

The Twelve and the Seven in Acts 6 and the Needy

By Norman Nagel



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*With a preface by Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison
President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295
888-THE LCMS (843-5267) • lcms.org

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PREFACE

Lutheran theology without mercy renders the confession of the faith a clanging cymbal. Mercy without the mooring of a solid confession, and rooted in the church's life of worship, quickly loses its Christian character.

This essay by Rev. Dr. Norman Nagel of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, is offered here for broader distribution. The essay is brief, but carefully packed with insight on the New Testament and the ministry of mercy. In the solid Lutheran tradition, Dr. Nagel notes that care for the needy was a concern of the apostolic office, and continues with the office of the ministry (See Walther's *Pastorale*, paragraph 39). The "seven" of Acts 6, argues Nagel, were ordained to the office of the ministry, and specifically tasked with care for the needy. "They are ordained and allocated a verb to do." "The work involved in caring for the poor was never left unallocated." Yet, as this essay notes, there is fluidity in the church's ordering of offices and persons for *diakonia*, and setting churchly offices against one another, or against the vocation of mercy of all Christians, is not viewing the matter from the perspective of the Gospel.

As I have surveyed the diakonic life of the LCMS these past five years, I have found myself particularly struck by one comment by Dr. Nagel:

When deacons lose their place in the liturgy and yet are to have a care for the needy, the care for the needy may then also drift elsewhere away from the liturgy and the Lord's Table.

Spot on! (See *Fight, Work, Pray!* in this series.) Those given the task of caring for the needy must themselves be connected to altars, fonts and pulpits, that is, caring for needy ones in the midst of the

congregation. And moreover, reaching to the edges of that fellowship and beyond, they bring Christ's ministration of the Gospel of forgiveness, and the touch of mercy of the body of Christ.

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Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison
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THE TWELVE AND THE SEVEN IN ACTS 6 AND THE NEEDY

Luke 6 tells of our Lord's praying and then of His calling His disciples to Him. From among them He chose twelve. These He named apostles. Their names are listed. There is no doubt who is an apostle, who is of the Twelve.

As apostles they get sent. For their first mission Jesus "gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (LUKE 9:1-6). There are specifications unique to this mission.

Upon their return they reported to Jesus. The crowds came after Him. "He welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing ... The Twelve came and said to him, 'Send the crowd away' ... But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat'" (LUKE 9:11-13). Something they are specifically told to do. They gave out what He gave them to give. When they were at table with Him, He was the one who served (ὁ διακονῶν, 22:27). He gives them to eat and to drink, and thereafter they would give out what He has them there for, for His giving out, specifically His body and His blood. As at Passover and its meal, there was thought and provision for the needy (JOHN 13:29). But sadly, "a dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (LUKE 22:24).

The mission of the Seventy has similarities with the first mission of the Twelve (LUKE 10:1-20). Their message is the same and they also are to heal the sick. The Seventy are specified to "where he himself, was about to go" (LUKE 10:1). That done their mission was done, as also the first mission of the Twelve, and also the mission of John the Baptist. Our Lord has directions which are unique and specific to each mission on which He sends whom He sends. We are following Luke, most sensitive to the people on the fringes.

In Luke's final chapter the message and its mission are based on the Old Testament. On the way to Emmaus Jesus said to the two who report to the Eleven (v. 33):

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (LUKE 24:25–27).

Then in Jerusalem:

“Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (LUKE 24:44–47).

The apostles whom Jesus had chosen through the Holy Spirit were given the charge to remain in Jerusalem to await the promise of the Father (ACTS 1:4).

They were the Eleven (LUKE 24:9, 33; MATT. 28:16; MARK 16:4). Their names are listed (ACTS 1:13F.). Judas's share in this ministry (τὸν κληρὸν τῆς διακονίας ταύτης), his office (ἐπισκοπήν αὐτοῦ, AV: bishoprick) his place in this ministry and apostleship is filled by Matthias—done only here by lot (κληρὸς), by intervention of the Lord. ““He was numbered with the eleven apostles” (ACTS 1:26). Then there were Twelve. When James, the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve was martyred, he was not thus replaced (ACTS 12:2).

For the Pentecost of Israel there are Twelve. Wind, storm, and fire signal the Lord is having an Israel, a Twelve, as at Sinai (Ex. 19:16; HEB. 12:18–24; LUKE 22:30). Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem” (2:14).

“Those who received his word (λόγον) were baptized,” three thousand in all. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship (κοινωνία), to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (ACTS 2:41–42). The apostles appear to be taking care of things. Only two of the Twelve are mentioned, and then as apostles: Peter and John. The Twelve appear only once more in connection with the Seven.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common (κοινά). And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need (χρείαν). And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (ACTS 2:44–47).

Quite a flock if they all went to the temple together and how many houses were needed for doing the other things? “With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them” (ACTS 4:33 FF; DEUT. 15:4). The generous provision was laid at the apostles’ feet, who then saw to the distribution. How much was done at the same time and in the same place: the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers?

