

The Three Orders of the Christian Ministry

By REV. THOMAS NATTRESS.

People are sometimes afraid of a form of words because it has been employed by somebody else with whom they have not been in full accord upon the question in connection with which that expression has been used technically. Such an expression is this "the three orders of the Christian ministry." It is a misfortune that this should be so, for the shyness felt in regard to the term has often helped to perpetuate the differences, supposed or real, that first made them wary of the term itself.

We, of the Presbyterian Church, believe just as firmly in three "orders" of the ministry as do (e.g.) those who hold to an episcopal form of church polity. Moreover, (though there may be those who, not having considered the question upon its merits, will at first blush of the question deny that it is so,) we have always held to the three orders. But these we call by the New Testament names of Ministers, Elders and Deacons.

To go minutely into Scriptural passages bearing upon the question in its entirety would be to write at too great length for the purposes of this article. It will be enough to take the first two orders as granted, for upon these we are all agreed, and show the authoritative existence of the third, that of Deacons. The sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles records that the Apostles found a division of labor necessary. They said: "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, 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." This is the origin of the office, ever since known as that of the Deacon. In the rapidly developing church the responsibilities of the deacons soon increased, and as Christians began to organize themselves into congregations, the temporal affairs of these congregations fell to their management, in addition to the duty of caring for the poor. From the first the office was looked upon as a very essential one, and the Apostles' words calling it into existence "pleased the whole multitude." Its economic value is emphasized in the same passage of Scripture that records its creation: "the Word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly," a result evidently looked upon as directly traceable to the division of labor effected.

The Blue Book defines very well the relative functions of the three orders, according to the New Testament teaching as we understand it. "The duties of Deacons have special regard to the temporal and financial affairs of the congregation. More particularly it is their duty to obtain from the people contributions for the sustentation of the ministry and the schemes of the Church, and to disburse all moneys received for these purposes, subject to the approval of the congregation; to attend to the wants of the poor, to take care of the property of the congregation; to provide for the payment of the minister's stipend and other salaries and generally to administer all matters committed to their charge, as the congregation may from time to time direct." (§ 36, p. 14.)

"The duty of the Session (Minister and Elders) is to watch over and promote in every Scriptural way the spiritual interests of the congregations, more particularly to receive applicants for admission into the Church; to admit those who have been baptized into full communion, and to receive persons bringing certificates of membership from other congregations; to grant certificates to members leaving the congregation; to watch over the Christian deportment of the members of the congregation; to exercise discipline by admonition, rebuke, suspension, or exclusion from membership; to restore to privileges; to care for the religious instruction of the young, including the oversight of Sabbath schools; to determine all matters touching the order of public worship, including the service of praise; to arrange for the dispensation of the Sacraments; to appoint congregational fasts or thanksgivings; to appoint the time and mode of making special collections, and where there are no deacons, to provide for the necessities of the poor; to call congregational meetings; to examine and judge of the qualifications of persons elected to the Eldership and the Deaconship; to receive and judge of petitions; to transmit papers to the Presbytery, and to do whatever else may, in their opinion, promote the religious interests of the congregation." (§ 51, p. 16.)

In defining these two offices the Minister is distinguished from the Elder and the Deacon. He presides over the Session and also over the Deacons' Court. His office is that of the Elder who labors in the Word and doctrine. (1 Tim. v. 17).

To speak of these three offices as the three orders of the Christian ministry is to designate them as being alike sacred. Accordingly, it is the practice of our Church, as it was the practice of the Church from the beginning, to ordain the Deacon as we ordain the Elder, or as the Minister of the Word is ordained. In other words, each is set apart to his sacred office by a rite that is itself sacred. Though the duties differ the religious character of the offices is the same.

Confused ideas have crept in, both as regards the third order of the ministry and the sacredness of its duties, owing to the widespread practice of our Church in substituting a Managers' Board for a Deacons' Court. The tendency is for men to underestimate the sacredness of the office to which they are elected only to retire from it again at the end of a three years term, and to which they are not ordained. Nor are the members of the Managing Board the only ones to be affected by this tendency; but the congregation suffers in the same way, and the spiritual tone is lowered in proportion. The objection is sometimes raised that men might be ordained to the office of a deacon who would prove incapable and unworthy. Any one desiring to object could say the same thing about the election of Elders. But the objection is not raised in the latter case, and probably would not be in the former were our people accustomed to Deacons' Courts instead of Managing Boards. Besides we have Scriptural authority for the Deacons' Court and we have not Scriptural authority for the Board of Managers. The fact that unworthy men are occasionally elected to Managing Boards is an indication of the lowered moral tone consequent upon the mistaken conception of the office and its duties, rather than of any danger of the kind referred to that would attend the ordination of Deacons. Moreover there is always the safeguard of the judicial and episcopal function of the Session brought into play in refusing to ordain an improper person to the Eldership or to the office of Deacon, just as the same function is exercised by Presbytery in refusing to ordain an improper or unqualified candidate for the ministry. Still further, though one be ordained a Deacon who afterwards shows disqualification, Presbytery, by virtue of its episcopal power, is able to deal with the case, as it would with that of an Elder in a similar instance.

The Board of Managers is distinctly un-presbyterial, although very largely substituted for the Deacons' Court in our Church, both in this and other lands, for it is unscriptural. It has ousted that which is Scriptural and which owes its authority to the Apostles, so that the practice of the modern Church is decidedly modern and unauthoritative.

Holding, as she does, the medial and advantageously influential place among the several great branches of the Church, and at a time when the Episcopal Church has become un-episcopal in matters of detail, when the Methodist Church is deviating from her own peculiar forms and practices, and the Congregational Church is becoming less congregational, and all are favoring cur policy to the same extent that they are deviating from their own, our Church should be exceedingly careful that she is altogether Scriptural, not in doctrine alone, but also in constitution and practice. Any well ordered plea in behalf of the Scriptural three orders of the Christian ministry in place of the prevailing two and a fraction is also a plea for order and efficiency.

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A Good Church Member.

He believes in his church. He loves it. He gives himself to it. He prays for it and speaks kindly of it. He does not put a stumbling-block in the way of his brethren and avoids those things which grieve or cause them to offend. He is charitable in his judgments and promotes peace. He feels it a duty to build up his own congregation. He cheers his brethren and his pastor by regular attendance upon the public service. He helps the pastor, and does not leave him to preach to empty pews with an aching heart, or to carry on the prayer-meetings alone. It is no slight excuse that keeps him from the Lord's Supper. The appointments of his church and the memory of his Saviour are sacred to him. He does not trifle with either. He keeps his covenant solemnly made with his church when he entered its fellowship. God bless our good members, old and young, and constantly increase their number! Let lively stones be laid into the spiritual temple.