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JOHN WESLEY'S ORDINATIONS FOR AMERICA IN 1784
CALMLY RECONSIDERED:
PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE OF
EPISCOPAL-UNITED METHODIST RELATIONS

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
1. ANGLICAN ROOTS FOR AMERICAN ORDINATIONS: A REASONABLE VALIDITY	3
Did They Separate?	5
Ought They to Separate?	8
Wesley's Reasons Why Not: From High Church to Latitude	11
The Child of Anglicanism	11
The High Churchman	15
Wesley's Broadening Horizons	20
Latitudinarians: Episcopal Polity	22
Latitudinarians: Ecclesiastical Orders	27
A Functional Bishop?	31
What is not Prohibited is Permitted	32
Conclusions	33
Wesley's Vision for the American Methodists	35

Chapter	Page
2. CHANGING ANGLICAN VIEWS OF EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY FROM RICHARD HOOKER TO THE CONCORDAT OF AGREEMENT	48
Richard Hooker's <i>Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Polity</i>	49
The Laudian Theory of the Divine Right of Bishops	56
The Oxford Movement	61
Two Oxford Movements	64
The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral	66
The Concordat of Agreement / Call to Common Mission	69
Diversity and Change	73
3. CONCLUSION: CONVERGENT VISIONS.	76
WORKS CITED	87
VITA	90

ABSTRACT

In 1784, after the Paris Peace Treaty had been signed between England and its former North American colonies, John Wesley ordained a “superintendent” and two “presbyters” to minister to the Methodists in America. Wesley claimed that this did not result in separation of the Methodists from the Church of England. This paper considers whether his ordinations amounted to separation then, and whether they should be an obstacle now to a coming together of the Episcopal and United Methodist churches.

Wesley’s family identity and education reflected the wide diversity of theology and practice within the Church of England of his time. As the Methodist organization developed, he moved from a High Church to a Latitudinarian position with respect to questions of ecclesiology, coming to believe that episcopal polity was fully justified but not required by Scripture and that priests and bishops were essentially of one order, but he always wished the Methodists to remain part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, rather than becoming a sect.

On the Anglican side, the dominant understanding of episcopal authority had moved from Hooker’s scholarly and sophisticated view of its authenticity to Laud’s *jure divino* persuasion that bishops ordained in the apostolic succession were essential for ecclesial validity. Laud’s view was widely accepted in the nineteenth century throughout the Anglican Communion, but recently the Episcopal Church, as it considered an agreement of full communion with the Lutherans, has moved to a view of the

historic episcopate more broadly understood in terms of apostolic mission. This understanding of episcopal authority, which is closer to Hooker's position, offers a new perspective on the significance of Wesley's 1784 ordinations for the relationship between the two churches.

INTRODUCTION

Christian unity is a legitimate goal of all Christians -- that the church may be one. In the Gospel of John, this is an expressed desire of Jesus Christ (John 17:21). In the past, Methodists and Episcopalians have made attempts to come into a closer relationship, but so far they have not been able to achieve any official understanding. One of the key obstacles has been the role of bishops, and especially the validity in Anglican eyes of Methodist orders. The initial ordinations among Methodists were performed by John Wesley, a priest of the Church of England, and not by a bishop in the apostolic succession.

John Wesley's ordinations for America should not be an obstacle to a closer relationship between the two churches. The ordinations were not simply arbitrary: Wesley had strong support in Anglican thought for his belief that he had legitimate power to ordain in an emergency situation and beyond the jurisdiction of England. Also, he stated very clearly at all times that he did not intend the Methodists to become separated from the Church of England, because that might make them a sect rather than the part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church which he always understood the Methodists to be.

On the other hand, the Episcopal understanding of apostolic succession has changed. Since the seventeenth century, the apostolic succession has been viewed by many influential Anglican groups as a litmus test of historical legitimacy for the church: a

church and its sacraments could be valid only under bishops who had been consecrated by the laying on of hands in a hand-to-head chain stretching back to the twelve apostles and Jesus Christ. Now apostolic succession is understood by the Episcopal Church primarily in terms of mission, and the historic episcopate is described as extending back only to "apostolic times" rather than actually to the apostles themselves.

Wesley intended to reform and enlarge the Church of England, not to divide it. For the Methodist organization in England and through his ordinations for America, he envisioned a nuanced arrangement that would keep Anglicans and Methodists together in a fruitful relationship of mutual respect.

The recent Call to Common Mission agreement between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America suggests a new way forward for agreement between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church. Under an agreement of this nature, the Episcopalians might officially recognize the validity of Methodist orders and the Methodists might choose to integrate their ministry intentionally into the historic episcopate. Under such an arrangement, Wesley's vision would be essentially realized and the unity in diversity of an important part of the Christian church would be re-established.

CHAPTER 1
ANGLICAN ROOTS FOR AMERICAN ORDINATIONS:
A REASONABLE VALIDITY

On Wednesday, September 1, 1784, at five o'clock in the morning, the eighty-one year old John Wesley, together with two other priests of the Church of England, by the imposition of his hands and prayer, "set apart" Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as "Deacons in the Church of God." The next day, the two men were by the same process "set apart for the said work as Elders . . . as fit persons to feed the flock of Christ, and to administer Baptism and the Lord's supper according to the usage of the Church of England." On that same day, Thursday, September 2, Wesley "set apart as a Superintendent, by the imposition of my hands and prayer (being assisted by other ordained ministers) Thomas Coke, Doctor of Civil Law, a Presbyter of the Church of England . . . to preside over the Flock of Christ." In his published *Journal*, Wesley stated that he had "appointed" them; in his shorthand *Diary* he recorded that he had "ordained" them. When news of these events spread, they were generally understood and spoken of as ordinations.¹

The newly created Superintendent and Elders sailed to America a few weeks later, carrying with them a book of liturgy called "The Sunday Service." This was in fact a

¹For details of the ordinations, see Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 2nd ed. (London: Epworth, 2000), 266 -270; for the references in Wesley's *Journal* and *Diary*, see John Wesley, *Journal and Diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, 1995, 6:329, 497, vols. 18-24 of *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 23:329, 497.

revised and abbreviated version of the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* which Wesley had recently prepared, and it included the services of Baptism and the Lord's Supper at which the newly ordained ministers were to preside. They also carried with them a short printed letter from Wesley addressed to Coke, Asbury and the American Methodists.

Coke, Vasey and Whatcoat arrived in New York in early November to find themselves in a situation of extreme political uncertainty. The peace treaty with England had been signed by representatives of the Continental Congress in September of 1783, but it was still quite uncertain what form of government would be adopted by the newly independent colonies. Indeed it was by no means certain that they would remain together in one political union. The Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia would not even meet until three years later (1787). It was a time of economic depression and hardship.

The war for independence from England had been devastating to the American colonies' Anglican churches, which had after all been parishes of the Church of England. Most of the Anglican clergy had been loyal to the crown; they had emigrated to Canada or back to England after the war was lost, and so had much of the laity, who were also predominantly loyalist. There never had been a Church of England bishop in the colonies, although such a notable figure as Thomas Bray, founder of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, had lobbied for one as early as the seventeenth century. All Anglican clergy had reported across a wide ocean to the Bishop of London, and there was now no bishop to provide supervision or to ordain new clergy. The Church of England

had never been strong in New England, and now the Anglican churches were unpopular in the middle and southern colonies because of their perceived loyalty to England.²

Indeed, the very word “Anglican” had not yet come into wide use. It would not become common until the Oxford Movement some fifty years later, when the development of Anglican churches in various former English colonies had resulted in the development of the concept of an Anglican form of Christianity separate from the legal entity of the Church of England. After the American Revolution, Christians who had been part of the Church of England in the colonies soon came to be known as “Episcopalians.” Although they are now widely referred to for convenience as “Anglicans,” it should be remembered that in 1784, the idea of a Church of England in a place which was no longer a part of England was a confusing contradiction in terms. It seemed not unlikely that what was left of the Church of England in America would either change radically or simply die out.

It was amidst this confusion and disarray in 1784 that Wesley had decided to take action. One thing was of paramount importance to him: to rescue and strengthen the Methodist societies at a time when all the familiar, stabilizing social and political landmarks were disappearing. The Methodist sheep were wandering without shepherds in a disordered wilderness; and so, Wesley sent them shepherds.

Did They Separate?

Wesley’s younger brother Charles made it plain that he thought John’s ordinations of ministers for America had brought about a final separation of the

² For a general description of the Church of England in the North American Colonies during and after the American Revolution, see Robert W. Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church*, rev. ed. (Harrisburg PA: Morehouse, 1991), 73-103.

Methodists from the Church of England, an outcome Charles had long sought to avoid. In a letter of April 1785 Charles wrote: "What will become of those poor sheep in the wilderness, the American Methodists? How have they been betrayed into a separation from the Church of England . . . ! But what are you poor Methodists now? Only a new sect of Presbyterians!"³ His anger and disappointment were expressed in poetry, the medium of which he was a master:

So easily are Bishops made
By man's or woman's whim?
W(esley) his hands on C(oke) hath laid,
But who laid hands on him?

Of Coke's subsequent ordination of Asbury he wrote:

A Roman emperor, 'tis said,
His favorite horse a consul made:
But Coke brings other things to pass,
He makes a bishop of an ass.⁴

A few weeks after Wesley's ordinations for the Methodists, another Anglican group took action to deal with the critical situation in America. The Rev. Samuel Seabury from Connecticut had been seeking ordination in England as a bishop, but the English bishops were unwilling to ordain him because they had no legal authorization to ordain a bishop for a territory outside of British jurisdiction. On November 14, 1784, he managed to secure ordination by Scottish non-juring bishops, whose own legitimacy was not free from doubt. (In fact, in return for his ordination, Seabury signed an agreement with the Scottish Episcopal Church recognizing the legitimacy of that church.)⁵ Nonetheless, these

³ Quoted in Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 275.

⁴ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 288.

⁵ Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church*, 88.

men did not feel hampered by any lack of explicit legal authority to ordain a bishop for foreign parts. Despite these possible questions about the legitimacy of his own ordination to the episcopacy, the new Bishop Seabury had no doubt that Wesley's ordinations were invalid and had brought about a separation. He expressed his position with clarity, if little empathy:

The plea of the Methodists is something like impudence. Mr. Wesley is only a Presbyterian, and all his ordinations Presbyterian, and in direct opposition to the Church of England: and they can have no pretense for calling themselves Churchmen till they return to the unity of the Church, which they have unreasonably, unnecessarily, and wickedly broken by their separation and schism.⁶

Although Seabury's position on the question was therefore clear, he could not speak for the larger group of Anglicans in the middle and southern states, who still remained without a bishop.

However, John Wesley himself never admitted that his ordinations had brought about a separation. In 1785 he wrote to his brother Charles, "You say I separate from the Church: I say I do not. There let it stand."⁷ Later that year, after three preachers had been ordained for Scotland, Wesley wrote a paper entitled "Of Separation from the Church" in which he stated "But this is not a separation from the Church at all. . . . Whatever then is done either in America or Scotland is no separation from the Church of England. I have no thought of this. . . ." ⁸ In 1789, in the well-known Korah sermon, he wrote: "Now as long as the Methodists keep to this plan they cannot separate from the Church. And this is our peculiar glory. . . . The Methodists . . . are not a sect or party . . . they are still

⁶ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 275.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁸ *Ibid.*

members of the Church; such they desire to live and to die.”⁹ And an article he wrote in December of that year, entitled “Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church,” ended with the words “. . . I declare once more that I live and die a member of the Church of England, and that none who regard my judgment or advice will ever separate from it.”¹⁰

Ought They to Separate?

The question of separation had been considered at length some thirty years before at the annual Conference of Methodist Lay Preachers in 1755 at which John Wesley delivered a paper, about 45 contemporary pages in length, called “Ought we to Separate from the Church of England?”¹¹ The result of the conference, Wesley afterwards wrote in the *Journal*, was “that (whether [separation] was *lawful* or not) it was in no ways *expedient*.”¹²

In the paper, Wesley denied that the Methodists had yet separated from the Church – with the interesting possible exception that some might consider their insistence on open-air preaching, extempore prayer, the societies and the lay preachers to be in themselves a separation. He concluded that they should not separate from the Church “any farther.”¹³

He then considered whether he should ordain persons to administer the sacraments and concluded, after a discussion of preachers as different from priests, that it was not expedient (even if it were lawful) “seeing it would be little less than a formal separation

⁹ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Appendix, 326.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 328.

from the church, which we cannot judge to be expedient”¹⁴ for twelve reasons, mostly including various kinds of harm to the Methodist movement. The conclusion of the paper was that all, or nearly all, were in agreement that the Methodists were not “the authors or ringleaders of a particular sect or party . . . but as messengers of God” to nominal Christians, as “living witnesses in and to every party of that Christianity which we preach. . . .”¹⁵

Baker proposes that by 1755 Wesley’s thinking was settled: that a part of Wesley’s mind recognized by then that there would be a separation, such that the rest of his career was a lengthy denouement;¹⁶ and yet the whole point of the 1755 paper was that there should not be a separation. Some thirty years later he did ordain, but under special circumstances and in a special way. Baker is correct in proposing that John Wesley’s thinking did not change substantially after 1755, but I would argue that Wesley never mentally agreed to separation either in 1755 or afterwards. Although he considered the ordination of English preachers to be “little less than a formal separation,” he considered the ordination of American presbyters and a superintendent to be much less than a separation.

It appears that Wesley’s overriding objective expressed in this remarkable paper was, while recognizing their distinctive ministry, to avoid having the Methodists become a *sect*. This may have been because it would tend to detract from the efficacy of the work God was doing through the Methodist movement, since it would wall them off from the entire established social structure of England as well as from the established church. However, I would submit that the real reason for Wesley’s reluctance to separate lay in

¹⁴ Ibid., 334.

¹⁵ Ibid., 337.

¹⁶ Ibid., 159.

his love and respect for the one, holy, catholic and apostolic tradition of which the Church of England was a part.

For Wesley, the worship of the Church of England was “truly primitive and apostolical.”¹⁷ In his student days at Oxford he formed for himself and other members of his group a rule of life grounded in the doctrines, disciplines, and sacraments of Christian antiquity. His spiritual discipline was focused on the early fathers because Wesley believed that the earliest practices of the church, especially if they came from pre-conciliar times, were of “Apostolical institution.”¹⁸ He recommended weekly attendance at Holy Communion. He always fasted and later would not hear of keeping a lay preacher who did not fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. The sacramental dimension of Christianity was essential for him, and he always expected Methodists to be baptized and to attend Holy Communion in their local parish churches. He for a long time resisted Methodist services on Sunday morning because this would interfere with attendance by Methodists at their parish church. He did say to the lay preachers in the 1755 paper: “Without your preaching numberless souls must have perished. But there is no such necessity for your administering the Sacraments. It does not appear that one soul will perish for want of your doing this.”¹⁹ However, Wesley’s purpose was not to denigrate the importance of the sacraments, but rather to avoid separation, which he thought would have been the result of ordaining the preachers to administer the sacraments. He probably meant merely that Methodists could obtain the sacraments in the existing parish churches.

Wesley’s vision for the Methodists was a scriptural New Testament Christianity as reflected by the Church of England in continuity with the church of the earliest centuries.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

He used Christian antiquity to challenge contemporary Anglicanism, not merely to defend the status quo.²⁰ For Wesley, the acceptance and use of Christian antiquity was part of essential Christianity. He did not want the Methodists to become a sect because he profoundly disagreed with dissenting Protestant sects which rejected patristic thought, liturgy and polity in favor of direct engagement with the Bible.

In 1755, Wesley had made clear his opposition to separating from the Church of England. In 1789, well after the ordinations which to his brother amounted to separation, his position on separation had not changed: the Methodists ought not to separate and they had not done so.

Wesley's Reasons Why Not: From High Church to Latitude

Wesley believed that his ordinations had not brought about a separation because they were somehow valid, somehow not in contravention of the governing rules of the Church of England. What were his reasons for claiming that his ordinations had not brought about separation?

