

THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING CONCERNING THE DIACONATE

PREAMBLE

The fact that this subject appears on the agenda of this Conference of Faith and Ethics, is in itself significant. Many questions have been asked in recent years concerning the functions and ordination of the diaconate. It is, therefore, an encouraging factor to know that we are seeking solutions, that we believe these can be derived from the principles laid out in the New Testament. I agree with Brother Victor Adrian when he states that, "The proper application of these principles in our day will require constant Bible study, and sharing of our understanding of Scriptures within the Brotherhood."

Another problem that faces us is, why are these questions being asked? What is it that we really want to know about the New Testament teaching concerning the diaconate? Are we implying that we have not understood what the Scripture says? Are we suggesting that the many papers presented in the past are not in accord with the Scriptures? (See attached list.) Are we possibly acknowledging an openness to new and more light upon the Scripture which we have always used for our guidelines? Or are we looking for an escape from the established pattern of the diaconate in our churches? Are we seeking to justify new trends and condemn the old, or condemn the new and justify the old? Are we seeking a uniform pattern of the diaconate to which every church and every given situation must adhere? Have we possibly failed to recognize that every ministry must be progressive, and that the office of the diaconate is permanent, but the ministry can change as the need demands?

To find answers, we will have to be as objective as possible, willing to relinquish traditional views and prayerfully consider new ideas, and at the same time maintain a scripturally sound basis. What we need is the unity of the Spirit, more than a unity of pattern.

Permit me at this time to give credit to the various sources listed in the bibliography from which I have drawn much of the information found in this paper. Some of the work that has been done on this subject can hardly be improved upon, and certainly this paper is not an attempt to do so, but rather an effort to present in simple form the New Testament teaching concerning the diaconate, to form a basis for an open and frank discussion.

THE USE OF THE WORD DEACON

If we are to understand the New Testament teaching concerning the deacon, we need to know something about the use of the word deacon. It is of interest to note that the King James version of the New Testament uses the word only a few times (Philippians 1:1, I Timothy 3:8, 10, 12, 13). The

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1. Victor Adrian, The Ministry of the Deacon, article in The Voice of the M. B. Bible College, Vol. XIV, No. 6, 1965, p. 4

word deacon is derived from the Greek work diakonos. According to the Greek-English lexicon, it means a servant, waiting man, a messenger. In time this term came to denote any kind of service. This development is noticed already in the New Testament. To illustrate this point, we do well to quote Brother R. M. Baerg in his paper, "The Scriptural Pattern of the Diaconate".

"The English word "deacon" is seldom used as a transitive verb. Disregarding the fact that the word "deacon" is not used as a transitive verb, let us use the word in the various ways in which it is used in the Greek to show something of its meaning in the New Testament. "The Son of Man came not to be deaconed but to deacon, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). "I am among you as one that deacons" (Luke 22:27). "If any man deacons me" (John 12:26). "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and deacon tables" Acts 6:2). "Let them deacon" (I Peter 4:11). "Martha was cumbered about much deaconing" (Luke 18:40). "Now this I say that Christ was a deacon of the circumcision for the truth of God" (Rom. 15:8). Speaking of the wicked emperor, among other officials of government, the apostle says, "For he is a deacon of God to thee for good" (Rom. 13:4). Paul calls himself and Apollos deacons when he says, "Who then is Paul? and who is Apollos, but deacons by whom ye believed?" (I Cor. 3:5). Phebe was a deacon (Rom. 16:1). Concerning angels we read, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to a deaconship for them?" (Heb. 1:14).

As a noun diakonos occurs thirty times and is translated "minister", "servant", and "deacon". (See Matt. 20:28; Mark 9:35; Phil. 1:11; I Tim. 3:8, 12). The noun diakonia occurs thirty-five times and is translated "Ministry", "relief", "ministering", "service", and "ministration". The verb diakoneu found thirty-seven times in the New Testament is translated "ministered", "serve", "administered", and "use the office of the deacon". From all the various uses of the noun and its cognates, we observe that the basic idea is the same; it is service, help, subordination."

