

Exodus from Privilege: Reflections on the Diaconate in Acts

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In this ecclesial reflection on Luke's account of the institution of the diaconate (Acts 6), I explore the thesis that ordained ministry is the church's instrument of self-criticism and self-correction in the face of the dynamics of privilege, exclusion, and inertia within the body of Christ. For Luke, the post-Pentecost Jerusalem church betrays a failed exodus from these dynamics, as becomes evident when it is discovered that the widows of the non-Palestinian segment of the community have been neglected in the daily distribution of food. The church responds by setting Stephen and six other diaspora Jews apart, not only to ensure future fairness, but (as Stephen's sermon shows) to call the church and Israel to renewed exodus. I argue that this sets the pattern for all ordained ministry, and suggest that priesthood and episcopacy are best viewed as specific variations on diaconal ministry, grounded in diakonia.

The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* brought the ministry of all the baptized front and center. If baptism is full incorporation into the body of Christ, then every baptized person is fully authorized to be a minister of Christ's reconciling work. Not surprisingly, this insight has led to a fresh examination of all kinds of authority, particularly that of the ordained. As we live into the ministry of all the baptized, what role, if any, should bishops, priests, and deacons play? The tensions packed into this question are nowhere more evident than in the church's ongoing reflection on the diaconate. The rise of the modern diaconate is inextricably bound up with the recovery of the ministry of all the baptized, and could be said to have been its precursor. Yet it is

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sometimes said that deacons usurp the servant ministry that belongs to all God's people, repossessing it as a ministry proper to the ordained.¹ There is ample justification for this complaint in the history of our own church. In the late nineteenth century the Episcopal Church routinely ordained men from ethnic minorities as permanent deacons for missionary work among their own people (David Pendleton Oakerhater being a prime example). Around the same time, women were permitted to function as deaconesses—"set apart" but not ordained. For about twenty years, beginning in the 1950s, men were ordained as "perpetual deacons" to shore up the shortage of priests in a then rapidly growing church. Following on the Second Vatican Council's decision to revive the diaconate as a distinct order, and the Lambeth Conference's similar call in 1968, our development of the so-called vocational diaconate proceeded at a rapid pace, on the understanding that the diaconate complemented lay ministry rather than competed with it. Such complementarity remains the ideal, although it is still not uncommon for deacons to lead public worship in the absence of a priest, where laity could do as well or better.

On the other hand, the diaconate is also seen as a challenge to inherited assumptions about ordained ministry. For instance, the emergence of the diaconate as an order with its own distinctive integrity has prompted calls for the abandonment of the so-called transitional diaconate, the ancient practice of ordaining to the diaconate as a step toward ordaining to the priesthood. If the diaconate is a distinct order, then why are those who are called not to the diaconate but to the priesthood ordained to the diaconate at all? Admittedly, this argument speaks to the integrity of the priesthood as well as the diaconate, but it also raises what is perhaps a deeper—and less priest-friendly (and bishop-friendly) question. Are priesthood and episcopacy "higher" than the diaconate, such that one moves from one to the other as from

¹ Most Protestant bodies regard the diaconate as an essentially lay ministry. To a great extent, this reflects the Reformation rejection of any suggestion of hierarchy within the ordained ministry of the church. But this, in turn, reflects a concern lest ordained ministry constitute a church order apart from the ministry of all baptized believers. This is the reason for the reluctance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America to recognize the diaconate as a separate order, despite our virtual union on so many other matters. This twofold concern emerges repeatedly in the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission's seminal *Hanover Report: The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity* (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996), 2, 32, 56, 70. The report was published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation.

one rung of the hierarchical ladder to the next? If so, are we still in the grip of a neoplatonic paradigm that places the laity on the bottom and bishops on the top? Perhaps the recovery of the diaconate, far from demoting the laity, presages a flattening of our hierarchy, a redistribution of ministerial power that calls the very purpose of ordained ministry into question. It might be that the diaconate, far from re-sacralizing servant ministry, charts a path toward lay presidency of the eucharist or, still more radically, the elimination of orders altogether.