The Child of Anglicanism

To understand Wesley's rationale, we must remember that his entire life and identity reflected, indeed embodied, the diversity, contradictions and paradoxes of the Church of England. Academically, professionally, and spiritually, his career was entwined with an Anglican history of staying connected to the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church even in the presence of serious disagreement about major theological,

²⁰ See Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 116.

political, and social issues. He was personally and intellectually committed to an ongoing effort to reconcile the tensions arising from vigorous contradictions within the Church of England.

Since his father, Samuel Wesley, was an Anglican priest of the Church of England, Wesley was the child of a marriage which was only possible in a branch of the catholic church that had rejected papal authority and accepted reformation teaching about the sanctity of marriage for all, including priests. Samuel Wesley was the Rector of Epworth and an Anglican clergyman in the Oxford High Church tradition, which tended to consider the hierarchy sacrosanct and emphasized the importance of sacramental worship. Both his father and his mother Susanna were the children of dissenting ministers; both embraced the Church of England with the zeal of converts, bringing up their children with a rigorous education in scripture and prayer.²¹

His mother was sympathetic with the Non-Jurors, those extreme Jacobite members of the High Church party who declined to take an oath of allegiance to William and Mary after the Glorious Revolution had deposed James II, whom they viewed as the only sovereign lawfully ordained by God. This brought about a crisis in the marriage. Susanna's refusal to pray for King William angered Samuel, who declared, "if we have different monarchs we shall sleep in different beds," and prepared to become a naval chaplain. The next year, however, Queen Anne ascended the throne and Susanna announced that she could pray for the new sovereign. The couple was reconciled and almost precisely nine months later, in 1703, little Jacky Wesley was born, living fruit of a

²¹ For biographical information about John Wesley, see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast : John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 2002). While Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* is not intended as a biography, it is an excellent source of information about Wesley's family and early life.

reconciliation between a Jacobite High Church view which favored the divine right of bishops as well as kings, and, on the other hand, a more pragmatic High Church Anglican heritage with a less exalted view of the divine authority of kings and bishops.²² The often stark disagreements between his father and his mother, both of whom were conspicuously devout and attached to the Church of England, probably conditioned Wesley to feel that the church, like his family, could experience deep division and still hold together.

Wesley's mother is considered to have had a strong influence on him. She emphasized what he would come to call "scriptural holiness," teaching her numerous children to memorize prayers and then to read by drilling them in biblical verses. Yet her discipline was warm and affectionate. She spent an hour each day in spiritual discussion with one of her children, and Wesley always remembered his sessions with her. Over his father's objections his mother organized large and irregular prayer meetings at the Rectory. These prayer meetings were criticized as illegal conventicles, but Wesley afterwards recognized them as precursors of the Societies he organized. The example of his mother's leadership at these meetings may have been an influence in favor of Wesley's later relative sympathy to the idea of women preachers. She certainly played an important role in his acceptance of the idea of lay preachers.²³

Wesley's parents did represent different strands of Anglican thought: his mother was initially closer to a Laudian emphasis on the divine and sacramental authority of the church and his father was closer to a broader Anglican understanding that the church is subject to the judgment of other authorities in light of the scriptures. On the other hand,

²² For narratives of this well-known incident, see Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 9; Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 27; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 48.

²³ See Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 83.

his father stood for the established authority of the church, whereas his mother exemplified for him a combined mystical and rationalist approach and especially a Christian's liberty to make one's own judgments.²⁴

In the early eighteenth-century Anglican theological environment into which Wesley was born, the fundamental authority of the scriptures was universally acknowledged and emphasized. Tradition, in the form of the writings and customs of Christian antiquity, was recognized as a second source of authority in the church, informing the interpretation of the scriptures. In addition, the validity of human reason was recognized as a third source of authority.²⁵

During the course of the sixteenth century, influential groups in the Church of England had reflected first Lutheran and Zwinglian and then, increasingly, Calvinist reformed views. In the early seventeenth century, a new sacramentalist, hierarchical Anglican theology had developed under the leadership of Archbishop William Laud during the reign of Charles I. This "Laudian" theology had been suppressed during the interregnum under Cromwell and the Independents but had afterwards emerged triumphant in 1660 as the dominant wing of Anglicanism at the Restoration. In 1662 the Act of Uniformity was adopted; this, together with other statutes comprising what is known as the Clarendon Code, defined Anglican orthodoxy and thenceforward excluded all dissenters from the Church of England. All of this was reflected in Wesley's education.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ For a discussion of sources of authority in Anglican theology, see Henry R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century, The Hale Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary* (New York: Scribner, 1965).

²⁶ For an overview of the development of the Church of England from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, see John R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, 2nd ed. (London: Black, 1967).

And as the political, intellectual and theological currents in the eighteenth-century Church of England changed character and gained or lost influence, John Wesley's theological and ecclesiastical ideas also changed over the course of a lifetime that nearly spanned the eighteenth century (1703-1791). As a young man, his views on most ecclesiastical matters could have been straightforwardly characterized as typically "High Church," but during the course of his career he became increasingly influenced by the intellectual and theological views of a group called "Latitudinarian." The Latitudinarians, who will be discussed below at greater length, have sometimes been dismissed as too close to Deism, but they were in fact descendants of an important strand of Anglican thought older than the Laudian antecedents of the High Church party.

The High Churchman

The various schools or parties of the Church of England, such as "High Church," "Low Church," "Broad Church," "Latitudinarians," "Evangelical," or "Methodist" are not easy to define with precision. The names often began as derogatory appellations, usually offering only caricatures of the lengthy and complex writings of their various leaders. However, if the boundaries of the differing parties were often shifting and indistinct, they did have recognizable identities and they were acknowledged as existing and as influential. It was perhaps inevitable that a broad national church should contain a variety of viewpoints organized with varying degrees of clarity and political energy.²⁷

²⁷ For a discussion of theological parties in the Church of England in the century and a half after the Glorious Revolution, see John Walsh, Colin Haydon, and Stephen Taylor, *The Church of England C.1689-C.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge, England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Wesley not only started from a High Church position, but also seems to have considered himself as part of the High Church party throughout his life. In 1775, when he was seventy-two years old, he wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth: "I am an High Churchman, the son of an High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance."²⁸ The exact nature of "High Churchmanship" cannot be defined with any more precision than that of the other church parties. Generally, however, as Peter Nockles explains, a typical High Churchman held an attachment to some version of the apostolic succession, "which was the basis of his strong attachment to the catholicity and apostolicity of the Church of England as a branch of the universal catholic church, within which he did not include those reformed bodies which had willfully abandoned episcopacy, so that a distinction was made between Nonconformist congregations and continental Protestant churches."²⁹ Other elements of importance to the High Church viewpoint were the supremacy of scripture, the importance of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Creeds, the writings of the early Fathers as a means of interpreting scripture, the importance of sacramental grace, both in baptism and in the eucharist, and the established religion of the state understood as divinely ordained, not merely secular.

One element of Anglicanism which was of special importance to the High Church party, and which tended to confuse onlookers from other ecclesiastical traditions, was the insistence on its "catholic" nature, even though the Church of England was so obviously part of the Protestant Reformation. In the late sixteenth century, the dominant theology of most members of the Church of England was Calvinist; in 1586, for example, Richard

²⁸ Quoted in Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 259.

²⁹ Peter Nockles, "Church parties in the pre-Tractarian Church of England 1750-1833: the 'Orthodox' – some problems of definition and identity," in Walsh, Haydon, and Taylor, *The Church of England*, 336.

Hooker was the subject of a complaint to the Privy Council for daring to suggest that all Roman Catholics might not be automatically damned.³⁰ By the early seventeenth century, however, Archbishop Laud was prepared to state that “The Roman Church and the Church of England are but two distinct members of that Catholic Church which is spread all over the face of the earth.”³¹ Even Richard Baxter, the eminent Puritan divine, was clear on this point: arguing against sectaries and separatists, he exhorted the Christian to adhere to the baptismal vow, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Decalogue “and then thou art certainly of the Catholic Church which Christ is the head of and will save.”³² So its catholic nature was important to the central tradition of the Church of England, but the High Church party, Wesley’s spiritual home, was the special guardian of the Church’s catholicity.

The crucial importance of bishops was another important element of the High Church position. Anglican opinions about the necessity for and the authority of bishops in the Church of England changed considerably during the century after the Elizabethan establishment of 1559. In spite of the growing influence of Calvinist thought during the first thirty years of her reign, and in spite of England’s accepted position as head of the non-Lutheran Reformed churches, Elizabeth resolutely stood in the way of turning the Church of England into a reformed church on the Calvinist model. It was a chief political purpose of the Elizabethan government to establish, for the peace and safety of the kingdom, a national church broad enough to comprehend all but the extremes of Roman Catholicism on the one side or Anabaptism on the other. Elizabeth herself, however, was

³⁰ Philip Bruce Secor, *Richard Hooker: Prophet of Anglicanism* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1999), 194.

³¹ Charles Carlton, *Archbishop William Laud* (London ; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 40.

³² Quoted in “Introductory Essay” in *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J.M.Dent, 1931), xxii.

the principle architect and defender of an episcopal polity which was independent of and distinct from Roman Catholicism, but which also insisted on its catholic nature, distinct from Calvinist Reformed Christianity.³³ Elizabeth's personal piety and religious devotion tended to be overlooked until the relatively recent publication of her extensive and eloquent prayers and devotions.³⁴

Initially, it was the general understanding that the episcopal form of ministry of the established church was not of great importance: the Church of England had bishops because of an ancient tradition and because Crown and Parliament had selected episcopacy in the exercise of their right to choose their own form of polity. By the 1590's, however, there arose an increasingly vigorous defense of episcopacy as a thing good in itself because it was scripturally based. Some concern was even expressed that bishops were threatening to undermine the royal supremacy by claiming a *jure divino* authority having its own separate validity.³⁵ At the same time as Parliament was beginning to share the Queen's view that the English Church was threatened by Puritans as well as by Roman Catholics, Richard Hooker began publishing his arguments for the scriptural and historical authority of bishops.

Then, during the reign of James I, a group of highly committed Anglicans, who currently are often identified as Laudians, began in earnest to develop what was a radical and new theology. The Laudian view emphasized the divine right of bishops, the superior importance of sacraments as compared with preaching, and the importance of liturgy,

³³ William P. Haugaard, "Introduction: 'The Preface,'" in vol. 6, bk. 1, *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1993), 12.

³⁴ See *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³⁵ Haugaard, "Introduction: 'The Preface,'" 32.

including church architecture, church furnishings and vestments, all expressive of the catholic tradition.³⁶ The Laudians also accepted what was called an Arminian doctrine of modified free will, in contrast to the Calvinist predestinarian views which were generally accepted in the Tudor and Jacobean Church of England. The Laudians were the direct ancestors of the High Church party which included Samuel Wesley and his son, but their development of episcopal theory would hardly have been possible had not Elizabeth initially established the English episcopacy and vigorously defended it for the forty-five years of her long and politically successful reign.

At Christ Church, Oxford, which he entered in 1720 at the age of 17, Wesley continued to absorb a High Church view which emphasized the authority of the church and the hierarchy, since although the Bible was the highest authority, “scarce ever was any heretical opinion either invented or revived but Scripture was quoted to defend it.”³⁷ From Dr. Thomas Deacon, a leading non-juror, he accepted the principle that all churches should follow the doctrines, worship and discipline of “the ancient and universal church of Christ from the beginning to the end of the fourth century” and that the book called the Apostolical Constitutions contained the most authentic version of Christian doctrine and practice “which the three first and purest ages of the gospel did with one consent believe, obey and submit to.”³⁸

It was at Oxford in 1729, when he was 26 years old, that Wesley became a full-time Tutor and also became the leader of a small religious group of students which had been founded by his younger brother Charles. This group grew, under John’s leadership,

³⁶ Peter Lake, “The Laudian Style: Order, Uniformity and the Pursuit of the Beauty of Holiness in the 1630s” in Kenneth Fincham, ed., *The Early Stuart Church, 1603-1642* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 161-185.

³⁷ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

to include some 20 to 40 students whose spiritual lives were organized in the form of a society with set rules and a discipline, emphasizing attendance at Holy Communion and charitable works such as visiting the sick and prisoners. The group was called, partly in derision, the “Holy Club” or the “Methodists.” It reflected the values of its High Church founders, calling on its members to be elite in scriptural study, in prayer and in charitable works, with a more formal dedication to the teaching and work of the church than would have been expected of ordinary lay people. And here, in a High Church organization of Oxford students, are found the beginnings of the identity of the distinctly non-High Church people called Methodists.³⁹

Wesley’s Broadening Horizons

From late 1734 until early 1738 Wesley served as a missionary in the English colony of Georgia in North America. In the new world he developed significantly new ways of proclaiming God’s word, partly from study and reflection on his own experience, and partly through encounters with other religious traditions. A careful reading of Beveridge’s *Synopticon* persuaded him that the Apostolic Constitutions were not fully authentic, and he concluded that he had erred in “making antiquity a co-ordinate rather than a subordinate rule with scripture.”⁴⁰ Through German Moravians he was introduced to a simple piety and to the emotional power of hymns. From Scottish Presbyterians at their settlement of Darien he learned the value of extempore prayer and resolved no longer to be confined to the forms of prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*. He

³⁹ For descriptions of the beginnings of Methodism through the activities of Wesley and his students at Oxford in the years after 1729, see *ibid.*, 22-38; Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* 39-58; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 81-106.

⁴⁰ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 50.

experimented with preaching in the open air and with itinerant preaching. He made use of lay people, including women, for pastoral work. By the Moravians he was introduced to the idea that one could know one was in a state of salvation through grace and to the idea that, in matters essential to faith, one was not obliged to defer to higher authorities. The validity of orders came to seem less important to him than the presence of the Holy Spirit. Most importantly, he organized societies for religious fellowship in addition to and apart from regular public worship.⁴¹ All of these things were intended as a supplement to, not a substitute for, the normal activities of the church, although afterwards they all led increasingly to a distinctive identity within the Church of England for the Methodists.

On his return to England in May 1738 at an evening prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street in London he underwent a personal conversion experience in which, as he recorded in the *Journal*, he felt that his “heart was strangely warmed.” In later years he seems not to have regarded this famous moment as especially significant,⁴² also, he seems at times to have felt with regret that he lacked the kind of personal assurance he encouraged his followers to have.⁴³ Perhaps for Wesley, whose entire life had been a series of dedications and rededications to following in the way of Christ, a conversion would have represented a less dramatic change of course than for many. Still, this experience, with whatever force it did have, occurred just at the time when he had returned from a journey to the wilderness where he had encountered new things and wrestled with various kinds of demons, and just as the Evangelical Revival was gathering headway in England. With a Christian identity newly strengthened and widened by the experience of other

⁴¹ For a description of the significance of Wesley’s activities in Georgia, see *ibid.*, 50-57.

⁴² Frank Whaling, “Introduction,” in *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*, ed. Frank Whaling, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 21.

⁴³ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 546, 548.

traditions, and with an array of new techniques, Wesley prepared to bring scriptural holiness to many by bringing them into the national church, not by leading them away from it.

On April 2, 1739, at Bristol, he preached out of doors, for the first time in England, to a crowd of about three thousand people, using for his text the words from Isaiah with which in the Gospel of Luke Jesus began his public ministry: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Latitudinarians: Episcopal Polity

Bishops of the Church of England were initially friendly to the Wesley brothers, but they tended to become less friendly as the Methodist Societies came to be seen as rivals or even threats to the existing parishes. Wesley had some independence because of his status as a Fellow of Lincoln College, but as episcopal resistance solidified he was forced to think about the nature of episcopal authority. Wesley had grown up with a High Churchman's unquestioning acceptance of the idea that the Church of England with its bishops in the apostolic succession was the only valid form of church organization. But in the early 1740's, his thinking was changed primarily by his encounter with two scholarly works by authors whose lives were separated by more than a generation, but both of whom are considered to belong to the Latitudinarian party.