THE ORIGIN OF THE DIACONATE

The origin of the office of the diaconate cannot be conclusively determined. Various theories have been advocated, but in actual fact, the origin is not of prime importance. The portion of Scripture generally used as the basis for our view of its origin is Acts chapter six. "Dr. E. G. Robinson did not regard the election of the seven in Acts 6:1-4 as marking the origin of the diaconate, though he thought the diaconate grew out of

the election." ³ Lightfoot, one of the greatest authorities on this question, sees no reason for relating the origin of the diaconate to any other event than that the urgency of the times required a particular work and that the narrative in the Acts implies that the office thus created was entirely new." ⁴ It is of interest to note that the word "deacon" does not appear in Acts 6 and neither are the elected seven called deacons anywhere in the Scriptures. Although the seven were not called deacons in Acts, their work was actually that involved in the meaning of the word "deacon". The important thing for us to note is that regardless of what the origin was, the New Testament makes it obvious that the diaconate was an established office in the early Christian church. New Testament Scripture does not seek to prove the existence of the office, but neither does it question the existence. Paul's reference to them in Phil. 1:1 and the outline of their qualifications in I Tim. 3 take for granted the existence of the diaconate. That the office of the diaconate forms a vital part of our church structure has never seriously been questioned by the Mennonite Brethren.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE DEACON

BASIC PRINCIPLES

When we come to deal with the qualifications of the diaconate, we need to ask the question, "Who is the deacon? To find the answer, we need to discover principles laid down in the New Testament.

1. A principle derived from the meaning of the word itself. First, we would say that he is a minister. As already indicated, the noun and verb forms of the word "deacon" in the Greek are used over one hundred times, and are translated to mean such things as "minister", "servant", "ministry", "relief", "service", "serve", and other similar words.
2. The principle that the deacon is one who serves in an administrative capacity. The apostles asked for someone whom they could "appoint over the business".
3. A principle based on election and ordination. Our concept of the deacon is that he is someone who has been duly elected and possibly ordained by the church to that office. This principle is very obviously laid out in Acts 6. Therefore, we could say that a deacon is someone who holds office upon the approval by the church.
4. The principle that the deacon is one who is chosen out from among the members of the congregation. The twelve apostles called the brethren of the congregation together and said, "Brethren, look ye out among you". This obviously implies that the deacon must be one who is a Christian and a member of the church who chooses him. The apostles laid down a basic principle here; namely that the congregation has the democratic right to make its own choice in regards to the deacon. The church early in its history faced a social problem, and it is noteworthy that when we look at the names of the seven men that were chosen that they were the people of that segment that brought

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3. A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology, Philadelphia, The Judson Press, 1961, p. 917
 4. J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, London: Macmillan Company Limited, 1927, p. 198

forth a complaint concerning the widows. In other words, the men who were chosen to do the job were familiar with the circumstances and understood the situation. One very basic qualification of a deacon, therefore, appears to be that he be one from among the people, familiar with the tradition and culture and the current needs of the people to be served.

5. The principle taught in Acts 6 that the deacon is one who is called upon to handle emergency situations. One of the greatest qualifications of any deacon is his availability for any given situation. A deacon should not be made immobile by a stringent framework imposed upon him. His ministry must be flexible enough to serve when emergencies arise within the church and its area of service.

6. The principle that the deacon is to look after areas of neglect.

Individuals or groups of individuals may be neglected in a church, spiritually, socially, or even economically. The deacon is responsible to see that these areas of weakness in the church are properly regulated and rectified. Neglect should be noticed, not necessarily brought to the deacon's attention.

7. The principle of equality in the congregation. We ask again, Who is the deacon? We answer with this statement, that he is an ordinary member of the church who meets given qualifications and is entrusted to responsible office by the church, who has come to recognize these qualifications in him. He is one of and with the congregation whose personality and influence is of more significance in his ministry than the office he fills.

BASIC QUALIFICATIONS

A study of Acts 6:3 indicates that there are three basic qualifications: namely (1) Christian character, (2) being filled with the Holy Spirit, and (3) practical wisdom. "These may broadly be spelled out in terms of Christian character, (Above all suspicion), men of wisdom (practicability and efficiency in their office) and men filled with the Holy Spirit (endowed for the task by the Holy Spirit, submissive, sober, dedicated.)"

REQUISITE CHARACTERISTICS

In I Timothy 3 we are given the requisite characteristics of the deacon. The first thing that comes to us in this portion of Scripture is that the qualifications for the diaconate are similar to that of the Bishop, except that the ability to teach and by sound doctrine to exhort and convince the gainsayers, are especially required of the bishop, and not of the deacon.

