

CHAPTER II.
OFFICERS OF A CHURCH.

It cannot be said that officers are essential to the *existence* of a church; for a church must exist before it can appoint its officers. After this appointment, if, in the providence of God, they should be removed by death, it might affect the interests, but not the *being* of the church. It has been well said by an able writer, that “although officers are not necessary to the *being* of a church, they are necessary to its *wellbeing*.” No church can reasonably expect to prosper which does not obey the law of its Head in regard to the appointment of officers. It is obvious, too, from the teachings of the New Testament that pastors and deacons are the permanent officers of Christian churches. Paul, referring to Christ’s ascension gifts, says: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” Eph. iv. 11, 12. Apostles, prophets, and evangelists filled extraordinary and temporary offices. There are no such offices now. Pastors and teachers, the same men, are the ordinary and permanent spiritual officers of the churches while the office of deacon has special reference to the secular interests of churches. Of these offices in order:

I. PASTOR. – This term was first applied to ministers having oversight of churches, because there is a striking analogy between such a minister and a literal shepherd. A shepherd has under his charge a flock, for which he must care, and for whose wants he must provide. The sheep and the lambs must be looked after. The Lord Jesus, “the great shepherd of the sheep,” the chief Shepherd, virtually says to all his under-shepherds, as he did to Peter, “Feed my sheep,” “Feed my lambs.” It is worthy of remark that this language was not addressed to Peter till the

Saviour obtained from him an affirmative answer to the question three times propounded, “Lovest thou me?” As if he had said, “I love my spiritual flock so well, I cannot entrust the sheep and lambs composing it to any many who does not love me.” And love to Christ must be regarded in all ages and in all places as the pastor’s supreme qualification. All other qualifications are worthless if this is absent. Talent and learning are not to be undervalued; but they must be kept under the control of piety, and receive its sanctifying impress. With regard to the pastoral office, there are two things worthy of special consideration.

1. *The Work of Pastors.* – Truly theirs is a work. Paul says, “If any man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” It is indeed a good work – the best work on earth – but a *work*. We must not suffer the term bishop to suggest any such idea as the word in its modern acceptation implies. In apostolic times there were no bishops having charge of the churches of a district of country, a province, or a kingdom. A bishop was a pastor of a church, and the New Testament, so far from encouraging a plurality of churches under one pastor, refers, in two instances at least, to a plurality of pastors in one church. See Acts xx. 28; Phil. i. 1. In the former passage the elders of the church at Ephesus are called *overseers*, and the word thus translated is the same rendered *bishop* Phil. i. 1; 1 Tim. iii. 2; Titus i. 7; 1 Peter ii. 25. Thus does it appear that pastor, bishop, and elder are three terms designating the same office. This view is farther confirmed by a reference to Peter v. 1, 2, where elders are exhorted to feed the flock – that is, to perform the office of pastor or shepherd – taking the oversight thereof, etc. – that is, acting the part of bishops or overseers. For the word translated *taking the oversight* belongs to the same family of words as the term rendered bishop in the passages cited. It is plain, therefore, that a pastor’s work is the spiritual oversight of the flock, the church he serves. Like a good literal shepherd he must care for the feeble and the sick, as well as for the healthy and the

vigorous. Some he can feed with “strong food,” while others can digest nothing stronger than “milk.” He must exercise a sanctified discretion, and “*study* to show himself approved to God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Much depends on dividing the word of truth *rightly*; and hence the necessity of study – prayerful study, imbued with the spirit of the Master. The administration of ordinances as well as the preaching of the word is the proper business of the pastor. It does not accord with the plan of this volume to elaborate any topic, and therefore the work of the pastor can not be enlarged on, nor is there room to present the many motives to pastoral fidelity. The mention of two must suffice: the church, over whose interests the pastor watches, has been “bought with the precious blood of Christ;” and the faithful pastor will, when “the chief Shepherd” comes, “receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” What motives to diligence and faithfulness could possess more exhaustless power!

