

Deacons in the Church

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THE REPORT OF THE ACCM working party on the diaconate* has been long awaited, but it has now appeared, and its character is sufficiently surprising. There has long been a measure of concern about the diaconate, owing partly to the fact that there is some uncertainty as to its character and function in the New Testament period (reflected today in varying practice in the various denominations), partly to the fact that it did not become a first step to the presbyterate until the fourth century, and partly to the fact that in the earliest period (and for much longer in the East) it seems to have been open to women as well as men. Reform of the diaconate is therefore in the air. There has been a lot of recent literature on the subject.¹ The Roman Catholic Church, in accordance with Vatican II, has entered on a course of experiment with other forms of the diaconate alongside the normal one, and the 1968 Lambeth Conference proposed that Anglicans should do this in a more adventurous way—a proposal on which various churches of the Anglican Communion, for example PECUSA, have since acted. In particular, Lambeth suggested that the perpetual diaconate should be revived (alongside the present probationary diaconate), that it should not necessarily be stipendiary, and that it should be open to women (resolution 32). In opposition to these developments, the new report proposes that the diaconate should not be reformed but abolished, that stress should be laid instead on 'the diaconal work of the laity', and that the revived order of deaconesses should thus become not unmistakably deacons but unmistakably laywomen. Hence, as the concluding sentence of the report says, 'If women wish to be ordained and if the Church wishes to have women in its ordained ministry, they will be ordained to the priesthood' (p. 37).

After a discussion extending to a mere 37 pages, the proposal that

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nearly 2,000 years of Christian history should be swept away and the diaconate abolished seems a little lacking in modesty. But it is not just its revolutionary character that tells against the proposal; it is also its ecumenical divisiveness and its dubious consistency with the New Testament. The proposal, therefore, seems certain to be rejected, and the significance of the report may prove to be of a quite incidental kind. For example, to have this proposal in the wings will certainly prejudice the General Synod's discussion of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. Whether women should rather be ordained to the diaconate (perhaps to be abolished in twelve months) will seem a question not worth discussing, despite the fact that female deacons are probably to be found in the New Testament, whereas female presbyters and bishops are certainly not to be found there. Another incidental respect in which the report may prove significant is that one of its signatories is a member of the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission, and has recently published a commentary on the Commission's *Statement on the Ministry*, in which he contends that the account which the Commission's statement gives of the historic three-fold ministry is merely descriptive, not prescriptive.⁸ He could hardly have underlined this view in a more emphatic way than by signing the report on Deacons, and so proposing that one of the orders of the three-fold ministry be abolished!

The ACCM working party has very little to say about the ecumenical aspects of its proposal. Perhaps as an afterthought, it suggests in its introduction that Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox would not be alienated by such a step, but that, on the contrary, many Roman Catholics would be glad if Anglicans took an initiative in the matter (p. 2). This suggestion has been stigmatised by Dr. E. L. Mascall as 'the ecumenical non-argument', and he reckons it totally unrealistic. It certainly seems very improbable that the Church of Rome, even when experimenting with new forms of the diaconate, would be ready to abolish it; and the suggestion that the account of the three-fold ministry in the Anglican/Roman Catholic statement is merely descriptive has not been well received by the Roman Catholic episcopate in this country.⁹ As to the likely reaction of the Eastern Orthodox, the comment in *Episkepsis* (the bulletin of the Orthodox Centre at Geneva) is probably representative:

If the Anglican Church were to adopt measures for the suppression of the diaconate, it would be posing a further serious obstacle to efforts for the achievement of the unity of the Christian world (*Episkepsis*, 25th June, 1974, p. 9).

Whether the working party desires union with the Roman and Orthodox Churches, it does not say, but either way there is no excuse for not facing the facts.

It is, of course, the biblical objections to the working party's pro-

posal that are the most serious. The biblical picture appears to be this. In the New Testament every Christian has a ministry, and the sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit in distributing gifts for those ministries conforms to no obvious pattern. But among these charismatic ministries are a few which are singular in resulting from human commissioning as well, and so, without ceasing to be charismatic ministries, become also ecclesiastical offices. Notable among these are the two local ministries of elder (*presbyteros*) or bishop (*episcopos*) and of deacon (*diakonos*). In Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 Paul is said to appoint or provide for the appointment of 'elders' in each congregation. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 the qualifications for this office and for that of deacon (and for no other office) are listed, obviously with a view to appointment. (Whether the appointment was by the laying on of hands and in all respects equivalent to modern ordination is of quite secondary importance.) In Acts 15, and elsewhere in Acts, the elders have a special place, next to the apostles, at the Jerusalem council and in the life of the Jerusalem church generally. In Acts 20 the elders alone are summoned from the church of Ephesus to receive Paul's final instructions and exhortations. In Philippians 1:1 the bishops (or elders) and deacons alone are singled out from the church of Philippi for special mention. In James 5:14 it is the elders who are to be sent for to pray over the sick.

It appears from all this that elders and deacons have a unique status in the Christian congregation. The title 'elder' implies seniority and the title 'bishop' (*episcopos*) implies oversight, and pastoral oversight is the function of the elder stressed in Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:4ff; 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-5. His second great function is teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; cf. Acts 20:28). The functions of the deacon are not stated (unless in Acts 6, which has only doubtful reference to deacons) but certain things are clear. The way they are singled out in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3 implies that their office is one of considerable distinction, as 1 Timothy 3:13 indeed states. The fact that they are always mentioned with the elders or bishops, never alone (except in the incidental reference to Phoebe in Romans 16:1ff.), and that much the same qualifications are laid down for the two offices in the Pastoral Epistles, implies that the two offices are related, and are concerned with similar duties. Finally, the fact that they are much less often mentioned than the elders, are mentioned second, and have a less exalted title (meaning 'servants'), suggests that they are assistants to the elders in their duties. Certainly they have a share in the elders' duty of oversight, as a comparison between 1 Timothy 3:12 and v. 4f. shows, though nothing explicit is said about deacons teaching.

