

THE Union Seminary Magazine

VOL. XVIII

APRIL—MAY, 1907

No. 4

THE ELDER AND THE DEACON IN SCRIPTURE.

By REV. T. R. ENGLISH, D. D.

The most primitive form of government known to man is that in which authority is exercised by those superior in age and wisdom, "elders;" and the first who filled this office was Adam, the natural head and ruler of his house. Traces of this primitive custom are still to be seen in the names applied to rulers at the present time, such as, "senators," "alderman," etc.

The term "elder," as an official title, occurs first in Genesis 1. 7, where mention is made of "the elders of Egypt." At the time of the Exodus we find "the elders of Israel" exercising authority over that people, nor was the institution by any means confined to that people, as we find mention also of the elders of Moab and Midian, (Num. xxii. 4, 7). From this time on to the close of the Old Testament, we find constant mention made of these "elders of Israel," and, besides these, each tribe and city and village seems to have had its own elders, who exercised a local and subordinate authority.

These elders were primarily civil rulers, as is manifest by their functions, but they had also their religious and ecclesiastical functions as well. When the synagogue made its appearance after the Exile, we find that each synagogue had its bench of elders, and while they apparently still exercised certain civil functions, it is evident that they were primarily ecclesiastical rulers. They are referred to in the New Testament as "the rulers of the synagogue" (Mark v. 22; Acts xiii. 15; Cf. also, Luke vii. 41), and also as "the elders of the Jews" (Luke vii. 3). Apparently, there was one of their number who acted as pre-

siding officer, and hence spoken of as "the ruler of the synagogue" (Mark v. 35, 36, 38, Luke viii. 49, xiii. 14), and also as "the chief ruler of the synagogue" (Acts xviii. 8, 17). If we may trust the statements of rabbinical writers, these elders were elected by the people, examined and ordained, and were the only officers who were ordained, even those who "preached" not being required to submit to this rite until a late period. (Edersheim). As rulers of the synagogue, they had charge of the services, and it was their prerogative to designate the persons who were to read the scriptures and the prayers, and also to address the people, or preach, as may be seen in the incident related in Acts xiii. 15ff., where Paul and Barnabas were invited by them to address the people in the synagogue in Antioch. While it is not expressly stated that these elders themselves taught the people and expounded the scriptures, it is more than probable that they had the right, and did so whenever occasion required, as seems to be implied in the fact that they were examined and ordained, and it would be passing strange if they could give authority to others to do what they themselves had no right to do.

Such, in brief, was the situation in the Jewish Church at the beginning of the Christian dispensation. Be it remembered that there was never any formal organization of the Christian Church, as distinguished from the Jewish. It gradually developed out of the latter, as the fruit follows the flower, without any clear line of separation between the two. Just as the Methodist Church began in the bosom of the Established Church, without so much as a dream of separation at first, so looking at it from a human standpoint, the Christian Church, as it is popularly called, grew out of the Jewish, without any thought of separation upon the part of those who first composed it. It was pre-eminently a growth and development, and hence we may look for no more than a gradual modification of existing institutions and customs, as occasion might demand.

When we come to the New Testament we find the term "elder," as an official designation in the Christian Church, occurring eighteen times, besides a number of other passages where the office is clearly referred to, though the term "elder" is not used. The first mention occurs in Acts xi. 30, at least a decade and a half after Pentecost, and about midway of the

period covered by the Book of Acts, where aid was sent by the Antiochan Church to the famine-stricken brethren at Jerusalem, and was put in the hands of the elders of the church. No mention is made whatever of the institution of such an office, and it is evident that this institution, so familiar to these Christian Jews, had quietly and naturally found a place among these people who practically, though not formally, had separated from the synagogue. The next mention is in Acts xiv. 23, some two or three years later, when we find Paul and Barnabas "ordaining elders in every city" among their Gentile converts.

But what were the functions of these elders? We would naturally expect that they would conform very closely to those of the same officials in the synagogue, excluding, of course, all civil functions, but this presumption must be confirmed by more positive and direct evidence.

That they exercised rule is clear not only from their position in the Jewish Church, but we find them sitting in the council at Jerusalem, and in conjunction with the apostles, deciding a question submitted to them by the church at Antioch, (Acts xv. 2, 6, 22, etc.). In 1 Tim. v. 17, we read of "the elders that rule well." Three times in the Epistle to the Hebrews mention is made of "them that have the rule over you" (xiii. 7, 17, 24), where the reference is clearly to the elders, at least in part.

But ruling, in the narrow sense, was not their sole function. We find that elders or "presbyters," (the Greek form of elder, and hence "presbytery" and "presbyterian"), were also called "bishops," (overseers), as may be seen by referring to Titus i. 5, 7, where these two terms are undeniably used interchangeably. This is also apparent from Paul's address to the "elders" of Ephesus, (Acts xx. 7), whom he exhorts to "take heed to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops." (xx. 28, R. V.). In this same passage he charges them to "feed" the church of God, so that it devolved upon them, not only to rule the church, but to give them spiritual food, even as a shepherd feeds as well as rules his flock. Indeed the word rendered "feed" means to act the part of a "shepherd" or "pastor," and includes all the functions of such an office.

