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# What Do We Bless And Why?

by

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by Charles Hefling

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On the question that gives this short paper its title, I have one thesis to advance, two theological premises that support the thesis, and three comments to make by way of elaborating it. The context of my thesis is liturgy — “primary” theology, as it is sometimes called. This I take to be a suitably Anglican way to proceed. And I shall start from a concrete question about a specific liturgical practice that has been under discussion in my own diocese.

The discussion concerns postulants and candidates for Holy Orders, more particularly those who aspire to ordained ministry as vocational or permanent deacons. There are four or five such persons in the diocesan program of training and instruction, which includes a year of field education in a parish church. The question that has come up is this: In addition to their other ministries in their respective parish settings, should deacons-in-training be allowed to do the things that deacons customarily do *at the eucharist*? Should they read the liturgical gospel, prepare the bread and wine at the altar, say the dismissal, and so on? Should they, in other words, act like deacons now, before the bishop has ordained them?

The question was discussed at a meeting of instructors and supervisors, one of whom insisted that the answer is *yes*. Deacons-in-training should not only be *allowed* to take the deacon’s liturgical role, as though it were a concession or a special case; taking that role should be required as part of their formation. The argument that was presented went like this:

“The rite or ceremony of ordination is like the rite of matrimony. Everybody knows that when two people present themselves for marriage, they are already living

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together in physical intimacy. Clergy *presume* that wedding couples ‘know’ each other in the sexual sense. Couples presume that clergy *will* presume it. That is how things should be when it comes to ordaining a deacon. In the same way that the couple who take part in the rite of matrimony are already doing what married people do precisely *as* married people, so a candidate taking part in ordination to the diaconate should already be doing what deacons, precisely *as* deacons, do.”

Such was the argument. It posits an analogy, and from it draws a practical implication. I am not entirely convinced the argument is sound. But let me make the best case I can for it, and then examine what I take to be its presuppositions and implications.

According to this argument, there would seem to be three components in marriage, which fit together in a certain way according to an inherent “logic.” The same three components, ordered in the same way, are involved — or ought to be involved — in ordained ministry. Marriage and ordained ministry alike involve (1) a ceremonial event, (2) a social fact, and (3) an operative or constitutive action. The analogy that the argument posits thus falls nicely into a table with two columns and three rows.

	MARRIAGE	ORDAINED MINISTRY
RITE / OFFICE / CEREMONIAL EVENT	Holy Matrimony, The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage	Conferral of Holy Orders, Ordination (of a deacon)
STATE OF AFFAIRS / SOCIAL FACT / SET OF RELATIONSHIPS, ROLES, AND PRACTICES	marriage as institution; relations of spouses to each other, to children, to “forsaken” others, to church	diaconate as institution; relations to bishop, presbyters, church, and world
OPERATIVE SIGN / CONSTITUTIVE ACT	physical intimacy	speaking liturgical gospel; preparing gifts at the altar; dismissal

The middle row of the table lines up marriage and diaconate as “states” or conditions that consist in certain relations between the persons who are “in” these states, and other persons. Below these, I have put the “constitutive acts,” to show that (on the argument I am considering) they are the basis on which everything else in the table is built — the acts that most directly and decisively signify what diaconate, or marriage, is all about. In each case, the “constitutive act” focuses the *meaning* that makes the institution what it is, and performing the acts is what brings the institution into being. This is what married people do, *as* married, and what deacons do, *as* deacons. So, if a sacrament is an *effective* sign, the really sacramental component is the foundational, bottom row rather than the one at the top. The top-row components, the ceremonial events, may be more conspicuous, but (according to the argument) they presuppose the social facts in the middle row, and you have the middle row, to all intents and purposes, when you have the bottom row.

What the church does, then, when it conducts the wedding rite or the ordination rite is clear enough. It adds its endorsement to a reality that already exists. The ceremonial event acknowledges, celebrates, and gives thanks for a social fact, a set of particular relationships and activities that have begun to exist and occur. The institution or social fact is a fact apart from the celebration. We are what we do, and so the candidates *are* deacons; the bride and bridegroom *are* spouses. They come to the ordination or the wedding as persons who have already been enacting their respective roles, constituting their respective relations to others. That being so, the church now formally takes cognizance of what they have been doing, and thus of what they are. It recognizes a state of affairs. It declares that so-and-so is to be regarded and acted toward *as* such-and-such (wife, husband, deacon), because so-and-so *is* such-and-such.