The name "Latitudinarian," like other church party names, was initially a derogatory epithet, and there is the usual uncertainty about the precise intellectual and

theological boundaries of the group.⁴⁴ The Latitudinarians are generally agreed to include such figures as Simon Patrick, Bishop of Ely; Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester; and John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury. At times they have been dismissed as proto-Deists, or even as Deists themselves; but in fact they were deeply committed to the fundamental tenets of Christianity, including the fallen nature of humankind. Their core purpose was to draw a distinction between the essentials of the Christian faith and those things that were merely accessory or secondary, which were referred to as “adiaphora.” They also emphasized the role of reason as a valid epistemological tool in the study of scripture to discover the fundamentals of faith. In all this they stood in a main current of Anglican thought to which Richard Hooker was a major contributor, a current which included their appeal to the use of reason, their irenic call for calm and civility rather than violence and polemic, their quest for a comprehensive church, their attention to scholarship and their use of scripture, which was permissive rather than prohibitive. What scripture did not expressly forbid could and should be adopted by the church for its good and reasonable governance. This tradition of reason and moderation reached back to sixteenth-century humanists such as Erasmus, whose tolerance found renewed favor among educated English people who had recently been through the violence of a religious civil war.⁴⁵ The adiaphorism of these moderate churchmen (their concern to avoid “indifferent” matters) and their irenic purpose, were first fully represented in 1660 with the publication of *The Irenicum, a Weapon-salve for the Church's Wounds, or the*

⁴⁴ For general discussions of Latitudinarianism, see: Robert S. Bosher, *The Making of the Restoration Settlement: The Influence of the Laudians, 1649-1662* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951); Martin I. J. Griffin, Richard Henry Popkin, and Lila Freedman, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, vol. 32 (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992); McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*.

⁴⁵ W. M. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 156.

Divine Right of Particular Forms of Church Government, by the twenty-four year old Edward Stillingfleet.⁴⁶

This was the first of the two Latitudinarian works that were instrumental in changing Wesley's thinking. The two main purposes of the work are apparent in its full title: a weapon-salve was an ointment believed in folk tradition to heal wounds by being applied to the weapon that caused the wounds. This refers to healing the obvious wounds of the Church of England, but the salve is to be applied to the weapon that caused the wounds: the belief that any particular form of church government had a divine right of legitimacy. Stillingfleet states in the Preface:

My main design throughout this whole treatise, is, to shew that there can be no argument drawn from any pretence of a Divine Right, that may hinder men from consenting and yielding to such a form of government in the Church, as may bear the greatest correspondency to the Primitive Church, and be most advantageously conduceable to the peace, unity and settlement of our divided Church.⁴⁷

This is really aimed at persuading Calvinists to join the episcopal Church of England, but the reasoning is that no form of church government is divinely imposed. As a result, this claim can be equally used against the necessity of an episcopal form of church government. This is the sense in which Wesley understood it.

The adiaphorism of the Latitudinarians' search for essentials is also apparent in the Preface to Stillingfleet's work:

They (the Primitive Churches) judged it, and that very justly, a foolish and frivolous thing, for those that agree in the weighty matters of religion, to separate from one another's communion for the sake of some petty customs and observations. . . . For Churches agreeing in the same faith, often differ in their rites and customes.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Edward Stillingfleet, *Irenicum a Weapon-Salve for the Churches Wounds, or the Divine Right of Particular Forms of Church-Government : Discuss'd and Examin'd According to the Principles of the Law of Nature* (London: Printed for Henry Mortlock 1662), [microform].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, image 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, image 7.

By this reasoning, Christians having widely varying ideas about church polity and church liturgy should be able to find their home in a broadly inclusive national Church of England.

Wesley seems to have read Stillingfleet in the early 1740's. In 1756 he wrote in a letter to the Rev. James Clark:

I still believe 'the Episcopal form of church government to be both scriptural and apostolical': I mean well agreeing with the practice and writings of the apostles. But that it is *prescribed* in Scripture I do not believe. This opinion, which I once heartily espoused, I have been heartily ashamed of ever since I read Bishop Stillingfleet's *Irenicon*. I think he has unanswerably proved that neither Christ nor his apostles *prescribed* any particular form of church government, and that the plea of the divine right for diocesan episcopacy was never heard of in the primitive church.⁴⁹

The divine right of bishops, a main pillar of the High Church view, had crumbled in Wesley's mind. The effect of this would be seen much later, when he formulated his plan to address the pastoral emergencies of the American Methodists.

As Wesley moved from a relatively pure High Church to a more Latitudinarian view of ecclesiastical polity, he was also moving back towards the pre-Laudian thinking of Hooker, who emphasized reason, moderation, a search for the fundamentals of faith, and a denial that any one form of polity was mandatory. As W. M. Spellman explains, "In fact, the men of latitude viewed themselves as the heirs of a genuine Catholic tradition first articulated by Hooker, and their pastoral activities, together with their preaching after 1660, were designed to build upon the work of that great apologist."⁵⁰ Martin Griffin observes that the *Irenicum* was "fundamentally an attempt to apply the general principles of the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* to a specific religious and political

⁴⁹Quoted in Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 146.

⁵⁰ Spellman, *The Latitudinarians*, 157.

structure existing in England from the Restoration to the passage of the Act of Uniformity in 1662.”⁵¹

The Latitudinarian tolerance of non-episcopal forms of church government was consistent with the view commonly held in the mid-sixteenth century, for example by Archbishop Whitgift, that all the major Protestant denominations, whether Lutheran, Zwinglian, Church of England or Calvinist, were valid. (This of course did not apply to Anabaptists.) In fact, the validity of the orders and sacraments of the foreign Protestant denominations which did not have bishops was recognized not only by Hooker but by such Caroline divines as Lancelot Andrewes and Jeremy Taylor.⁵² Luther maintained that bishops were essential for the good governance of the church, but since Roman Catholic bishops would not ordain his reformed ministers, it was necessary to have ordinations performed by priests. Thus, the validity of Lutheran pastoral offices depended on presbyteral rather than episcopal ordination. The German Lutherans would presumably have chosen to remain within the historic episcopate had that been possible, as did the Swedish Lutherans, whereas the reformed Calvinist view found episcopacy to be inconsistent with the plain meaning of scripture as they read it. Hooker, on the other hand, stated his approval of even the Calvinist polity established at Geneva:

⁵¹ Griffin, Popkin, and Freedman, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England*, 145.

⁵² Norman Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyter; [Episcopacy and Presbyterianism since the Reformation with Especial Relation to the Churches of England and Scotland; Being the Gunning Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh 1953-54 and the Edward Cadbury Lectures in the University of Birmingham, 1954-55]* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1956), 211.

This device I see not how the wisest at that time lyving could have bettered, if we duly consider what the present estate of Geneva did then require. For their Bishop and his Clergie being (as it is sayd) departed from them by moonelicht, or howsoever, being departed; to choose in his roome any other Bishop, had been a thing altogether impossible.⁵³

Such pragmatic flexibility is characteristic of many, though not all, prominent Anglican writers, and it is fully reflected in Wesley's own decision to ordain.

Wesley's increasingly skeptical view of the absolute necessity for episcopal government, therefore, had strong support in foundational Anglican thought.

Latitudinarians: Ecclesiastical Orders

The second scholarly work that contributed significantly to Wesley's changing view of episcopal authority was Lord Peter King's *Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church*, first published in 1691.⁵⁴ King, born in 1669, was the son of a grocer but on his mother's side a cousin of John Locke (itself a Latitudinarian connection). Locke recognized his cousin's scholarly abilities and advised him, since he was a Presbyterian and therefore ineligible for admission to Oxford and Cambridge, to attend the University of Leiden, where he studied law but also read theology. At the age of 22 King published his *Enquiry*, which evidenced a remarkably high degree of patristic scholarship. He pursued a legal career and afterwards served as Lord Chancellor for 9 years. Since he was not a clergyman, there is little reference to him

⁵³Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, Preface, Chapter 2, Section 4, ed. Georges Edelen, in *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 1:6. Hereafter, passages quoted from Hooker's *Lawes* will be taken from this edition and will be identified in Arabic numerals by book, chapter, and section number of Hooker's work, followed by the volume, page number, and line number of this edition. Spelling has been silently modernized only where I thought the original spelling might convey an erroneous or confusing meaning.

⁵⁴Peter King, *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church: That Flourish'd within the First Three Hundred Years after Christ, Faithfully Collected out of the Extant Writings of Those Ages* (London: printed for J. Wyat and R. Robinson, 1713).

in writings on English church history, except in connection with his book's influence, over fifty years later, on Wesley's thinking and, almost forty years after that, on Wesley's American ordinations.

Although King lived more than a generation after Stillingfleet and the other thinkers usually considered Latitudinarian, his volume recognizably takes their position on key issues. His peaceful, irenic purpose is evident: he urges the reader "to imitate and follow the primitive Christians in their moderation and the peacableness of their temper and disposition."⁵⁵ He argues for the necessity of "an Union or Comprehension."⁵⁶ The "adiaphoristic" character of the work is evident in his rehearsal of the major elements of Christian faith on which all agree, in contrast to non-essential matters: "our disputes are only about lesser Matters, about Modes and Forms, about Gestures and Postures, and such like Matters, about which it should grieve a wise man to quarrel, and which with the greatest Ease in the World might be composed and settled. . . ." ⁵⁷ Such a Latitudinarian attitude is in no way dismissive of the central issues of faith, but it is fully prepared to use human reason in the service of avoiding quarrels and violence about matters of small importance. This attitude is central to the Anglican system of theology.⁵⁸

King argued, on the basis of wide reading in the Early Fathers (quotations from whom are reproduced in the book by extensive and frequent marginal citations in Greek and Latin) that originally each individual church was supervised by a bishop (episkopos) whose diocese was no bigger than a modern parish. On the death of a bishop, a new bishop was elected by the congregation but also approved by adjoining bishops.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See McAadoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*.

Presbyters -- needed to staff new churches as they were built in the diocese -- had all the essential powers of a bishop, including the power of ordination. Nonetheless, presbyters did not ordain “without the permission and consent of the bishop of a Place or Parish”⁵⁹ much as a curate has the same power as a minister but “cannot perform there any acts of his ministerial functions without leave from the minister thereof.”⁶⁰ King’s conclusion is “1. that the Presbyters were different from the Bishops *in gradu*, or *in degree*; but yet, 2. They were equal to them *in Ordine*, or *in Order*.”⁶¹ Actually, Wesley could also have found in Stillingfleet evidence that presbyters had and occasionally exercised the power of ordination, this being advanced as an argument that no certain form of church government was handed down to the ages after the apostles.⁶²

On January 20, 1746, Wesley wrote in his *Journal*:

I set out for Bristol. On the road I read over Lord King’s account of the Primitive Church. In spite of the vehement prejudice of my education, I was ready to believe that this was a fair and impartial draught. But if so it would follow that bishops and presbyters are (essentially) of one order, and that originally every Christian congregation was a church independent on all others!⁶³

If a situation should arise in which there was no bishop of a higher *gradus* in the place – as there was not in the newly independent American colonies – presumably there could be no objection to a presbyter exercising the power of his *ordo* in that place. This is in effect what Wesley did in his 1784 ordinations.

The number of ecclesiastical orders and specifically the independence of episcopal orders from presbyteral orders has been under discussion for most of Christian history. In Roman Catholic thinking, it was not clear that episcopacy constituted a

⁵⁹ King, *Enquiry*, 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶² Stillingfleet, *Irenicum*, Part 2, chap. 7, 346, 379.

⁶³ Wesley, *Journal*, 3:112.

separate order. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the sacrament of order includes the seven degrees of porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte, subdeacon, deacon and priest – episcopacy was not included because a sacerdotal order was tied to the eucharist and a bishop had no more power than a priest as to the eucharist. On the other hand, episcopacy could be viewed as an order because of jurisdiction received from the Bishop of Rome. Not until Vatican II was episcopacy declared to be fully sacramental.⁶⁴

Luther acknowledged only one order of ministry.⁶⁵ Wesley, viewing the matter from a more sacerdotal Anglican perspective, insisted on two orders, one having the power to preach but only the higher order of priests and bishops having the power to ordain and to administer the sacraments.⁶⁶

However, the threefold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons had not been abandoned by the Church of England, although there was debate among sixteenth-century Anglicans as to whether priests and bishops were of different orders or were only of different degrees within the same order.⁶⁷ Without going into that precise question, Cranmer's 1550 preface to the rites of ordination, also included in the 1552 Prayer Book, stated that the three orders of bishop, priest, and deacon had scriptural and historical support: "It is evident unto all men, diligently readyng holye scripture, and ancient aucthours, that from the Apostles tyme, there hath bene these orders of ministers in

⁶⁴ George H. Tavard, *A Review of Anglican Orders: The Problem and the Solution*, Theology and Life Series vol. 31 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 48.

⁶⁵ See Byron D. Stuhlman, *Occasions of Grace: An Historical and Theological Study of the Pastoral Offices and Episcopal Services in the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp 1995), 262; Charles P. Price, "Commentary," 73, and Eric W. Gritsch, "Commentary," 79-80, in James E. Griffiss and Daniel F. Martensen, *A Commentary on "Concordat of Agreement"* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994).

⁶⁶ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 153.

⁶⁷ Stuhlman, *Occasions of Grace*, 263.

Christes church: Bishoppes, Priestes, and Deacons. . . .⁶⁸ In 1662, changes were made to the *Book of Common Prayer* to make it more clear that these were three separate orders, partly in answer to Puritan arguments against the validity of bishops.⁶⁹ By Wesley's time, therefore, it was clear that the Church of England did regard bishops and priests as separate orders. Yet Wesley's position was not unreasonable: it had significant support in Anglican thought both before and after 1662.

A Functional Bishop?

One might argue, as we have seen, that Wesley had the authority of a bishop because a presbyter was essentially of the same *ordo* as a bishop. But there are also grounds for arguing that Wesley had an actual functional episcopal authority: he was the founder and acknowledged leader for some 40 years of the Methodist organization. As Baker explains:

Wesley himself was not only a presbyter with a presbyter's inherent *right* to perform the office of the presiding presbyter or bishop; by his extraordinary call to found and rule the Methodist societies it had been demonstrated that in *function* he was the equivalent of a scriptural bishop. . . . True, Wesley had received this 'extraordinary call' without any special ordination or commissioning by man, but surely this did not prevent his passing on to others his own acknowledged *episcopate* or superintending authority by the normal means of an ordination? Perhaps this line of argument would not convince either the patrologists or the liturgiologists, perhaps Wesley himself was not fully convinced, but it seemed at least a viable emergency measure.⁷⁰

In one popular nineteenth century American history of Methodism, the author argues that Wesley was "a bishop by the grace of God," refers to his "episcopal tours" and at least

⁶⁸ Church of England, *the Booke of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacramentes and Other Rites and Ceremonies in the Church of England* (London: Richardus Graftonus Typographus Regius excudebat, 1552) [microform].

⁶⁹ Stuhlman, *Occasions of Grace*, 264.

⁷⁰ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 263.

once refers to “*Bishop Wesley*.”⁷¹ This is intended to support the validity of American Methodist Bishops, but Wesley himself would probably have been far from pleased by such a reference.

However, Wesley himself said in a letter to his brother: “I firmly believe I am a scriptural Episkopos as much as any man in England or in Europe. (For the ‘uninterrupted succession’ I know to be a fable which no man ever did or can prove.)” His brother replied: “That you are a scriptural Episkopos or Overseer I do not dispute.”⁷² It seems clear that Wesley would not have understood any such functional authority as giving him powers that he could exercise within the Church of England, but where the Church of England had no jurisdiction, as in the American colonies after the Peace Treaty was signed, he may well have regarded his functional authority as further support for his decision to ordain.

