

DEACONS AND DEACONESSES

Editor's Note: This is taken from The Earthen Vessel and Christian Record the October 1, 1866 issue, pages 293 – 296. The emphasis is mine to highlight his remarks about the cares of the ministry. He suffered as much, if not more, from those who should have been his deepest friends and allies as from what would normally be considered his enemies.

Deacons and Deaconesses

By Mr. James Wells, Of Surrey Tabernacle, Walworth Road.

[On Tuesday morning, September 4th, 1866, a very interesting service was held at the New Surrey Tabernacle, Wansey street, Walworth road, on which occasion Mr. Evan Edwards and Lydia Mayne were married by Mr. James Wells. Mr. Edwards having been a deacon at the Surrey Tabernacle for twenty-three years, Lydia Mayne a member about seventeen years, considerable interest was attached to the occasion. The following is the substance of the address, with a few additional remarks, then delivered by the pastor of the church, Mr. James Wells.]

Dear Brother And Sister In The Lord,—It is with much pleasure I congratulate you both on your mutual choice, for although it lay entirely with you to judge and to decide for yourselves, no one having any right to interfere; satisfied with each other, you had not to ask the permission or sanction of any one; nevertheless, it is very pleasant to have the approbation which you both have of your friends, of the step you are now taking. Being both of you of middle age, I need not say anything to you upon the things which are essential to happiness in the married life. I shall therefore avail myself of the present opportunity, to say a few things concerning the office you hold. Twenty-three years you have been an honored and honorable Deacon in this Christian church, honored and respected during the whole time by your brethren; and though misunderstanding occurred, by which Sir John Thwaites and Mr. Thomas Howard (another respected deacon) left us, yet, Sir Johha wished it to be mentioned to you, that but for unavoidable hindrances, he would have been with us this morning—a feeling which does him very much credit; also all your brother deacons that could possibly be here, are here this morning; and we all feel a sincere desire, that you and the Christian woman who is now your wife, may be spared to be devoted to the cause at the Surrey Tabernacle for many years yet to come.

I will now notice the nature of the office you hold, and you and your brethren in office, do answer in character to the requirements of your office; you of course all feel your own deficiency, and are led of necessity to acknowledge that your sufficiency is of God.

I shall deal this morning with the office of deacon, only as it relates to a church with a settled pastor; for in the office of deacon many things, in different churches, must be left to discretion; so that rules in detail that may apply to one church, may not be applicable to another church, though the principles of the office are the same in all; but, in the working out thereof are often very different. The office of deacon is gratuitous, and we have, we hope, in many churches, bodies of men as deacons, most sincerely devoted to the proper objects of their office, and truly worthy of double honor. Deacons must be men of honest report, conscientiously managing the temporal affairs of the church; ministering without partiality to the poor the funds put at their disposal; also, they must be spiritually minded men, feeling a deep interest in the spiritual welfare of the people; also they must be wise men. of good business capabilities, or things cannot be kept in order; they, when chosen by the church, must be pointed out not only by the excellency

of their Christian character, but also by the finger of Providence, as having at their command that requisite spare time to devote to the house, and to the cause of God; also they must have a preference for their own minister, before all other ministers. I do not mean by this anything contrary to Christian feeling, and all proper respect towards other ministers, but as soon as they can hear another minister better than they can their own minister, they ought to resign, for their heart is gone, and will soon go from the people, and from the place; and the sooner such are gone the better, both for themselves and for others; not that deacons are to think there is no such minister as their own minister, for it would ill become them to be puffed up for one against another, and when they occasionally have another minister in the absence of their own minister, the more useful such minister to the people the better, and the minister—the stated minister of the place will, if he be a sensible man, be the first to rejoice therein; for if Christ be preached, and the people profited, the minister and deacons should rejoice therein: and if a neighboring minister—a minister of truth take away a few of the hearers, then the minister and deacons should rejoice that while the people were doing pretty well before, they are now doing better still; and let us expect that when we thus lose a few hearers, the Lord will send us some more.