1. The deacon must be grave, that is, respectable, becoming the dignity of the man. He must be a man who inspires respect by his conduct and deportment. Such gravity becomes all Christians, but especially those who are in office.

2. The deacon is not to be double-tongued. This is a new qualification not found in the list given for bishops. "They were to be straight. The Greek is, that they must not be dilogos, which means speaking with two voices, saying one thing to one, and another thing to another. A deacon

in his going from house to house and his dealing with those who need it and those who request charity has to be a straight man. Again and again he would be tempted to evade issues by a little timely hypocrisy and smooth speaking." To be double-tongued comes from a double heart. Flatterers and slanderers are double-tongued. The double tongue also suggests the breaking of confidence. A deacon is one who can be trusted with the most confidential matters of any one in every area of life. Deacons must not allow themselves to become receptacles or vehicles of scandal and distraction. Their speech to rich and poor alike must be perfectly sincere. 7

3. Not given to much wine is a qualification that possibly does not need much emphasis in our circles, but the danger of the temptation is always there. Wine is a disrupter and unfits men for business, and also opens the door to many other temptations. This speaks also of moderation. Every deacon should be an example of moderation, particularly so in our present affluent church.

4. He is not to be greedy of filthy lucre. When lucre is the price for doing wrong, it is filthy. When lucre is sought on occasions where none is due, it is filthy, and when the desire of even just gain is excessive, it ceases to be clean. This characteristic would especially be bad in the deacon, who is entrusted with the church's goods and money for distribution. If he is covetous and greedy of filthy lucre, he would be tempted to embezzle it and convert it to his own use.

5. He is to hold the mystery of faith in a pure conscience. The real truth of the gospel is to be preserved from error and delusion. A deacon must be filled with a love for truth. The fact that this guarding of the faith is to be done in a pure conscience teaches us that orthodoxy without personal holiness is of little worth. A deacon must be motivated by love in his contention for the faith.

6. It is further required that he be proved before put into office. His general character as described in verses 8 and 9 must not be taken upon loose hearsay, but must be put to the test by examination, by inquiry, and then, if found blameless, he is to be admitted to serve as deacon. It is necessary that he be found fit for the business he is to be entrusted with. His soundness of judgment, zeal for Christ and the blamelessness of walk must be proved. Acts 6 does not appear to allow for a long period of examination between election and ordination. The admonition of Paul to Timothy, "Lay hands suddenly on no man" needs to be heeded, but the prolonged term as practiced in our churches appears to have no scriptural basis. The early church recognized the necessary qualifications before the election. Our practice seems to suggest that we hope these will manifest themselves after the election.

7. The deacon must be the husband of one wife. Divorce and re-marriage or having more than one wife is out of the question. The husband-wife relationship must be such that it will not reflect upon the ministry negatively, but rather be an example of the love relationship that should exist between husband and wife. The brief listing of the qualifications of the deacon's wife implies that she should be a sympathetic and understanding woman willing to assist in the work.

6. W. Barclay, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Edinburgh, The Saint Andrew Press, 1962, p. 93

7. _____, The Pulpit Commentary, Vol. XXI, Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962, p. 53

8. He must also be one who is capable of ruling the children and the house well. In other words, he must have respect as a father and the ability of management in a household.

This formidable list shows how closely the diaconate was allied to the authority and oversight of the pastor, and to all the spiritual interests of the church. The one thing lying at the centre of these qualifications is Christian character, tested and confirmed. "In his description of the diaconate, Paul did not consider young manhood or advanced life. Maturity of character, wisdom, sound judgment, fixed relationships in life both domestic and socially, tried and confirmed godliness - these are the traits Paul defines. Such men as possess these qualifications regardless of their physical age, are to be selected by the church, that confidence may be placed in them, that they may wisely administer the affairs of the church, whatever they may be. But Paul's words describe the qualifications, not his duties." ⁸

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE DEACON

It is a fairly widely accepted fact that different qualifications point to different functions, and that the functions may vary from time to time to meet existing needs. But it is also evident that we cannot deduce a definition of the specific duties of the diaconate from the description of qualifications for the office. It is significant to note that there is an absence in the scriptures of a specific list of duties of the deacon. We may therefore draw the conclusion that these duties and functions were to be determined by the conditions that developed with the change of time and program. It is assumed that the duties of the deacon are defined in the sixth chapter of Acts, but since the service of the seven was to meet an immediate and temporary emergency, it is rather difficult to describe the specific duties of the diaconate for later church periods from this chapter.