2. *The Authority of Pastors.* – All things earthly are liable to abuse, and that feature of congregational church government which places all the members on an equality in the transaction of church business, has been, in some instances at least, suffered to interfere with the deference due to pastors. There is a class of Scriptures whose import is not sufficiently considered – such as the following: “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.” “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.” “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken to you the word of God.” “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account.” In these passages pastors are referred to, and there is claimed for them an authority not belonging to other

church members. They are to be esteemed highly for their work's sake. Whatever esteem their personal merits may excite, they are to be chiefly esteemed for the great and glorious work in which they are engaged. On account of this work they are to be regarded worthy of "double honor," that is, special honor. This surely is reasonable, for pastors are chosen by the churches over which they preside. The churches act voluntarily, and the love which prompts the choice of a pastor should secure for him reverential respect in the performance of his duties. The words *rule*, *obey*, and *submit* in the foregoing quotations mean something. The ruling is not unrestricted, neither is the obedience and submission. The pastor is to rule *in accordance with the law of Christ*. No other kind of rule is legitimate or obligatory; but when he rules in accordance with the will of Christ, obedience and submission on the part of the members of the church, are imperative duties. Andrew Fuller well says, "It is in this view, as teaching *divine* truth, and enforcing *divine* commands, that the servants of God, in all ages, have been invested with *divine* authority." (Complete Works. Vol. I. p. 197) It may be added that this is the only sense in which men can be invested with divine authority.

Distinguished scholars are of opinion that the two passages quoted, which refer to ruling, should be translated thus: "Remember your leaders," etc. "Obey your leaders," etc. Admitting the correctness of this rendering – and it cannot be denied – still the idea would not be essentially different. Pastors in leading their flocks do, in one sense, rule them; and in the only sense in which they should rule them. While the proper exercise of pastoral authority is essential to the spiritual welfare of a church, pastors must beware of assuming a power which does not belong to them. They must remember the words of Peter: "Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." There must be, in the exercise of pastoral authority, nothing like priestly lordship or clerical despotism; but the influence of pastors must grow out of the fact that

they faithfully obey the will of Christ, the great Shepherd, and thus set an example worthy of imitation. There is nothing which gives a pastor so much influence as unreserved consecration to the work of the Lord. As the influence of judicious pastors increases, the more they are known, the pastoral relation should be rendered as permanent as possible. It should not be dissolved for any slight cause. As to the custom of some churches that choose their pastors annually, it would be difficult to say too much in condemnation of it. It is vastly injurious both to pastors and churches. Pastors should be chosen for an indefinite period. If the work of the Lord prospers under their labors, well; if they find after a sufficient trial, that they are not accomplishing good, let them resign.

II. DEACONS. The office of deacon originated in a state of things referred to in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. It is said that, “when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.” The “Grecians” were Jews as well as the Hebrews, but they spoke the Greek language, and were probably not natives of Palestine. The members of the church at Jerusalem “had all things in common,” and a distribution was made out of the common stock “as every man had need.” This seems to have been done at first under the immediate direction of the apostles; and the intimation is that the large increase of the church interfered with an impartial distribution of supplies. The apostles saw that, if they made it their personal business to “serve tables,” it would greatly hinder their work in its spiritual aspects. 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 Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”