What is not Prohibited is Permitted.

Underlying all of Wesley’s arguments is the view that if his actions were not in actual contravention of the effective and functioning laws of the Church of England (as opposed to rubrics or regulations which were technically in effect but were disregarded in practice), they could not be characterized as violations amounting to separation. What the laws of the Church of England did not specifically forbid might be novel or uncomfortable, but should be acceptable as at least consistent with the ongoing life of the church. Soon after his return from Georgia, for example, he defended his use of extempore prayer and his preaching in the fields by arguing that while the *Book of*

⁷¹ W. H. Daniels, *The Illustrated History of Methodism in Great Britain, America, and Australia*, rev. ed. (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887), 349, 336, 314.

⁷² Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 277.

Common Prayer prescribed formal prayer and pulpit preaching for formal services, it did not forbid other approaches in other circumstances.⁷³ His broadest argument for the validity of his ordinations would have been that, under the circumstances, they were not inconsistent with the laws of the Church or government of England. It is an adiaphoristic (“matters of indifference”) argument, not in the sense that his ordinations were of no importance, but that he saw them as in agreement with the essential beliefs and practices of the primitive church and of its successor, the Church of England.

The bishops of the Church of England would not have agreed with his reasoning. Indeed, they took the opposite view: they had no power to act if not clearly authorized to do so. This is why they refused to consecrate Seabury or any American bishop until an act of Parliament permitted it some years later. The Scottish non-juring bishops who did ordain Seabury, on the other hand, had evidently taken the same view as Wesley: although not clearly authorized to ordain for the American colonies, they were not clearly prohibited from doing so, and so they ordained. From this point of view, Seabury’s ordination was arguably as irregular as the ordinations performed by Wesley. Seabury’s ordination was performed by bishops who might have believed themselves to be in an unbroken apostolic succession, but Wesley sided with historians such as Lord Peter King who had argued that the unbroken chain theory lacked historical foundation.

Conclusions

Wesley always regarded the Church of England with affection and respect and steadfastly maintained his position as a priest of the Church of England until his death,

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 54.

but over the course of his long career, his understanding of the nature of the church had changed. As a child, he wrote, he was taught to

love and reverence the Scripture, the oracles of God: and next to these to esteem the Primitive Fathers, the writers of the three first centuries. Next after the Primitive Church I esteemed our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national church in the world.⁷⁴

As he gradually accepted Latitudinarian elements, he had come to believe that episcopal authority, though consistent with scripture, was not prescribed by it. He had also come to assert that bishops and priests were “essentially” of one order and that he therefore had all the essential powers of a bishop, including the power of ordination, although he evidently also believed that he could not exercise such powers in defiance of English law.

If the episcopal form of ecclesiastical polity was not required by scripture, and if bishops and priests were essentially of one order, it became difficult to adhere to the High Church view that the validity of ministry and sacraments depended on the divine authority of bishops in an apostolic succession extending back in an unbroken chain to the apostles. When and if a situation arose where the circumstances were extraordinary, and where there was no bishop in the place, Wesley believed he could exercise his power to ordain. If the bishop, as in Hooker’s description of Geneva, had left by moonlight, a substitute polity would be valid.

That unlikely situation had come about in 1783 with the signing of a peace treaty by which Great Britain recognized the independence of most of its former North American colonies. There had not been a local bishop who left by moonlight, but the Bishop of London’s authority had vanished with the signing of the peace treaty.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 138.

Meanwhile, most of the clergy and much of the laity in fact had left and the remaining Methodists were largely without access to the sacraments. Therefore, under Hooker's and Stillingfleet's thinking, a reasonable alternative polity would be acceptable in the face of this pastoral emergency. Furthermore, there was no bishop in the premises and after the signing of the peace treaty, no English bishop could possibly have jurisdiction. Therefore, accepting King's evidence from the primitive church, Wesley considered that he had the power of ordination and was subject to no existing higher *gradus*. Wesley's ordinations addressed both of these theories: he exercised his perceived power to ordain in a place where there was no one having a higher *gradus* of authority, and he created a new polity which Anglicans should acknowledge as reasonable, since it was faithfully and exactly modeled on the Church of England.

Wesley's Vision for the American Methodists

A burst of anger, as heated as that of Charles though not in verse, came from John at the news from America that Asbury and the other American leaders, whom Wesley had ordained as Supervisors, had chosen to call themselves Bishops. In a famous letter to Asbury, John Wesley wrote:

How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called 'bishop?' I shudder, I start at the very thought! Men may call me a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content; but they shall never by my consent call me a bishop! For my sake, for God's sake, for Christ's sake, put a full end to this! Let the Presbyterians do what they please, but let the Methodists know their calling better.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1938), 8:91, quoted in *ibid.*, 271. Apparently, some Presbyterians in America were assuming the title of bishop, either as a form of liturgical creativity or to make fun of Episcopalians. Wesley's vehement protest, however, did not signify a breach of relations between himself and Asbury; the letter ends: "Thus, my dear Franky, I have told you all that is in my heart. And let this, when I am no more seen, bear witness how sincerely I am your affectionate friend and brother. John Wesley."

What was it about the assumption of the title of “bishop” by the American Methodists that brought John Wesley to such an uncharacteristic pitch of anger? Perhaps he had hoped for a new and apostolic simplicity for the Methodists in America. Perhaps the use of this title was embarrassing to him because it made it appear that he had assumed the power to create a hierarchical bishop whereas he was not himself one and the whole theory of his ordination was that he had power to ordain as a presbyter. Perhaps he was offended that one placed by him in a supervisory office he had himself created and carefully identified as an administrative rather than a sacramental office should now assume a hierarchical and social stature he himself did not have and could not hope for, whether or not he wished for it. I would suggest that the real reason for John Wesley’s anger was the same as for Charles’ anger: separation from the Church of England. Whereas for Charles the ordinations themselves amounted to a separation, John did not intend or admit that this was their result, in large part because the superintendents he had appointed were functional rather than hierarchical and could theoretically have co-existed with Anglican bishops. But when the American leaders styled themselves as “bishops,” with all the historic, political, legal, sacramental and liturgical overtones of that title, the existence of a separate and rival church became difficult to deny.

What was Wesley’s vision for the American Methodists and their relationship to the other Anglicans? It must have been something other than the separated status which he felt had not been caused by the ordinations, but which he evidently felt might now have been brought about by the assumption of the title of bishop.

Before the Revolution, the American Methodists had been in a relationship with American Anglicans similar to that of English Methodists with the Church of England:

there was a structure of classes and societies that were related to Anglican churches and occasionally dependent upon Anglican clergy. By September 1784, to describe the situation of American Anglicans, one would have to mention three groups. The first and most numerous was the Anglicans of the middle and southern colonies under the leadership of The Rev. William White of Philadelphia, who three years later in 1787 would become the first American bishop to be regularly ordained in England by English bishops for America. A second, smaller, group was the Anglicans in New England under the leadership of The Rev. Samuel Seabury, whose ordination by Scottish non-juring bishops three months later, in November 1784, was considered by some to be of questionable validity. The third Anglican group was the Methodists themselves.⁷⁶ Efforts to unify the three groups were not successful, but eight years later the New England Anglicans did merge with the Anglicans of the middle and southern states. In view of the relatively close relationship of the three groups, it is not surprising that both of the surviving organizations chose to include the word "Episcopal" in their names, the Methodist Anglicans forming the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 and the other two Anglican groups coming together as the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1792.

Wesley's planning in the spring and summer of 1784 was complicated by all the uncertainty about the future of the Anglicans in the newly liberated American colonies. Whatever he intended for the American Methodists could hardly have been rigidly defined in view of the fluid and perilous situation of the Anglican churches that remained in the colonies. How could the Methodist organization be seen as either separating or not separating from the Church of England in America when there was in fact no longer a Church of England in the colonies from which the Methodists could either separate or not

⁷⁶ Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church*, 94.

separate? There was as yet no Anglican bishop for the former colonies and no immediate prospect of one. It does not appear that Wesley was aware of Seabury's impending ordination. If he had known of it, he would probably have had the same questions about its authenticity that were afterwards raised by the Episcopalians of the middle and southern states.⁷⁷ (An awareness of such doubts might explain Seabury's truculent expression of his view of Wesley's ordinations.)

Nevertheless, there were still parishes which considered themselves to be Anglican, and Wesley could reasonably have foreseen that there would at some point be an episcopal structure for the former American parishes of the Church of England. His plan for the American Methodists would therefore have been consistent with what he had labored to achieve in England: a carefully nuanced organization with its own identity but within the larger church -- not a dissenting sect. American Methodism would thus be compatible with whatever form the remaining parishes of the Church of England in the colonies would turn out to take, although not fused with the Anglican parish system. In a letter of October 1784 to Asbury and Coke, he wrote:

You are aware of the danger on either hand: and I scarce know which is the greater. One or the other so far as it takes place will overturn Methodism from the foundation: either our traveling preachers turning Independents and gathering congregations each for himself: or procuring ordination in a regular way, and accepting parochial cures. If you can find means of guarding against both evils the work of God will prosper more than ever.⁷⁸

The Methodist organization was not to be swallowed up either by the Independents or the Anglicans. (In fact, one of the three men ordained by Wesley, Thomas Vasey, was later ordained by Bishop White in the Episcopal Church.)

⁷⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁸ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 274.

Wesley's vision for the organization of the American Methodists was delineated with clarity and brevity in Wesley's published letter of September 10, 1784 addressed to Coke, Asbury and "our Brethren in NORTH AMERICA." It was brought to New York by Coke and his companions along with copies of the Sunday Service. In typically Wesleyan paradox, the apparent clarity of the brief letter artfully disguises a thicket of ambiguity.⁷⁹

The short printed letter to the Americans consists of six numbered paragraphs. The first three are recitals: of the colonies' newly gained independence; of Wesley's theory, based on Lord King, "that Bishops and Presbyters are the same order and consequently have the same right to ordain;" and of the current emergency situation in America, where "for some hundred miles together, there is none, either to baptize, or to administer the Lord's supper."

The last three paragraphs of the letter are as follows:

4. I have accordingly appointed Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury to be joint Superintendents over our brethren in North America; as also Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to act as Elders among them, by baptizing and administering the Lord's supper. And I have prepared a Liturgy, little differing from that of the Church of England, (I think, the best constituted national Church in the world,) which I advise all the Travelling Preachers to use on the Lord's day, in all the congregations, reading the Litany only on Wednesdays and Fridays, and praying extempore on all other days. I also advise the Elders to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord's day.

5. If any one will point out a more rational and scriptural way of feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it. At present, I cannot see any better method than that I have taken.

6. It has, indeed, been proposed to desire the English Bishops to ordain part of our Preachers for America. But to this I object, (1.) I desired the Bishop of

⁷⁹ For the text of the letter, see Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America*, vol. 2, *Sourcebook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000). For the circumstances of its composition and publication, see Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 253, 271-272.

London to ordain only one; but could not prevail. (2.) If they consented, we know the slowness of their proceedings; but the matter admits of no delay. (3.) If they would ordain them now, they would likewise expect to govern them. And how grievously would this entangle us! (4.) As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State, and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again, either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.

Ordinations and liturgy are succinctly provided and defended.

In these three short paragraphs, Wesley covers a number of important and complex issues. A church polity is given: superintendents and elders who are to administer the sacraments, in addition to the existing traveling preachers. The brief description of a liturgy refers to the *Sunday Service*, not a simple pamphlet but rather Wesley's careful modification of the entire *Book of Common Prayer*. The two chief authorities are to be, first, the scriptures and, second, "the primitive church," which refers to the extensive question of Wesley's views concerning the importance of early Christianity and the writings of the early fathers. There is clear direction that the Church of England (described as "the best constituted national Church in the world") is to be the model, yet the brethren are not to be controlled by the English Bishops or "entangled" with the English hierarchy. The new organization is defended as "rational and scriptural."

Although the letter exhibits clarity in its provision of essential structure and identity, it also seems carefully drafted to provide ambiguous answers to some questions and to leave others unanswered, presumably with the object of preserving some relationship with the English Methodists and with other Anglicans both in England and in the new states. The separate identity of the group is not even recognized by the use of the name "Methodists;" they are referred to as "our brethren." The offices corresponding to

bishop and priest or presbyter are given the alternative names of “superintendent” and “elder.” While Wesley gives his opinion in paragraph two that bishops and presbyters are of the same order and therefore have “the same right to ordain,” he states in paragraph four that he has “appointed” (not “ordained”) the two superintendents and two elders, a less sacramental word. (Such usage may have been necessary in any case in the context of this sentence, since he actually laid hands on Coke, but not, of course, on Asbury.) If he did have the right to ordain, why did he not simply ordain one Bishop and two priests? For whatever reason, he had felt he should go no further than was necessary to achieve his functional purpose, not so far as his theory would have permitted him to go.

Wesley’s personal authority is clearly asserted throughout by his use of the first person pronoun, yet in the last paragraph the subject becomes “we.” This represents a shift to the viewpoint of the English Methodists, but also perhaps carries an echo of the royal “we,” which would emphasize the personal authority Wesley felt he had over the group. However, it also tends to defend against any charge of separation, because it implies that he is not presuming to exercise the authority of the Church of England, but only making provision for a special organization of Christians which could still be in relationship with the American successor to the Church of England. Finally, unmentioned in the letter, but looming large in the consciousness of all who read it, was Wesley’s earlier “Calm Address to Our American Colonies.” In 1775, Wesley’s outspoken opposition to the American struggle for independence had been a severe blow to the American Methodists. The tract had arguably created the situation in which Asbury was obliged to hide in the forest for weeks, hunted for his life. Wesley’s diplomatic references to liberty and freedom in the 1784 letter would have been understood as a gesture of

reconciliation. Wesley acknowledges the liberty of the American Methodists, even as he asserts authority over them.

In this 1784 Letter to the North American brethren, one may discern the four elements of what has come to be called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. The letter appeals specifically to the “rational” as a standard. Experience is assumed in the whole existence of the Methodist structure of societies and classes; it is also alluded to in the image of “feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness.” The last two elements, scripture and tradition, are given their most prominent mention in the next-to-last sentence describing the brethren as free “simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church.”

For Wesley, scripture was, after all, the supreme authority. As a young man at Oxford he had been impressed with the importance of early church writings and traditions in the interpretation of the scriptures, but well before this, his eighty-first year, he had firmly concluded that antiquity should be subordinate to scripture. His stated purpose was to “spread scriptural holiness through the land.”⁸⁰

As to tradition, Ted A. Campbell has noted that Wesley would not have used the word “tradition” as we use it today, but rather would have understood Christian antiquity (the “primitive church”) and the early Church of England as sources of authority along with scripture, reason, and experience.⁸¹ The mature Wesley came to question the authenticity of ancient liturgical sources and to regard the early church more as a model and source of spiritual and moral purity, valuable for its closeness to the church of the apostles. His use of primitive Christianity, and also of the early Church of England, was

⁸⁰ From the Large Minutes of 1763, quoted in Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 118.

⁸¹ Ted A. Campbell, “The Interpretive Role of Tradition,” in W. Stephen Gunter and others, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 64.

primarily to justify challenge to and reform of the contemporary Anglican structure rather than to defend the status quo as being culturally consistent with or descended from the forms and uses of early Christianity. Methodism for Wesley represented the revival of pure early Christianity as a means of reform and renewal for the contemporary Anglican church.⁸²

The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” is an organization of authority; it is related to the traditional “Anglican three-legged stool” of scripture, reason and tradition, with the addition of experience. By contrast, the “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,” which was officially adopted by the Anglicans a century after Wesley’s death and will be considered more fully below, is a different concept: it is a list of four essential principles of Anglicanism intended for use as a basis for ecumenical discussion. Its four elements, described as the “absolutely essential features of the Anglican position” are: the scriptures, the two creeds, the two sacraments and the “historic episcopate.” These four Anglican principles of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral may also be observed in Wesley’s letter to the American Methodists. The first three are fairly clear: Wesley’s letter contains specific references to scripture and the two sacraments, and the creeds are incorporated in the revised *Book of Common Prayer* referred to as the “Liturgy.”