As you will gather, the analogy between ordination and matrimony, drawn as this argument draws it, entails a whole theology of sacraments in the sense of ritual actions. That theology is what I find questionable. There is no need here to decide whether marriage and ordination are real and proper sacraments on a par with holy baptism and the holy eucharist. Anglicans do speak of *holy* matrimony and *holy* orders, and for present purposes it is enough to acknowledge that the two rites have a sacramental quality. That quality, however, can be understood in various ways. In this case I should say it is being understood more or less as follows. There is sacredness everywhere. From time to time, certain things or occasions become “transparent” and disclose an underlying holiness. We do not make this sacral character: we find it. It

belongs to the being of creation, just as it is, as being, as created. That being so, sacred *ceremonies* might seem superfluous. Why, we might ask, do we need deliberate, formal, ritualized, “sacramental” occasions? If we do ask this, the reply might well be the one that Robert Farrer Capon often used. He answered with another question: Why kiss your spouse when you both know you love each other? The point, I surmise, is that states of being such as love and holiness have an intrinsic exigence for expression. They “need” to be manifested, communicated, brought to common awareness, even though none of that really *adds* anything to the fact that gets manifested. Applied to the topic at hand, this means it is meet and right that when persons have in fact become spouses or deacons, as the case may be, this state of affairs should be expressed in outward, public fashion, at a ceremony which can be thought of as sacramental in the sense — but only the sense — that it calls attention to something holy.

This way of understanding the sacramentality of sacramental rites is not idiosyncratic, least of all in the Episcopal Church. It has philosophical roots which this is not the place to trace, but theologically speaking, the soil that nourishes it is a certain doctrine of creation and therefore a certain doctrine of God. What God “does” is what, as a matter of fact, happens in the ordinary, natural course of things. God “raises up” ministers and “raises up” relationships — which is the same thing as saying they emerge. When that happens, the church, by its liturgical activity, celebrates what has happened. If we speak of the celebration as “blessing,” then, we do so in the same sense that saying grace at meals is blessing. The food is there, on the table; we rejoice in its being there and bless God that it is.

I have tried to state as fairly and positively as I can the sort of case that could be made in support of the argument regarding candidates for the diaconate with which I began. By no means do I want to say it is all utterly and completely wrong. It is not. Much of it is right — but there is much that it leaves out too. There *is* an analogy between matrimony and ordination, and the analogy is important. But it is not exactly the analogy set out in the table above. Stated in the most comprehensive terms, the problem, I think, is this. If you put all your theological eggs in the basket of creation, as this analogy does, you are bound to leave out *history* — as this analogy does. That is its chief flaw. In the rest of this paper I shall try to see if it can be mended.

By *history* I mean not simply what happens in time. I mean what happens insofar as human beings decide it is going to happen. We make ourselves, and make our world,

by making decisions; and that ongoing process of making is open-ended. When I fault the analogy I have discussed for leaving out history, I mean specifically that it leaves out newness, purpose, expectation, intention, commitment; in a word, orientation to the *future*. It leave out the history that is still in the making. It construes rites such as weddings and ordinations as endings rather than beginnings, as conclusions rather than initiations, as the sacred counterparts of secular events like graduating from high school rather than events like the commissioning of an officer or the inaugurating of a president. So construed, the church's sacramental rites do not change anything or start anything; they register change that has already happened and announce situations that have already begun.

Now there is certainly nothing wrong with celebrating accomplished facts. After all, the Christian church celebrates the accomplished fact of the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. But that is not all there is to Christianity. Nor is that all that Christian sacramental practice is and does. There is also a forward-looking dimension, a "not yet" as well as an "already."

That is my first theological premise. The redemption of the world is not finished, and so human history is not finished. History is going somewhere, and it is not there yet. To use a very slippery theological word, my premise is that Christianity is *eschatological*. Whatever else that means, I take it to mean that "here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Heb 13:14). However much we affirm and rejoice in what has happened, or is happening, Christians still look to what is not yet, to what is to be, to the "last things." What these *eschata* will be, we know, in part, because "in these last days" they have begun to occur, in the person and work of Jesus. Nevertheless, to make the point in liturgical terms, the season we are living in, "now, in the time of this mortal life," is Advent.