Both views of the diaconate—threatening lay ministry in one direction or ecclesiastical hierarchy in the other—convey a piece of the truth. But of course each argument cuts two ways. If deacons are doing ministry that lay people could do just as well, they are also challenging the laity to claim the full breadth of their ministry as baptized persons. Again, if deacons are challenging the vertical structure and perhaps even the existence of ordained ministry, they are also forcing us to look at ordained ministry in new ways, and in so doing are inviting us to reimagine ordained ministry for a new time. Unfortunately, these legitimate tensions have been distorted by the dynamics of entitlement and turf. It is appropriate to be concerned lest the ministry of deacons diminish the ministry of laypeople, but we may be sure that when this concern is raised by the laity it has as much to do with their own status and power as it has to do with devotion to Christian service. By the same token, pressure from deacons to eliminate the transitional diaconate is as much about their own standing relative to priests as it is about their distinctive role in the body of Christ. And when priests complain about deacons, it usually comes down to accusations of insubordination or collusion with the bishop.

So where do we go from here? The question before us is not whether the church can rid itself of turf wars—that will never be the case—but whether we can imagine an institutional structure that addresses our drive for privilege head on. I would suggest that our recovery of the diaconate, as flawed and confused as it has been, demonstrates our capacity both to imagine such a structure and to implement it. So far, we have considered the revived diaconate in two contrasting ways: as an icon of the church's ideal of servant ministry, and as one more occasion for one-upmanship in the church. We are dismayed by the second and should be suspicious of the first. But there remains a third approach. We can consider the diaconate as a structural remedy for the church's addiction to privilege. Not that deacons are immune from the temptations of privilege, but that the

diaconate, as a constituent element of the body of Christ: (1) demonstrates the church's acknowledgment that it is prey to the dynamics of privilege, and (2) functions as an engine of internal resistance to that dynamic.

Neither the problem of privilege nor the solution I am pointing to is new. Both lie at the heart of Acts 6, Luke's account of how there came to be deacons in the first place. In this essay, I engage in ecclesial reflection on this passage and what leads up to it, in the hope that we might reimagine ordained ministry—deacons, priests, bishops—as ordered to overturn (rather than reinscribe) privilege within the church.²

As Luke tells it, the ordination of seven men to look after the needs of a marginalized group resolves the church's first political crisis: "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1). What a contrast to the situation only a few chapters earlier: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44–45). Obviously, Acts 6 signals a swift decline from the harmony described in Acts 2. What changed? To tease this out, we will need to look more closely at the intervening text.

Let's begin by looking more closely at Acts 2:44–45. It is natural to read this description of the Jerusalem church's sharing of goods as a more detailed enlargement on the general statement in verse 42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." I would suggest, however, that these subsequent verses do not enlarge the earlier description but mark a progression from it. The earlier verse proclaims the existence of a new society united by three foundational practices: teaching and fellowship, bread-breaking, prayers. These practices are simply registered in shorthand, as if Luke is being as non-specific as possible. Why? Because he is describing a society that is still undifferentiated, devoted to practices that have not yet become institutionalized. The community being described comprises three thousand souls who have been "cut to the heart" by Peter's teaching and have been baptized

² To be clear: I do not read Acts as history, but as a canonical (and therefore authoritative) window onto the early church's self-understanding.

there and then (see verse 41). So they are just there—a peaceful mob, but a mob nevertheless, gathering daily in the Temple precincts. Already they are eager to acknowledge the authority of Peter and the other apostles, and are eager to learn from them. Already they are breaking bread with one another—whether this is a reference to the eucharist or to the simple sharing of food and other goods we do not know. Already they are engaged in prayer together. These practices arise out of the shared experience of conversion and baptism, and, as such, they reflect the community's implicit unity. But that unity has not yet yielded principles of common life that sustain solidarity in baptism for the long term. The Jerusalem church has yet to discover how its devotion to apostolic teaching, bread-breaking, and praying will play out over time. Verse 45 suggests dramatic advancement on this front: "They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." By selling their property and contributing the proceeds to a common fund, these earliest Christians incarnate their initial experience of Christ as a radical rejection of privilege and rank. If we wanted to name an act—short of martyrdom—that signified death and resurrection, we could do no better than this abandonment of worldly status for the sake of *koinonia*.