Caring for the needy was part and parcel of being an Israelite, one who belongs to such a Lord who “executes justice for the

fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” (DEUT. 10:18; JAMES 1:27). Among the prophets, “doing justice for widows” was shorthand for covenantal loyalty. In the Rabbinic tradition, “doing justice” (*sedeka*) was spelled out in terms of organized community almsgiving.¹ This was never just something secular. Un-Israelizing denial of this brought down a curse (DEUT. 27:19; MAL. 3:5). It was rebellion against the Lord who gives without reckoning of return, as is most clearly the case with orphans, widows and strangers — not by some abstract principle of equality but “as any had need.” In the temple there was provision for “the poor of good family.” The Mishna tells of “The Seven of the City” who managed the distribution. Daube points out that they were not ordained (not *samakh*, but *˘sam*, “more civil than religious”), as was Joshua, Moses’ substitute, and as were the seven in ACTS 6.²

A Damascus Fragment tells of a pre-Christian ordinance for the members of the congregation to put their offering every month for the needy into the hand of the *episcopus* and the judges.³ Jeremias

¹ L. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 105f.; O. Proksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: Bertelmann, 1950), 232; H. J. Degenhardt, “Liebestätigkeit in den Gemeinden der apostolischen Zeit,” in Volk Gottes, ed. R. Baumer and H. Dolch (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 250.

² D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 239; “A reform in Acts and its models,” in *Jews, Greeks and Christians*. Festschrift for W. D. Davies, ed. R. Hamerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 162; H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Munich: Beck, 1956), 2:641–647; Megillah 3:2; IA, Three members of a synagogue act for the synagogue. B, Seven townspeople act for the town. *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, ed. J. Neusner (Chicago and London: UCP, 1982), 19:123; Also Josephus’s *Antiquities* 4.14 (214) *Jewish War* 1.5 (569). “More civil than religious.” *Flavius Josephus 3, Judean Antiquities* 1–4, ed. L. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 408, n. 648. Deut. 16:18. A plethora of invaluable data is given by H. LeCornu with J. Shulam in *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts* (Jerusalem: Academ, 2003), especially 301–320. Still unsurpassed is E. Lohse’s *Die Ordination im Spätjudentum und im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: V & R, 1951).

³ CD XIV, 12f. *Die Texte aus Qumran*, ed. E. Lohse (Darmstadt: WBG, 1971), 97, Mebaqqer, Aufseher, episcopus. In the LXX usually a Levite with varying allocations of task. Eleazar was the priest with responsibility for the range of things needed for the liturgy, among which was the cereal offering (Num. 4:16). 2 Kings 11:18 has watchmen over the house of the Lord. In 2 Chron. 34:12 we may find “ministers of music,” and in Neh. 11:22 episcopal Levites for choir service. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 260f.; In Qumran he (Jeremias) finds them “as a shepherd with his sheep”; and “among the Jews the ruler his sheep”; and “among the Jews the ruler of the synagogue.” See B. Reicke, *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos* (Uppsala: Lundequist, 1957), 29. Also his *The Jewish “Damascus Documents” and the New Testament* (Uppsala: Wretman, 1946), 17, and 16 where he comments on xiii, 7: “striking linguistic and sociological similarities with the Christian ἐπίσκοπος.”

points to evidence prior to A.D. 70 which tells of arrangements for the care of the poor. The “poor basket” (*quappāh*) was a weekly distribution of food and clothing. The “poor bowl” (*tamhay*) was a daily distribution of food also with provision for a cup of wine at Passover. To be included in the rejoicing before the Lord were the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (DEUT. 16:11). While the Jerusalem Christian Israelites would have some knowledge of this, Jeremias concludes: “it is more likely that the fellowship meal that was held daily by the Christian community, entailed of itself a daily distribution of aid for its poor members.”⁴ Reicke pushes this point further. He does not see the Christian care for the needy in close continuity with what went before. He sees it rather as an aspect of the liturgical life of the Jerusalem congregation. The apostles themselves had the doing of it.⁵ In Corinth Paul had to deal with the treatment of the have-nots in church when they came together for the Lord’s Supper.

But we are still in Jerusalem in Acts 6. Here disciples appear for the first time in Acts. It embraces all the Christian Israelites despite differences of language and culture. They are also held together as the baptized, those who call upon the name of the Lord, those belonging to the Way, the saints, the brethren, the believers “who received his (Peter’s, the Twelve’s) words.” Together they are the Lord’s church assembled in specific places (20:28). First in Antioch we hear of them as Christians (11:26). Same ones, different designations, each with some specificity.

What the Lord sets going does not stop in Jerusalem, and so further afield on to Judea and Samaria, and to the ultimate end of the earth. All along the way there is continuity of message and ministry. In Jerusalem the Twelve are first central. In the

⁴ Jeremias, 131, 133. Jeremias’s dating is discounted by Brian Copper, “The Palestinian Context of Community of Goods,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 351.

⁵ Reicke, 29.

Pentecost of Israel the Twelve stand before the people with Peter their spokesman.

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (ACTS 2:38–39).

Things went well, and they went badly. There is always the danger of being brought to a stop.

“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving 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 were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (ACTS 4:32–35).

ACTS 5 tells of hypocrisy and cheating regarding what was laid at the apostles’ feet. The apostles were imprisoned. Forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus, “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (5:42).