The interesting point is the fourth: the historic episcopate. Much of Wesley’s 1784 letter is an explanation of why the English bishops, who constituted the historic episcopate as it then existed in the Church of England, would not or could not give episcopal supervision to the Americans. The letter also explains why he believed he had the right to carry out presbyteral ordinations, and how he had appointed leaders with

⁸² For a thorough discussion of Wesley’s understanding and use of primitive Christianity, see Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity*.

functions resembling those of bishops and presbyters, with different titles but the same functional meaning.

The historic episcopate, as will be discussed below, is no longer understood by the Episcopal Church to be synonymous with the apostolic succession or to embody a kind of spiritual power line of divine authority extending directly back to the apostles of the first century A.D. Nevertheless, it is still understood as the ordination of bishops, priests and deacons exclusively by the hands of bishops who stand in the historic episcopate. This would not include the ministers ordained by Wesley in 1784. However, even in an earlier and more narrowly understood form, the concept of the historic episcopate might not have excluded some form of cooperation with or even recognition of Wesley's ministers had they been called "superintendents" rather than "bishops."

Wesley's vision for the organization of the American Methodists would have included the possibility of a complementary relationship with the as yet non-existent Protestant Episcopal Church. But if an American form of the Church of England did not emerge or a relationship could not be achieved, then Wesley's vision provided a separate enough identity to ensure for the Methodists the preservation of apostolic scriptural holiness and the sacraments. His solution was to provide the American Methodists with a distinct structure that was similar and related, but not identical, to that of the Church of England which he so deeply admired. He had provided for presbyterially ordained ministers in three orders, authorized to ordain new ministers and to administer the sacraments "according to the rites of the Church of England" from a book of liturgy which was in fact a slightly abridged version of the *Book of Common Prayer* with a different name. This structure would not technically be a rival independent church

because its clergy were “supervisors” rather than “bishops” and “elders” rather than “priests” and its book of liturgy was called *The Sunday Service* rather than the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The ecclesiastical structure Wesley probably had in mind would have had a more distinctive identity than the Methodists in England did, and yet it would have been theoretically compatible with the still hypothetical Protestant Episcopal Church. Wesley was well aware from his own experience that the New World was a different world, and it must have seemed possible to him that a *modus vivendi* could have been worked out whereby the new Methodist organization and the new Episcopalian organization would be in a relationship at least as closely knit as the relationship Wesley had always worked to preserve between the Methodists and the Church of England. In this way the American Methodists, like the English Methodists, would, in the words of an article he wrote on the subject in 1789, continue to embody “our peculiar glory, not to form any new sect, but abiding in our own church to do to all men all the good we possibly could.”⁸³

But not if the supervisors called themselves “bishops.” And not if the book of liturgy was laid aside. And not if the American Methodists cast off the leadership of John Wesley during his lifetime. It is questionable whether such a delicately nuanced plan could possibly have survived for long in late eighteenth-century America. In the event, it did not survive the assumption by Asbury of the title of bishop. In the event, the American Methodists rather quickly laid aside the “Sunday Service,” Wesley’s carefully abridged version of the Book of Common Prayer, together with its sacramental liturgies. In the event, Francis Asbury did not accept his leadership position directly from Wesley. Having barely survived persecution by revolutionary mobs and understanding better than

⁸³ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 321.

Wesley the resolution of the Americans to make their own decisions for their own lives, he refused to acknowledge either his own or Coke's appointment unless elected to the position by the other Methodist preachers. A conference was called for Christmas Day 1784 at Baltimore without the knowledge of Wesley, and at the Christmas Conference Asbury and Coke were both unanimously elected superintendents. They then ordained new elders.⁸⁴

In a characteristically Wesleyan paradox, this demonstration of independence by the newly independent American Methodists did not result in or imply any lessening of respect by them for Wesley; the "Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church" adopted at the Conference stated: "During the life of the Rev. Mr. Wesley we acknowledge ourselves his sons in the Gospel, ready in matters applying to Church government to obey his commands."⁸⁵

It had seemed evident to Methodists and Anglicans that some kind of co-operation might be possible, but after brief talks between the Methodists and the Episcopalians at the 1784 Christmas conference in Baltimore, and after a brief correspondence between Coke and White in 1790, the two churches went their separate ways. As an Episcopalian observer at Baltimore had it, the Methodists were insisting that "Mr. Wesley be the first link of the chain upon which their church is suspended,"⁸⁶ whereas validity in the eyes of Episcopalians depended upon bishops as links in an unbroken chain of apostolic succession extending directly back to the apostles.

⁸⁴ For a narrative of the events of the Methodist Episcopal Church in its early years, see Frederick Abbott Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism : A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974).

⁸⁵ For excerpts from the Minutes of the Christmas Conference, see Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America*, 2:82.

⁸⁶ Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 292.

In this chapter, I have looked at possible reasons why Wesley believed that his plan for the American Methodists should not result in separation. In the next chapter, I will consider the ordinations from the viewpoint of several Anglican theological parties which held varying and changing views of episcopal authority.

CHAPTER 2
CHANGING ANGLICAN VIEWS OF EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY FROM
RICHARD HOOKER TO THE CALL TO COMMON MISSION AGREEMENT

Having looked at Wesley's ordinations from his own point of view, I turn in this chapter to a brief consideration of their significance from various Anglican viewpoints. There were of course several major Anglican schools of thought both before and after the Act of Uniformity in 1662, and the meaning of the ordinations for any one group would depend on its understanding of episcopal authority in the Church of England and in the Anglican Communion as that world-wide entity gradually came into being during the nineteenth century. For many Anglicans at the time of Wesley's ordinations and for a growing number during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the authenticity of the ministry and sacraments of their church depended on bishops in the "apostolic succession," understood as ordination by the physical laying on of hands from one bishop to another in an unbroken chain stretching back to the apostles and Jesus Christ. However, by the end of the twentieth century, largely as a result of its conversations leading to the Call to Common Mission agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church had changed its position on the nature of the apostolic succession and effectively abandoned the "chain" theory as historically untenable and theologically unsound. In its changed position on this issue, the Episcopal Church has

actually come closer to the position on episcopal authority formulated by Richard Hooker in the sixteenth century.

Richard Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*

Richard Hooker remains the most influential and profound apologist for the Elizabethan settlement that formed the basis for the Church of England, which eventually grew into the Anglican Communion. His views on ecclesiastical authority and episcopacy provide a framework for understanding the ecclesiological significance of Wesley's ordinations for an Elizabethan understanding as well as for our own.

During the early years of Elizabeth's reign, spokesmen such as John Jewel defended the Elizabethan establishment against Roman Catholic attack, standing shoulder to shoulder with the continental Protestant churches, whether they had retained bishops or not.¹ As the century wore on, it became clear that Elizabeth had no intention of "perfecting" the reform of the Church of England by either abolishing or reforming the episcopate. In response, the more extreme Puritans increasingly targeted the episcopacy by means of legislative attack, secret organization and public satire. These attacks called forth a stronger intellectual and theological defense of the office of bishop, as well as repressive measures by the government against the Calvinist reformed party of Puritans. In the 1580's and 1590's several books were published defending the episcopacy as well-founded in scripture or even divinely inspired. Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical*

¹ John Jewel, *An Apology of the Church of England*, ed. John E. Booty (New York: Church Pub., 2002), 57.

Polity (1593) was part of this effort to define and defend the Church of England over against the Puritan attack on the church and her bishops.²

Hooker's detailed thinking about the place of bishops in the Church of England is found in Book VII, which was not published until 1662. In that same year, the Uniformity Act of 1662 more or less settled the basic outlines of the Anglican establishment which was reinstated at the restoration of the monarchy after the Commonwealth period. This establishment would remain essentially unchanged for the next century and a half. It seems possible that the leaders of the Caroline church suppressed publication of Book VII until the Act of Uniformity was safely in place: Book VII was something of an embarrassment to the episcopal establishment involved in imposing the Act, since Hooker did not support the divine right theory of bishops which the seventeenth-century Church of England had in the meanwhile adopted.³

Hooker clearly grounds the authority of bishops in their having been appointed by the apostles, whom he identifies as the first bishops, in the exercise of their "Episcopal Authority."⁴ He maintains that the apostles founded the earliest churches and immediately or shortly thereafter appointed successors in episcopal authority.⁵ "The Apostles therefore were the first which had such authority, and all others who have it after them in orderly sort are their lawful Successors. . . ."⁶ Hooker concedes that in their initial stages the early churches might have been run by councils of equal presbyters, but argues that they would always have been subject to the authority of the founding apostle

² Hugaard, "Introduction to: 'The Preface,'" 27, 60.

³ P. G. Stanwood, "Textual Introduction: The Last Three Books," in *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, 3: xvii.

⁴ Hooker, 7:4:1; 3:155:26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:5:1-2; 3:159-160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:4:3; 3:157:23.

until he appointed a successor in authority. Later he argues that even if the first bishops were elected by councils of presbyters after the death of the apostles, and therefore derive their authority from election by the churches rather than from appointment by the apostles, that still furnishes ample authority for the episcopacy.⁷

However, Hooker's explicit grounding of the episcopate in the authority of the apostles did not amount to any divine right of episcopacy that could not be taken away. On the contrary, he explicitly denies the existence of any divine authorization for, or inalienable right of, episcopacy. For Hooker, the ultimate authority is the church as a whole, neither the bishops alone, nor the presbyters alone, nor the laity alone (and certainly not the Pope.) He explicitly affirms that the power of the bishops is subordinate to the power of the church as a whole.

On the other side Bishops albeit they may avouch with conformity of truth, that their Authority hath thus descended even from the very Apostles themselves, yet the absolute and everlasting continuance of it, they cannot say that any Commandment of the Lord doth injoyne; And therefore must acknowledge that the Church hath power by universal consent upon urgent cause to take it away, if thereunto she be constrained through the proud, tyrannical, and unreformable dealings of her Bishops. . . . Wherefore lest Bishops forget themselves, . . . let them continually bear in mind, that it is rather the force of custome, whereby the Church . . . doth still uphold, maintain, and honour them in that respect, then that any such true and heavenly Law can be showed, by the evidence whereof it may of a truth appear that the Lord himself hath appointed Presbyters forever to be under the regiment of Bishops, in what sort soever they behave themselves. . . .⁸

The powers of bishops, then, are located within the greater power of the whole church, to which episcopal powers are subordinate.

He indicates further that the power to ordain deacons and presbyters is normally given to bishops alone, but, significantly, that there can be exceptions even to this rule.

⁷ Ibid., 7:11:8; 3:208:13.

⁸ Ibid., 7:5:8; 3:168:6.

In the normal case, the power to ordain is only for bishops. “Again, the power of ordaining both Deacons and Presbyters, the power to give the power of order unto others, this also hath been always peculiar unto Bishops. It hath not been heard of, that inferiour Presbyters were ever authorized to ordein.”⁹ Later in Book VII, however, Hooker maintains that there are occasions when non-episcopal ordinations can be allowed. He states:

. . . That there may be sometimes very just and sufficient reason to allow Ordination made without a Bishop. The whole Church visible being the true original subject of all power, it hath not ordinarily allowed any other than Bishops alone to ordain: Howbeit, as the ordinary course is ordinarily in all things to be observed, so it may be in some cases not unnecessary that we decline from the ordinary ways.¹⁰

Again, he grounds his conclusion on the fundamental power of the church as a whole, which may as a general proposition allow exceptions to particular rules.

There are two situations, he explains, when non-episcopal ordinations may be allowed: “Men may be extraordinarily, yet allowably, two ways admitted unto Spiritual Functions in the Church.”¹¹ The first is an extraordinary call from God, which should be demonstrated by some clear heavenly sign.

One is, when God himself doth of himself raise up any, whose labour he useth without requiring that men should Authorize them. But then he doth ratifie their calling by manifest signs and tokens himself from Heaven.¹²

There are many who would argue that Wesley’s ministry is as clear an example of this possibility as any from Hooker’s time until now.

The second situation in which non-episcopal ordination may be allowed is where there is an urgent need for ordinations and no bishop is available to

⁹ Ibid., 7:6:3; 3:171:17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7:14:11; 3:227:3.

¹¹ Ibid., 7:14:11; 3:227:9.

¹² Ibid., 7:14:11; 3:227:10.

perform them. The unconditional necessity of an unbroken apostolic succession for the episcopacy is specifically denied.

Another extraordinary kinde of vocation is, when the exigence of necessity doth constrain to leave the usual ways of the Church, which otherwise we would willingly keep: Where the church must needs have some ordained, and neither hath nor can have possibly a Bishop to ordain; in case of such necessity, the ordinary Institution of God hath given oftentimes, and may give place. And therefore we are not simply without exception, to urge a lineal descent of power from the Apostles by continued succession of Bishops in every effectual ordination.¹³

This second case presents a remarkably exact picture of the circumstances that faced Wesley in North America in 1784.

Hooker, then, allows exceptional ordinations to the office of bishop not from political necessity nor from ecumenical necessity, but rather because, as stated above, “the whole Church visible” is “the true original subject of all power.” If one accepts his view that divine power was originally received by the church as a whole, rather than by one episcopal order within it, then Wesley’s ordinations might be seen as validated by the power of the whole church.

In order to understand the context of Hooker’s position on episcopacy in Book VII, it is necessary to look at the fundamental definitions and assumptions in Book I. There Hooker presents creation as the expression of a God whose very being is “a kinde of lawe to his working”¹⁴ and the end of whose external working is “the exercise of his most glorious and most abundant vertue.”¹⁵ He grounds this view of the universe on the concept of becoming and process, rather than on the concept of essential being, and so he is open to a dynamic, changing view of history, including change in the polity and

¹³ Ibid., 7:14:11; 3:227:23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:2:2; 1:59:5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1:2:4; 1:61:6.

customs of the church to conform to changes in society over time.¹⁶ Hooker's view of law follows the medieval rationalist and realist tradition of Aquinas, adopting the Thomist dictum that *gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit* (grace does not replace nature, but perfected it). Nature without grace is flawed in the sense of being incomplete, but not devoid of value. For Hooker, reason, as a natural power with which humans have been endowed by God, and natural law, with which God has endowed creation, serve as essential bases for a defense of the established church.¹⁷ This gives him a very different view from his Puritan opponents. As Gibbs explains: "The major difference is that Hooker stands within a school of natural law that regards the essence of law as something rational (*aliquid rationis*) while the Reformers and disciplinarians stand within that of the voluntarist-nominalist school that regards the essence of law as a command sanctioned by reward and punishment."¹⁸ Hooker's essential vision of reasonableness at the heart of things became one of the central strands of Anglican theological thought, and it is closely related to another concept prominent in Hooker's work: the distinction between things essential to the faith and things non-essential or "indifferent."

The "final resolute persuasion" of the whole treatise is set out in two propositions early in the Preface:

Surely the present forme of Churchgovernment which the lawes of this land have established, is such, as no lawe of God, nor reason of man hath hitherto bene alleaged of force sufficient to prove they do ill, who to the uttermost of their power withstand the alteration thereof. *Contrariwise*, The other which in stead of it we are required to accept, is only by error and misconceit named the ordinance of Jesus Christ, no one prooffe as yet brought forth whereby it may cleerely appeare to be so in very deede.¹⁹

¹⁶ Lee W. Gibbs, "Introduction: 'Book I,'" in vol. 6, bk. 1, *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, 87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 103, n. 36.

¹⁹ Hooker, Preface:1:2; 1:2:17.

First, in other words, no one has yet proved by the law of God or by the reason of man that the present form of church government in England is wrong, and second, no one has proved that the proposed alternative is in fact required by the law of Jesus Christ. This is very different from a positive claim that bishops exist by divine right; it simply permits what is not forbidden by God's law or man's reason.