This *koinonia* (that is, fellowship, communion, or common life) is already evident in the initial description of the three thousand devoting themselves "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." But now these foundational practices take on permanence and predictability through the establishment of an economy of exchange in which every member of the community receives what he or she needs out of the collective treasure. This is quite evident if we go back to the first of these foundational practices: devotion to the teaching and fellowship of the apostles. Peter's Pentecost sermon, which first brings the three thousand to faith, concludes by sounding the central theme of Luke/Acts: "The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39). Fellowship with Peter and adherence to his teaching require a readiness to be in communion with "all who are far away," that is, with outsiders and strangers. The daily collection and redistribution of goods requires one of the most immediate efforts at *koinonia* with outsiders there can be—*koinonia* with people who are richer and poorer than we are. Here is a policy that reinforces the converts' baptism and holds them accountable to it, while setting them on a path that will bring them into fellowship with

more and more classes of strangers, across wider and wider gaps of distance and difference. As we know, Acts presents the story of the early church as a movement out from the Temple in Jerusalem into the world. This is the beginning of that exodus: the constitution of a community defined by nothing other than its members' repentance and embrace of the Good News.

The theme of exodus is sounded more loudly with the second of Luke's foundational church practices: the breaking of bread. This practice is invoked once again when Luke describes the immediate fruit of the daily distribution: "They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). In the context of the daily collection and distribution of goods, it is hard not to associate this equitable getting and eating with the Israelites' daily gathering of manna in the wilderness: "Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed" (Exodus 16:18; see Paul's reference to this passage at 2 Corinthians 8:15). We have here the clearest indication so far that, for Luke, an exodus community is in the process of being formed. Anyone who picked up the reference to the gathering of manna would notice a further parallel. Each household among the Israelites was to gather as much as was needed "according to the number of persons [in each household], all providing for those in their own tents" (Exodus 16:16). So in Acts the various households of the Jerusalem church consume their just portion "with glad and generous hearts." The breaking of bread in private homes becomes the daily enactment of a bond uniting household to household as so many building blocks of a new people embarking on a new exodus out of privilege into equity.

Luke concludes his account of the daily distribution by saying that the Jerusalem community was "praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:47). If we are looking for prayer, the third foundational church practice, here it is. While the poor are giving thanks that they will not go hungry, the rich, remarkably enough, are giving thanks that, having sold everything they have, their meal is no longer lavish but adequate. The prayers of this community are prayers of praise—for the provision of food, surely, but more significantly for the possibility of a fair distribution that ensures that every household has equal access to nourishment. What is the basis for this possibility? The Holy Spirit is the basis, of course, and, more immediately, the existence of a settled community capable of organizing

itself around—and holding itself accountable to—a commitment to ensure that everyone in the community has enough to eat. The Jerusalem church could not have accomplished this without beginning to be a people governed by policies and membership requirements understood by all. The story of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11) illustrates just how serious the mechanism of collection and distribution was for the church in Luke’s account. This couple sells its land but secretly keeps back some of the proceeds, and both are struck down by God. Luke’s main point—quite apart from the warning not to lie to the Holy Spirit—is that the Jerusalem church is no longer a mob, no longer even simply a definable movement, but a real body animated by a common purpose, governed according to a common policy, and respected by the people of Israel—if not for being followers of Jesus, then, presumably, for reviving the Jewish spirit of exodus and developing a disciplined way to live it out.

It is no accident that Luke’s initial account of the daily distribution in Acts 2, and the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, are the bookends for a complex narrative regarding a healing which lands Peter and John in trouble with the local authorities. When they are released for fear of the people, they inveigh against the earthly rulers who “gathered together against [God’s] holy servant Jesus,” and ask God that they may continue to speak the word with boldness and perform miracles in his name (4:24–30). Their prayer does not overtly ask for the overthrow of these earthly powers, but it does ask that the church be able to withstand them through the power of the word and through “signs and wonders.” The “signs and wonders” of the exodus are surely referenced here, as Peter and John stand up against the assembled council—the equivalent here of Pharaoh—and call down (or so it would seem) something like the ten plagues on them. We cannot conclude from this passage that Peter and John see their community as a society poised to replace the society that surrounds them. But clearly they seek to be the spokespersons of a community that is, as Luke goes on to say, “of one heart and soul” (4:32), that is, united in such a way that it is able not only to confront worldly power strategically, but also to withstand the persecution that will inevitably follow. The prayer of Peter and John is one with the prayer of those who give thanks for the daily distribution of food. In both instances, God is being praised for raising up a community that leaves nobody out. God’s approval is evidenced immediately, as the place of prayer is shaken and all are filled with the Holy Spirit—a second Pentecost.

