1) To proclaim the gospel to believers and unbelievers.
- (2) To care for the church's members and other persons in the community.
- (3) To lead the church in the achievement of its mission.²

These ministries require very special gifts and deep spiritual overtones which require unique skills in Christian maturity. Those early church deacons who measured up to the qualifications of the biblical Scriptures added an element of integrity and spiritual maturity to that early church fellowship that could be found nowhere else in the known world.

Deacons in the Middle Ages

During this period of time, especially in the fourth

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Charles W. Deweese, The Emerging Role of Deacons (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 17-18.

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Howard B. Foshee, The Ministry of the Deacon (Nashville: Convention Press, 1974), 39.

century the role of the deacon met with unfavorable demise in the Christian church. God's providence and care, discipline and spiritual nurture were the basis of His appeal for the obedient deacon in the early church. However, among the very ones whose souls have been the examples of love and tolerance and forbearance, there is instead too often confusion and chaos with innumerable divisions of sects, classes, creeds and dogmas, with fighting and bickering and condemnation of each other all in the name of Jesus, the Christ who prayed that we might all be one. With the influx of so many entering the church, even to the point of Constantine's sword, there was little left to doubt that problems awaited on the horizon.

The Nicaea Council issued a Canon which summed up the feeling of the clergy at this time. Canon 18 stated:

It has come to the knowledge of the holy synod that in certain places and cities, the deacons give the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom allows that they who have no authority to offer should give the Body of Christ to those who do offer. It has also been made known that now some of the deacons receive the Eucharist even before the bishops. Let all such practices be done away, and let the deacons keep within their proper bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and inferior to the presbyters. Let them, therefore, receive the Eucharist, according to their order, after the presbyters, either the bishop or presbyter administering the Eucharist to them. Further, the deacons are not to be allowed to sit among the bishop;

for this is done contrary to the canon and due order. But if any one even after this decision will not obey, let him be put out of the diaconate.¹

This demonstrates that the Church, during this period of time, began a process of assimilating the social order of the deacon to a regulated function within the Church. Even though, in places, there were deacons whose conduct was in the interest of the Church, the legislation singled them out as being branded as inferior to the Clergy. Not only did this statement represent the changes being made in the Church, it also served as a future statement as to the course of action which would be taken by all the involved parties of the coming split.

The Decline of Deacons in the East

All christendom suffered in the East-West split which followed, and left large holes and gaps which were filled only with human hurt and bitter memories of what might have been. During the Middle Ages, the deacon ministry suffered great losses and we do well to examine very briefly the reasons:

A key reason for the decline in the East Church was an increased emphasis on the liturgical tasks of deacons. This stress lessened the primary role of deacons as agents of charity and practical ministries.²

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J. Stevenson, A New Eusebius (New York: MacMillan, 1957), 363.

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Lev Gillet, "Deacons in the Orthodox East," Theology, 58. November 1955, p. 415; Dix, p. 283.

In the Eastern Church, the deacon merely became a function or a task within the whole church which could easily be performed by the laity; hence, the importance of the deacon's ministry in this period can be seen as a lingering eminence, even as it slowly begins to decline.

As the congregations grew larger, the role of the deacons diminished to nothing more than being the presbyter's assistance. They lost their high positions by being outnumbered in the multiple of needs which surpassed their very number. Deacons became nothing more than merely figure-heads in the church, or at best, pawns in a "game" of religion.

By the latter part of the fourth century, the deacons had ceased to form the bishop's personal staff. Lukas Vischer observes that this lack of definition in the deacon's position caused repeated difficulties and rightly sees it as one of the major reasons for the decline of the deacon in the Middle Ages.¹

The Decline of Deacons in the West

The major reason for the decline of the deacon's ministry in the West is an idea of the deacon being placed in a position of honor within the church. This idea facilitated a clerical position on the rung of an

¹ Lukas Vischer, The Ministry of Deacons (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1965), 25.

ecclesiastical ladder. This concept is vividly portrayed in an early prayer of the Deacon Ordination Service which implied the deacon to be worthy of his high promotional ranking within the church. Within the context of this religious bureaucracy, the deacon ministry became twisted and deformed and suffered many negative impressions which lasted for hundreds of years within the religious community.

Later, the church councils would impose other, more severe, edicts which would further restrict the role and the status of the deacon in the Middle Ages. The church councils were responsible for:

- (1) the introduction of the "hierarchy" which finally placed the deacon below the presbyter as an inferior minister,
- (2) the professional distinction which developed between the clergy and laity in church ministries,
- (3) and the segregation of ideas, which created a gap between the clergy and laity in church services.

The rise of this ecclesiastical hierarchy in the West created an environment which influenced the decline of the deacon as a lay minister, while pushing many deacons into more and more of the liturgical roles of the church or even into the ministry itself. These changes formed an entire religious super structure in which ecclesiastical orders were rules rather than exceptions. In the middle of the confusion, the deacon's role as a ministering servant became more obscure. Indeed, one is hard pressed during this period of church history to

discover any resemblance to those original seven men who were selected by the early church to wait on tables and serve the church community. With this great religious suppression, one speculates that in the minds of those Christian men and women, there was the idea of the Religious Reformation.

Deacons in the Reformation Period

Church order had become so ecclesiastically structured that "true worship" had been obscured and surrounded by the hedges of religious rules and regulations which sufficated even the most devoted. This stimulated the movement known as the Protestant Reformation. In this religious movement, the deacon ministry found new life and a rebirth experience. The movement centered away from the liturgical functions of the church and back toward the service ministries. In his writings, Martin Luther, the great religious reformer, believed and taught that the major function of the deacon was vitally linked between the church and the bishop.¹ Martin Luther believed that unless the deacon served and worked closely with his pastor, in church related matters, there would be total confusion and misunderstanding that would

¹ John T. McNeill, and F. L. Battle, Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), 1050.

ultimately lead to disruption in the fellowship of the church. Many others agreed with Luther's concept of Religious Reformation.

John Calvin stimulated the deacon's ministry by advocating a return to the original Scripture which began the deacon's ministry in the early New Testament church. Calvin added, "Here, then, is the kind of deacons the 'Apostolic Church' had, and which we after their example, should have."¹

These and other men who with vision of the Holy Spirit, began to recapture the spirit of the age within the ministry of the church. As a light out of the dark abyss of the human soul, the truth was revealed, the men responded to the enlightenment as the role of the deacon once again emerged within the Christian community. They came forth, from every crack and corner of the known world, as shining lights against a dark backdrop of religious ritual which had literally choked the very life-blood out of the serving ministries of Christianity. The words of Jesus Christ ring true again. He said, "You know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8.32). The "truth" revealed in the Protestant Reformation set all men's spirits free to serve the power of

¹ John T. McNeill, and F. L. Battle, Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), 1061.

the risen Christ. The Reformation had a profound effect on the serving ministries of the deacon as related to a rise in leadership within the church.

Conclusion

As a result of the Reformation, the deacons eventually became a key part of many Christian denominations: Lutheran Church, Reformed Churches (including Presbyterianism), Mennonite Churches, The Church of England, Congregational Churches, Baptist Churches, and others. The reason was a widespread affirmation of the centrality and value of deacons. The Reformers challenged the excessive desire of deacons to seek promotions in the ecclesiastical structure and put them back to work in a variety of service ministries.¹

The Reformation brought the deacon ministry back into the reality of service ministries and opened the flood gates for our continual study of the present day ministry of deacons in the twentieth-century church.

¹ Charles W. Deweese, The Emerging Role of Deacons (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 21.