The itemized qualifications given earlier indicate that the functions of the deacon had expanded over the years. Although the qualifications should never change, the ministry of any office should be progressive. "That there was flexibility in their service, and latitude in their performance of their functions, is evidenced by the fact that Stephen became noted as a preacher, and Philip as an evangelist." If we adhere to the letter of Acts 6 in respect to the serving at tables, then we no longer have an extensive need for the deacon in our churches. We can, however, clearly imply from Acts 6 that the functions and duties of the diaconate deal with the administrative duties and caring for the temporalities of the church, but that they are not restricted to this. These duties must be looked upon as spiritual as well as temporal. Deacons represent Christ in his office of mercy, and the exercise of mercy certainly entails the consoling of the distressed. It is not unusual for charity, so-called, to be administered in a cold and even haughty manner." ¹⁰ Hence, the high qualifications of being filled with the Spirit and of Christian

8. Baerg, The Scriptural Pattern of the Diaconate, pp. 3-4

9. O. L. Shelton, The Church Functioning Effectively, St. Louis, The Bethany Press, 1958, p. 26

10. R. B. Kuiper, The Glorious Body of Christ, Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 154

character.

An intended principle of Acts 6 seems to be that what a deacon is to do depends partly upon what the church determines that he should do. One thing is obvious, namely, that the limited functions of the deacon in many cases is a detriment to the office. For the deacon to be successful, he must know what his job is, and what it entails. The very nature of the name implies that the deacon is to do something. He is elected to a program of hard work, and a good part of this program cannot be itemized or designated as a constitutional function, but must be worked out by the deacon on the basis of his own initiative and personality in an informal manner. Looking pious and being prominent will not suffice. The first group of seven went to work.

In order to determine what the deacon is to do, we face several questions. What and where are the current existing needs in the church? How can the people with the stated qualifications minister to these needs? Should some former functions be dropped to give room for new ones?

AREAS OF FUNCTION

To try to answer the above questions, we need to find practical application for the principles given in the New Testament. Unless we take a positive and progressive position as far as the deacon's functions are concerned, we stand in danger of developing an organizational structure in our church that not only serves no purpose, but is a hindrance in the building and in the maintenance of the Lord's work in the local church. Several broad areas of responsibility can be arrived at.

1. The deacon functions in a visitation ministry. To be effective, every deacon should have a specific visitation assignment so that all members are regularly and systematically visited. There ought to be a constant moving of the deacon among the people. Visitation does much to help detect areas of neglect. This visitation program should extend through the entire year. There should never be a time in the church where the deacon is not freely moving among the people. No one ought to see the problems of the church better and more quickly than the deacon in the church. In this regard, the deacon should be looked upon as assuming pastoral responsibilities and spiritual leadership. The pastor cannot visit every home regularly if the membership is sizeable. If the membership is to receive a visit every year or two, then the pastor cannot give enough time to study and to prayer and to the preaching of the Word. This certainly relates itself to the principle put down in Acts 6.

The New Testament deacon had a work to do with reference to the membership of the church. The original seven men were in fact concerned with personal relationships of the church. Complaints disrupt good relationships and the deacon must be one who hears and listens to the complaints and then does something to remove their cause. Through personal and informal contact the deacon will readily discover attitudes developing in the church. Often negative attitudes can be changed by the understanding heart and the clear explanation of the situation by the deacon. In freeing the apostles, who can be compared to pastors, for their major work of prayer and preaching, the deacon has to accept pastoral functions. The needs, the complaints, and the dissatisfactions of the church can be dealt with by the alert deacon before they mushroom into serious issues. Often the pastor, in his ministry, is hindered by too close involvement in prob-

lem situations. At the same time, the church may richly benefit from the undivided attention given by the pastor to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. No pastor is able to bear all the spiritual and temporal problems, and it is not good for him to try to do so.

One of the greatest needs among our church members today is to be able to fellowship around God's Word and to share their faith even in social settings. Our congregations today face the inability to communicate Christ. This is a need that is prevalent not only with younger people, but also among older folk. The deacon as the helper of the church, seeks to restore this ability through personal contact and visitation. His example should stimulate others to communicate their faith more freely. Therefore the deacon must assume the initiative in the setting in which he finds himself, to convey to the people how Christ can be communicated. This is a very vital aspect in church member visitation.