Not everyone subscribes to the idea that an eschatological dimension belongs intrinsically to Christianity. The Jesus Seminar does not; N.T. Wright does. If you do subscribe to it, there are implications for every department of theological reflection, and not least for the way we think about the church. Applied to the church's liturgical and sacramental practice in particular, what it means, among other things, is this. The church does not exist only to praise God for creation, or even for the *magnalia Dei*, God's mighty acts in history, after he has done them. It does exist for that. But also, and even

more crucially, the church exists to be the thing that God is doing, and to become the thing that God will be doing until the End.

What that thing is is my second theological premise. As Archbishop Rowan Williams has written — and it is significant that he wrote it in an article on liturgy — the characteristic form of God’s doing is the formation of community: the formation of Israel, the formation of the church, the formation of common life lived in such a way as to manifest not just the inherent goodness of creation but the possibility of *new* creation, of healing and justice and forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> The characteristic form of God’s doing is bringing about community that anticipates the kingdom that is coming. The church, then, as “eschatological,” exists to be what the human race is meant (by God) to be. The biblical way to talk about this formation of community is to speak of *covenant*; the New Testament way is to speak of the “new covenant of reconciliation” established in the Paschal mystery — which is to say, in *the* eschatological event.

There, all too briefly stated, are my two theological premises. Christianity is participation in an eschatology that is being realized in the ordering of community towards reconciling unity. As premises should be, they are quite general. Let me now bring the discussion back to the specific liturgical practices I began with. If we consider the scripts for those practices, the Prayer Book services for ordination and marriage, in the light of my two premises, one moment stands out very clearly. In both cases, the real climax of the rite comes at the point where the church, in the person of the presiding minister, asks certain of its members: will you be, will you do, such-and-such? Not *are you* now, not *have you* already, but are you *willing*, *will you*, *do you will* to be and do? Will you be loyal to doctrine, discipline, and worship; will you obey your bishop; will you be faithful in prayer and the reading of scripture; will you love, comfort, honor and keep, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, be faithful? Will you, in sum, set yourself on the way to a certain kind of future? Will you make it *be* this kind of future? Will you define, in terms of these relationships, these obligations, these expectations, what you are going to become?

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<sup>1</sup> See Rowan D. Williams, “Imagining the Kingdom: Some questions for Anglican worship today,” in *The Identity of Anglican Worship*, ed. Kenneth Stevenson and Bryan Spinks (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), pp. 1-13, esp. p. 10.

Persons who reply “I will” are making a promise. They are performing a “speech act,” a speaking that brings into being for the first time the reality spoken of. They are not just stating a fact but *creating* a fact. They are *changing* something, namely themselves, and by doing so they change their relationships with others — the bishop, each other, presbyters, children, and so on, as the case may be.<sup>2</sup> The Prayer Book now recognizes that the change is reciprocal, in its directions to the church not only to receive (in the person of the presiding minister) these promises but also to make (in the person of the assembly) a promise of its own. *Will you* support the persons who have come here to begin making a future? *Will you* endeavor to actualize with them the future that is being promised?

Where all this is headed is probably plain. It leads to my one and only thesis. I am convinced that what the church blesses in matrimony and ordination is the same thing. So far, I agree with the argument I discussed at the outset. *What* we bless, however, is not an existing fact. What we bless is a set of promises. It is the making of these promises that begins the making of a marriage or a ministry, properly so called. The act of promising is what constitutes, sets up, “creates” a particular instance of either of these institutions or states or social facts in so far as it concerns the church.<sup>3</sup>

As for *why* the church blesses these promises, my thesis is that it blesses them because to fulfill them is to take part in the church’s “eschatological” project of becoming the kingdom. We bless the promises of ordinands, bridegrooms, and brides because the relationships those promises inaugurate — the relationships that constitute *diakonia* or marriage, as the case may be — are such as to promote and embody new creation. We, the church, pronounce and invoke divine favor on the indeterminate future which these persons are committing themselves to determine, because inasmuch as they continue that self-determination they play a part in the ordering of the community for which God made the world and which God is making for the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the middle row of the chart above.

<sup>3</sup> Marriage also concerns the state of course. Whether it is concerned with exactly the same thing as the church is an increasingly disputed question. The idea that church and state do have the same concern, for the same reasons, is one that Episcopalians inherit from the Elizabethan settlement and find it hard to let go, although as I shall mention the current Prayer Book implicitly denies that holy matrimony and marriage coincide. The diaconate, on the other hand, seems to be a wholly ecclesial institution, although ironically one point that does concern the state is whether a deacon can function as its officer in witnessing a marriage.

