

John Wesley and the Principle of Ministerial Succession

By John C. English *

A SUBJECT of recurring interest among Methodists is John Wesley's doctrine of the ministry. Succeeding generations of students have sought to derive from the ambiguous evidence a historically accurate picture of Wesley's thought on this subject. The defense of Wesley's setting apart a ministry for the Methodists in America and the British Isles is a staple in Methodist apologetic. Today, when many Christians from all denominations are discussing the reunion of the churches, the question of the Wesleyan understanding of the ministry has taken on additional significance.

A common interpretation of Wesley's teaching concerning the ministry has not emerged from the extensive discussion of the question. Why is this the case?

Ernst Troeltsch, in his famous book, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, introduces a distinction between two types of Christianity, "sect" and "church." Representatives of these types differ, among other things, in their interpretation of the ministry. In the "sect" ministerial functions are usually exercised by laymen. "Sectarians" emphasize the pneumatic and prophetic aspects of the ministry. "Churchmen," on the other hand, stress the hierarchical and priestly elements in the ministerial office. This emphasis reflects their sacramentalist understanding of the Christian religion.

By and large students of Wesley have interpreted his doctrine of the ministry in "sectarian" terms. Certainly one may find in Wesley's actions and writings a considerable amount of support for such a view. Many statements by Wesley, however, cannot be fitted easily into this interpretation. Granted that "sectarian" motifs appear in Wesley's doctrine of the ministry, yet his position, I believe, is fundamentally "churchly" in nature. Important pieces of evidence, such as Wesley's statement that the ministry is essentially priestly in character; his care in maintaining a succession of ministers in the Methodist Episcopal Church in America; the arguments of Peter King's *History of the Primitive Church* and Edward Stillingfleet's *Irenicon*; and the doctrine of the Ordinal which Wesley prepared for the Americans in 1784 support this conclusion.

Attention may be directed, by way of preamble, to Wesley's distinction between the preaching and the sacramental or priestly ministries. That this distinction is significant is borne out by Wes-

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ley's repeated use of it. The distinction is implied in Wesley's continued opposition to the administration of the sacraments by unordained lay preachers, in the ordination certificate of Thomas Coke, and in Wesley's letter to America, dated September 10, 1784. The American fathers meeting at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore accepted Wesley's design and restricted sacramental ministrations to those few men who were duly ordained. Wesley's teaching is clearly stated in his 1788 sermon on "The Ministerial Office."

I do not find that ever the office of an Evangelist was the same with that of a Pastor, frequently called a Bishop. He presided over the flock, and administered the sacraments: The former assisted him, and preached the word, either in one or more congregations. I cannot prove from any part of the New Testament, or from any author of the three first centuries, that the office of an Evangelist gave any man a right to act as a Pastor or Bishop.¹

I suggest that due consideration of Wesley's definitions of preaching and sacramental ministries is needed in order to understand his manifold utterances on the subject as a whole.

Wesley recognizes four classes of ministerial persons.

1. The lay preacher. God in his Providence has raised up a group of men and women to proclaim the Gospel of Christ under the direction of John Wesley. The occasion of their calling out is an extraordinary one, peculiar to a given time and place, eighteenth century Britain, Ireland and America. Because the established churches have not been fulfilling their God-given mission adequately, God has used this means to re-invigorate and to infuse new life into them.

The lay preacher, in an emergency, performs one of the functions of the clergy, preaching the Gospel, but he is not a clergyman. The following three groups of persons are clerics. The distinctive function of the clerical orders is the administration of the sacraments.

2. The deacon. According to the Ordinal of 1784, the function of the deacon is to preach; to perform various pastoral ministrations, especially in connection with the charitable activities of the church; to assist the elder in the administration of the Lord's Supper; and to baptize in his absence.

3. The elder (presbyter, priest, bishop). Like the deacon, the elder is engaged in preaching and the cure of souls. His particular glory, however, lies in the fact that he celebrates the eucharist which is the focus of the church's worship and life. I find no suggestion that Wesley ever rejected the point of view which he expressed in a letter of December 30, 1745:

¹ *Works*, VII, 275.

