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WOMEN DEACONS IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

BY THE REV. T. P. STEVENSON.

To the junior member of the Committee appointed to present the reasons which underlay the decision of Synod respecting the ordination of women to the office of deacon, was assigned the duty of collating the historical facts which show that women were elected and ordained to this office in the early Christian church, and that this recent decision involves no departure from the primitive order of the house of God.

The authors and compilers of the various encyclopedias of ecclesiastical history and literature have, for the most part, treated this topic in a thoroughly unsatisfactory way, the one notable exception being M'Clintock and Strong's "Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature," where the subject is presented with a fulness which leaves little or nothing to be desired. Nearly all the facts set forth below may be found in its excellent article under the title "Deaconesses." This article, however, is itself the fruit of the new impulse given to the study of the subject in connection with modern efforts to establish an order or institution of "Deaconesses" in the Church of England and in various churches on the continent of Europe. Dean Howson's work entitled "Deaconesses, or the Official Help of Woman in parochial Work," (London, 1862) and Ludlow's "Woman's Work in the Church," (London, 1864), are among the sources from which, as well as from the article above referred to, the facts herein presented have been gleaned.

The earliest reference to women as deacons is found in Pliny's famous letter to Trajan in which he describes the usages of the Christians against whom at that time he was, by the emperor's command,

waging a bitter persecution. In this letter he speaks of having examined by torture "two maids who were called ministers"—*ex duabus ancillis quae ministrae dicebantur*. The word *ministrae* is an exact translation of the Greek *diakonos*, a word of common gender, and the word which is applied to Phebe, Rom. xvi. 1. The expression "who were called ministers" plainly indicates that these women had some recognized position among the Christians, that they belonged to a class or order designated by that name. When we remember that this was written about A. D. 104, while those were still living who had been taught by Paul, the importance of this link in the testimony becomes apparent.

The next valuable testimony to the official work of women in the early church is found in the "Apostolical Constitutions." These are a body of rules for the government of the church, gathered partly from the Scriptures, especially the Pastoral Epistles, partly from tradition and the unwritten law of early times, and partly from the decrees of early Synods and Councils at Antioch, Neo Caesarea, Nice, Laodicea, etc. They are not in any sense of apostolical authority, they were evidently and necessarily of gradual growth, and were collected by some unknown hand in the fourth or fifth century. Their historical value, as to the usages and institutions of the early church, is unquestionable. These rules prescribe that the female deacons be ordained with the laying on of hands, and give the following form of prayer for this service: "Eternal God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of man and woman; Thou who didst fill with thy Spirit Miriam, Deborah, Hannah and Huldah; Thou who didst vouchsafe to a woman the birth of thy only begotten Son; Thou who didst in the Tabernacle and in the Temple set female keepers of thy holy gates; look down now also upon this thy handmaid and bestow on her the Holy Ghost that she may worthily perform the work committed to her to thy honor and the glory of Christ" (Chase, Constitutions of the Apostles, N. Y., 1848, p. 225) Grant, as we have already done, that these canons have no apostolical authority, that they are a compilation from various sources by an unknown hand in the fourth or fifth century, still they prove that the ordination of women to this office was the custom at that time and in the time of the still earlier synods and councils from whose decrees these canons were compiled.

Origen, in the early part of the third century, commenting on the example of Phebe, speaks of the ministering of women in the church as being both useful and necessary. In the fourth and fifth centuries all the eastern fathers refer to deaconesses—Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Sozomen. Notices of individual deaconesses become frequent in the annals of the church, and "everywhere," says Ludlow, "the female diaconate is spoken of as an honorable office, and one filled by persons of talent, rank and fortune." No less than six deaconesses appear by name among those who enjoyed the personal

