

# Why we do not possess Bishops and Deacons.

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The question raised by your friend — "Why do we not possess Bishops and Deacons?" — is by no means a new one. It is a difficulty that many have found when enquiring into the principles of those who occupy the ground you and I do through grace.

It has been well remarked that the Catholic error confounds priesthood and ministry, and that Protestants mix together gifts and offices. This is unquestionably true. To the Romanist a minister is a priest, entitled to offer sacrifice and to stand between men and God. I need not stay to show that such a notion is virtually a denial of Christianity. The Jew needed a priest, most assuredly; but then (*i.e.*, before the Cross) the veil was unrent, redemption was unaccomplished, and God's people could not draw near to Him within the sanctuary, even though but an earthly one. But all is blessedly changed now. Redemption is now an accomplished fact and the Lord Jesus has gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God. The way into the holiest is now open and believers may draw near with boldness of faith. All believers are priests. In this there are no distinctions now, (Heb. 1: 3; Heb. 9: 11-12; Heb. 10: 11-22; 1 Peter 2: 5; Rev. 1: 5-6).

Ministry is as distinct from priesthood as from office. Ministry flows down from the risen and ascended Head, as Eph. 4 shows fully. The whole epistle to the Ephesians should be carefully pondered. It unfolds the blessing of the saints individually (Eph. 1), our union together as one body (Eph. 2), the revelation of the mystery concerning Christ and the Church (Eph. 3), and the gifts of Christ for the edification of His body below (Eph. 4) As I have said, all flow down from Him. We read, "When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" (v. 8). They are the result of His toil, the fruit of His victory. He went into the lowest depths in order to accomplish redemption, and to annul the power of Satan: He has now ascended far above all heavens, that He might fill all things. If the persons enumerated in v. 11 are "gifts," where does the Church come in, save as receiver? And where is there room for official men? Nearly all Christendom is united in the idea that appointment is necessary, though all are not at one as to by whom the gifts should be authorised. In the Romish body, as you know, the Pope is the fountain of all authority. Solemn as is the thought, he assumes the place and title of "Head of the Church." This is serious encroachment upon the rights of Christ, which will have to be accounted for in its day. The National bodies reject this, and have placed all power in the hands of the Sovereign of the country. This is tantamount to asserting that the Church and the World are but one thing, which is a solemn removal or ignoring of all holy landmarks. The King of the land is not Christ! He may not even be a Christian! Yet he, acting by his Prime Minister for the time being, is the recognised fountain of all authority in that which professes to be the Church of God! The Lord needed to remind Sardis (in which there is a voice for Protestantism) that He "hath the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars" (Rev. 3: 1), in other words, that He, and He alone, is the source of all spiritual power and authority.

But, as Nationalists reject the Papacy, so do Dissenters disown State control. But what have they substituted for it? The idea, unheard of in apostolic times, that the Church is entitled to order itself, and to call and appoint its own ministers. I trust I shall not be considered unkind when I say that what Radicalism is in the world, Dissent is in the Church of God. It is one thing to condemn evil principles, quite another to condemn holy men, who (perhaps) for want of clear light lend their support to them. We love such men because they are members of Christ's body, and indwelt by His Spirit, while we

abhor the principles they help to support.

Leaving all these departures aside, the Head gives and the Church receives. The gifts are specified. "He gave some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers," (Eph. 4: 11). The first two gifts are of a foundation character and have ceased. I know of no promise in Scripture of a revival of them in the last days, as the Irvingites claim. They, *i.e.*, apostles and prophets, established the Church on its base, and, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote the Scriptures. Their work being done, they have gone. But the other gifts remain. The evangelist is a worker of an outside character. He goes out into the world with the glad tidings of the Saviour's love, and seeks the salvation of sinners. But though his work necessarily lies outside the Church, it is not independent of it. Many seem to think so in this day. The evangelist labours for the edification of the body in his way as truly as the pastor and teacher in theirs. This must never be lost sight of either by the saints in general or by the preachers. There is a tendency in some quarters to despise evangelisation. May the Lord mercifully preserve us from such a spirit! The evangelist is the assembly's recruiting sergeant, if I may so say; and we cannot do without him. If we were all as near the heart of Christ as Paul, we should say, even of faulty workmen, "Christ is preached; and I therefore do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice," (Phil. 1: 18).