In chapter 6 things come to a stop. “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” What language you spoke could be a problem. In Jerusalem there were Aramaic-speaking synagogues and Greek-speaking ones. Among the disciples this was also the case. Christian Israelites whose first language was Greek are here called Hellenists. The Hebrews were Aramaic-

speaking Christian Israelites.⁶ To speak of Israel is to speak of Twelve. The Israel whose Twelve they are, are “the body of the disciples.” That body incorporates both the Hebrews and the Hellenists, both Israelite disciples. Murmuring is an Israelite thing to do, for any number of reasons, among them food complaints.⁷ Exodus 16 makes clear that the murmuring against Moses and Aaron was in fact murmuring against the Lord. The distribution of food is from His hands. He feeds the widow and orphan and stranger by His arrangements. When this is not being adequately done, others are appointed to help in the work. Thus the Seventy.⁸

Greek-speaking Jews, sensitive to presumptions of superiority on the part of the Aramaic –speaking Jews, might well suppose this to be a ground for second-class treatment. Or that may have been the way they put their case, when they thought they were not getting as much as some others in the distribution. Some given reasons may be chosen as more pious and persuasive than more honest ones. Widows, for whom the Lord has a special care, were being slighted. Who then is pulling with the Lord, and who is pulling against Him? Murmuring, which is usually against the Lord, is here directed against the Hebrews, when in fact responsibility for the distribution, we have been told, is at the feet and in the hands of the apostles, of whom we know twelve, with Barnabas from Cyprus already mentioned.

⁶ C. F. D. Moule, “Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?” *Expository Times* 70 (1958–1959), 100–102; Hengel agrees. *Between Jesus and Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 8–11; “The Ἑλληνοίται, in 6:1 and 9:29, are a phenomenon limited to Jerusalem.” Hengel offers a way through the maze tentidiously projected by Baur, 1ff. For Chrysostom 137, no. 37. J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte* NTD 5 (Göttingen: V & R, 1988), 108, agrees with Chrysostom when he says on Acts 9:29, Luke “names those who speak Greek Hellenists.” *Homilies on Acts 21.1*; *Library of Fathers* (Oxford: OUP, 1851), 33:299. NPNF 1 16:135. J. Jervell would reawaken regard for Baur in his *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: V & R, 1998), 52. Jervell would show how separate the two groups were.

⁷ Daube, *Reform*, 152f.

⁸ Ex. 18:22 [tells of] judges as assistants of Moses, “They will bear the burden with you.” Similarly Num. 11:17, the Seventy, “They shall bear the burden of the people with you,” and Deut.1:12, officers of the tribes, “How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife?” Too many to deal with. Daube, *Report*, 155: “Linguistically, Acts is a blend of Exodus and Deuteronomy plus the appointment of Joshua.” And in general, Jervell, 75.

The Twelve act. For more than anything else they are there for preaching the Word of God. Their continuing to take care of the distribution, which surely took place with the “Word of God,” would now use up too much of their time, burdened now with the task of sorting out all its problems. Who is right; who is wrong? Who is strong; who is weak? Overcoming such questions is the core question put by the Twelve: What of the Word of God? What may hinder the onward movement of its message, mission, and ministry? What carries everything forward in Acts is the preaching of the Word of God. That happens as it has mouth and feet put to its service. We have heard of the Twelve, and the apostles. Now we hear of the Seven.

ACTS 6 gives intimation from within Jerusalem of threats to be faced again later. The language question was perhaps cover for who counts for more, and who gets more in the distribution. Whose church is it (**1:6; LUKE 9:46**)? **ACTS 11:1** tells of when “The apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.” Here we hear of “the apostles and the brothers.” In **ACTS 6** the disciples and the Twelve.

In Jerusalem the Twelve are in authority. They will shortly disappear as “sent ones” are apt to do. The movement does not end with the Twelve; others are put to do what they have been doing. The distribution, as done by the apostles (**4:35**), grew to be more than they could manage, particularly if there was now some friction to be dealt with. That would claim more time. Some designation was called for regarding what in the *διακονία* (service/ministry) was whose responsibility. The Twelve did not wish to have less time for prayer and the ministry of the Word. If they gave up the distribution, or at least some of it, others would need to be designated to that part of the ministry which is designated by tables. This suggests meal, food, eating, and drinking. These were never without the Word of God and prayer, certainly not when the Twelve were responsible, and not when those taking

their place were responsible, particularly not in the context of devotion to the apostles' teaching and fellow-ship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (1:42).

The Twelve ask to be relieved of some of their responsibilities so that they may have more time for what really comes first. Having drawn the attention of the disciples toward that, so away from their squabbles, the Twelve put forth both problem and proposal. "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint (καταστήσομεν) to this duty" (Acts 6:3). Luke tells of this in the way he tells of an ordination.⁹ There is an election (ἐξελέξαντο) of seven by the deliberative body of the disciples (πλήθος). These the Twelve will put to this task (i.e., duty, need, office, χρεία αὐτή, 6:1).¹⁰ The Seven were elected. As specific to the task of fair distribution to the Hellenist widows, they have Greek names. Would the care of the Hebrews then need "no special attention and go on smoothly as before?"¹¹ Greek names were not unusual among Greek-speaking Israelites, especially those from the Diaspora. One is a proselyte from Antioch, of which more anon. The first named is Stephen, the second is Philip, of whom more anon. "These (seven) they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them." (Acts 6:6).