I offer the thesis, not as a replacement for the argument I have criticized, but as its complement — an essential complement, though, in my estimation. Obviously a vocation to ordained ministry does not begin like a bolt from the blue on a deacon's ordination day, nor does an intention to form a matrimonial community begin at the wedding. There are deliberations, discernments, and decisions to be made before a decisive promise is appropriate. But these prior movements towards commitment do not necessarily lead to it. Often enough they do not. If they do, we may certainly celebrate the fact and thank God for them; but that is not the central meaning of our liturgical celebration. What we "celebrate and make, here before [God's] divine majesty," is the future.

Such is my basic thesis. Three short elaborations will bring these remarks to a close.

(1) Directly, my thesis regards two "occasional services" that have some claim to be regarded as sacramental, whether they are truly sacraments or no. But I would argue that the thesis is not descriptive only of these particular liturgies. It can be generalized. Blessing promises that look to a certain kind of future is what liturgical blessing *as such* is and does. The church can, of course, bless animals or vestments or food or buildings or palm branches, if it has a mind to do so. But these, I would argue, are blessings of a subsidiary or secondary kind. Such blessings make sense only in so far as they are in some way extensions of the "sacramental" blessing of human commitment and self-determination that promotes the formation and building up of a community of healing and forgiving and renewal and worship.

(2) On the other hand, to hold (as I do) that the blessing of the promises made at a wedding or an ordination is blessing in the proper sense is not to make either of these the very essence of Christianity, as though the church's primary business was getting people ordained and married. Those promises and those institutions are themselves subordinate to the promising that does constitute the church as such. They make sense inasmuch as they extend and specialize baptism. That is where the new covenant of reconciliation is inaugurated. That is ordination to the fundamental ministry, and the establishment of the fundamental community of Paschal mystery. Marriage and the ministries of bishops, priests, and deacons are made by "sub-covenants," as it were —

covenants within *the* covenant, orderings of community within the “eschatological” community.

(3) There is a corollary. Let us suppose that baptism is indeed so essential that without it there is no church, no community that effectively symbolizes God’s new creation. Some would add that the same is true of ordination, at least the ordination of bishops in “apostolic succession,” although the suspension of the preface to the Prayer Book ordinal for the sake of ecumenical relations could be interpreted as admitting that episcopacy, so construed, is not all *that* essential. But however that may be, it would seem that where any *other* rites and ceremonies are concerned, it is for the church, the community formed by baptism, to decide what sort of promises, institutions, roles, and practices — in short, what internal orderings or “sub-covenants” — it will bless and support. Presumably the ground on which it makes such decisions will be the one I have already suggested: the church blesses and takes into itself as special vocations those modes of human interrelation that are apt to bring into concrete existence the church’s “eschatological” character.

And in fact that is what the church has always done. At some point in the middle ages, the Western church embraced an institution that had been a matter of secular custom and civil law — a certain kind of marriage. In the nineteenth century, the Church of England decided that the promises made by monks and nuns were such as it might appropriately (if somewhat gingerly) bless. The common life of a monastic household could particularize and exhibit the church’s identity. In the twentieth century, the Episcopal Church added an occasional office that in effect blesses another civil relationship, the one established by adopting a child; and at the same time it added an office for the blessing of a civil marriage.

These last two are particularly interesting illustrations of my thesis. The service for adoption very nicely makes the point that motherhood and fatherhood are relationships that human persons bring into being by deciding that it shall *be*, whether there is already a biological fact or (as in this case) not. Parenthood is historical in the sense I used earlier: it *is* what the persons involved make it be. In the Prayer Book office, the son-to-be or daughter-to-be is asked much the same question as the ones in matrimony and ordination: *Do you* take this woman as your mother, this man as your father? And similarly with the parents-to-be. Persons saying “I do” make promises that make someone be a son, a mother, a daughter, a father. So too, the service for blessing a

civil marriage shows clearly that the legal status which the couple already enjoy is not what concerns the church. The presiding minister requires the husband and wife (who are so designated) to make the same promises as a bride and bridegroom.

Since this paper was intended to generate discussion, it has no conclusion. Readers must draw out any implications it may have. I have moved from a particular question of liturgical practice to some general theological principles, my two premises; and I have begun to move from a general thesis back to the concrete. The thesis is the important thing, in my judgment. To apply it further, further argument would be necessary. I have proposed an explanation of why the church blesses what it does. But on the question of what the church *might* bless my paper has neither prescription nor prophecy to offer.

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