friendship of Chrysostom. Three of his letters "to Amprucla the deacon, and those with her" were written to console them under the persecutions they were subjected to. Not less than eighteen of his letters are addressed "to my lady, the deacon Olympias," whom he chides for her unbounded liberality and whose steadfast adherence to his cause led to her expulsion from Constantinople after Chrysostom's banishment. Tertullian speaks of female deacons, and prescribes their qualifications and their duties, saying they are not to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, *i. e.*, the Eucharist, nor to arrogate any function belonging to men, "lest two should claim the lot of the priestly office." The duties of the female deacons were to care for the sick and the poor, especially women, to prepare female catechumens for baptism and to assist at their baptism, to stand at the women's entrance to the church and to assist in seating women in the sanctuary, to minister to martyrs and other sufferers to whom they could often gain access when men could not, while to them equally with men deacons pertained the duty of "messages, journeys to foreign parts, ministrations, services" ("Apostolical Constitutions," Bk. iii. c. 19.) Phebe's journey to Rome was thus strictly within the limits of her recognized functions.

The Council of Nice forbade the ordination of women by the laying on of hands, "lest it should be supposed they were admitted to priestly functions"—a circumstance which marks the growth of the sacerdotal and hierarchical spirit in the church. From this point the deaconess gradually disappears from ecclesiastical history until during the dark ages the institution became extinct. The Council of Orange abolished it in France in A. D. 441, followed by the decree of the Synod at Epaon in 517. In the Greek church they are still found as late as the twelfth century at Constantinople, assisting at the communion services.

That the office was not restored to women in the Reformation is not surprising. Glorious and beneficent as that spiritual uprising was, it was not complete or exhaustive. It did not revive the work of foreign missions; it did not recover the law or the spirit of systematic beneficence; it did not in other respects than this do justice to women or restore her to her true position in the household of Christ. Yet there was one earnest effort, at an early period of the Reformation, to re-establish the function of women deacons. In the reformed churches of the Netherlands, the congregation of Wesel restored the office, and the classis or Presbytery favored their action, and referred the matter to the Synod that the office "might be revived in other places also." Accordingly the subject came before the Synod at Middleburg in the year 1581, which decided against it, not on scriptural or historical grounds, it would seem, but "on account of various inconveniences which might arise out of it"—a deliverance not very creditable to the scholarship or good judgment of the Synod. It is

noteworthy that in this discussion it was argued that women deacons already exist "among our Bohemian brethren "

The Puritans in England in the sixteenth century recognized women deacons, as appears from the following extract from the "Conclusions" drawn up by Cartwright and Travers: "Touching deacons of both sorts, men and women, the church shall be admonished that they are not to choose men for their riches but for their faith, zeal and integrity, and that the church is to pray to be so directed that they may choose them that are meet. Let the names of those that are thus chosen be published by the next Lord's Day, and after that their duties to the church and the church's duties toward them; then let them be received into their office with the general prayers of the whole church." (Neal's History of the Puritans, Vol. 1. Chap. vi.)

The writer respectfully submits that the facts adduced establish the position assumed at the beginning that the late action of Synod is in consonance with the usage and belief of the church from the earliest times. When it is added that the majority of the members in all Christian churches is composed of women, that their zeal and liberality always do much to replenish the treasury, that the public charities of Christendom are to day devised and administered very largely by women, that God is leading his handmaidens out in these days into manifold and most important fields of activity and that "this way points the finger of God" for the further progress, in most important respects, of the kingdom of Christ, it will be concluded that Synod has taken a very natural and reasonable step in admitting women to a share in the official administration of the charities and benefactions of the people of God.

THE WORK AMONG THE CHINESE IN CALIFORNIA.

BY THE REV. N. B. JOHNSTON.

Neither the Anti-Chinese politicians here, nor the Anti-Chinese legislation in Congress has prevented the Chinese of Oakland from attending the Mission. Some come only to learn to read English; some come because they wish to meet friends, and they regard it as a pleasant place and way to spend a couple of hours; while others come because they love the brethren, the Bible, and the Redeemer.

Nearly all the early converts are now in China, or scattered over our country. The last who left us has taken up his abode in Pittston, Pa. Soon after his arrival in his new home, he asked a Christian friend to write a letter for him to me. Among other things the writer says: "He tells me to tell you to take care of your health; and he hopes you will live to be a thousand years old to pray to God and to do good to others." Most of the Christians of the R. P. Mission who are yet in Oakland, are making steady progress in education and in