The episode about Ananias and Sapphira comes next. It is introduced by a second, expanded description of the daily distribution of food: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (4:32–35). This second description of the daily distribution underscores its central importance for Luke, and his assumption that this practice is inseparable from the church’s witness to Jesus’ death and resurrection. See how naturally the text moves from the topic of common ownership to the apostles’ testimony and back again, as if it were all one subject. We are reminded that holding “all things in common” (*hapanta koina*) is the precise expression of the believers’ devotion to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), and that this teaching and fellowship are both about how Jesus has abolished false divisions between rich and poor. No wonder, then, that once judgment is visited on Ananias and Sapphira for faking *koinonia*, and a corresponding fear of God has been visited on the church, Luke brings the first movement of his history to a triumphant close with an account of the “many signs and wonders [that] were done among the people through the apostles” (5:12). These signs and wonders (once again invoking the exodus) are all about healing, as people from the surrounding region bring their loved ones who are sick or demon-possessed into Jerusalem in the hope that even Peter’s shadow would fall on them. Luke reports that great numbers were cured, simply by being in proximity to Peter and the other apostles (5:15–16). Clearly, we are meant to see this explosion of healing as an extension and a consequence of the church’s renewed commitment to *koinonia*. Luke draws a straight line from the *koinonia* of rich and poor to the *koinonia* of healthy and sick.

With Acts 6 we come to the crisis. The narrative shifts abruptly and without warning from triumph to trouble, with Luke’s terse report about the Hellenists’ complaint. No reason is given for the breakdown of the distribution system, unless it is with reference to this breakdown that Luke mentions that “the disciples were increasing in number.” Was the breakdown simply a by-product of church growth, an administrative challenge requiring a technical fix—in this case the

creation of deacons? Are we to suppose that, since the newly added disciples probably represented the majority population in Jerusalem, the believers who were “foreign” Jews had become an increasingly small minority relative to the whole? Would they then not be easier to forget quite unintentionally? But this is beside the point, quite apart from the fact that we have no basis within the Lucan text or apart from it to adduce what really happened. What we do have is the inner dynamic of Luke’s narrative, and if we follow the flow of that narrative, the crucial point is not that the system has broken down, but that it has done so at the expense of the widows of the Hellenists. This moral lapse contradicts everything we have been told about the Jerusalem church so far. Given Luke’s—to this point—emphatic portrayal of the Jerusalem church as utterly given over to *koinonia* in all things, what is he up to here? There are two possibilities. On the one hand, Luke may be using historic memory of the distribution crisis to introduce a new perspective on the Jerusalem church, one that reads bad faith back into the story as previously told. Perhaps Luke viewed the material he had to work with as too idealized and insufficiently self-critical—with the exception, perhaps, of Ananias and Sapphira, whose tale might well be read as a signal that all was not well in the community as a whole. Now, with the tradition regarding the origin of deacons, Luke finally has an internal church fight he can get his teeth into.

The problem with this reading is that it loosens the narrative tension between Acts 6 and what has come before, and so deprives the reversal described in Acts 6 of its narrative power. But suppose Luke is dead serious in his initial portrayal of the Jerusalem church as totally devoted to *koinonia*. If so, he means us to see the complaint on behalf of the widows as something taking the church completely by surprise, something it regrets, and something which it would have avoided if it could have done so. I shall proceed with this second possibility, first, because I see no reason to doubt Luke’s sincerity in his account of the Jerusalem church in its earliest days, and second, because the church’s response to the Hellenists’ complaint is so strikingly positive and constructive. There is no rebuttal of their complaint and no defensiveness, only a swift move to address the matter: “The twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task’” (6:2–3). Seven men are selected—all Hellenists, judging

from their names—and the account moves on to the preaching of Stephen, deacon and martyr, and the first persecution and dispersion of the Jerusalem church.

Still, we are left with questions. How does the crisis occur in the first place, if the community is so focused on *koinonia*? Again, how should we assess the appointment of the seven as a response to it? If it isn't a technical fix, does it constitute an adaptive change, and if so, what changes?

