

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE PROPOSED PERMANENT DIACONATE.

BY W. GUY JOHNSON.

AMONG the more urgent of the problems which the Church has to face at the present time, the alarming drop in the number of the men who are applying for admission to the ranks of its ordained ministry has a foremost place. It is true that the ex-Service candidates, now being trained, offer for the moment an additional source of supply, but when this is exhausted the problem will assume a still graver and more urgent aspect. There will not only be the shortage of clergy, but with this will come the inevitable temptation to lessen the period of their training, inadequate as it already is, and if this were done it would mean a fatal lowering of the educational standard of the clergy at a time when that of the laity is steadily rising.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the subject of the shortage of the clergy, but we may take leave to express a doubt whether the reasons frequently given afford a sufficient explanation of its causes. The inadequacy of clerical stipends, the uncertainty of promotion and similar reasons no doubt have their effect, but the causes must be sought also in those wider and more subtle influences which have been tending for years past to keep men away from Church, and indeed from any organized form of Christianity. It is important to take account of this, for it is obvious that the same causes would be likely, in a measure, to operate also against the complete success of whatever remedies or palliatives may be proposed.

One of these, which is being very strongly urged in some quarters, is the creation or revival of what is called the permanent diaconate. There are some difficulties attaching to the subject, not the least of them being the different views of the origin and functions of the office of deacon and the purpose to be served by the new order, or modification of the order, which have emerged in the course of recent discussions. It is proposed that the statutes disqualifying the clergy from engaging in secular occupations shall be amended, as far at least as the Order of Deacons is concerned, so that men

earning their living in other professions or trades may be ordained to the office of deacon, with the definite understanding that they shall not proceed to the priesthood, and shall devote as much of their time as possible to assisting the Incumbent. It is generally understood, and would no doubt be the case, that this work would be unpaid. Among the reasons offered in support of the proposal is that it would be a reversion to the practice of the primitive Church, where the Diaconate appears to have been a definite office, and not, as with us, merely a short probationary step to the presbyterate.

Before examining the proposal itself, it may be as well to consider the actual needs of the situation which has elicited it. We can then judge better as to how far it would meet them, and how far it is necessary to resort to a step of such magnitude, in view of the fact that the Church has only within the last half-century called into existence a body of episcopally licensed Lay Readers and Preachers for this very purpose.

In many parishes, of course, the inconvenience of the diminishing number of clergy is not felt. This is the case in rural districts where the population of the parishes is small and the Incumbent would not in any case require a curate, and in some town parishes, usually at either extreme of the social scale, which afford attractive spheres of work. But in a large number of parishes there is a steadily increasing difficulty in obtaining curates, though they are very urgently needed. This means that the active responsibility for the organization of the parish, as well as for its spiritual work, falls upon the Incumbent. The establishment of parochial Church Councils with definite financial powers and responsibility, and with the duty of co-operating with him in the work of the parish should, and probably will, relieve him very considerably, not only in regard to finance, but also in the general parochial organization and work, much of which it has usually been the duty of the curate to arrange and supervise. But the curate assists the Vicar in another way as well, by taking part in the services of the Church or Mission Hall and by preaching, and, as time goes on, some means will have to be devised to increase this assistance if clergy who are single-handed are not to break down from overstrain. This is the particular need which the class—I may not call it an "order"—of licensed Lay Readers and Preachers was created to meet. It was intended to

afford some relief and help to the Vicar or Rector, but not in the matter of "serving tables." Such relief, immensely important as it is, must be sought in other directions. That this latter was not the purpose of the office of Reader is quite clear from the discussions in Convocation and elsewhere, and also from the various regulations which have been issued in the different Dioceses where the scheme has been adopted.

The proposal before us, however, looks in another direction. It is suggested, as already stated, that the diaconate should be so modified as to permit the ordination as deacons of men who would continue their secular calling and would give such time as was left at their disposal to the work of their ministry; and that these deacons should remain permanently in that office, not proceeding to any higher order. There is a certain attractiveness about the proposal, and if there were any evidence of a widespread demand for it the experiment might well be tried, but most of the evidence points the other way. The London Diocesan Conference, a very representative body with a strongly independent outlook, rejected at their meeting last year, by a two-thirds majority, a recommendation of its own Committee that there should be "a re-examination, by proper authority, of the grounds, theological and practical, on which men in Holy Orders are at present debarred from the exercise of a secular calling."

It is not a pleasant task to raise objections to a proposal which is put forth seriously and in good faith by responsible men, especially when, as is the case in this Diocese,¹ it has the support of our own Bishop and the approval of the Diocesan Conference.