The deacon should also assume the responsibility of visiting the sick, the bereaved, the widowed, the aged and any situation that might warrant a house call. The deacon as an individual member of the church, should also be a leader in visitation that extends beyond the membership into the community.

2. The deacon functions as minister to the pastor. Another important function of the deacon in our present pastoral system is that of being a minister to the minister. With whom does the pastor share his problems? The very qualifications and nature of the diaconate should make it possible for the pastor to share in all confidence many personal as well as mutual church problems. The deacon should always be mindful of any material needs the pastor may have, and through the proper channels, seek to alleviate them. Communication between the pastor and the deacon must be free and frequent. As soon as this breaks down, the work of the church is hampered. The deacons as a board could well function permanently as the pulpit committee, enabling an informal inter-action and relationship between the church and the pastor.

3. The deacon functions in matters of disciplinary responsibilities. The deacon should also assist the pastor in all matters pertaining to disciplinary situations of the church, being prepared to accept responsibilities according to the teaching of the Scripture, and here we refer to Gal. 6:1 and Matt. 18:11-19. "In most of the Mennonite churches the work of the deacon includes that of aiding the ministry in maintaining proper discipline."¹¹ The deacon in consultation with the pastor should be the first to deal with disciplinary matters. Through visitation, personal contact, or whatever way possible, he should seek to remedy problems or prevent them if possible. The similarity of qualifications of the bishop and deacon in I Timothy 3 indicates that the diaconate was closely related to the authority and oversight of the pastor and to the influence, training and all the spiritual interests of the church. These interests will make the deacon aware whenever there is need of reconciliation within the church. It is imperative that the deacon becomes involved in disciplinary situations, not from compulsion, but of love and concern. This love and concern will alert the deacon to spiritual needs existent in individual lives. Members abstaining from church attendance should become a special concern in order that the difficulties and problems faced by the

11. _____, Mennonite Cyclopedic Dictionary, Scottdale, Mennonite Publishing House, 1937, p. 74

individuals may be handled before they become disciplinary matters that have to be dealt with in a formal way.

4. The deacon functions in the educational ministry of the church.

The deacon should be keenly interested and alert to the entire church program. He should be available to review the church work, counsel together with the pastor, fellowship together in prayer and God's Word, and assist in planning the ministries of the church with a view to the spiritual needs of the church as a whole. The deacon should be a man of vision and concern. Our present Christian educational program in the church requires a great deal of administration and supervision. In the present trend in our church away from several ordained preachers, it becomes increasingly more imperative that the deacon assists in a prayerful oversight of the educational work and of the doctrinal purity of the church. According to I Timothy 3:13, the deacon is to possess great boldness of the faith. This along with the statement that he is to hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience would certainly support this thought. If the deacon is to be a helper, then the important issue may not be so much as where he helps, but that he helps. Since not all deacons have the same abilities, their responsibilities in this area can be divided according to the diversities of their abilities and gifts.

5. The deacon functions in administrative responsibilities. Our churches and Conferences today demand a great deal of administrative work. There is a real danger currently, that too much of this responsibility falls into the hands of the pastor or his assistant. There is little question that Acts 6 teaches that men chosen were to be administrators. If we agree that this is a valid function of the deacon, should we not then review our position as to which current officers in our church should not also come into the deaconship? Brother Victor Adrian states it this way:

"Today we have many similar administrative functions which ought to fall in the realm of the deacon's work. We have a large treasury; these funds must be carefully administered; decisions must be made about their distribution.

- to aid the pastor
- to care for the place of worship
- to care for those in need; M.C.C. and other social services
- to aid in the extension of the gospel directly and indirectly through the Conference
- to aid educational endeavors

These duties would seem, according to the biblical pattern of the early church, to fall into the hands of deacons. Because we have failed to follow the biblical pattern we have given these duties to others and consequently are at a loss to give a clear definition of the deacon's functions.