Let's begin by circling back to Luke's account of Ananias and Sapphira. In the unfolding narrative this episode is obviously an object lesson about hypocrisy and greed. But when we reread it in the light of chapter 6, other elements present themselves. One is struck, first of all, by how much this couple wants to be part of the church. Their deceit is motivated both by greed and by the desire to belong. It is not immediately clear, however, whether their inclusion required them to liquidate their holdings and turn them over. Peter asserts that no such sacrifice was required of them (see 5:4), but the narrative as a whole suggests otherwise: "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (4:32). Luke's claim that everybody bought into this practice is at odds with Peter's claim that Ananias had no obligation to sell his land and hand over the proceeds. Luke may be alerting us to a disjunction between what Peter says and what was actually the case. If the unspoken goal was universal participation, then the pressure to conform would have been enormous. Perhaps what Ananias and Sapphira hold back is an indication of their resistance to such pressure. In any event, Luke takes pains to let us know that their demise sends shock waves through the community: "Great fear seized all who heard of it" (5:5), and again: "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things" (5:11). Their fear may reflect pious awe at this display of divine judgment, but it also suggests that many in the church discern something like Ananias and Sapphira's ambivalence in themselves. If there is any prelude to the problem over distribution, this is it. Luke's repeated insistence—notably before, not after the complaint of the Hellenists—that the Jerusalem church was unqualifiedly united in its embrace of radical *koinonia* reflects the hubris of a community more willing than able to live out its vision of God's reign.

In any case, it is remarkable that, once it is plain that radical *koinonia* has not been achieved, the church offers no excuses, refrains from defending itself, and mounts no attack on the minority party.

Luke presents us with a community ready to face its weakness without disavowing its aspirations. This is why I do not view the decision to create deacons as a “technical fix.” If that were the case, the leadership would simply have been creating an administrative office to accommodate the needs of a growing church, without any acknowledgment that overlooking the widows was the sign of a deeper problem. Instead, we see seven men set aside not simply to improve the process of distribution, but to be the church’s conscience to ensure that the church is not permitted to forget its poor.

This constitutional innovation changes everything. From now on, the church will not assume that it can pursue its mission as a community in exodus from privilege unaided. In creating the diaconate as an internal watchdog it has introduced a certain element of self-deconstruction into its own basic structure. This is a profoundly significant development, because it establishes the church as a body that (1) wants to be a redeemed and *koinonia*-shaped community, (2) discovers itself to be no less given to power dynamics than any human community, and (3) decides not to abandon its initial project, despite the pain of predictable, repeated failure. The institution of the diaconate is a classic instance of adaptive change. On the one hand, it confirms the church’s initial commitment to radical *koinonia*; on the other, it embodies the church’s realization that in order to achieve this goal it must build in structures that work against its own collusive tendencies.

In so doing, the church must begin to govern itself. This does not have to do with the Seven specifically, since they are clearly not appointed to govern but to advocate. Yet their appointment signals the church’s recognition that it can no longer operate under the immediate governance of the Holy Spirit. The Jerusalem church has enjoyed a kind of holy anarchy, much like pre-monarchical Israel, for which the lack of human government meant no distinction of rank or privilege. After the crisis, Luke depicts the church as a community driven to deliberation, first in response to the complaint of the Hellenists, and later in response to the challenge of table-fellowship with Gentile Christians. The crisis over the distribution of food teaches the church that it must still struggle with selfishness and ethnocentricity: it has not crossed over the line into a new age in which such dynamics can be factored out. Practically speaking, this means that the church cannot simply depend on the Holy Spirit to order its life. It is not a pure body, vivified by the Spirit. Rather, it is a redeemed community still

riddled with sin, open to the Spirit that is forming it, slowly but surely, into the body it is called to be. But such formation, as we all know, is a cooperative venture. It requires that we actively engage in the work of discernment and change, so that we may forge an identity fit to receive the promises. To be sure, the church, throughout Acts and to the present day, will struggle to know how best to govern itself. The apostles themselves seem reluctant to assume a permanent governing role: “We, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word” (6:4). Yet a corner has been turned. The church will never again assume that it can simply embark onto smooth waters with the Spirit in its sails. It will have to content itself with an overland journey through the Sinai wilderness that lies between the *koinonia* we aspire to and the privilege to which we still cling.