They are ordained and allocated a verb to do. That is not called a διακονία nor are they διάκονοι. What is primary of διακονία is

⁹ The usage is traced out by G. Schille, *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lukas* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1984), 169–171; Terminologisch ausgewogen. Here "set there" ἐστησάν, put) toward technical term for ordination for which these things are done: election and presentation by the congregation, prayer and the laying on of hands by the apostles. Strack-Billerbeck 2:655f., observe that the laying on of hands probably fell out of Jewish usage because it meant so much among the Christians. B. Domagalski, "Waren die 'Sieben' (Apg 6, 1–7) Diakone? *Biblische Zeitschrift* 26 (1982), 30; "Die Sieben im Grunde die gleichen Handlungen ausüben wie die Zwölf." A similar view is expressed by J. Emminghaus, "Amtverständnis und Amtsübertragung im Judentum und in der frühen Kirche des I. Jahrhunderts," *Bibel und Liturgie* 3 (1977): 183f. E. Lohse, TDNT 9:433, n. 55; A. Weiser, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Güterloh: Mohn, 1985), 167. Contra Jervell, 219.

¹⁰ E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 263: 1f. "In Hellenistic usage χρεία means 'function' and 'office,' not 'requirement.'"

¹¹ Moule, 101; The Hebrews were already receiving adequate care. Jervell, 218. The aorist καταλείποντας allows the Twelve to have felt the burden already. Daube, *Reform* 155.

the ministry of the Word (6:4), that is the preaching of the Word of God (λόγον, 6:2). Luke's emphasis on the Word of God as the primary doer in the Acts of the Apostles may help to explain why the Seven are not outside the ministry of the Word by their designation "to serve tables," any more than the Twelve had been, as is confirmed by what we are later told of Stephen and Philip. Having a Twelve and a Seven is not the final solution. Polity may vary. Constant are the words of the Lord and their delivery as He has mandated. In **Acts 6** the number of ministers is augmented with specific allocations of tasks.¹²

There is no διακονία going on unless there is someone doing it. Into some διακονία there are those who are specifically put. Those thus put are spoken of by what in that ministry they are there allocated to do. They might both be called deacons/ministers, with the Twelve having a prior claim. That does not happen here, nor do we hear of this allocation again. We attend upon what does happen.

The Jerusalem chapter is drawing on toward Judea and Samaria (8:1, "except the apostles"). The "preaching the word of God" of which the Twelve spoke is carried on further by Stephen and Philip of the Seven. Their preaching, baptizing, and witnessing brings the account beginning from Jerusalem, on through Judea and Samaria, on toward "the ultimate end of the earth." Saul, mentioned at Stephen's stoning, enters the ongoing movement in chapter 9. It is the one movement as the Word of the Lord travels and grows.¹³ One message proclaimed by those whom the Lord puts to carrying it, one ministry. Those whom the Lord puts into this ministry may be variously assigned to its tasks, as may vary in time, place, need, and opportunity, and as may also be indicated by a variety

¹² Schille, 165: Die Vergrößerung der Mitarbeiterschaft. 166: Versus Strobel's aitiology theory, "man müsste doch zunächst einmal nachweisen, dass es christliche Armenpfleger als Institut (gar der Sieben) gegeben hat." 169: Man wird mit Did. 11.9 τράπεζα = Abendmahlstisch) an die eucharistische, prinzipieller: die kultische Funktion denken dürfen. Jervell, 218: "Verkündigung und Armeindienst nicht zu trennen sind."

¹³ M. Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961). J. Kodell, "The Word of God Grew," *Biblica* 55 (1974), 505ff.

of titles. Part of what the Twelve had been doing was assigned to the Seven. Of two of the Seven we are told they proclaimed the Word of the Lord. Of Philip, that he baptized, and that he was an evangelist. Of Paul we are told that he baptized for only a little while in Corinth, and then as an apostle he traveled on. The departing apostle left resident ministers in place, and saw to it that the churches in every place had ministers (χειροτονήσαντες, 14:23; καθίστημι, **TITUS 1:5**).

Next we may enquire how the Seven lived on in the usage of the church. Was their specified responsibility specific to that Jerusalem phase of which **ACTS 6** tells us? In **PHIL. 1:1** and **1 TIMOTHY** there are men called deacons, διάκονοὶ (*deacons, ministers*). They serve with bishops. Their ministry is done in relation to senior clergy. They are all ordained by the Lord. The furthest that we get in the New Testament are the words to bishops and to deacons in **1 TIMOTHY 3**; both are in the “preaching the word of God.”