It would seem to this writer, to be practical, that the chairman of the finance committee or the treasurer, ought to be a deacon possessing wisdom (ability) and spiritual endowment to be discerning in the proper distribution of the offerings. Quite frequently, appeals for aid from relief bodies and religious agencies are relegated to the finance committee for recommendations. The careful distribution of the church funds should therefore require more than technical ability. The total thrust, of the church in its calling in this world,

should always dictate policy." 12

It should however, be noted that if all deacons become administrators then the most essential, and the most neglected areas related to the functions of the diaconate would remain unattended to. The inclusion of this function, therefore, would have to take into consideration a considerable increase in the number of deacons in the church.

6. The deacon functions in various ministries as helper to the church.

- i. The deacon helps in the ministry related to the Lord's supper.
 - a. Assumes responsibilities for all requirements before and after the services.
 - b. Assists the pastor in the preparation and distribution of the Lord's supper.
- ii. The ministry related to baptismal services
 - a. Shares in the interviewing of baptismal candidates before they give their testimony to the church.
 - b. Give necessary instruction to the candidates before baptism.
 - c. Help in the function connected with the actual baptismal service.
- iii. Assume the responsibility for the hospitality of guest speakers and visitors in the church setting.
- iv. Show leadership in hospitality, friendliness to strangers in the church. The Board of Deacons should unofficially be a welcoming committee.
- v. He should be an example in testimony and witness.

THE SELECTION OF THE DEACON

When we come to the sections dealing with the selection of the deacon, the ordination, and the term of office, we come to the matters that can be considered the problem areas. What we practice as Mennonite Brethren churches can possibly best be illustrated by a quote from Brother D. D. Duerksen's report on Practises Regarding the Diaconate in Mennonite Brethren Churches, based on the response by sixty churches to a recent questionnaire. "In fifty-six cases, candidates are nominated. Out of these, fifty churches have secret nominations. Fifty-three replies indicated that every member is eligible to nominate. Of those who replied to the question 'Who is excluded?', the following is indicated - members not in good standing, non-immersed members. It can probably be assumed that these reservations would apply to the case of all churches, even though this is not indicated. Only in four cases are deacons appointed. In two of these cases, appointments are made by the Church Council, in one case by the pastor and the deacons, in one case by the church itself. (How is not indicated)." That we are not in entire agreement in the matter of selection of the deacon is seen by this report.

PRINCIPLES OF ELECTION

Are there any principles laid down in the New Testament which should help us in this vital aspect of the diaconate? Let us look again at Acts 6 to see what we can learn concerning the method of selecting the deacon.

- (1) The expression "Look ye out among you seven men" implies that the candidates were to be carefully examined. How they went about doing this we are not told, other than that certain qualifications were to be evident.
- (2) Another expression of significance is "And they choose" - they, the people, did the choosing. It was not the apostles who did the choosing, and then set their choices before the people. R.B. Howell is quite emphatic on this point. "The ministry have no right to ordain any man to the deaconship not previously elected by the church to that office. The consent of the church is positively necessary. Otherwise, he would be a deacon at large, having no place in which to exercise his functions. On the other hand, though brethren may be elected by the church, they are still, unless ordained by the ministry, not deacons. There must be a concurrence between the church and the ministry to create the officer."¹³
- (3) The statement, "Whom we may appoint over this business" gives a further principle. The multitude elect, the apostles appoint.
- (4) Closely related to this is the truth gleaned from the words, "Whom they set before the apostles". The people presented their choices to the apostles, who approved them and ordained them and set them to the necessary business.
- (5) This scripture also bears out the principle that election takes place when the need arises. "The Lord did not furnish his church with an apparatus of government already complete. He did give his Holy Spirit by whom the church was to be guided according to emergencies and needs of the time".¹⁴

PROCEDURE OF ELECTION

On the subject of procedure, Brother R. M. Baerg has a good paragraph, and I quote,

"For all practical purposes for the church of today, it would seem advisable that the following procedure, or one similar to it, be used in the election of brethren to the diaconate. First, the church should be thoroughly prepared by instruction from the Word as to the qualifications and duties of the deacon. Second, much prayer and fasting should precede the selection of candidates for office. Third, each member should be given opportunity to indicate his candidate, this being done on a secret ballot. Fourth, these ballots carefully tabulated, the ones with the highest number of votes should be considered possible candidates for election; however, their candidacy should not become public until the church council has reviewed the list of candidates, having secured each one's personal willingness to serve and thus to allow the council to place their names on the ballot for final election. Fifth, the candidates, having been reviewed, their names would be placed on a ballot and submitted to the church for publication. Sixth, adequate time should be given the church to consider the candidates for election,