The deacons must feel that there is no place, or people to them like their own place and people, at the same time cultivating every good feeling towards the deacons, members, and ministers of other Christian churches. The deacons must see that the chapel is kept thoroughly clean; that the doors be opened at the proper time; that the people be treated courteously and kindly; that everything possible be done for their comfort, to make the house of God in this respect pleasant and attractive; much of the good order of public worship will depend upon them, in seeing that the chapel-keeper and pew-openers do everything in their power to make things pleasant to the people, that they may not be in any way annoyed, and so be interrupted in hearing the Word, and in the solemn worship of God. Also, the deacons must do things officially, and not personally; one should not act without the other, nor without the minister, nor minister without them, for by such proceedings, they would soon all be pulling different ways, and fearful must be the consequences to the cause to which they belong. Nor can deacons ever call a church meeting, nor address the people at the church meeting, or at any public meeting, without the sanction of the minister, because this would be taking the people out of the minister's hands, and the language of the minister is, "This flock hath my Father made mine: I yield my life to the sheep." Nor can the minister call a church meeting without the sanction of the deacons, for this would be declaring a want of confidence in the deacons, and would be treating them unbecomingly, if the minister wish to declare a want of confidence that would be another thing. Nor can the minister (unless there be something very unusual), address the church or a public meeting, without first having an understanding with the deacons what the object of the address is to be, because this also would imply a want of confidence in them; the exceptions which are but few to this rule I need not here mention. Also, every case of discipline or of order must come to the church through the deacons and the minister, so that no case can be introduced publicly at a church meeting by a private member, for this would also be declaring a want of confidence in the deacons, and would be most disrespectful to them; and, indeed, would be taking their proper authority, and a part of their office from them; nor can private members of the church be appointed to visit any cases whatever! The deacons must do all this, and settle in the fear of God all they can, without troubling the church with it: and when it cannot be settled privately, they must then put it into the hands of the church, and their decision, when come to soberly and properly, must be final. The church, having put the deacons into office, must support them in the responsibilities of that office, and treat them respectfully, or recall them from the office they hold. Also, as the deacons do not expect absolute perfection in the members of the church, so neither must the church expect absolute perfection in the deacons. We have no doubt deacons in churches, who do sincerely aim at the perfect pattern given in the Third of the First of Timothy.

Again, deacons nor deacons' wives, must have any party or parties in the church. They, the deacons, are to be deacons of the whole, without partiality or hypocrisy. The wife must keep aloof from all gossiping and slandering, or she drags her husband down from his office. A man cannot hold the office of a deacon with a tale-bearing wife. She must be courteous to all; but neither a confidant nor a bosom friend to any. All public men have to make great sacrifice of private feeling, and their wives must be prudent enough to do the same, and then the Church will greatly respect them.

The nearer the minister and deacons come to the character described in 1 Tim iii., the better, they then enjoy the full advantage of their position; but every divinely-taught minister and deacon sees and feels that he does not in full perfection come up to what is there described. All feel that they are compassed with infirmity; but they come near enough to shew that they do, according to the grace bestowed upon them, act in the spirit thereof. Thus, the deacons must be kind and courteous to all, and the church cannot esteem such deacons too highly. The relation of minister and deacons is a most important matter; **The minister is a very delicate sort of plant to deal with! No one but a minister knows the tremendous weight of such an office.** The poet hath well said: —

"Tis not a cause of small import,
The pastor's care demands;
But what might fill an angel's heart,
And fill a Savior's hands."

His mind is never at ease night or day. The welfare of the people lies heavy on his mind, and his concern to be favored in private with that fellowship with the holy Scriptures which enrich him both in his own soul and for the pulpit, often, very often overwhelms him; a mere trifle before he enters the pulpit will sometimes spoil him for the whole day, and often does he leave as well as enter the pulpit, as wretched as he can exist. Satan is at him in all shapes and forms, and perhaps the people as happy as he is miserable; of course, there are times when the work is easy and pleasant, but it is little else but a life of unequalled care, toil, trial, and anxiety, torn to pieces in all directions by misled friends, (at least professing to be friends to the same truths), and by merciless foes, vilely misrepresented. Here then is room for deacons to be a dreadful curse or an unspeakable blessing to the minister. Do they, the deacons, keep everything in order, smooth the way for the service of God to go on properly, and the minister grudged nothing that will relieve his mind from the cares of the world, and ever ready to pass by any little crotchets he may have, and never speak behind his back otherwise than kindly, and the people seeing this respect the deacons all the more, and the deacons respect them in return? Such deacons as these must be respected! The minister is almost more than happy with them. They are wonderful helps to him; and through smoothing the way for him, they, the deacons, are through the minister a blessing to the whole congregation; for the ends all have in view, are, first, their own personal salvation and welfare; second, the welfare of the minister and people, and the conversion of souls to God, that God in all things may be glorified.

It would be a good thing if it could be so done in churches, for the minister to have no fixed salary, but that when all lawful expenses are paid, let the rest, as a matter of course, come to the minister, and none but the deacons know how much the minister has, that the minister may enjoy the same degree of privacy in this respect as does the common tradesman, who does not choose to publish every half-penny of profit that he may have; this would conduce to his freedom and to his proper self-respect as a man among men, and the deacon that should betray him by telling anyone what he has, let the days of such deacon be few, and another take his office; but I am fully aware that churches are so very differently circumstanced that it is very difficult to give rules upon this not at all unimportant subject. Also, I am aware that many

churches do not contain many men suited altogether for deacons; so that they must put up with what they have. I have hitherto received such kindness with such few exceptions not only from my own deacons, but from deacons of other churches too, that my sympathies are rather strong in their favor: and may the Lord bless all His ministers, and all His people, and all His servants, that the Word of the Lord, by the services of them all, may have free course and be glorified!