Whatever the titles, the constant and the continuity are in the message, and that the Lord has put them into its service. Specifications within the service may be indicated by a particular title. The Twelve were doubtless apostles. As sent ones they traveled. The specific import of their being Twelve dominates the Pentecost of Israel. They evidence the Lord’s one Israel.¹⁴ That accomplished, they disappear. Jerusalem does not hold them nor furnish them with a succession. If not Jerusalem, how then any other place? In Jerusalem we hear of no successors of the Seven. **ACTS 6** is the last time we hear of both the Twelve and the Seven.

There continue to be apostles. As apostles they tend to move on. Churches came to have resident clergy. From synagogue background there were presbyters (*elders*). The Septuagint tells of

¹⁴ K. Rengstorf, “The Election of Matthias,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, Festschrift for O. Piper, ed. W. Klassen and G. Snyder (New York: Harper, 1962), 188. B. Rigaux, “Die Zwölf in Geschichte und Kerygma” in *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus*, ed. H. Ristow and K. Matthiae (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962), 481.

bishops, priests who cared for supervising and supporting the liturgy. There were other priests whom they directed (NUM. 4:16). Ἐπισκοπή, and ἀποστολή, and διακονία are synonyms by ACTS 1:25. The office was there before Matthias was put into it. It was there before all its nomenclature, before the allocations within it, as might be indicated by various titles and roles in the liturgy. Each may have some *proprium*.¹⁵ Ysebaert acknowledges this when he shows the way presbyter and bishop are synonymous, and on the basis of more evidence than ACTS 20:17, 28 and 1 PETER 5:1. Presbyter could include both bishop and deacon.¹⁶ Where presbyter, there is no deacon. Didache 15.1 has bishops and deacons; no presbyter in sight. When presbyters were subordinated to bishops, deacons were subordinated to presbyters, one tier down, but still primarily responsible to a bishop. In the Apostolic Tradition (c. 215) no presbyter but only the bishop ordains a deacon “to do what is ordered by him.” This cannot but include what needs to be done for the needy.¹⁷ We hear nothing of the specification of the Seven.

¹⁵ G. Konidaris, “Warum die Urkirche von Antioch den προεστῶτα πρεσβύτερον der Ortsgemeinde als ὁ Ἐπίσκοπος bezeichnet.” *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 12 (1961), 276: Denn zuerst war das Amt da und dann kam die richtige Amtsbezeichnung. Cf. the Seven of the Roman priesthood. Henry Denzinger (*Enchiridion symbolorum et declarationem de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. P Hünermann [Freiburg, Basel, Rome, Vienna: Herder, 1991]), 1765, *non pari gradu* in one priesthood.

¹⁶ J. Ysebaert, *Die Amtsterminologie im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche* (Breda: Eureka, 1994), 77. In 1 *Clement* (c. 96) between bishops and presbyters “kein sachlicher Unterschied.” H. Lona, *Der erste Clemensbrief* (Göttingen: V and R, 1998), 446. Note 5 quotes Lemaire and Stadler as equating deacons and presbyters. *Clement* refers to these Ἐπίσκοποι and διάκονοι as πρεσβύτεροι.” Kirsopp Lake, “The Apostles in Acts,” in *The Beginnings of Christianity* 5, ed. Kirsopp Lake and H. Cadbury (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 57, n. 2. 1 *Clem.* 42 and 44 (AF 74 and 76, LCC 1:62–64). M. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), 2:684. “All these ranks the apostles include under the terms ‘presbytery’ and ‘episcopacy.’ Sometimes they also call those to whom the ministry of Word and sacrament has been committed by the term ‘minister’ (‘servant’ [διάκονος])” (Col. 1:7, 23; 1 Thess. 3:2; 2 Cor. 3:6; 11:23; Eph. 3:7). See n. 26.

¹⁷ P. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo, 1990), 108f. His “Ordination” in *Essays on Hippolytus*, ed. G. Cuming, 36: some things “belong more to the fourth-century.” 38: “The model for the deacon is not St. Stephen nor the Seven in Acts 6, as it is in many later rites, but the service of Christ himself, as it is also in Ignatius of Antioch (*Magnesian* 6; *Trallians* 3).”

The prophets and teachers in the Didache, who are in the same ministry with the bishops and deacons, disappear.¹⁸ What they were there to do lapses, or is taken into some other office—usually, that of the bishop.¹⁹ The work involved in caring for the poor was never left unallocated. As bishops came to have more management of things they came to be more specifically designated to this part of the ministry, which had its place in the liturgy, in which all clergy, however titled, had their part. Here we may come to spot those upon whom the title deacon settled, after having been common to them all. In Sarapion the ordination prayer for a deacon prays, “that he may serve in his *leitourgia* in the midst of the holy people.”²⁰ In Didache 15.4 we glimpse the prayers and almsgiving running together, with all the clergy in the same service/ministry (διακονία). “The gifts given by the rich to the poor are really God’s gifts.”²¹

There is nothing unusual in Ignatius admonishing Polycarp that his care for the widows be such as is second only to the Lord’s care for them.²² Recall Deuteronomy as quoted above and also Ps. 68:5 and 146:9. For the Smyrnians, Ignatius diagnoses the problem in a way that recalls Jerusalem in Acts. “Those who have wrong notions about the grace of Jesus Christ ... have no concern for widows and orphans ... They hold aloof from the Eucharist.”²³

Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians admonishes the presbyter to look after the sick, widows, orphans, the poor. Two paragraphs

¹⁸ Didache 15.1–2, *Early Christian Fathers, Library of Christian Classics*, ed. C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 1:178, (hereafter LCC). K. Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 203–205.