13. R. B. Howell, The Deaconship, Valley Forge, The Judson Press, 1946, p. 56

14. Joseph Exell, The Biblical Illustrator, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1954. Exposition on Acts Vol. I, p. 534

after which the election may be effected. This particular procedure, or at least one similar to it has the advantage of carefully reviewing the candidates for the high office of the diaconate and of securing only those who are willing to serve. Hasty elections and rash decisions are thus avoided. All in all, much prayer and spiritual instruction must go into any church election." ¹⁵

THE ORDINATION OF DEACONS

The subject of ordination of deacons as it has been practised in the Mennonite Brethren Churches is seriously being questioned today. Again, referring to the Report on Practises Regarding the Diaconate in the Mennonite Brethren Churches by Brother Duerksen, we note the following: "Forty-nine responses indicate that churches practise ordination. In seven cases, ordination is not practised, four are doubtful." The question is not so much whether ordination has scriptural basis, but rather whether the Mennonite Brethren view of it is altogether scriptural. Is it possible that we have added certain aspects that cannot really find support in Scripture? There can be no question about the fact that the seven chosen by the people in Acts 6 were set apart for their office by the laying on of hands, and the Lord's blessing invoked upon them. From New Testament references such as Acts 13:3 (the appointment of missionaries), and I Timothy 4:4, 5:22, II Timothy 1:6 (the appointment of elders), it seems apparent that the early church had adopted this procedure. This laying on of hands has come to be known as ordination.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ORDINATION

What is the significance of this act? "The New Testament pictures the laying on of hands as the recognition of the gift already given through faith. Certainly, Christ did not elevate the laying on of hands to sacramental power... Luke was careful to mention that the seven ministers of mutual aid described in Acts 6:1-6 already were filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom before hands were laid upon them. Paul reminded Timothy of the time hands were laid upon him, and offered this as an added reason why Timothy should kindle or develop to the full his God-given gift, but said that the gift was given by prophetic utterance. Paul did not say that the laying on of hands actually conferred the gift. Rather, it is implied that some brethren with prophetic insight discerned the gifts Timothy had, which qualified him for leadership. Then Paul laid hands upon him as a public recognition of his gift, and gave to him an official charge to use it to serve the church." ¹⁶ In connection with this Brother Victor Adrian stated, "This would suggest that before the people or the congregation publicly ordained the man for a specific task, there was the inner call by the Holy Spirit in terms of gifts given to qualify the man for the work. The laying on of hands was the recognition of this inner call and induement by the Spirit, and an association or an

15. Baerg, The Scriptural Pattern of the Diaconate, p. 6

16. Paul M. Miller, Servant of God's Servants, Scottdale, Herald Press 1964, p. 204

identification with the call to the ministry by the Brethren of the congregation." ¹⁷

THE VALUE OF ORDINATION

That a definite distinction has arisen in our Brotherhood between the ordination to the ministry and the ordination to the diaconate cannot be denied. How this distinction has come about is difficult to ascertain. Scripture does not allow for two kinds of laying on of hands. "The laying on of hands on the seven brethren for the sacred task of serving in the sphere of the temporality, indicates the greatness of this office and enhances this ministry before the membership of the church. Any tendency to lower the status of the diaconate, constitutes a violation of the Biblical pattern. Inasmuch as there was no distinction between the laying on of hands on Paul and Barnabus (Acts 13) and on the seven (Acts 6) the former being ordained to missionary service, the latter to the temporal duties of the church, we do injustice by making distinctions between the ordination to the ministry of the Word, and the ministry of tables." ¹⁸

THE TERM OF SERVICE OF THE DEACON

Current reaction against the ordination of the deacon is closely related to the matter dealing with the term of service. The concept of "Once a deacon, always a deacon", has not always worked out in practical situations, nor does it appear to have any scriptural basis. God has established two permanent offices in the church to administer its affairs, the bishop, elder or overseer, and the deacon, but the New Testament says nothing to warrant the conferring of a lifetime place in the office. Ordination undoubtedly has come to mean this in our congregations. According to our practice, the only factors to determine the termination of the services of ordained deacons are spiritual disqualifications, age, health and death. By this rather rigid pattern it has been hoped that the diaconate be maintained in an elevated position. The fact is that the result has too frequently been to the contrary. If ordination is an act of public recognition that certain gifts given by the Holy Spirit are manifest in an individual, then the deacon should continue in the office as long as these gifts are exercised in his ministry. Most of our churches do not require a periodic vote of confidence. It is feared that such action would lower the office of the diaconate. The church who recognizes that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still operative will without fail continue to lend its support and confidence. The effect of the confidence vote will be two-fold. The deacon will be encouraged to continue, and the congregation will be willing to give heed to him in whom they have confidence. A deacon who attempts to serve without the confidence of the congregation cannot function effectively.