We [John and Charles Wesley] believe there is, and always was, in every Christian Church (whether dependent on the Bishop of Rome or not) an outward priesthood, ordained by Jesus Christ, and an outward sacrifice offered therein, by men authorized to act as ambassadors of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Acting in conjunction with his fellows, each elder is responsible for the ordination of the clergy. Inherent in the order of elders is the authority to ordain others to succeed themselves in their ministry.

4. The superintendent. In the interest of a more effective witness to Christ by the church, certain elders are invested with responsibilities of oversight extending beyond a single congregation or circuit. In the same interest the elders refrain from exercising their authority to ordain except in conjunction with and under the direction of the superintendent.

The man whom Wesley ordained (Wesley does not use the word "consecrate" in his Ordinal) as superintendent, Thomas Coke, and his colleague, Francis Asbury, substituted the title "bishop" for Wesley's term. Although Wesley's equation of *presbuteros* and *episcopos* provided some justification for this change, he protested the action. Supposedly Wesley was concerned with the ambiguity of the word *episcopos*; his conception of its meaning, which he took to be that of the New Testament and of the primitive church, did not coincide with contemporary usage. Wesley wanted to avoid misconceptions on the part of his brethren. Therefore he objected. We will follow Wesley's terminology, and avoid statements to the effect that Wesley ordained or consecrated Coke as "bishop."

It is apparent from this scheme that classes one and four are not indispensable to the constitution of the Church of Christ. There is a certain ambiguity concerning the diaconate, but implicitly Wesley recognizes this order as one of two established in the apostolic church. There is no ambiguity about the presbyterate, however. The presbyterate (eldership) belongs to the *esse* of the church. This fact is the basis for the conclusion of some persons, including Charles Wesley, that John Wesley's view of church order is fundamentally presbyterian in character.

I want to put aside the consideration of the role and function of the lay preacher, and concentrate attention upon the clergy. Each member of the diaconate and presbyterate receives from God an interior call to enter upon his ministry, and grace sufficient to carry that ministry forward. The clergy, if satisfied that the candidate is truly called and sufficiently prepared, may admit him to their ranks.

The transmission to a candidate of the authority to exercise his prophetic and priestly ministry in the church is the essential part of the rite of ordination to these two orders. The visible sign of

the transfer, the handing over, of this authority is the laying on of hands. The rite is accompanied by prayer that the Holy Ghost will enable the ordinand to carry out his ministry.

The authority to exercise this essentially sacramental ministry has been transmitted through succeeding generations of presbyters since the Apostles, who received their authority from Christ himself. This principle is clearly implied in Wesley's ordination of Whatcoat and Vasey in 1784, and his expectation that these men, together with Coke, would ordain Methodist preachers in America. The principle of succession is nowhere contravened by either Lord King or Bishop Stillingfleet, Wesley's two mentors in the doctrine of the ministry. I conclude that Wesley always remained a firm believer in apostolic succession.

I am not forgetting Wesley's celebrated statement, "The uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable." This remark refers to a continuous succession of an order of bishops with exclusive powers of discipline and ordination. An essential distinction between presbyter and bishop cannot be traced in all ages and in all places in the catholic church. Wesley brings forward the example of Alexandria to the contrary. But there have always been presbyters in the church, whom we may call elders or priests, and could quite properly term bishops, "overseers." Without their ministry of word and sacrament the church could not continue to exist. These men are linked by the rite of ordination to their fellows in all periods of the church's history and wherever the church is found.

Reference may be made to Stillingfleet's conclusion that no particular church order is prescribed in the New Testament. This is not to be taken to mean that the exercise of ministerial functions is not in the hands of definitely constituted orders of clergy. Stillingfleet's statement refers rather to the accidental organization of the presbyterate. Is it to be formed along "collegiate" or "monarchical" lines? The church may follow the example of Clement or it may find Ignatius' pattern more expedient.