¹⁹ Bradshaw points to the liturgical evidence: formularies that were once common to all. *Ordination Rites*, 38.

²⁰ Bradshaw, 75. Paul as *leitourgos* in Rom. 15:16.

²¹ Niederwimmer 82, on *Didache* 1.5. Here also advice regarding the exploitation of almsgiving by the devious poor. *Didache* 11.1–6 warns of false teachers and freeloading clergy. *Didache* 12:3–5 echoes 2 Thess. 3:10–12.

²² Polycarp, 4.1. *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. M. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 196, (hereafter AF. LCC 1:119).

²³ *Smyrnaeans*, 6.2. LCC 1:114. AF 188.

earlier deacons are admonished to godly living. There is no mention of their caring for the poor. The title bishop does not appear.²⁴

With Justin Martyr we could almost be back in Jerusalem. After the Eucharist the collection comes to the celebrant (προεστῶτι) who “takes care of orphans and widows and those who are in want.” Deacons distribute the consecrated elements, and also carry them to those who are absent,²⁵ and could that be without something more as needed?

Chrysostom speaks respectfully of the text; he hesitates to make it say some things that were not yet there. “There was no bishop, but the apostles only. Whence I think it clearly and manifestedly follows, that neither deacons nor presbyters is their designation: but it was for this specifically that they were ordained.” The “this” is here the specific χρεία God ordained them to. It is called a διακονία and not alms out of regard for those who give and for those who receive. “How vital then are alms and getting things allocated.” “Nothing is more characteristic of a Christian than mercy/charity/alms.”²⁶

The Apostolic Canons (late fourth century), have it all in the hands of the bishop with presbyters and deacons his instruments for carrying out his care of the poor.²⁷

When Jerome wrote to the presbyter Nepotianus he extolled a bishop’s providing for the poor as his glory.²⁸ When the hospitality was more than he could manage, we hear of xenodochia, hostels

²⁴ LCC 1:133. AF 312.

²⁵ *Apology*, 1.67. LCC 1:287.

²⁶ Homily 14. *Patrologia Graeca* 60:115f. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christian Fathers*, 1 11:89f. *Homily 30 on 1 Corinthians* tells of the widows having seven deacons set over them. PG 61:254. NPNF 1 12:179. *Homily 32 on Hebrews*: 7 begins with ἐλεημοσύνη and goes on to “the widow and the fatherless” of Psalm 146:9. “Nothing is as characteristic of a Christian as ἐλεημοσύνη.” Mercy, charity, alms. In verse 8 you can tell a fruitful olive tree (Ps. 52:8) by the way it does or does not give alms in a whole year or each week. PG 63:223f. NPNF 1 14:513.

²⁷ *Apostolic Canons* 40, 41. F. X. Funk. *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum* (Paderborn: Schoenigh, 1895), 1:576.

²⁸ *Letter 52. Saint Jerome Lettres* ed. J. Labourt (Paris: Bude, 1951), 2:180f. NPNF 2 6:92.

and hospitals. Canon 8 of Chalcedon bids the clergy of the poor-houses, monasteries, and martyries continue under the authority of the bishops in each city.²⁹ Later it was the glory of the monasteries.

Where the monasteries disappeared the poor could not be left uncared for. Luther urged the Common Chest for their welfare. “No more begging among Christians under the New Testament than among the Jews under the Old Testament.”³⁰ Gone the monkish idealization of poverty, and instead Christians together caring for the needy in the way and fruit of each one’s calling. Chemnitz included being active in the care for the poor in what the Office of the Ministry is there for.³¹ In France and England, with secularization, almoners, who were traditionally clergy, saw their work taken over by civil authorities.

What, however, of the deacons? Canon 15 of Nicaea forbids them, along with bishops and presbyters, “to remove from one city to another.”³² Ignatius included them in his fanciful trinitarianization of the *ordo-triplex* which was first clearly stated by the Apostolic Constitutions 7.31.³³ “Everyone must show the deacons

²⁹ J. Stevenson. *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 327. W. Caspari. “Die kirchliche Armenpflege,” in *Die geschichtliche Grundlage des gegenwärtigen Gemeindelebens* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1908), 219–231. He gives a sparkling array of data.

³⁰ *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), 45:281. Deut. 15:4. Here at Leisnig we may observe the difficulties involved in the transition of responsibility from the abbot and monastery to the local congregation’s clergy and laity with each their specific role in the liturgy and the caring for the needy. 161–194. Both spiritual and temporal authorities have each their responsibilities. And so into the ways of the two kingdoms. Primary resources for the Lutheran tradition are Caspari and Elert’s *Morphologie des Luthertums 2* (Munich: Beck, 1953), 396–452. Luther simply inherited the tradition of the Seven being the first deacons. LW 44:159; 39:312. In the paragraph regarding the installation of a parson (Pfarrer) Leisnig Ordinance for the Common Christ speaks of a caring for the poor and needy as “a preeminently spiritual undertaking (ertzgeistlichen).” WA 12; 16, 22; LW 45:177.