Hooker's permissive view of church polity is comprehensive, organic and relational rather than simplistic and prohibitive or prescriptive. In defining ecclesiastical law as "merely human" rather than "mixedly human," he makes ecclesiastical polity something appropriate for human regulation rather than the product of divine law.²⁰ In Book III, Hooker considers whether church polity is either necessary for salvation or only accessory to salvation, in other words not of the essence of the Christian religion. He concludes that it is error to think that God set out any one single form of ecclesiastical government in scripture.²¹

It is not really possible to speculate about how Hooker would have judged Wesley's ordinations for America, which occurred some two centuries after Hooker's death and in a very changed world, although we can consider later events in the light of his principles. However, it seems probable that he would have regarded the American Methodists and the American Episcopalians as no longer part of the English church. And it is fair to consider, in the context of the ordinations, the breadth and flexibility of Hooker's vision. Hooker emphasized the use of human reason in the construction of social systems, including ecclesiastical systems, and in the solution of social as well as theological problems. Within appropriate limits of divine law and human reason, he

²⁰ See Gibbs, "Introduction," 116.

²¹ Hooker, Book 3, e.g. 3:3:3; 1:211:13.

offered an open-ended analysis of permissible forms of ecclesiastical polity. His opinion of Wesley's ordinations would surely have been nuanced rather than simplistic. Finally, in conformity with the reasoning process of the common law, his consideration would probably have focused on the facts of the case and included whatever complexity those facts demanded.

The Laudian Theory of the Divine Right of Bishops

Although some Anglican writers in the late 1580's had argued that episcopacy had support in scriptures and was therefore not unreasonable, the first strong step in the direction of a theory of divine right for bishops came with the publication in 1590 of a work by Hadrian Saravia. Saravia, a Dutch exile, opposed the common Elizabethan view that the first bishops were chosen from among equal presbyters in order to avoid strife. He argued instead that Christ himself had approved different degrees in the Christian ministry by his distinction between the twelve apostles and the seventy elders.²² This argument for dominical approval of bishops was adopted by Richard Bancroft, who became Archbishop of Canterbury under James I, and it influenced Jacobean theologians in this direction. Under Charles I the theory was developed to its logical extreme by the anti-Calvinist party of Archbishop Laud, who wrote: "Bishops might be regulated and limited by human laws, in those things which are but incidents to their calling; but their calling, as far as it is *jure divino*, by divine right, cannot be taken away."²³ In the

²² Arthur Stephen McGrade, "Introduction: 'Book VII,' " in *ibid.*, 322.

²³ Anne Whiteman, "The Restoration of the Church of England," in *From Uniformity to Unity 1662-1962*, eds. Geoffrey F. Nuttall and Owen Chadwick, 19-88, (London, S.P.C.K. 1962), 45.

Jacobean church, a *jure divino* view of bishops was considered to be consistent with a Calvinist theology,²⁴ but Laud and his party were not Calvinists.

There is, of course, disagreement about the terms used to describe the various church parties during the reign of James I (1603-1625). The name "Puritan" has been used to describe separatists, but the current view is that this term more accurately describes those evangelically-inclined members of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church of England who wished to reform it further in the direction of the Calvinist model of Geneva, but did not wish to separate.²⁵ As the reign of Charles I progressed, they became more willing to consider separation. The anti-Calvinist party was traditionally called Arminian, and it did include theological support for free will, as opposed to the predestinarian views of Calvin.²⁶ Recently, however, there has been an effort to substitute the name "Laudian" for "Arminian," not because the movement was invented or definitively expressed by Laud, but in order to call attention to a focus on issues other than anti-predestination in the world view of this party.²⁷

In the Laudian view, the church was the house of God, primarily for worship of the holy God through prayer and the sacraments. Preaching was criticized as the imposition of the preacher's own ideas between the people and the word of God read in scripture. The main use for preaching was as a means to bring people to prayer, and both preaching and prayer were primarily for the purpose of bringing people to the sacraments. The church, the house of God, was to reflect the heavenly glory by embodying the beauty

²⁴ McGrade, "Introduction: 'Book VII,'" 322.

²⁵ Haugaard, "Introduction: 'The Preface,'" 15; and see Judith Maltby "'By this Book': Parishioners, the Prayer Book and the Established Church," in Fincham, ed., *The Early Stuart Church*, 116.

²⁶ The Dutch reformer Arminius questioned the Calvinist emphasis on predestination and proposed that Divine supremacy was compatible with real human free will.

²⁷ Peter Lake, "The Laudian Style," in Fincham, ed., *The Early Stuart Church*, 162.

of holiness, both in decoration, vestments, and ceremony.²⁸ And of course, the Laudian view included the divine right theory of bishops who were, after all, the spiritual heirs of the apostles and of Aaron, the priestly servants of God's holy temple. The true church in history could be located primarily through the uninterrupted succession of its bishops.²⁹

All this seemed dangerously papist to the Puritans and to many others in the Church of England. James I, whose own theology was Calvinist, pursued a moderate policy of encouraging preaching while tolerating Puritan failure to observe ceremonial conformity, so long as the Puritan clergy subscribed to the royal supremacy as well as the Prayer Book, the Ordinal and the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.³⁰ During his reign, however, a minority party of anti-Calvinist Laudian bishops, such as Lancelot Andrewes, became increasingly critical of Jacobean policy, in particular attacking the contemporary emphasis on preaching to the neglect of sacraments, ceremony and prayer.³¹

James' son Charles I favored the Laudian view. On his accession to the throne in 1625, the Laudian party took control of the Church of England and Laud was made Archbishop of Canterbury. The relative tolerance of dissent, particularly in matters of conscience, that had characterized Charles' father's reign was abandoned. Conformity to the new liturgical view was rigorously and insensitively enforced. The Laudian emphasis on beauty and order was particularly attractive to Charles, who viewed Puritanism as a dangerous threat to his authority and to the social order, and who introduced an almost liturgical sense of beauty and decorum into the life of his court.³² Hooker's relatively

²⁸ Ibid., 168 ff.

²⁹ Anthony Milton, "The Church of England, Rome, and the True Church: the Demise of a Jacobean Consensus," in *ibid.*, 204.

³⁰ Kenneth Fincham, "Episcopal Government, 1603-1640," in *ibid.*, 75

³¹ Ibid., 77.

³² Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625-1641*, Oxford Historical Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14.

tolerant thought was one of the major sources for the Laudian view of Anglican holiness, but Laudian theory had rapidly grown more sacramentally exclusive as it emerged and gained in strength during the twenty-three year reign of James I. By the time it came to power under Charles, Laudianism presented a sharp challenge to a widespread Protestant consensus which included a considerably broader segment of the population than only the Puritan wing of the Church of England.

The widely unpopular enforcement of Laudian theological ideas and liturgical practices was certainly a major factor in bringing on the subsequent Civil War. Prior to that, this enforcement was a major cause of the Puritan decision in 1629 to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was intended to exemplify the godly reformed scriptural life that should have been operative in a true Church of England, whereas the actual Church of England under the reign of Charles had veered off in a distressingly Papist direction.³³

Neither Saravia nor subsequent Jacobean thinkers had questioned the validity of continental Protestant denominations that had no bishops. Indeed, the most prominent Caroline Divines such as Andrewes, Hall, and Taylor, while insisting on the necessity of episcopacy in the Church of England, also explicitly recognized the validity of the orders and sacraments of continental Protestant churches which did not have bishops.³⁴

This changed with Laud, whose view of the divine right of bishops was carried a step further to make the logical, if diplomatically difficult, claim that only a bishop could confer orders and that therefore “the reformed Churches that had not Bishop, nor Presbyters ordained by Bishops, were not true churches, though the Church of Rome be a

³³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Can the English Think for Themselves? The Roots of English Protestantism,” in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 30, Number 1, (Spring 2001): 17.

³⁴ Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyterian*, 211.

true church, as having bishops.”³⁵ When the defeated Laudians returned triumphantly to power at the time of the Restoration, their ideas were imposed on the nation with a determination, even a ruthlessness, reflected in the Clarendon Code. At this time, in 1662, additions were made to the Book of Common Prayer to make a clear distinction between bishops and priests as separate orders, resolving an issue that had been debated among sixteenth-century Anglicans. This confirmed Cranmer’s view, indicated in the preface to the rites of ordination issued in 1550 and bound up with the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, that three distinct orders of bishops, priests and deacons were to be continued in the Church of England.³⁶

What would the Laudians have thought about Wesley’s ordinations? Again, it is not historically sound to claim to know what a seventeenth-century group would have had to say about something that happened more than a century after their time, but we may well hazard a guess that the Laudians would have found very little to like about Methodism. Its emphasis on preaching and on individual (as opposed to corporate) salvation, its relative neglect of the sacraments, its religious services held in places other than the parish church building, were all directly contrary to Laudian views. Wesley’s ordinations themselves were clearly more inconsistent with the exclusive sacramental powers of the Laudian view than with the reasonable comprehensiveness of Hooker’s understanding, which was reflected in the Latitudinarian writings that influenced Wesley. As I described earlier, the Latitudinarians formulated a broader view of episcopal

³⁵ Richard Baxter, quoted in Nuttall and Owen, eds., *From Uniformity to Unity*, 44.

³⁶ Stuhlman, *Occasions of Grace*, 264. The 1549, 1552 and 1559 Prayer Books all included Ordinals which provided for the “consecrating” of archbishops and bishops and the “ordering” of priests and deacons. In the 1662 Prayer Book, the corresponding forms were for the “ordaining or consecrating” of archbishops and bishops, the “ordering” of priests, and the “making” of deacons. Texts of the earliest versions of the Book of Common Prayer may currently be found at <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/>.

authenticity and permissible church polity in response to the strict Laudian outlook, as a means of drawing those of Calvinist persuasion into the Church of England.³⁷

The Oxford Movement

Wesley had performed his ordinations relying on Latitudinarian theories of limited episcopal authority and the equivalency of episcopal and presbyteral orders. Fifty years later, in the 1830's, another Oxford group called the Tractarians moved firmly towards a *jure divino* episcopal theory: bishops were divinely ordained as an independent ecclesiastical order; only bishops in the apostolic succession, as they understood it, could confer orders; and only those bishops or presbyters ordained in this way had the power to administer valid sacraments. The Tractarians founded what came to be known as the Oxford Movement, which became increasingly influential in Anglican churches in the United States as well as in England during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Laudian tradition which they revived and perhaps magnified, the Tractarians understood the apostolic succession as the ordination by imposition of hands from one bishop to another in a chain extending back to the apostles. Other churches which had not preserved the true apostolic succession were not considered to possess valid orders or valid sacraments. As the Oxford Movement became increasingly influential through its Anglo-Catholic descendants in all Anglican churches, including the Episcopal Church in the United States, this "chain" view of the apostolic succession was bound to have a chilling effect on ecumenical efforts, since it in effect excluded as invalid most of the major Protestant denominations. The insistence by American Episcopalians

³⁷ See p. 22 above.

on this view of the nature of bishops in the apostolic succession was a major stumbling block for their ecumenical discussions during most of the twentieth century.

The Oxford Movement began as an effort by Oxford academics to defend the Church of England against what they considered a serious and immediate threat of expropriation by a reforming government. In order to defend the Church of England against the government of England, it was necessary to recognize an identity of the church separate from that of the government, and an authority separate from the legal authorization given by the Crown and Parliament. This was something of a challenge for a church whose predecessor ecclesial structure had been established by Henry VIII, and whose own ecclesial structure had been established by Elizabeth I, through acts of Parliament. It was not necessarily a contradiction, however. The statutes of Henry claimed to be merely recognizing the independence of the Church of England which, they alleged, had always been in effect. In addition, the Henrician church had been described as the “true catholic church,” implying that it had already had an independent existence but was now being rescued from bondage and corruption.

If the foundation of the church’s authority was not the organizing statutes of a Parliament that now appeared to threaten it, what was that foundation? In Tract 1, which marked the public commencement of the Oxford Movement when it appeared on September 9, 1833,³⁸ John Henry Newman, writing as an anonymous “presbyter” of the Church of England, gave a clear answer: the real foundation of the church’s authority is the apostolic succession. Tract 1, entitled *Thoughts on the Ministerial Commission: Respectfully Addressed to the Clergy*, and succeeding Tracts by Newman and his fellows worked out the concept of the apostolic succession in terms of a “divine” or “apostolic”

³⁸ John Keble’s Assize Sermon is also widely viewed as marking the beginning of the Oxford Movement.

commission, a process in which Jesus Christ bequeathed the Holy Spirit to the apostles and they then handed their authority down to bishops and succeeding bishops by the successive laying on of hands. In Tract 1 Newman described:

the real ground on which our authority is built, -- OUR APOSTOLICAL DESCENT. . . . We have been born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of GOD. The LORD JESUS CHRIST gave His SPIRIT to His Apostles; they in turn laid their hands on those who should succeed them; and these again on others; and so the sacred gift has been handed down to our present Bishops, who have appointed us [Presbyters] as their assistants, and in some sense representatives. . . . It is plain then that [the Bishop] but *transmits*; and that the Christian Ministry is a *succession*. And if we trace back the power of ordination from hand to hand, of course we shall come to the Apostles at last. We know we do, as a plain historical fact; and therefore all we, who have been ordained Clergy, in the very form of our ordination acknowledged the doctrine of the APOSTOLICAL SUCCESSION.³⁹

Tract 4, entitled *Adherence to the Apostolical Succession the Safest Course*

argued that the sacraments can be considered assuredly valid only through the apostolic succession. The eucharist “was intended by [Christ] to be constantly conveyed through the hands of commissioned persons. Except therefore we can show such a warrant, . . . we cannot be sure that souls . . . are partakers of the Body and Blood of CHRIST.” Tract 15, *On the Apostolical Succession in the English Church*, stated that “the Clergy have a commission from GOD ALMIGHTY through regular succession from the Apostles, to preach the gospel, administer the Sacraments, and guide the Church.” Tract 24, *The Scripture View of the Apostolic Commission*, argued that the apostles were directly commissioned by Jesus Christ to build the Christian church and that the apostles’ ministry “was to be transmitted along the sacred line of those whom they ordained.”⁴⁰

³⁹ John Henry Newman, *Thoughts on the Ministerial Commission: Respectfully Addressed to the Clergy*, Tracts for the Times, Tract Number 1.

⁴⁰ Texts of the Tracts for the Times may currently be found at the following website: <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/pc/tracts/index.html>.

In Geoffrey Faber's view, the apostolic succession was central to the Tractarian notion of the validity of the church. What was the Church of England for the Tractarians? "The answer was simple. She was the Catholic and Apostolic Church, ordained by Christ Himself, tracing back her authority to the Apostles through the laying on of hands, and keeping in her sole gift the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, by which God's saving grace was conveyed to sinful man."⁴¹

Two Oxford Movements

In some ways the Oxford Movement of the Tractarians was remarkably similar to John Wesley's Methodist movement, which preceded it by almost exactly a century. In both cases a small group of highly dedicated men at Oxford University, including ordained priests of the Church of England, sought to reform the church by espousing a disciplined Christian life of prayer and sacraments. Both groups came into conflict with existing church authorities, and both groups decisively influenced large numbers of English-speaking Christians in succeeding generations. The first Methodists at Oxford under Wesley were more strongly committed than the Tractarians to social action, such as visiting prisoners and the poor, but the Oxford Movement also engendered a strong Anglo-Catholic dedication to social justice.

Both groups saw the early church fathers as a crucial source of support for their theology and practice. Wesley as well as Pusey studied the Fathers and prepared editions of their works. It has been suggested that Wesley was superstitious and a poor theologian

⁴¹ G. C. Faber, *Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin Books in association with Faber and Faber, 1954), 321.