Thus the creation of the office of deacon recognizes the fact that the duties of pastors are preeminently spiritual; and that they should not be burdened with the secular interests of the churches. The opinion has been entertained by some that the deaconship was designed to be temporary. The argument is, that the office was created because the property of the church at Jerusalem had been thrown together into a common stock, and it was requisite to have officers to superintend and distribute it. Then the inference is drawn, that when the property of church members was no longer put into a common stock, the office of deacon was virtually abolished. This reasoning is more plausible than conclusive. In proof of this it may be said, that the members of the church at Jerusalem were not required to put their property into a common stock. It was a voluntary matter. Nor is there an intimation in the New Testament that any church, except the one at Jerusalem, ever adopted the common stock regulation. It was, doubtless, considered by that church a prudential arrangement, which involved temporary expediency rather than permanent principle. That the church at Antioch did not follow the example of the church at Jerusalem, in relation to this matter, is evident from Acts xi: 29. "Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren who dwelt in Judea." This *individual* determination shows that the property of the church was not in "common stock." And Paul's direction to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. xvi: 2) indicates that the Jerusalem policy had not been adopted. The same apostle, too, in his letter to the Philippians, and to Timothy refers to deacons. There was, therefore, a recognition of the deaconship when there was, so far as we know, no common property regulation. And more than this, the irresistible inference from Paul's first Epistle to Timothy, is that the office of deacon is as permanent as that of pastor. No one doubts that the office of pastor is to be perpetuated to the end of time. The conclusion is that the

deacons is permanent in the churches of Christ, and that pastors and deacons are the only permanent Scriptural church officers.

The words – “men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit, and wisdom” – applied to the first deacons, indicates that they were men of unblemished reputation, ardent piety, and good common sense. These qualifications should be sought in all who are appointed to the office of deacon. The phrase, “full of the Holy Spirit,” is an admirable description of fervent, elevated piety; and in the selection of deacons their spirituality must be regarded, for their duties are not exclusively secular. Their secular duties, however, should be performed in a spiritual frame of mind; and in this way “they purchase to themselves a good degree, and obtain great boldness in the faith.” In visiting the pious poor, to distribute the charities of the church, deacons must not perform the duty in a *formal* manner, but must inquire into the spiritual as well as the worldly circumstances of the recipients of the church’s bounty. They will often witness such an exhibition of faith, patience, gratitude, and resignation as will richly repay them for their labor of love. As occasion may require, they should report to the pastor such cases as need his special attention, and thus they will become a connecting link between the pastor and the needy ones of the church.

As deacons were appointed at first “to serve tables,” it may be well to say, there are three tables for them to serve: 1. *The table of the poor.* 2. *The table of the Lord.* 3. *The table of the pastor.* The pecuniary supplies to enable them to serve these tables must be furnished by the church. The custom of taking a collection for the poor when the Lord’s supper is administered is a good one, and worthy of universal adoption. It is suitable at the close of the solemn service to think of the pious poor, whom sickness or some other misfortune may have kept from the sacred feast.

As some pecuniary expenditure is necessary in furnishing the table of the Lord, this should be made through the deacons; and it is eminently proper, though not indispensable, for them to wait on the communicants in the distribution of the elements.

Deacons must serve the pastor's table. It is not for them to decide how liberally or scantily it shall be supplied. The church must make the decision, and enlarged views should be taken when it is made; for the energies of hundreds of pastors are greatly impaired by an incompetent support. The pastor's compensation having been agreed on by the church, the deacons must see that it is raised and paid over. They may appoint one of their number acting treasurer, who shall receive and pay out funds; but it should never be forgotten that deacons are by virtue of their office the treasurers of the church. To appoint any other member to act as treasurer is not warranted by Scripture.

As all pecuniary expenditures are to be made through deacons, they should at the end of every year, make a report to the church what monies they have received during the year, how they have been expended, etc. This will keep every thing straight and plain, while it will have no little to do with a church's influence and efficiency.