³¹ Locus 13. *De Sacramento Ordinis* [as in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession XIII, 2], *Examen Concilii Tridentini* (Berlin: Schlawitz, 1861), 474, 3: *pauperum curam agere*. ET (*Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. F. Kramer [St. Louis: Concordia, 1979]), 679: “be in charge of care for the poor.” 683 has Acts 6:1–4. “Thus in the beginning the apostles took care of the ministry of the Word and the sacraments and at the same time also of the distribution and dispensation of alms. Afterward, however, as the number of the disciples increased, they entrusted that part of the ministry to others, whom they called deacons.”

³² J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1987), 342.

³³ Funk 1:420.

respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God's council and an apostolic band.³⁴

Irenaeus is the first to make the aetiological connection of deacons as third level clergy with the Seven, or really much more with Stephen.³⁵ In Sarapion "the ordination prayer sets the institution of the diaconate within the context of God's sending of Christ," and refers unequivocally to "the seven deacons." Specification is lacking except "that he may serve in his *leitourgia* in the midst of the holy people."³⁶ Lay deacons are not heard of until the sixteenth century among the Reformed, and then of two kinds.³⁷ Few now attempt to defend the view that the Seven were the first deacons.³⁸

When deacons lose their place in the liturgy and yet are to have a care for the needy, the care for the needy may then also drift elsewhere away from the liturgy and the Lord's Table (**1 COR. 10:21; MAL. 1:7; DID. 11.9**). There were tables in **ACTS 2:42; 6:2; and 20:7**. **1 COR. 16:1-2** also speaks of the first day of every week. What, we may ask, happened with the care of the needy when the Lord's

³⁴ *Trallians* 3.1. LCC 1: 99. AF 160. No mention of caring for the needy here, nor Phil. 11.1, where the deacon Philo "assists me in the word of God." AF 183. LCC 1:111. *Trallians* 2.3 they are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ. "They are not merely deacons of food and drink, but ministers (ὕπερέται) of God's church." AF 161. LCC 1:99.

³⁵ *Against Heresies* 3.12.10; 4.15.1, ed. N. Brox (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), 3, 146; 4, 112. ANF 1:434, 480. Bradshaw 74. Ysebaert 124 synchronically. Zahn gives following citations. *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lucas* (Leipzig and Erlangen: Deichert, 1922), 234, n. 17. For Isidore's diaconal arabesque see *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, ed. C. Lawson (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), CCSL 113, 66f.

³⁶ Funk 2:188. Bradshaw 75.

³⁷ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.3.9. LCC 21:1061. From Rom. 12:8 "deacons who distribute the alms," and deacons who "devote themselves to the care of the poor and sick" (an opening here for deaconesses). Compare two kinds of elders from 1 Tim. 5:17. LCC 21:1211. McKee observes "the development of a clear theory of a plurality of ministries." He writes in "Church Officers: Calvinist Offices," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York Oxford: OUP, 1996), 1:337f. More fully in John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving (Geneva: Droz, 1984), 139-158 for Acts 6:1-6. "Prescriptive for church order for all time." "Conceivable to ordain for a temporal office." "Discontinued the practice of laying on of hands."

³⁸ B. Kleinheyer, *Die Priesterweihe im Römischen Ritus* (Trier: Paulinus, 1962), 6: "von der Forschung kaum mehr vertreten." NB notes 8 and 10 for the discussion. Jewell, 221. Roloff: kein neues Amt. *Apostolat-Verkündigung-Kirche* (Gütersloh: Bertelmann, 1965), 107, 109. Schille, 166.

Supper moved to Sunday morning, and when the agape and its sharing no longer preceded the Lord's Table,³⁹ or when they spoke of altar rather than table and of priest than presbyter?⁴⁰ Polycarp and Tertullian spoke of the widows as God's altar.⁴¹ Sacrifices offered there might prompt some thought of reward.⁴² How long did it take for such thinking to claim a place in the liturgy, and how long for it to be removed, or put elsewhere?

One way or another the needy could not *not* be cared for. Clearly the apostle would rather see Sunday's collection meet the need than there have to be supplementary gathering of funds "when I come" (1 COR. 16:2). There may be a hint here of what we may observe nowadays when supplementary funds are gathered at other times, and not always in the unfractionable way of the Gospel. Would you rather they not go to hell, or not starve to death? Appeals may alternate between support for the means of grace or feeding the hungry.

Different churches have decided upon different definitions of deacons, presbyters, bishops, pastors, ministers. Ordained, not ordained, fractionally, functionally ordained. Almost clergy, no longer quite lay. How to measure "which of them was to be

³⁹ A. Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934), 330. He sees Paul nudging toward this in 1 Cor. 11:32: "den Tisch Jesu gegen alles schützt, was ihn entweiht." E.g., die Entehrung ihrer Armen.