But there are some considerable difficulties in the way of its adoption. One of these is that we should have two distinct classes of deacons, those as we know them now, and the new permanent order. Chancellor P. V. Smith notices this in his article on the subject in the *CHURCHMAN* of April last, as a real objection, but his attempt to meet it is hardly convincing. Another is that the permanent deacon would occupy a somewhat anomalous position as being neither layman nor cleric. Chancellor Smith suggests that they would naturally be associated with the laity in Diocesan Conferences, etc., and even in the Lay House of the

¹ The substance of this paper was given at a meeting of clergy and laity of the Diocese of Southwark.

National Assembly. Nevertheless they would technically and in fact be included in the ranks of the clergy, unless we are to regard their ordination as different in some way from that of other deacons. From the practical point of view, advocates of the scheme must be prepared to face the fact that a reconstruction of the diaconate on such radical lines as would be involved if we were to class its members as laymen would have the unflinching opposition of the main body of the clergy, and that only a very limited number of laymen would be prepared to relinquish their lay status while possessing only a very limited ministry. I mean, of course, laymen of the class and standing who would be of any real service in the particular capacity now proposed.

A good deal of scorn has been poured upon the diaconate as at present existing in the Church of England. Chancellor Smith calls it an "Ecclesiastical Camouflage" and cites Dr. Arnold as saying that it "is extinct in all but name"; and there is a good deal said from time to time about reviving the ancient order. Certainly, we can hardly be said in strictness to possess three distinct "orders" if one is only a temporary and brief stepping-stone to the next—if it is merely the chrysalis stage of the priesthood. But there is just as much camouflage, to use the awkward and overworked expression employed by Chancellor Smith, in talking of *reviving* an order when you are simply attempting to revive one of its accidental features while completely altering its character and functions. If our deacons were to be made permanent they would no more represent the primitive deacons than they do now, unless, which is not suggested, we give to them an entirely different class of work. It is not necessary here to attempt any history of the diaconate or of the manner in which it evolved in the Western Church. The generally accepted view seems to be that of Bishop Lightfoot, who held that its origin is to be found in the appointment of the Seven as recorded in Acts vi. He wrote in the well-known essay on the Christian Ministry, "I have assumed that the office thus established represents the later diaconate; for though the point has been disputed I do not see how the identity of the two can reasonably be called into question." He also says, "Thus the work primarily assigned to the deacons was the relief of the poor. Their office was essentially a serving of tables as distinct from the higher function of preaching and instruction." It is true that

Professor Gwatkin in *Hastings' Bible Dictionary*, Art. "Deacons," and in his *Early Church History*, Chapter iv., differs as to the origin of the order being found in the appointment of the Seven, but he does not differ as to its functions. Dr. Armitage Robinson, in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, agrees with Bishop Lightfoot as to the functions, and, in a measure, the origin of the order. Unless, therefore, we are prepared to restore these functions, as well as the permanence of the office, it is far better not to talk of reviving the primitive order. As a matter of fact the primitive diaconate now finds its expression, though not its name, in our Church Sisters, Lay Helpers, Women Workers and District Visitors. Even its name is found in those cases where the Women Workers are called Deaconesses.

It has been suggested that the institution of this modified form of the Diaconate would provide a body of men who could mediate between the Incumbent and his parishioners, and where difficulties existed facilitate their removal, and generally promote a better understanding between clergy and laity. There does not as a rule appear to be much difficulty in the way of mutual understanding between the ordinary parson and his congregation or parishioners, but we may be permitted to doubt whether the mediation of a deacon of the new order would assist much, if at all, should such difficulty arise. Successful mediation of this kind demands personal qualities such as tact, judgment, character and general standing which have no necessary or definite relation to office or position. The Church of England supposes that the Bishop is the person to mediate when differences occur.

But a further objection to the proposal is that it ignores the existence of that large and increasingly influential body of Church workers created about fifty years ago to meet the very needs we are considering, which were even then being felt to a certain extent. The office of licensed Lay Reader and Preacher, parochial or diocesan, which was then established has been of the utmost service to the Church. Chancellor Smith, who regards it as only a palliative and not a remedy, and who himself was one of its most distinguished members, admits that "In many parishes it would have been impossible during the Great War to have kept up the regular worship of the Church without the assistance of these Lay Readers." This is very strong testimony, and much more could be furnished,

Why, then, should not an existing organization such as this, the value of which has been amply demonstrated, be developed and modified for the purpose in view? It is said to be "only a palliative, not a remedy." It is by no means clear that this is the case; but were it so, we must remember that the alternative is also only a palliative, and one, moreover, which affords no promise of being adopted on any adequate scale. An office which has successfully survived the initial stages of indifference and opposition; has proved its practical usefulness; has developed an esprit de corps, a compact organization for conference, co-operation and the promotion of study, has produced a very ably edited magazine now in its eighteenth year; and contains among its members men of such outstanding ability and character as Dr. Eugene Stock, Mr. G. A. King, Mr. Albert Mitchell, Mr. W. A. Kelk, Chancellor P. V. Smith, Mr. De Winton, Mr. H. C. King, Mr. C. E. Caesar, Col. Everitt, Col. Seton Churchill, to name only a few, is not one which should be lightly set on one side. We may be told that no such object is contemplated; but the success of the new scheme would either result in this or leave the office only for the less-qualified men, and we should moreover have a needless complication of orders or classes with deacons temporary and permanent, and lay and semi-lay workers which would cause much confusion and perhaps even jealousy.