Luke brings home this shift in self-understanding in his account of Stephen’s sermon before the Sanhedrin. Stephen is one of the Seven, described by Luke as “full of grace and power,” doing “great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8). The heart of the sermon is an attack on the Temple. Stephen reminds his hearers that throughout the wilderness wandering there was only a movable tabernacle, and that this tabernacle was sufficient for years in the promised land, until Solomon decided to build a permanent (and immovable) home for the ark—a home God neither needed nor asked for (7:49). Stephen moves quite abruptly from his implied criticism of Solomon to a vicious attack on his judges: they resist the Holy Spirit and kill the prophets (7:51–53). The text is very taut at this point, and we must be careful not to read into it more than is there. But the sheer intensity of the transition from the mention of Solomon to his denunciation of the council invites interpretation. The most probable reading is as follows. In Stephen’s view, Solomon built the Temple to consolidate his power, and so resisted the Holy Spirit, who always supports *koinonia*, that is, the circulation of power for the common good, and resists the accumulation and retention of power by a few. In other words, Solomon’s Temple surfaces the rejection of *koinonia* that has infected Israel’s leadership all along. Stephen applies to his hearers what he says of their shared ancestors: “in their hearts they turned back to Egypt” (7:39). In short, Israel’s was a failed exodus, and the final fruit of that failure is the leaders’ rejection of Jesus, the new Moses who was to effect a true exodus from selfishness through the forgiveness of sins. Stephen has come to regard the Temple, and all the structures that support it, as the embodiment of an exodus that came to nothing. But

why would Stephen himself turn against the Temple in this way? He is surely among the disciples who assembled every day in Solomon's Portico, where Peter and the other apostles stationed themselves to teach (3:11, 5:12, 5:20–21). But if my reading so far is correct, Stephen's role as a deacon has already led him to reframe the story of the young church as an exodus that has not yet begun. He then proceeds to interpret this as yet another instance of Israel's repeated failure to leave Egypt behind. So, while we can readily see how Stephen's message might have careened into vitriol as he found himself standing before the same council that had tried and condemned Jesus, we must not let Stephen's fury at his audience blind us to the fact that his message about failed exodus applies to the Jerusalem church as well. It is no accident that Stephen's death becomes the occasion for a literal exodus from Jerusalem: "That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria" (8:1). Thus begins the well-known trajectory of Acts from Jerusalem outward, eventually to Rome.

I have lingered over Luke's account of the events preceding and following the appointment of the Seven, sometimes reading between the lines but at all times seeking to capture the undertow of the narrative, the better to understand what this story can teach us about the diaconate and about ordination. Two strong currents run through this section of Acts. One current is Luke's insistence that the church began as a community devoted to the sharing of all things in common, as a sign of the breaking down of all false divisions. The other current is Luke's repeated allusion to the exodus. The apostles, and later Stephen, perform signs and wonders like Moses before Pharaoh; the daily collection and distribution of food according to need recalls the equalizing effect of the Israelites' dependence on manna in the wilderness. These two currents converge in the crisis that issues in the ordination of the Seven, where the church learns that exodus and attention to the weakest amount to the same thing. After that, nothing is the same. Stephen sums up Israel's whole history as an exodus gone wrong, and his death triggers the persecution that drives the church from Jerusalem and inaugurates the Christian diaspora. Significantly, we never hear of another attempt on the church's part to share all things in common. The rest of Luke's history sees the church moving further and further outward from Jerusalem, with many instances of graced fellowship and costly witness. But the church as Luke knows

it does not presume to claim radical *koinonia*. From now on, it is content with an exodus from privilege that proceeds by fits and starts.