What happens, however, to a deacon who leaves his assignment? Or what happens if the task assigned is no longer existent? If we agree with the principle that the congregation has the right to choose its own deacon,

17. Adrian, The Ministry of the Deacon, p. 6-7

18. Baerg, The Scriptural Pattern of the Diaconate, p. 6

then we must conclude that a deacon ceases to function as a deacon until the new congregation to which the deacon has joined himself has come to recognize in him the qualifications required for service. It is interesting to note that the pastor in our church is not appointed to a lifetime assignment. He is subject to a vote of confidence at regular intervals, as agreed upon by the church. If he leaves his assignment, he ceases to function in the office until a church extends a call to him to take up a new office. Ministers other than pastors are frequently set aside by an automatic process, by which they are merely just not called upon to minister the Word. In both of these cases we hold that ordination is for life. That the act of ordination cannot be undone is understood, but what we need to come to fully understand is that this does not imply that the office to which a deacon has been appointed cannot be set aside by him or be taken from him. Devious ways have been sought to accomplish this deposition, often with lasting damage to the person and the church involved. We have held that the appointment is for life, but somehow, it has not always worked out so well in actual practice. Since the New Testament does not expound on the tenure of office, it should be the prerogative of the congregation to find the most practical way to determine the length of service for the deacon. The dignity of the office will only be enhanced if the ministry of the deacon will be prayerfully reviewed periodically. Such review would include a personal testimony by the deacon in relationship to his experiences and conviction in the diaconate; and an evaluation by the church of his ministry before a vote of confidence be taken.

In the light of what has been said earlier, ordination should take place even though the length of service could conceivably be terminated after a given period. However, it should be noted that the term of service should not be so short as to require frequent changes. This could easily affect the moral power of the office and introduce an undesirable element of instability. A governed term of service would also provide for entrance of other men into service, who with new energy and abilities, could help to keep the functions of the diaconate progressive.

THE CONCEPT OF THE DEACONESS

The New Testament teaching on the diaconate cannot be considered complete without also dealing with the subject of the deaconess.

It is generally understood in our church that the wife of the deacon is included in the work of the diaconate. However, the emphasis has always been on the husband to the degree where the woman and her function has almost entirely been disregarded.

Does the New Testament make provision for the deaconess? Authorities¹⁹ generally agree that the deaconess was included in the apostolic churches. In Romans 16:1 Paul refers to Phebe as diakonos. She is not called a deaconess very likely because that word was not coined until after the close of the New Testament.²⁰ According to the Revised Version I Timothy 3:11 reads, "Women in like manner...". This can be understood as meaning something quite different from "Even so must their wives be grave...". There

19. Howell, The Deaconship, pp. 115-116

20. Baerg, The Scriptural Pattern of the Diaconate, p. 7

appears to be room for unmarried women serving in the diaconate. "Paul would be the last one to select both husband and wife for an office and assign to the wife duties that would take her away from home and children."²¹

There are many occasions where a deacon cannot extend help and counsel to women. The deaconess must therefore assume sympathetic oversight, otherwise the women can easily become an area of neglect within the church. Phebe was a servant, subordinate to the church, that she might fill a need for which she was especially fitted and specifically appointed. The need in the churches today is great enough to warrant a thorough reconsideration of our concept of the deaconess.

CONCLUSION

That the diaconate is a permanent and very essential office in the church is without question. The Mennonite Brethren Church have reaped untold benefits from many who have served faithfully in the capacity called upon by the church. A continued emphasis on the ministry of the diaconate is imperative for the spiritual welfare and growth of the church. May the Lord grant unto us the vision of the true biblical pattern of the diaconate.

21. Kenneth S. Wuest, The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament For the English Reader, Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952, p. 61

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