When Wesley, Coke and Creighton ordained Whatcoat and Vasey as deacons and elders, they acted as ministers of the catholic church in the succession. What are we to say concerning the ordination of Coke as "superintendent"?

A preliminary word concerning Wesley's relationship to the United Societies is in order. In addition to the ordinary ministry to which Wesley was called by God, and which he was authorized to perform by the bishops of the catholic church in England, he had received a call to an extraordinary ministry to spread scriptural holiness through the land by means of the Methodist societies. Wesley felt himself called by God to exercise spiritual oversight over

those societies. This extraordinary authorization was sealed by the fact that Wesley's work bore fruit in the salvation of men.

In the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Wesley envisaged officers exercising a general pastoral oversight over the whole, analogous to the extraordinary spiritual authority which he exercised over the Methodists at home. Wesley looked upon the ordination of Coke as superintendent as the transfer to Coke of a portion of the authority he had over American Methodists. The Methodists in America agreed to this arrangement and accepted Coke as the first incumbent in this office.²

The office of superintendent is not an essential element in the constitution of the Church of Christ, as the orders of the ministry are. Wesley, valuing strong central authority as an instrument of good order and efficiency, arranged for its establishment in America. But the superintendency theoretically could be set aside if its usefulness became impaired.³

Edgar Thompson rightly points out that Wesley, in his ordination of Coke, delegated to him a portion of Wesley's supreme authority in the United Societies. But Thompson then confuses the issue by distinguishing between "a local Methodist superintendency" and "a bishopric in a Christian Church."⁴ According to Thompson, the latter phrase, not the former, should be used to describe the position which Wesley gave to Coke, because he was sent to America to bestow upon the Methodists there "a Christian ministry and the sacraments."

This language is unacceptable for several reasons. In the first place, the extension of an ordained, sacramental ministry to the American Methodists was not the work of Coke alone. Vasey and Whatcoat were in order equal to Coke; they were fully qualified to ordain. Second, the phrase, "bishopric in a Christian Church," would hardly commend itself to Wesley. One does not ordinarily think of bishops as being bishops of only a part of the church of God ("a Christian Church"), but of the one church catholic. The word "bishopric" suggests a diocesan organization of the church,

² An unresolved difficulty is the association of Creighton, Whatcoat and Vasey with Wesley in the ordination of Coke. If the essential nature of the rite was the transfer of Wesley's peculiar authority to Coke, why did the other three men participate in it when they had nothing to bestow? The participation of Whatcoat and Vasey, who were going to accompany Coke to America, could signify their acquiescence in Wesley's act and their acceptance of Coke's authority over them. This suggestion is not entirely convincing, however.

³ J. C. Bowmer's valuable contribution to the discussion of Wesley's doctrine of the ministry is marred by his failure to distinguish between an "order" and an "office." Wesley does not teach a threefold order of ministers, as Bowmer implies (*Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism*, pp. 159, 163). Colin Williams makes the same error (*John Wesley's Theology Today*, p. 234).

⁴ *Apostolic Man*, p. 62.

focused upon a see city, complete with cathedral, chapter and court spiritual, surely an anachronism in eighteenth century America. Moreover, Wesley could not make Coke a bishop in the sense in which Wesley used that term. Coke, being a presbyter of the Church of England, was already a "bishop." This fact is signaled by Wesley's application to Coke of the term "superintendent," rather than "bishop."

The import of Wesley's actions in 1784 may be summarized in three propositions.

1. Acting as the general superintendent of Methodists everywhere, Wesley delegated to Coke a portion of his power of superintendence, and asked Coke to invite Asbury to participate in this delegated responsibility. This authorization Wesley calls "ordination."

2. Such authorization is different from that conveyed in the ordination of Vasey and Whatcoat as deacon and elder. Wesley participated in these ordinations, not as superintendent, but as a presbyter-bishop of the church of God, exercising a power inherent in that order.

3. Wesley authorized Coke, Vasey and Whatcoat to exercise their priestly ministry, sealed to them in their ordination as deacons and presbyters, in the Methodist societies in America, about to be organized as a denomination. Here Wesley was acting as general superintendent.