So, given all this, what does the diaconate mean for Luke? What have the Seven been ordained for? We must speak of ordination advisedly, since Acts offers no developed theology or procedure regarding what the church will later come to call “ordination.” In Acts 6, Peter calls for the people to make a choice of deacons (the Greek verb *episkepsomai*, which means something like “look over all the possibilities,” is intriguingly close to *episkopos*, overseer or bishop), and their choice is confirmed by the apostles through the laying on of hands. In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas choose elders for various congregations, but we do not hear who else, if anyone, is involved in the choice. In Acts 20, Luke refers to the leadership in Ephesus first as elders (presbyters), then, in Paul’s speech, as overseers or guardians (bishops), made such by the Holy Spirit. In other words, Luke offers a range of possibilities regarding who is ordained, for what purpose, and by what process, which he seems to have no interest in harmonizing, if, indeed, he views them as dissonant. Ordination assumes a system of church order, and, in most cases, a ranking of specific offices, which does not yet exist in the church Luke is describing. With the choice of the Seven, it is not only the diaconate but ordained ministry that is coming into being before our eyes, inviting us to consider this episode not only as a window onto the diaconate but onto Christian ordination as such. This would explain why Luke shows not the slightest interest in how the Seven go about dealing with food. His attention is focused on how Stephen, “full of grace and power, did great wonders among the people” (6:8). After Stephen’s martyrdom, he directs his attention to another one of the Seven, Philip, a great evangelist, healer, and catechist (8:2–40). His mission to the hated Samaritans and his baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (probably a Jew but unclean by virtue of his castration) pave the way for the church’s oncoming embrace of Gentiles. Both Stephen and Philip are living out the agenda they were set apart for. Stephen calls the church back into exodus mode; Philip is constantly moving from one wilderness road to another, proclaiming the good news to outcasts and strangers as he goes. We are not to imagine this agenda as theirs alone. It is the agenda of a church that has come to terms with its own need to be chastened, reimagined, and thrust out onto new paths. Together, Stephen and Philip exemplify the fundamental purpose of ordained ministry. As agents of the people they are to keep the people on track.

There is a marked contrast here with the role of the apostles, who are neither elected nor appointed by anyone. As companions of Jesus in his earthly ministry and eyewitnesses of his resurrection, they belong to the prehistory of the church and, with Jesus, constitute its foundation. This is not to say that they do not participate in the ebb and flow of the church's life in its first years. For instance, Peter's own call to entertain table fellowship with Gentiles is a major feature of Luke's account of the early days (10:1–11:18). Nevertheless, the apostles occupy a unique position. They are not so much the church as its progenitors, and their authority as eyewitnesses of the resurrection cannot be replicated. Paul himself, whose credentials as an apostle on these terms remain tenuous, is adamant that his call comes directly from Christ: he is not an agent of the church, but an agent of God to build up the church. It is essential to his claim to be an apostle that he does not represent the people but Christ, of whose risen glory he himself, too, claims to be a witness. It is not so with the Seven. They are set apart by the whole body to represent it to itself as a community that seeks, in its best moments, to be an exodus people.

Is this work of representation not the essential character of ordained ministry, whether we are talking about deacons, presbyters, or bishops? If we rely on Acts, ordination is always about being set apart for the persistent and effective encouragement of exodus. It is neither admission to a "higher" level of authority in the church nor entry into a contract to provide the laity with spiritual goods in return for special favors. It is the taking on of a critical agency within the body to ensure that the body as a whole does not fall back into the force field of Egypt. Those who have been ordered for this hard-edged ministry presume the people's genuine desire to head out into God's future, and agree to insist on that future in the people's name—even when the people protest. On the people's part—and this includes all the people, even those who end up being ordained—this requires a willingness to accept an amendment to the church's constitution, such that the provision of ordained ministry is no mere add-on to the life of the church, but is essential to its fullness. This means that from henceforth the laity and the ordained will depend on one another for their integrity. When ordained ministry neglects its grounding in the ministry of all the baptized it will quickly degenerate into autocracy or servility. When the laity regard themselves as separate from those who are ordained, they will risk falling back into the Jerusalem community's original naïveté about its ability to practice *koinonia*. Nevertheless,

barring an unholy alliance between the ordained and the laity (and the relation of service provider to client may be just that), the give and take of lay and ordained will be the arterial life of the church, each holding the other to account for promoting the mission of God.

So far we have been exploring ordained ministry in general on the basis of what Luke has told us about the ordination of the Seven. I realize that it is unusual to view the diaconate as the starting point for an understanding of ordained ministry. Nevertheless, what would it look like if the diaconate were the basis on which our understanding of other ordained ministries was built? Could we consider presbyters and bishops as variations on the diaconate? We might find it difficult to do this, because for centuries the church has viewed ordained ministry as a ladder of ascent, with deacons on the bottom rung and bishops at the top. Yet this ladder leaves the laity entirely out of consideration, except, perhaps, as the ground on which the ladder is secured. If the laity and the ordained are to be in a relationship of mutual accountability, then there can be no ladder of ascent among the various ordained ministries.