Among the qualifications required in the elders, whom Titus was to ordain in every city in Crete, occurs this: "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able

by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince gainsayers." (Titus i. 9.) In the parallel passage, 1 Tim. iii. 2-7, it is required of bishops that they should be "apt to teach." Now, when it is borne in mind that "elder" and "bishop" are unquestionably used interchangeably in the first of these passages, and by parity of reasoning in the second, and elsewhere; and when we bear in mind the fact that these are the only two passages in which the qualifications of elders and bishops are specifically set forth, and when we further remember that in both of these passages the teaching, as well as the ruling function, clearly appears, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that religious instruction was one of the prime functions of the New Testament elder. Indeed, if the elders ordained by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary tour did not preach and teach by virtue of their office, who gave instruction to these infant churches and conducted their worship when the apostles left them for other fields of labor, and whence did they get their first "preacher"? and who taught the church in Crete so recently founded? That these primitive elders were responsible for the religious instruction of the people, as well as for their government, is perfectly clear, but that some of them were ordained specifically to preach, while others were specifically restricted to the function of rule, cannot, we believe, be demonstrated, to say the least of it; and in view of all the circumstances of the case, it seems far more likely that among these elders those whose gifts fitted them more especially for such work, naturally and gradually devoted themselves to the work of public teaching. The first and only passage in which this distinction appears is 1 Tim. v. 17, in which Paul says: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine." As we understand it, the point which the apostle is making here is that fidelity upon the part of church rulers should be recognized and rewarded, and if, on the other hand, this fidelity is lacking, they should be reprov'd before all upon proper evidence (vs. 19, 20). The fundamental idea underlying the office of elder is that of authority, and this passage might be paraphrased in some such way as this: "Let all faithful rulers in the church be counted worthy of all honor (*i. e.*, maintenance and respect), and especially those engaged in the arduous work of giving public instruction." It is true that

our form of government distinguishes sharply between the teaching and ruling elder, requiring a separate and distinct ordination for each, and we believe that, by reason of changed circumstances, such an arrangement is eminently wise and desirable, if not absolutely necessary, but we fail to find a "thus saith the Lord for it," as in the case of many other wise regulations in our Book of Church Order. In our judgment, an elder has far more authority to "preach" than an unlicensed theological student, and while we do not advocate the formal and authoritative preaching of the Word by either, we long to see the day when our so-called ruling elders will come to realize that they are truly "pastors," and will seek to "feed the church of God," bound by their office to be teachers of religion, and to watch for souls, even though they may not stand in the sacred desk and formally preach the Word.

We have dwelt so long upon the elder that we have but little space left in which to speak of the other part of our topic—the Deacon in Scripture; nor is this to be especially regretted, seeing that there is but little said in Scripture as to this office.

It is generally held that the office had its prototype in the synagogue, and was derived from it, just as in the case of the elder, but this is doubtful to say the least of it, and is denied by many competent antiquarians. In the New Testament it is usually traced to the incident of the appointment of the Seven, recorded in Acts vi. 1-6, but it is by no means certain that these seven were deacons in this sense, and some competent scholars take the view that this was only a temporary arrangement to meet an emergency. In support of this view, attention is called to the fact that these men are not called "deacons" in the narrative; that there is no further reference to the existence of such a body in the church at Jerusalem; that upon a later occasion, when Paul and Barnabas carried relief to the brethren in Jerusalem, they delivered it to the elders, and not the deacons; that the first indisputable mention of the office occurs in Phil. i. 1, more than thirty years after Pentecost; and that the institution of the diaconate would normally follow, and not precede, that of the higher and more important office of the eldership. These considerations are not without weight, but, while it may not have been the actual beginning of this office, it was at least the forerunner of it, and forecasted the duties of the office.

In contrast with the elder, the deacon is mentioned by name in only two passages in the Bible, the word itself, as an official designation, occurring but five times, leaving out certain disputed passages. In the first of these passages (Phil. i. 1), the deacons are simply mentioned along with the "saints" and "bishops" (*i. e.*, private members and elders) as one of the constituent elements of the church, so that the passage throws no light upon the nature of the office or its functions. In the other passage (1 Tim. iii. 8-13), the apostle sets forth first of all the qualifications of the deacon, which are all moral and spiritual, and are almost identical with those of the elder or bishop. In the case of the latter the church is warned against the danger of committing the office to "a novice" (1 Tim. iii. 6), and so with reference to these inferior officers it is provided: "And let them first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless" (vs. 10). Furthermore, while the office is inferior in dignity and usefulness to that of the elder, yet it is by no means to be despised, "for they that have used the office of a deacon well, purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (vs. 13).

It is a noteworthy fact that if we leave out of view the narrative in Acts vi. 1-6, there is not a word in scripture as to the duties of deacons, and hence a variety of views as to the proper scope of their duties. We might say something about the so-called "deaconesses" in the New Testament, but our limits forbid the discussion of this vexed question at this time.