The work of the pastor and teacher is different. The Pastor in the Church is what the father is to the family, or the shepherd to the flock; and the teacher takes the place of the instructor.

The pastor watches over the growth of souls, and counsels and guides generally. The teacher unfolds the great truths and principles of the Word of God for their instruction and advancement.

It may be asked, "But if there is no appointment, how are such men to be known?" This question is best answered by asking another, "How is a Christian known?" Surely by his actions or manner of life. In the same way we know and recognise the gifts of Christ. This suggests another grave point of departure in

Christendom. Under existing arrangements the gifts of Christ cannot discover themselves. Everything is in the hands of an official man and it is regarded as a breach of order for anyone to attempt to take part but himself or his humanly appointed assistants. Unless there is liberty in the assembly of God — liberty for the Spirit of God to act through whomsoever He will — these gifts must remain hidden or buried.

When I see a Christian man displaying tender love for souls, acting the father among them, giving counsel, etc., I say, "that man is a pastor," and I give him his place as such. Or, when I see another taking real delight in instructing the saints, I recognise in him a teacher. The same may be said of the evangelist. The man that loves the lost and goes out after them in earnest service is to be owned as one of the gifts of the risen Head.

All these gifts we have still. It is a misunderstanding of our principles to assert that we do not believe in ministry. On the contrary, we thankfully accept it, in the measure in which it is granted to us by our faithful Lord in heaven. The gifts are "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ," and they will continue to be granted "till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4: 13). However low may be the condition of the Church, and however broken, the Lord is mindful of the need of His own, and raises up those He sees fit to supply their need.

As I said at the beginning, all this must be carefully distinguished, not only from priesthood, but

from offices. The latter are local, the gifts are placed in "the body," as such, and have a world-wide responsibility. So confused are the minds of those around us through the habit of centuries, that these distinctions are but little known. Thus "*the minister*" is supposed to be at once evangelist, pastor, and teacher. Others endeavour to make out that "priest" and "presbyter" mean the same thing.

But how does Scripture speak? That there were elders (or "bishops") and deacons in the early church no one will deny. We read that the apostles "ordained\* them elders in every church" (Acts 14: 23). "Every church" means in the particular district named; the reason of this remark will be apparent presently. We find also that Titus was left in Crete to set in order the things that were wanting and to ordain\* elders in every city, as the apostle appointed. (This chapter shows clearly that "elders" and "bishops" were the same persons). Such were to rule (1 Tim. 5: 17), to oversee the flock (Acts 20: 28), and to exhort with sound doctrine and convince gainsayers (Titus 1: 9). Gifts were not indispensable for this office, though doubtless of great service if possessed (see 1 Tim. 5: 17). Moral qualities were the great requisite, as both Timothy and Titus show. They must be irreproachable in every way, and their homes must be well governed. They were supposed also to be men of experience and married (1 Tim. 3: 1-6). They were appointed by the apostles or their delegates. Hands were probably laid on them, but Scripture nowhere directly says so. Their work was purely local. An elder at Ephesus had no authority at Corinth nor vice-versa. It should be noted also that there were always several in every assembly (Acts 20; Phil. 1: 1, etc.) The notion of episcopacy, *i.e.*, one person ruling (with the title of lord, alas!) over all the churches throughout a province, is quite unknown to the Word of God.