So how might we think of the diaconate as the wellspring of ordained ministry, rather than its bottom rung? Here are some initial and very tentative thoughts. If deacons are charged by the church to goad it continually into exodus, then we might think of priests as the rearguard, holding their particular communities together as they strain and fray against the centripetal force of that goading. Inasmuch as the call to exodus is a call away from privilege or isolation, it is a threat to most human communities, and will inevitably meet resistance, local parish by local parish. Is it not the vocation of the priest to name that resistance and work with the local congregation to overcome it? Priests are called to take the diaconal zeal for exodus and make it work for the local community by holding the community together while teaching it about exodus and organizing it for action. This ministry is summed up in the eucharistic assembly, when the people, gathered together by the priest, recall their exodus history and reorient themselves to it, through renewed identification with Jesus Christ. This is precisely why priests (or bishops) preside at the eucharist, rather than laypeople or deacons. Deacons do not preside, because it is not their job to hold the community together. It is their job to do in the assembly what they do everywhere else, namely, to proclaim the gospel, model Christ's servanthood, and keep people from lingering too long in familiar company. Laypeople do not preside, because to do so

would overthrow the whole basis for ordained ministry, which is to prevent, if possible, a repetition of Acts 6.

On this view, priests help local communities risk exodus and weather its rigors. But there is a danger here. Local formation may undercut a congregation's connection to the universal church. Why is such connection important? Because from the beginning the church has been a society driven to breach all false or unnecessary barriers, including barriers that may distance congregation from congregation, priest from priest, and deacon from deacon. This is where the episcopate comes in. It is a truism that bishops are charged with maintaining the unity of the body. But this serves a further goal, which is the formation of a people that is universal without being monolithic—present everywhere, yet as regards privilege, always outside. Here too we have a ministry related to, but distinct from, the diaconate. Just as deacons are not expected, like priests, to hold the local community together as it journeys into the wilderness, so they are not called, like bishops, to ensure that every congregation experiences itself as part of a vast and varied exodus. But if the ministries of priest and bishop are truly in the service of that outward journey, then it is no mistake to view them as variations on diaconal ministry, or even as its by-products.

This approach does away with any notion of “higher” and “lower” within the church's ancient orders, while clarifying why these three orders cannot be reduced to two or one. Each order has its own integrity and authority relative to the others, and each depends on the other for the fulfillment of its own purpose. But this equality only holds if priesthood and episcopacy are logically dependent on the diaconate—that is to say, if we understand the church in such a way that we cannot make sense of priests or bishops apart from the work of deacons. In any case, the logical priority of the diaconate provides a viable, completely egalitarian argument for retaining the ancient practice of ordaining people to the diaconate before ordaining them as priests or bishops. This is not about progressing from one rank to the next, but ensuring that priesthood and episcopacy be stamped with the character of the order which provides them both with their context and point. Not that priests and bishops remain deacons—a claim that deacons rightly find offensive. But their ministry arises out of the diaconate and is answerable to it.

So where does this discussion bring us? First of all, we can talk about ordained ministry without having to import rank into our

thinking about the church. If there is no “higher” or “lower” among the three orders—if ordination is not stepping onto a ladder of ascent—then there is also no “higher” or “lower” when it comes to comparing the laity to the ordained. We are all disciples of Jesus who are called to follow him into the wilderness. Some of us are invited by the baptized to be deacons, priests, and bishops, in order to help the whole body stay the course when so many forces urge us to turn back. But there is no privilege here. Each order serves the whole body as it struggles toward exodus. Furthermore, this line of reasoning reaffirms ordained ministry as a non-negotiable feature of the church. If my reading of Acts is correct, then ordination is part of the constitution of a body marked for all time by its early failure to achieve *koinonia*. Ordained ministry is therefore all the more clearly ordered to a hoped-for success, namely, the achievement of real *koinonia* in the church. But it can only fulfill this function when priests and bishops see themselves as postscripts to *diakonia*. Such a readjustment will not be easy for those of us who thought we were on top, or for those of us accustomed to wielding power from below. It will also not be easy for the laity, for whom this may spell more active ministry than they had bargained for. Nevertheless, if we can work out how every locus of authority—ordained and lay—serves the equal and Christly fellowship of all, then we will be on our way to the next step in our vocation to be a model of the body politic to the nations we inhabit and serve.