“who kept faith securely separate from reason,”⁴² but this scarcely does justice to Wesley’s great erudition and vast literary and theological output, although he was no more interested than the Tractarians were in systematic theology.

What perhaps distinguished the two groups most was their attitude to the Church of England. The Tractarians, with a somewhat picturesquely romantic view of medieval catholic piety, saw salvation as found almost exclusively within the church and mainly through its sacraments, which could be validly offered only by presbyters who had been ordained by bishops in the apostolic succession. They saw their mission as the strengthening and purification of the church; they were prepared to go to prison, and in some cases did, in defense of their ritualist innovations. Wesley, on the other hand, though deeply committed to the Church of England and always wanting the Methodists to remain a part of it, was nevertheless prepared to breach ecclesiastical order for the purpose of bringing souls from the power of Satan to God. Although he always encouraged Methodists to attend the sacrament of Holy Communion, for him the essential point was the preaching of the word. Wesley and the Methodists increasingly came to be seen in connection with the prophetic tradition of a mission church; the Tractarians were more the descendants of the Laudians, sons of Aaron, in the priestly tradition of an institutional church.⁴³

The problem Wesley faced was an institutional church that, if not stagnating, was failing to bring God’s word to emerging groups of economically disadvantaged people in the new industrial cities. His response was to renew the church by novel institutional additions: extempore prayer, preaching abroad, itinerant preachers, and specialized

⁴² Ibid., 84

⁴³ For a discussion of this point, see Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 158-159.

groups called classes and societies -- all of which were offensive to the bishops of the established church and all of which were intended more effectively to spread the word. For the Tractarians a century later, the problem was an institutional church under siege from a hostile government representing what seemed to be radical and novel forces. Their response was to buttress the institutional church, in particular by emphasizing the divine authority of its bishops and the importance of its sacraments, whose efficacy was guaranteed only if administered by bishops in the apostolic succession. The result was that although both groups began as reform movements within the Church of England, the more outward-looking Methodists did in the end separate from the church, while the more inward-looking members of the Oxford Movement and their descendants had, by the end of the twentieth century, established most of their liturgical ideas throughout most of the Anglican Communion.

Wesley's ordinations for America could never have passed muster with the Tractarians, if for no other reason than that they could not pass through the strait technical gate of having been performed by the hands of a regularly ordained bishop of the Church of England standing in a chain of succession known, as a matter of plain historical fact, to extend back to the apostles and Jesus Christ.

The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral

In 1888, some fifty years after the Tractarians burst upon the scene, a worldwide meeting of Anglican Bishops at the Lambeth Conference adopted what is known as the Chicago-Lambeth quadrilateral. The Quadrilateral defined four irreducible principles of Anglican Christianity, principles which had been formulated originally by William Reed

Huntington, an American priest, as a basis for ecumenical discussions with other denominations. These four principles had been adopted earlier by the American Episcopal bishops at their General Convention in Chicago in 1886. The four defining Anglican principles were: 1) the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, 2) the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, 3) the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and, finally, 4) "The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church." This fourth principle, unlike the others, was adopted by the Lambeth conference with no change at all from the wording of the Chicago resolution. Although the Quadrilateral has been under discussion several times during the course of the last century, neither the four principles themselves nor the specific language of the fourth principle has been changed. The Quadrilateral, including the "historic episcopate," has remained the official position of the Anglican Communion and of the Episcopal Church in the United States.⁴⁴

Although Huntington is not usually described as an Anglo-Catholic, the inclusion of bishops as one of the four cornerstones of the essential identity of Anglicanism probably reflects an influence of the Tractarians, and of the Laudians before them. However, the "historic episcopate" of the Quadrilateral was obviously not the same thing as the "apostolic succession" of the Tractarians; exactly what it did mean was not explained.

The American bishops had added the word "historic" to Huntington's "episcopate." Henry Chadwick points out that the meaning of the phrase was ambiguous:

⁴⁴ A complete discussion of the origins and history of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, including relevant texts, is given in J. Robert Wright, ed., "Quadrilateral at One Hundred: Essays on the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral 1886/88 – 1986/88," *Anglican Theological Review*. Suppl. no. 10.

“[T]he clause concerning the episcopate does not ask anyone to believe that the succession in apostolic order is a requisite sign and instrument of unity and continuity in the community. It is asserted only that it is ‘historic,’ a proposition standing beyond any possibility of refutation: the Episcopal order has been around for a very long time”⁴⁵

As a basis for ecumenical discussion, the “historic episcopate” was decidedly open-ended.

Was the “historic episcopate” merely a purposely ambiguous label into which Tractarians could read a high sacramental view based on the apostolic succession while Evangelicals could understand it as a purely functional office? It was certainly accorded such different interpretations. In 1890, Bishop William Stevens Perry wrote to challenge an interpretation of the phrase as meaning that the episcopacy did not exist *jure divino* but merely *jure humano*. Perry, who had been present at both meetings, asserted that it was the understanding of practically all the bishops at Chicago and afterwards at Lambeth that the threefold ministry could be traced to apostolic direction and that “short of an express statement, we can possess no better assurance of a Divine appointment, or at least a Divine Sanction.”⁴⁶ He reported that a proposal for temporary recognition of non-episcopal orders in return for subsequent episcopal ordinations was greeted with “contemptuous curl of the lip” and “indignant scorn of expression.” The Bishops, he wrote,

refused by a decisive vote even to receive the report containing this revolutionary suggestion. It is not too much to assert that the scheme of recognition – even for a time, and that too with a view to the speedy subsequent discontinuance of all distinctively Presbyterian or non-Episcopal ordination whatever – of any other

⁴⁵ Henry Chadwick, “The Quadrilateral in England,” in *ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁶ Bishop William Stevens Perry, quoted in J. Robert Wright, “History and Vision: The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,” in *ibid.*, 19.

ordination than that received at the hands of Bishops would, had it obtained the votes of the Conference, have tended to the immediate disruption of the Church.⁴⁷

A century later, the perceived meaning of the historic episcopate evidently *had* changed because the Episcopal Church approved a Concordat of Agreement (subsequently enacted as Call to Common Mission) with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America on exactly the same basis which had been so scornfully rejected by the bishops in 1888. The Episcopal Church agreed to temporarily suspend its ordination requirement to permit recognition of Lutheran ministers as fully authentic in return for Lutheran acceptance of “the common joint ordinations of all future bishops as apostolic missionaries in the historic episcopate for the sake of common mission.”⁴⁸ It was the expectation that after a transition period, both Lutheran ministers and Anglican priests will have been ordained in the historic episcopate.

The Concordat of Agreement / Call to Common Mission

What had happened in the intervening century? For one thing, there was general agreement that although bishops, priests and deacons were universally in place by the second century, it would be impossible to prove that all Christian churches followed this pattern immediately. Consequently, there could be no certainty that all bishops were actually in a direct, head-to-hand chain of succession leading back to the twelve apostles. The “Statement of Faith and Order” approved by the 1949 General Convention of the Episcopal Church stated that the Anglican churches had preserved the episcopate “in the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21

⁴⁸ *Concordat of Agreement*, Paragraph 3. The text of the Concordat of Agreement may be found in James E. Griffis and Daniel F. Martensen, eds., *A Commentary on “Concordat of Agreement”* (Minneapolis: Augsburg and Cincinnatti: Forward Movement Publications, 1994).

form and the succession which traces back to the ‘Apostles’ time’” rather than directly to the apostles themselves.⁴⁹ Wesley’s doubts about the literal apostolic succession, based on his reading of Stillingfleet and King, had in effect been echoed by the Episcopal Church some two hundred years later.

Of at least equal importance were lengthy conversations and studies between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which took place within the context of ongoing ecumenical studies by the World Council of Churches and which led both churches to adopt a view of apostolic mission in which the episcopate was part of a functional and ongoing apostolic ministry. Eric Gritsch wrote that Lutherans and Episcopalians came to view polity in connection with mission, as “a means to further the mission of the church rather than as part of an unchanging tradition. Thus the historic episcopate may take different forms at different times in order to enhance the mission of the gospel.” He indicated that a breakthrough came with the agreement that there was, in fact, a distinction between “apostolic succession” and “the historic episcopate.”⁵⁰

Anglican thinking had been moving in this direction. In 1936 William Temple, the revered and intellectually influential Archbishop of Canterbury, had written that he “could only agree to union or to any approach to full intercommunion on the basis of the agreement that all future ordinations are episcopal. But, if that is agreed, I would go far in recognizing the de facto efficacy of existing ministries.”⁵¹ The Church of South India, founded in 1947, was based on this idea. All ministers of the merging churches, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed, were accepted into a united ministry without any re-ordinations, but all bishops for the new church were consecrated by bishops in historic

⁴⁹ Text quoted in Wright, “Heritage and Vision,” 34.

⁵⁰ Eric W. Gritsch, “Commentary,” in *A Commentary on “Concordat of Agreement,”* 81-82.

⁵¹ William Temple, in a personal letter, quoted in Mark A. McIntosh, “Commentary,” in *ibid.*, 93.

succession and all future clergy were to be ordained by bishops ordained into the historic episcopate. The Church of South India has still not been accepted into full communion with the Church of England because of Anglo Catholic objections to the possibility that there might be some priests not ordained in the apostolic succession and to the fact that the Church of South India would remain in communion with its predecessor denominations, who were not in the apostolic succession. However, it is a member of the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Consultative Council and is in full communion with the Episcopal Church.⁵²

In 1982, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted a resolution accepting new “principles of ecumenical reunion” which had been developed over several years of study influenced by dialogues with the Lutherans and by the work of the World Council of Churches. The resolution adopted the new principles, but only as an “explication” of the Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral, which was reaffirmed as a statement of basic principles for the Episcopal Church. Paragraph 4 of the resolution, dealing with ministry, described the relationship between the concept of the historic episcopate and the concepts of apostolic teaching, apostolic ministry, apostolic mission and apostolic succession:

4. Apostolicity is evidenced in continuity with the teaching, the ministry, and the mission of the apostles. Apostolic teaching must, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, be founded upon the Holy Scriptures and the ancient fathers and creeds, making its proclamation of Jesus Christ and his Gospel for each new age consistent with those sources, not merely reproducing them in a transmission of verbal identity. Apostolic ministry exists to promote, safeguard and serve apostolic teaching. All Christians are called to this ministry by their Baptism. In order to serve, lead and enable this ministry, some are set apart and ordained in the historic orders of Bishop, Presbyter and Deacon. We understand the historic

⁵² For a narrative of the organization of the Church of South India, see Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda, an Autobiography* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985).

episcopate as central to this apostolic ministry and essential to the reunion of the Church, even as we acknowledge “the spiritual reality of the ministries of those Communion which do not possess the Episcopate” (Lambeth Appeal 1920, Section 7). Apostolic mission is itself a succession of apostolic teaching and ministry inherited from the past and carried into the present and future. Bishops in apostolic succession are, therefore, the focus and personal symbols of this inheritance and mission as they preach and teach the Gospel and summon the people of God to their mission of worship and service.⁵³

Bishops in the historic episcopate are defined as central to apostolic ministry, and bishops in apostolic succession are defined as the focus and symbols of apostolic mission. This is different from the Tractarian “power line” view, in which the spiritual power of the apostles is validly transmitted only through a hand-to-head chain of episcopal ordinations extending back to Christ and the twelve Apostles.

An important influence on the Episcopal-Lutheran conversations after 1982 was “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” a paper of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches issued in that year, also known as the “Lima Report,” which represented a significant achievement of agreement on basic principles by the world’s major churches. In the section on ministry, the Report observed that the threefold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons was the generally accepted pattern in the early centuries; it also noted that churches which had retained the historic episcopate increasingly recognized a continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission in those which did not retain it, and that the churches which had not retained it were coming to recognize the historic episcopate as a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church.⁵⁴ The significance of the Lima Report was recognized in a 1985

⁵³ Text quoted in Wright, “Heritage and Vision,” 42.

⁵⁴ See discussion of this influential document in Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops* (New York: Newman Press, 2001), 5-9, 234-236: traditional Anglican views of apostolic succession are described as being substantially identical with Roman Catholic and Orthodox views as distinguished from a unitary

resolution of the Episcopal Church's General Convention, which adopted an official response of the Episcopal Church to the Report and commended the Report as a resource in meetings with ecumenical partners.⁵⁵

By the year 1997, when they voted to approve the Concordat of Agreement,⁵⁶ the Episcopalians felt comfortable in asserting with the Lutherans that the historic episcopate was ~~valid only~~ ^{desirable} in the context of carrying out the gospel mission of Christ. On the other hand, the Lutherans chose to adopt the historic episcopate as a means of renewal and a sign of ecclesiastical unity and continuity. This did not imply the inadequacy of past Lutheran ordinations, since their pastors were recognized as fully authentic priests; it was rather for them a re-appropriation of a portion of their catholic heritage which had been lost by an historical accident.

The historic episcopate, then, had turned out to be a flexible concept, a tent broad enough to cover a variety of diverse, often conflicting theories of episcopal validity which themselves changed over time. This is consistent with a significant Anglican tradition of intellectual humility and theological restraint, a tradition which rejects claims of omniscience and therefore, within rather broad limits, tolerates diverse opinions and accepts the ambiguity of a reality which cannot be precisely defined. Such wise humility and genial restraint were exemplified by Hooker, who had viewed episcopal polity as

(Edward Yarnold is quoted as suggesting that)

"Protestant" view, but recent Anglican-Lutheran agreements ~~are~~ contradict~~ing~~ the Anglican position as it had been expressed in the Final Report of the first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. See also discussion of the "baptismal paradigm of ecclesiology" as opposed to an "apostolic paradigm" in Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 335-354.

⁵⁵ 1985, Resolution AO61.

⁵⁶ The Episcopal Church voted to approve the proposal for the Concordat of Agreement at its General Convention in 1997. A month later, at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Assembly, the proposal failed by 6 votes to receive the required two-thirds majority approval. In 1999, the ELCA did approve a slightly modified version, entitled Call to Common Mission, which is now in effect, although the ELCA has not yet fully complied with the terms of the agreement.

reasonable, consistent with scripture, and amply supported by historical precedent, but not divinely inspired or the only valid form of ecclesiastical polity.

Those espousing the Tractarian view of the apostolic succession as a spiritual powerline were probably the largest and most influential party under the tent at Lambeth in 1888. In the ensuing century, the Tractarians' insistence on the essential role of the episcopacy was not abandoned, but their rather narrow view of valid episcopacy came to be seen as historically untenable and theologically constricted. By the end of the twentieth century a different view had prevailed in the Episcopal Church: the historic episcopate had evolved from identification with the chain theory of apostolic succession to a more broadly defined component of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church with a particular focus on ecumenical gospel mission. The Episcopal position had shifted from a Tractarian view to one more like that of Hooker. As a result, the significance of Wesley's ordinations for America in 1784 could be reconsidered from new Episcopal perspectives.

Diversity and Change

James E. Griffiss, the late canon theologian to Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold, once wrote that he had wondered what it was about Anglicanism that appealed to students of his who came from the most diverse cultural backgrounds. The answer was orthodoxy and flexibility. "What they found in Anglicanism, despite all the cultural differences, was a way of believing, worshiping, and living that was grounded in the heritage of early Christianity but which was also open to working with all the changes and developments

taking place in their world. In other words, they valued a church which tried to live with *both tradition and change*.⁵⁷

Considering that the Anglican way seeks to be “grounded in the heritage of early Christianity” yet always tries to accommodate itself to a changing world, it should not be surprising that the history of the Episcopal Church is studded with disagreement over numerous issues involving matters not only of theology, but also of sociology, morals, ethics, aesthetics, and the politics of class, race and sex. In the late nineteenth century the broad church movement in the United States favored English “liberal catholics” associated with Charles Gore, who published *Lux Mundi*, a collection of essays dealing seriously with current intellectual trends from an Anglican perspective. Gore asserted that the church had nothing to fear from adapting ancient principles to the circumstances of a new age, but many disagreed.