{\*Though I use this ecclesiastical term, it may be well to remark that in Acts 14: 23 the word is simply "chose," and in Titus "appoint." But this is a mere detail.}

Deacons were also apostolically appointed. Their charge was the secular affairs of the assembly. But in their appointment the church had a voice. They selected the men and placed them before the apostles, (read Acts 6) What the assembly gives (money, etc.) it is allowed a voice in the administration of, what Christ gives (ministry) He holds entirely in His own hand. Good moral qualities were looked for in deacons, as in elders, and they must be "proved" men, (1 Tim. 3: 8-13). The ecclesiastical idea of a deacon appointed to read homilies, etc., with a view to priesthood, goes in the face of all this instruction.

Again let me press that gifts and offices are quite distinct. This is strikingly illustrated in Stephen and Philip — both deacons. They were appointed to serve tables, that the apostles might be free for prayer and the ministry of the Word. Yet on another occasion we find the one to the front in ministry in Jerusalem (Acts 6), and the other preaching Christ with great acceptance and blessing in Samaria (Acts 8) Philip is expressly said to have possessed the gift of an evangelist (Acts 21: 8). Their gifts they received from Christ, their office from the assembly and the apostles.

Now comes the important question, "If there were such men as bishops and deacons in the first days of the Church, why do we not possess them now?" The answer is simple. We *have no one to ordain them*. There is no ordaining power in the Church of God in the absence of the apostles. I am quite aware of what thousands think and say, that apostolic succession is the resource. But I find no such thing in Scripture. All the N.T. writers speak of evil coming in after their departure, but none refer us to any successors as a safeguard. Paul warned the brethren, and then commended them to God and the Word of His grace (Acts 20: 32), Peter provided for the need of the saints after his decease by inspired writings, speaking of nothing and no one else (2 Peter 1: 12-15), John casts the saints upon what they had heard from the beginning, and upon the unction they have received (the Holy Spirit, 1 John 2: 20-27), and Jude, after drawing a very dark picture, bids us build up ourselves on our most

holy faith, etc. (Jude 20). Absolute silence everywhere as to authoritative succession. *Transmission of truth* I certainly find; *transmissions of authority* nowhere (2 Tim. 2: 2). Every thoughtful person must know that this pretended apostolic succession is the most uncertain thing in the world. It is claimed by the Romish, Greek, and National bodies, all disowning each other. Rome claims that true succession is alone found in her, and that all who have not derived their office from the Pope are impostors. The Greek Church refuses Rome's claims as baseless, and rejects her communion as heretical. Where is certainty in all this? If apostolic succession is a divine principle, and our only true safeguard, as many assert, where can I be sure of finding it? The truth is, the notion has no warrant from Scripture at all. Consequently there is no authority to ordain in the Church now, and this is why we have amongst us no men with the titles of "bishops" and "deacons." *We do not pretend to a power that we do not possess.* We, the rather, own the ruin and disorder that has come in, and cast ourselves upon the unfailing grace of God. And many can testify, who have been gathered to the Lord's name for many years, apart from all ecclesiastical systems, that God is faithful in these matters to those who put their trust in Him.

Here another point must be noticed. If we have not the officers named above, *the work is done*, and for that we thank God. I will explain what I mean. In apostolic days there were some towns where no elders (or bishops) had been appointed. Perhaps the apostles had not had opportunity to attend to the matter, but that we can leave. What did the saints do in such a case? Simply this. Certain among them, seeing the need, set about and did the work, though not formally appointed by anybody. Such were to be recognised. This was the condition of things at Corinth. "I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the first-fruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints) that ye submit yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with us and laboureth" (1 Cor. 16: 15-16. See also the Thessalonians, "We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their works sake," (1 Thess. 4: 12-13). Here we have instances of what I mean. There were no official elders in these assemblies, but there were brethren who exercised themselves about the need of souls and looked to the work. Such were not to be put down, or slighted as irregular, because not apostolically appointed; but were to be thankfully accepted, esteemed in love, and submitted to. Such local workers we have to-day in every place known to me where saints are gathered in simplicity to Christ. We do not give them high-sounding titles, but we gratefully recognise their labour of love, and God is not forgetful, as His Spirit assures us (Heb. 6: 10). All is written in heaven.