⁴⁰ Goppelt, TDNT 8:214f. A Weckwerth, "Tisch und Altar." in *Zeitschrift für Religion und Geistesgeschichte* 15 (1963), 241. He sees them as interchangeable by way of sacrifice. The seven altars in Constantine's Basilica refer to the seven almoners of Acts 6. P. Gy, "Notes on the Early Terminology of Christian Priesthood," in *The Sacrament of Holy Orders*, ed. B. Bote (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1957), 107. B. Poschmann, *Die Sichtbarkeit der Kirche nach der Lehre des hl. Cyprian* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1908), 168: "Die Bezeichnung Sacerdos, ein Begriff, welcher mit der des Opfers in enger Beziehung steht."

⁴¹ *Philippians* 4, AF 210. LCC 1, Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 1.7. *Sources Chrétiennes* 273:116. *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.26. SC 329, 124. ANF 7:410. 4, 3. SC 329, 126. ANF 7:433. Didascalia 15, early third century, already quite worn. *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, ed. A. Vööbus (Louvain: Wavertbaan, 1979), 146.

⁴² 2 Clement 16.4 (before the middle of the second century): "almsgiving lightens the weight of sin." LCC 1:200. "Similar sentiments are not infrequent in patristic literature." E. Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (London: Longman, 1895), 35, n. 23. Later on: "man könne sich durch die Vermittlung von Almosen in den Himmel einkaufen." T. Strohm, "Luthers Wirtschafts- und Sozialethik" in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. H. Junghans (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 219f. Compare Romans 12:1–13. T. M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (New York: Doran, n.d.), 115f.

regarded as the greatest?” Who then is the *διακονος*? Jesus first and every disciple. From among the disciples Jesus selected twelve and named them apostles. He sent them to their specified tasks for the doing of which He gave them His words with His power and authority. Jesus gave them a number of tasks with no doubt of the who and what of their doing, and of whose instrument they were. The office the Lord instituted (AC V)⁴³ carries on into the Acts of the Apostles, which might also and primarily be called the Acts of the Word of God.

Is there one ministry with allocation of its tasks as may be indicated by differing titles and designations, or as many ministries as there are tasks, or even members? Muddle here can lead to confusing the office the Lord instituted and all Christians’ vocations. The office the Lord instituted is not there for its own sake, but for His use (ACTS 21:19). Vocation is every Christian’s specific life of service to the Lord and the neighbor, wherever the Christian life is going on. The Small Catechism has the Table of Duties.

Da capo then Acts 6. In the apostolic church the traveling on of the Word of God may not be hindered by murmurings of language or social class, who gets more, who is designated to do what needs to be done. Caring for the needy is part and parcel of being a Christian (LUKE 12:31–33; JAMES 1:27; GAL. 2:10; 1 COR. 16:1–4; MATT. 25:31–46). When there was hunger in Judea:

The disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief (διακομιαν) to the brothers living in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders (πρεσβυτερος) by the hand of Barnabas and Saul (ACTS 11:29F.).

Delivery and distribution were done by apostles and presbyters, as once was done by the Twelve and the Seven. There would have

⁴³ Who, put into the office, does what, is *iuxta vocationem*. Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXVIII, 8. That is the designating call, not the call as *synecdoche*.

been nothing to deliver without the disciples' contribution. So who gets the credit and the bigger score? That is a stopper. That is the worst possible question, unless the Lord is the answer, and He is not that sort of Lord. "I am among you as the one who serves" (LUKE 22:27).

Constant with *διακονία* is the serving of some need. Who are the needy, what is their need and who is to serve it may vary. Clarity comes by designating context and not by equation or comparative size. These stiffen, and give the Law control, and *διακονία* is a Gospelling word.

Paul tells the saints in Rome that he looks forward to seeing them on his way to Spain after he has delivered the aid for the saints in Jerusalem. "Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution (*κοινωνίαν* 15:26; 12:13) for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (ACTS 15:26). They belong together; they are in it together. It is altogether natural that the Gentile Christians see themselves joined with their fellow Christians in Jerusalem as aid flows thither, as before the Gospel had come from Jerusalem to them (15:27). No question here of who is getting a bigger share. There is no playing of Gentiles off against Jews, nor of spiritual blessings over against material blessings. They all belong and go together—neither muddled nor isolated. What carries it all? "And the word of God continued to increase" (6:7; 12:24; 19:20). "The word of the Lord was spreading" (*διεφέρετο*, ACTS 13:49, was carrying on, carrying through).

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR THE TWELVE AND THE SEVEN IN ACTS 6 AND THE NEEDY

**(THE READER IS ENCOURAGED TO HAVE A BIBLE
OPEN TO ACTS 6 WHILE READING THIS ESSAY.)**

1. What problems (both on the surface and deeper) led to the disciples choosing seven among them to handle the distribution?
2. How does the work of the seven relate to that of the twelve?
3. Why is it important that care for the needy be connected to the ministry of the Word?
4. On pages 15 and 16, the author clearly differentiates between the “office the Lord instituted” and the vocation that “is every Christian’s specific life of service.” Yet, on the next page, he asserts that neither apostles nor presbyters get “more credit” than [lay] disciples. Why is this not a contradiction?

(For more of Luther’s thoughts on the connection between the Lord’s Supper and care for the needy, see the booklets *All One Cake and Fight, Work, Pray!* in this series.)

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