It seems evident that any religious tradition which has accepted the process of change will constantly find itself embroiled in disagreement, since the situation currently being left behind, whatever it is, will be understood to be the position of orthodoxy. For example, slavery based on race was supported by a major part of the Episcopal Church before the Civil War as perfectly consistent with or even prescribed by the gospels. Acceptance of subsequent new realities, such as the emancipation of slaves, the election of an African-American Bishop, the adoption of a new prayer book, the ordination of women priests, the election of an African-American woman bishop, and most recently the election of an openly gay bishop have all been opposed as unorthodox or at least inconsistent with an orthodox understanding of scripture. The nature of episcopal

⁵⁷ James E. Griffiss, *The Anglican Vision*, The New Church’s Teaching Series 1 (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997), 17.

authority is only one instance of the Anglican tradition seeking to update its past understandings while containing under its roof a fairly wide diversity of theological opinions.

The Lutheran and the Anglican churches both arose in the Reformations of the sixteenth century, and both sought to validate themselves as maintaining continuity with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Wesley and the Methodists, a movement within the eighteenth-century Church of England, also saw their apostolic heritage as crucially important. The "historic episcopate" was a newer concept, formulated by Huntington and the American Episcopal Bishops in the late nineteenth century, related to but not synonymous with apostolic succession. Its meaning evidently changed during the succeeding century, yet all major Episcopal groups were always in agreement that the historic episcopate, however defined, was an essential component of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. By the end of the twentieth century, the Evangelical Lutherans had chosen to adopt the historic episcopate. Perhaps the Episcopal and United Methodist churches also will find a way to come together within a mutually defined historic episcopate.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION: CONVERGENT VISIONS

I have looked at John Wesley's ordinations for the Methodists in North America, performed in 1784 at a time of social confusion and political uncertainty. Wesley's Methodist friends, including his own brother Charles, judged that the ordinations had led to what he and his brother had always opposed: separation from the Church of England. John Wesley claimed then, and for the remaining seven years of his life, that the ordinations did not cause such a separation. I have given some of his reasons, considering how he had come to accept the ecclesiological reasoning of Latitudinarian thinkers of an earlier generation and had moved away from his High Church roots towards a position closer to that of Richard Hooker. I have proposed a description of his probable vision for the future relationship of Methodists and Anglicans in North America, including a fluid relationship involving communion and a recognizable identity, and not involving "separation."

I have also briefly reviewed some major examples of changing Anglican understandings of episcopal authority. Hooker's inclusive, flexible, and rational vision contrasts with the narrower, more exclusive, and more mechanical Laudian theory of the divine right of bishops, a position that denied the authenticity of those Protestant

churches that had not preserved the apostolic succession. Other examples include the Latitudinarians, whose thought reconnected with Hooker, and I have described in somewhat greater detail the thinking of two of the Latitudinarians, Stillingfleet and King, because Wesley acknowledged them as key sources of his own thought. I have considered the *jure divino* view of the Tractarians, which is in some ways a reprise of Laudian thought. I have also suggested that the Anglican Quadrilateral, originated by Huntington and adopted by the American Episcopal bishops in Chicago and the Bishops of the entire Anglican Communion gathered at the Second Lambeth Conference in 1882, introduced a useful ambiguity about the nature of episcopacy by using the phrase “historic episcopate.” The concept of the “historic episcopate” was widely interpreted as coterminous with a narrow view of the apostolic succession in 1882; a century later, it came to be understood in a broader sense that made possible the Call to Common Mission, an agreement of full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which recognized the full authenticity of ministers not yet in the historic episcopate and in return provided for the incorporation of the Lutheran ministry into the historic episcopate over time. I have suggested that the position on episcopacy adopted by General Convention in 1982, which is reflected in the Call to Common Mission, is closer to Hooker’s complex and comprehensive vision than to the more technical understanding of apostolic succession found in the Laudian view, the Tractarian view, or the view of the Anglican Bishops gathered at Lambeth at 1882.

Currently, the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church have begun a dialogue in the hope of developing a closer relationship, possibly including full communion. I suggest that the current Episcopal view of the nature of episcopacy,

expressed most succinctly in the reaffirmation of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral adopted by General Convention in 1982, should make possible a different understanding of the significance of Wesley's 1784 ordinations as an obstacle to a coming together of the two churches. The 1982 Episcopal conception of the historic episcopate as central to apostolic ministry in apostolic mission over time reflects the kind of inclusive and tolerant vision expressed by Hooker, rather than the more narrowly focused definitional clarity found in Bishop Seabury's crisply expressed view of church order or in the pronouncements of the Tractarians. The current, more nuanced approach would probably lead to the assessment of substantially more dimensions of the 1784 ordinations than the one technical issue of whether they were performed by a bishop standing in the apostolic succession.

Methodist views on the nature of their own episcopacy have also changed over time. The original designation of the office was "superintendent" rather than bishop, but the title of bishop came to be used soon after the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church at the Christmas Conference in 1784. The function of the American Methodist bishops as an itinerant superintendency after the model of Wesley's ministry was conceived of differently from the traditional local-diocesan definition of the jurisdiction of bishops in the Anglican or Roman Catholic or Orthodox traditions, but over the years it became more localized in practice. The proper degree of localism for bishops of the United Methodist Church is still under discussion. There is officially an equality among the Methodist bishops, but Asbury, the first American bishop, was in practice the unquestioned leader of the bishops. Currently there is a proposal to create an office of head bishop, corresponding to the function of the Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal

Church.¹ The renewed emphasis on liturgy in some parts of the United Methodist Church necessarily leads to greater liturgical emphasis in the bishop's activities.

It is also, of course, true that the American Methodist understanding of the nature of the church has been subject to change over the last two centuries, and a major current of this change seems to have been in the direction of a stronger definition of the church as an institution. The convening of the Christmas Conference at Baltimore in 1784, at the insistence of Asbury, was bound to weaken the international connection with Wesley as it strengthened and validated the American organization. Asbury's decision to assume the title of bishop may have been primarily aimed at asserting the independence and equality of the American Methodists, but it also indicated a stronger emphasis on institution. It incorporated a conceptual dimension of the ancient hierarchical (as well as catholic) structure of the Church of England which Wesley had declined to include in his vision for the American Methodists in their strange new freedom.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Methodist church structure grew more institutional, developing a more activist ethos of the church as an enterprise of salvation and more activity-centered patterns of voluntary association. It has been suggested that the Methodist Episcopal Church was transformed "into a modern corporate bureaucracy in the decades following the Civil War."² A related view was expressed in 1878 by a retired Ohio preacher: "Early Methodism was *subjective*; personal conversion, personal experience was the theme. . . . Modern Methodism is more

¹ Russell E. Richey and Thomas Edward Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition: Perspectives and Proposals* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 84.

² A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: the Domestication of American Methodism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 201.

objective: . . . it devotes its attention more fully to Christian activities.”³ Of course, the reactions of the Methodist churches to the swiftly changing currents of nineteenth and twentieth century history were too varied and complex to be summed up in a nutshell.

In the current state of development of the United Methodist Church and the role of its own bishops, might there be a different understanding of the significance of Wesley’s 1784 ordinations for the relationship between United Methodists and Episcopalians? Might there be, on the side of the Episcopal Church, considerably less interest in the technical “validity of orders” and more emphasis on a broader view of continuity and authenticity in mission? Could the Call to Common Mission serve as a model for a similar kind of agreement between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church?

In the Call to Common Mission agreement, Episcopalians agreed to recognize the full validity of the Evangelical Lutheran ministers even though they had not been ordained in the historic episcopate, and in return the Lutherans agreed to reclaim a part of their catholic heritage by having all subsequent episcopal ordinations included in the historic episcopate. Although the Episcopalians had recommended that the Lutherans receive the historic episcopate from other Lutheran churches under the Augsburg Confession who had maintained it, the Evangelical Lutherans chose to receive the historic episcopate through association with the Episcopal Church.⁴ Under the agreement, both churches retain their separate identities but recognize each other as fully valid.

³ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴ J. Robert Wright, “An Episcopalian Understanding of Episkope and Episcopacy,” (Paper Prepared for the Dialogue of Episcopalians and Methodists at the Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Texas, 15-17 January 2004), 12.

Such a mutual recognition of separate identities offers the advantage of flexibility in matters of discipline, doctrine and biblical understanding. For example, such a relationship could have been beneficial during the time when Methodists recognized the contribution of women as ordained ministers but Episcopalians did not. It could provide expansive flexibility now, at a time when Episcopalians are officially at a different place than United Methodists with respect to same-sex relationships within the church. Call to Common Mission offers an institutional relationship rather than an institutional merger: the distinctive identities of both organizations are preserved and the validity of each is mutually recognized, but the ministry and sacraments are shared within a framework of apostolic mission that now includes, for both parties, the historic episcopate.

The Call to Common Mission model is remarkably consistent with some features of the arrangement Wesley appears to have had in mind: the Methodists were to retain their identity, but in such a form as to make possible a relationship in which the Methodists could continue to receive communion in Episcopal churches. In theory, Methodist presbyters and superintendents could have continued to recognize the validity of Episcopal orders, while Episcopal clergy could have recognized the validity of Methodist clergy as part of a related structure of the church. Wesley's probable vision for the American Methodists, then, was fluid and relational, with enough identity to ensure survival, but open to the same kind of relationship with other Anglicans that he always espoused in England.

It seemed to many at the time of the ordinations and thereafter that Wesley's position on the ordinations was irrational, or at least inconsistent. Charles Wesley himself suggested that the ordinations might have been the result of senility, of a mind weakened

through age and subject to the baneful influence of a younger and ambitious man, namely, Coke. This view has been repeated in the intervening years. It seemed illogical and inconsistent to maintain that the Methodists could have their own independent organization and yet remain somehow part of the Anglican church.

Yet in this, as in other things, Wesley may simply have been ahead of his own time. In a Newtonian world of linear and hierarchical thinking, Wesley's insistence on continued relationship in spite of increasingly clear identity seemed unrealistic. In a postmodern world where current theories of leadership and management emphasize groups as living organisms rather than as mechanical systems, embodying fluidity, change, and webs of relationships, Wesley's vision may no longer seem so unreasonable.

The Evangelical Lutheran and United Methodist traditions, different as they are from each other, intersect with the Anglican tradition in different ways. In some respects, the Lutheran and Anglican traditions are closer. Both were products of sixteenth-century reformations in Western Europe, and both represented a more conservative view of reform than the Zwinglian and Calvinist Reformed churches. The European churches that were the sixteenth-century ancestors of both traditions were established national churches in their respective regions. Methodism, on the other hand, grew out of the eighteenth-century revival. It began as a reform movement within the existing Church of England -- in a sense a second generation of reform, more like a daughter church than a sister church.

In other ways, the Episcopal tradition has more in common with the Methodist tradition than with the Lutheran. Episcopalians and United Methodists share a common Anglican heritage, underlying everything that has happened since. There is ample

evidence of how much Episcopalians and Methodists hold in common: Wesley's lifelong identity as a priest of the Church of England; his considerable and not unreasonable effort to identify the ordinations as within the Anglican tradition; his unyielding insistence that they did not and should not result in "separation;" his stated intention to design the American Methodist polity as a copy of the Anglican ecclesiastical polity, which he openly recommended as the most scriptural and rational polity in the world; the acknowledged status of the pre-Revolutionary American Methodists as Anglicans; the initial discussion on unification between the Methodist Episcopalians and those who were to become Protestant Episcopalians at Baltimore in connection with the Christmas Conference of 1784; the cordial correspondence in 1791 between Bishop Coke and Bishop White about the possibility of repairing the separation; the nearly identical wording of the Service of Word and Table IV in the *Book of Worship* and The Holy Eucharist Rite I in the *Book of Common Prayer* – the list is long.

One point of similarity between United Methodists and Episcopalians that has profound significance is the ongoing ordination of Methodist bishops by the laying on of hands by other bishops (almost always more than three), which has been the continuing practice in Methodism since the ordination of Asbury. United Methodists and Episcopalians also share the practice of having Elders and Deacons ordained by Bishops. Evangelical Lutheran practice in this respect was different.

In one sense, the episcopacy is of greater moment for both Episcopalians and Methodists, as compared with Lutherans, simply because neither the Episcopalians nor the Methodists have a Confession: their ongoing interpretations of scripture in relation to the changing landscape of history are more openly dependent on the continuing

community, structured with living bishops, to define the right way of living the Christian tradition in the present. Both churches provide for the three orders of ministry, although in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* the service for the ordination of bishops comes first in order, followed by the services for ordinations of priests and deacons, whereas the *Book of Worship* presents the ceremonies in the reverse order (as did the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*.) Methodist Bishops are “consecrated” rather than ordained, presumably because they are still considered to be of the same order as Elders. This was true in the first Prayer Books of the Church of England in 1549, 1552 and 1559, but in the 1662 Prayer Book, bishops were “ordained”. That pattern was followed in the Prayer Books of the Episcopal Church, but the words “making”, “ordering”, “ordaining” and “consecrating” were all used at various places; in the current 1979 Prayer Book, the word “ordination” is used for all three services, but the word “consecration” also appears in all three services.

Considering that the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church, have developed their own identities over the course of the centuries, it would be highly unrealistic to think that there could be such a merger of the churches as Coke had in mind in his correspondence with White. Indeed it already was too late in 1791 for such a proposal to have a serious chance of success. Any effective coming together of the Episcopal and United Methodist churches would have to respect the developed and developing identity of each of the two churches. However, two churches, like two families, can stand in relationship to each other anywhere on a spectrum ranging from complete lack of communication to neighboring and close cooperation. In this respect, the Call to Common Mission might serve as a model, since

its essence is to respect the identity of the separate churches while mutually recognizing the validity of each other's orders and providing in the future for an equal place in the historic episcopate.

Considering Wesley's own considerable emphasis on itinerant preaching and his espousal of lay preachers, and in view of the laying aside of the *Sunday Service* by the American Methodists and their adaptation to frontier requirements, it seems fair to say that the predominant Methodist emphasis has been on preaching the Word, rather than administering the sacraments. Yet Wesley always insisted on the importance of the sacraments, and the sacraments were always administered by the American Methodists, although from an abbreviated form found in the Hymnal. In 1945 the *Sunday Service* was brought back in an altered form called *The Book of Worship*, most recently revised and updated in 1992. Perhaps more importantly, services for baptism and the eucharist following broad patterns of liturgical renewal (thus similar to Rite II in the Episcopal Prayer Book) have been incorporated into the United Methodist Hymnal.

With these developments has come an increased emphasis on the liturgy in some United Methodist churches

For the Episcopal Church, with the growing liturgical influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stemming from the Oxford Movement, the predominant emphasis has been on the sacraments. By the end of the twentieth century, for example, the eucharist had replaced morning prayer as the main Sunday service in most Episcopal churches. Yet the liturgical revisions incorporated in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* arguably center on a new awareness of the importance of the Baptismal Covenant lived ever more fully in daily life. The Episcopal liturgy has been heavily based on scripture

reading since Cranmer's first version of a common liturgy in English, the sermon remains a crucial part of the liturgy, and the Episcopal Church initiated a "Decade of Evangelism" at the end of the twentieth century.

Both churches acknowledge today, and always have, the essential importance of word and sacrament together, recognizing that both are at the core of the Christian mission of forming faith and lifelong processes of growth in holiness. In the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the travelers encountered but did not recognize Jesus, who expounded the scriptures, a prophetic evangelistic presence, and who was then recognized in the breaking of bread, a sacramental presence. The two churches in full communion could perhaps achieve together a more complete expression of the risen Christ, acting more fully together in the catholic tradition of apostolic mission than either does alone. Two centuries after John Wesley's ordinations for America, the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church have come to a place where it may be possible to reclaim Wesley's essential vision, to enlarge the horizons of both churches, and to focus them in joint mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim scriptural holiness with sacramental grace throughout the land.

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