The fewness of the references to deacons suggests that they did not exist in every congregation, but only where they were needed, and there is certainly no reason why they should be thought of more universal obligation today than they were in the apostolic age. But the fact that

the apostles maintained the Jewish institution of the eldership, that St. Paul apparently attempted to make it universal in the Greek no less than the Jewish world (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), that he provided it with the assistant office of deacon (if he did not, indeed, already find this in existence among the Jews),⁴ and that the two offices, despite some significant evolution, have continued in unbroken continuity down to the present day,⁵ suggests very strongly that they were intended to be permanent in the church, and that the church has found them of permanent value. It may well be that the diaconate ought to be reformed, along the lines of the Lambeth resolution: this would be in harmony with New Testament and early Christian practice, would provide a more suitable office for lay readers who have a pastoral charge, and would clear up the ambiguity of the order of deaconesses in a manner which satisfied the legitimate aspirations of women (making them unmistakably deacons, though perpetual deacons, not probationer priests). But to abolish the diaconate—this would be a step which the present writer could only regard as sacrilegious.

How does the working party treat the biblical evidence? To give them their due, they do not ignore it. Indeed, much of their report is geared to it. Nevertheless, their treatment of the evidence is open to the gravest objection. They begin their report by distinguishing two questions: Is the diaconate necessary? If not necessary, is the diaconate useful? The first question they call 'theological', and the second 'pragmatic' (p. 7). But is theology only concerned with what is necessary? The Bible would not lead one to think so, where some truths are certainly revealed less clearly than others, and some courses of action recommended without being commanded. However, having made this false distinction, the report goes on to analyse the life of the Church as Worship, Fellowship, Service and Proclamation, after which it asks its 'theological' question whether the diaconate is *necessary* to any of these four activities, and decides that it is not (pp. 7-14). The report then proceeds to an agnostic review of the New Testament evidence about the diaconate (pp. 15-18), from which it draws some far from agnostic and completely negative conclusions, quite unwarranted by the review: 'there was no order of deacons in apostolic times' and 'it is as much an anachronism to refer to ordination as it is to suppose an order of deacons at that stage'. On p. 21 the report goes on to say the same of all three orders of the ministry: 'there were not such Orders in the Apostles' time,' but it fails to draw the natural conclusion that the presbyterate and the episcopate should also be abolished (perhaps it finds them 'pragmatically useful', though not 'necessary').⁶ On pp. 22-25 the report asks whether the diaconate, though not necessary, is useful, and decides that it is not, recommending in the pages which follow that it would be better for diaconal work to be performed by the laity, whether in a voluntary or professional capacity. And so the report concludes.

One would not be sorry to see lay ministry (including *professional* lay ministry) championed, had it not been at the expense of the diaconate. But even when advocating something worthwhile the working party seems unable to perform its task well, defining the diaconal work of the church, of which the New Testament is supposed to speak, solely in terms of service to the world (p. 27; cf. also pp. 10-13). Anyone who examines the way *diakonos* and its cognates are used in the New Testament will see how unbiblical this is. There, service of God, of Christ, of the Gospel, of the church, of fellow-Christians, receive quite as much attention.

¹ See, for example, R. T. Nolan (ed.), *The Diaconate New* (Washington, Compass Books, 1968); Lukas Vischer et al., *The Ministry of Deacons* (Geneva, WCC, 1965); Robert Nowell, *The Ministry of Service* (Burns and Oates, 1968); discussions in *Christ's Living Body*, ed. J. P. Baker (Coverdale House, 1973) and in *Lambeth Essays on Ministry* (SPCK, 1969); articles in *The Churchman*, Spring and Summer 1970; reports produced for the Scottish Episcopal Church in 1963 and 1965.

² See J. W. Charley, *Agreement on the Doctrine of the Ministry* (Grove Books, 1973), pp. 17, 19.

³ See *Church Times*, 10th May, 1974, p. 3.

⁴ According to the fourth century father Epiphanius of Salamis, who had close connections with Palestine and some knowledge of Hebrew, the *hazzan* of the Jewish and Ebionite synagogue was the equivalent of the Christian *diakonos* or *hyperetes* (*Panarion* 30:11). The names do not mean the same thing, but the duties seem to have been similar. Among modern Jewish authorities who have accepted this identification is P. P. Levertoff.

⁵ Evidence of the diaconate between the New Testament period and about AD 150 is apparently regarded by the working party as scanty, but they go on to mention references in the *Didache*, 1 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Hermas and Justin Martyr (pp. 17, 19)! There can be few Christian institutions so amply attested at such an early date.

⁶ See also p. 8: 'efforts to find the pattern of the Church's structure of ministry in the dominical institution by Christ can no longer be sustained.' In this connection, the argument which the report bases on the Anglican-Methodist Ordinal deserves comment. It is pointed out that in the Ordering of Deacons there is no reference to New Testament deacons (p. 18), but it is also true that in the Ordering of Priests and the Consecration of Bishops there is no reference to New Testament bishops or presbyters. In some people's eyes (e.g. those of Roman Catholic critics of the Prayer Book Ordinal, who claim that it is not specific enough about the different orders to be regarded as valid) this might prompt doubts whether the Anglican-Methodist Ordinal has really anything to do with the Christian ministry.