Deacons should be appointed for an indefinite period, and set apart to their offices by prayer and the laying on of hands. It is much to be regretted that many churches hold very loose views on these points. They attach very little importance to the deaconship, and seem to regard it very much as a clerkship, or a trusteeship. Indeed a few churches, to their shame be it said, elect their deacons annually; and of one of them it was once said, "Nearly every male member in it has at some time acted as deacon." This amounts almost to a degradation of the deaconship. And those holding these views and endorsing this practice *consistently* oppose the *ordination* of deacons. They see not the propriety of ordaining men to an office to which they attach so little

importance. Let deacons be chosen for an indefinite period and then let them be solemnly ordained according to the example given in Acts, vi. 6. “*When they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.*” Prayer is appropriate on all occasions, and laying on of hands is a token of designation to office. Some object to laying on of hands, supposing the design of this ceremony in apostolic times was the communication of the Holy Spirit. That the Spirit was sometimes given in connection with the imposition of hands is evident from Acts viii. 17; but the first deacons were chosen because they were already “full of the Holy Spirit.” Therefore the laying on of hands was not for the purpose of conferring the Holy Spirit, but of designating to office. This is the object of the ceremony now, and no one who has scriptural views supposes there is a bestowal of extraordinary gifts. It is the custom in some places to lay on hands in ordination during prayer. This is not according to scriptural example. Whenever prayer and laying on of hands are referred to in connection with each other, as in Acts vi. 6; xiii. 3, it is evident that prayer was *first* offered – then followed imposition of hands – to be seen and known as a designation to office, but which could not without a violation of propriety be seen during prayer. It is very desirable that all the churches adopt the practice of ordaining deacons by prayer and the laying on of hands. It adds to the influence of the deaconship when induction into it is accompanied by appropriate services.

While pastors and deacons are the only permanent Scriptural church officers, it is a prudential arrangement in all churches to have a clerk; and owing to the requirements of the civil law in some places, it is necessary to have trustees. The business of the clerk of a church is of course to keep a record of the proceedings of the body. To secure accuracy in the record, at every business meeting the proceedings of the previous meeting should be read, corrected, (if correction is necessary,) and approved by the church. Trustees are generally the legal custodians

of the church property, and are chosen by the church. They have an official existence, because by civil statute it is required that the legal right to property be vested in individuals. It follows, therefore, that the manner of appointing trustees depends on the nature of the civil statute regulating the matter, and may be different in different States. If the statute permits the church to choose all the trustees, it is so done. If the *congregation* is permitted to have an agency in the election, then most probably the *church* will select so many and the congregation so many. This will depend, as has been said, on the civil statute. Most usually the church selects the whole number, and chooses from its own membership which is the better plan.

The province of trustees is quite restricted. They have nothing to do with the spiritual affairs of the church. They cannot control the house of worship, saying how it shall be used, or who shall preach in it, and who shall not. The church must do all this. As church members the trustees may with other members decide what shall be done with church property, whether the house of worship shall be sold and another built, etc., etc.; but *as trustees* they can do nothing in these matters. When the church so *orders*, they may convey or receive title to property, sue in the courts, etc., but their business as trustees is exclusively secular. They cannot in the capacity of trustees perform any spiritual function. A practical remembrance of this fact would have saved not a few churches from trouble.

It is said that in some churches the trustees fix the salaries of pastors; and from time to time increase or diminish them according to their pleasure – that they employ choirs, buy organs, engage sextons, etc., etc. All this is utterly indefensible. Trustees have not a particle of right to do these things. The government of a church is with its members. The churches must say what pastors' salaries shall be, whether music shall be led by choirs, with the aid of instruments or not, etc., etc. Nothing must be done which infringes the fundamental doctrine of church

independence. It is well worthy of the consideration of the churches whether they should have trustees distinct from deacons. Would it not be better for every church to merge its trusteeship into its deaconship? We do not hesitate to answer this question in the affirmative. Trustees attend to *some* of the secular interests of the churches, and *all* these interests should be under the management of the deacons. They were appointed originally for this very purpose, and a full discharge of the duties of their office would supersede the necessity of trustees. Should the churches practically adopt this view, it might be necessary, in some cases, to increase the number of deacons. This could be done. The probability, too, is that the plan here recommended would secure a better deaconship in many churches; for they make it a point to select their best business men for trustees. These are the very men for deacons. But the supreme argument in favor of this arrangement is, that it is scriptural while there is no scriptural authority for trustees as distinct officers.