The wisest course would obviously be to proceed along lines which have already proved fruitful of results and which have the potency of still greater things, rather than to attempt anything in the nature of an antiquarian revival alien to the whole atmosphere and spirit of the present age. It is said that there is a strong objection to lay ministrations in church and that this proceeds far more from the laity than from the clergy. This is true, though it is also true that the feeling is not now as strong or as general as it was a few years ago. It would, however, where it existed, apply with almost equal force to what would still be regarded as an essentially lay ministry, "camouflaged" (to use Chancellor Smith's word) by the intermittent use of a dog-collar. It is not likely that the objection to lay ministrations will long survive the growing realization of its need. Where the alternative is between having a clergyman or a layman to read or preach, the former will naturally be preferred; but where the alternative to lay assistance is either to have no services at all or to strain the Vicar to breaking-point,

there are not many congregations in which a matter of personal preference would ultimately be allowed to stand in the way of practical necessity.

The Regulations for Diocesan Readers have recently been revised and one of the most satisfactory aspects of the revision is the suggestion of special examinations and of a Diploma to be granted as a result of these. This, of course, would do much to stimulate the ideal of study amongst the Readers and would also furnish an objective to which their general reading and studies could be directed.

The new Regulations are, moreover, marked by the removal of some petty and needless restrictions, such as that which restrained the layman from the use of the pulpit. When we remember that the pulpit is only an elevated structure designed in order that a speaker or preacher should be more easily seen and heard, the unwisdom of such a restriction, which was very often disregarded, becomes apparent.

What is needed to meet the present case is a still further revision concerning those parts of the service which may be read by a layman, and possibly a provision that he may in cases of need be permitted to assist the clergyman by administering the cup at Holy Communion. There is no real question of principle involved in this. The cup may now be administered by a deacon, so that no function properly belonging to the priesthood is involved.

If some suitable revision of the scheme were made and the whole office regularized by proper authority, we should be then furnished with the means for providing in large measure for the situation in which the Church is placed. Something further, however, will still be needed. The clergy, and even more the congregations, must be ready to recognize and encourage the work of the Diocesan Reader. Most parishes should make it an object to provide one, and populous parishes more than one, for in urban districts at least there would be abundant opportunities of work for them even outside the Parish Church. There is one essential part of parochial work very largely neglected and very rarely done as it should be, the organization and conduct of open-air services, and this could well be developed by such lay agency. Like everything that is worth while, the movement will grow only by degrees, and may take a long time to become generally established; but at any rate it has passed the experimental stage, and it would be a grievous

waste of energy and machinery to give it a set-back now that its ripening usefulness has already obtained wide recognition.

It may be said in conclusion that if we suppose that any mere scheme of organization, or any plans of this kind, will of themselves effect the revolution so much needed in our religious and social life we shall be greatly disappointed. It is the duty of every individual member of the Church to endeavour, by prayer, by ceaseless effort, by love and mutual consideration to extend and deepen spiritual life, and to seek more of the Spirit of Christ, and so seek to raise the everyday standard of Christian living in order that the Church may give itself more unreservedly to that proclamation of the Gospel, still the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, which is its primary work.

W. GUY JOHNSON.

AN INDIAN PRINCESS.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN INDIAN PRINCESS. By Sunity, Devee Maharani of Cooch Behar. London: *John Murray*, 12s. net.

The daughter of Keshub Chunder Sen, one of the founders of the Brama-Somaj or Religion of the New Dispensation—a movement about which all students of Christian missions will know something—her betrothal and marriage to the Maharajah of Cooch Behar caused at the time much difficulty. This was eventually overcome, and the Maharani tells the story with feeling and candour. She herself is a woman to whom her religion is everything, and as one reads her confession of faith, one regrets that though she is not far from the Kingdom, she is yet not a Christian. Her story is one of an intensely happy married life, clouded only by the shadow of death. Moreover, it is the story of a life that has been for an Indian Princess singularly “full.” Perhaps one of the most interesting chapters is that in which she gives an account of her first visit to England for the Jubilee of 1887, and tells of many royalties and other notable persons whom she met and about whom she discourses frankly but always with unfailing good taste. She represents much that is best in native life and character, and she has given us a narrative of really absorbing interest. She commands our sympathy as in the closing pages she lets us look into a womanly heart and see the sorrow that has settled down over her life. The illustrations greatly add to the attractiveness of the volume.