THE NATURE OF ORDINATION IN WESLEY'S VIEW OF THE MINISTRY

by Linda M. Durbin

The recent merger of The Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren to form The United Methodist Church has brought under scrutiny the nature and function of the ministry. E. W. Thompson in 1957 felt that

> for the first time in history a large section of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America may assent to unite organically with churches of another denomination, episcopal and non-episcopal; and it has been necessary to determine and to agree how to deal with the American bishops, whose succession is from Dr. Coke.[1]

Did Wesley really intend to ordain and was Coke to function as bishop? Wesley himself was not a bishop in the eyes of the Church of England, but a presbyter. It would seem impossible for a lower order to confer the powers of a higher. Coke obviously felt he had received the power to ordain, a power reserved in the Church of England to bishops in the apostolic succession. Wesley stated repeatedly that he never wanted to separate from the Church of England—before *and* after his ordinations. What then led him to take a step he must have known meant separation?

In the course of researching Wesley's ordinations another, related problem arose, i.e., that of the dichotomy between preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments which was apparent in the Church of England and in Wesley himself.

There is no clearly stated "theology of ordination" in Wesley, but there is what he did, and his writings. It should be stated that any conclusions finally drawn are the author's, based on evidence thought found in Wesley, but nowhere explicitly set forth by Mr. Wesley himself. This paper will necessarily be limited to the nature of ordination in Wesley's view of the ministry. To bring this up to a consideration of the nature of the ministry in The United Methodist Church, such a scope would demand a book.

Thompson lists four guiding principles which he says Wesley had always before him:

> (1) Acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as the Rule of Faith and Practice;
> (2) Reverence for the usages of the Primitive Church;
> (3) A warm and unquenchable love for the Church of England, and especially for her Doctrines and Liturgy, as these are to be found in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Homilies;*
> (4) A constant and unshakable conviction that God had commanded him to proclaim the Good News of Salvation to all whom he could reach, and had appointed him to care for the souls of those who were converted under the preaching of himself and his "Helpers."[2]

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[1]E. W. Thompson, *Wesley: Apostolic Man.* London: Epworth Press, 1957. pp. 7-8.
[2]*Ibid.,* p. 14.

Perhaps to these should be added the principles of necessity and expediency. If these are all kept in mind it can be shown that Wesley was generally consistent in his practice and thought throughout his life.

The Early Wesley

Can we find in the early Wesley—of Oxford, England and Savannah, Georgia—indications of the latter Wesley, the innovator? The earliest view of the ministry evinced by Wesley was a high-church view. For insight into just what constituted a "high-church view" I refer the reader to *The Young Mr. Wesley* by V. H. H. Green.

> Certain basic assumptions stood out clearly. Bishop Talbot, of Oxford, . . . summarized them as "the independency of the Church upon the State," "a Proper Sacrifice in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," "the necessity of sacerdotal absolution" and "the invalidity of baptism administered by persons not episcopally ordained". . . . This attitude was founded on what its advocates held to be the practice and principle of the primitive and apostolic Church . . . [3]

This yearning toward the "practice and principle of the primitive and apostolic Church" led to the founding of the Holy Club at Oxford. Wesley wanted to "refashion the English Church according to the apostolic ideal, restoring the sacrament of Holy Communion to the place that it had occupied in the life of the early Christians."[4] Green says this also led "eventually to his decision to undertake mission work in Georgia . . . He visualized the Church in Georgia as in some sense a return to pristine apostolic standards."[5] Needless to say, Wesley had a few surprises in store. His idea of the glorious unspoiled savage proved hardly true, and his type of strait-laced, regulated life just didn't appeal to the New World. He failed in almost everything he wanted to do in Georgia. What had led to this disastrous venture?

Wesley had been ordained a deacon of the Church England on September 19, 1725 and was his father's curate at Epworth from August 1727 to July 1728. In September of 1728 he was ordained a priest, and was curate at Wroot until November of 1729. One reason for his taking Holy Orders was the desire to save his own soul.[6] Then he was called back to Oxford.

At Oxford, John took over the leadership of the Holy Club, started by his brother, Charles. This early Methodist society "formed rules for the regulation of their *time* and their *studies;* for reading the *scriptures,* and self-examination . . . . They also visited the *sick,* and the *prisoners,* and received the Lord's Supper once a week."[7]

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[3]V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley.* London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1961, pp. 272-73.

[4]*Ibid.,* p. 30.

[5]*Ibid.,* pp. 7, 39.

[6]E. Herbert Nygren, "John Wesley's Changing Concept of the Ministry," *Religion in Life,* Vol. XXXI, Spring 1962. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 266.

[7]Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists.* Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810, p. 11.

Wesley also entered on a controversy at this time with his father and older brother, Samuel Jr., as to undertaking a curacy. He appealed to Bishop Potter of London (who had ordained him), who replied, " 'It doth not seem to me, that at your ordination you engaged yourself to undertake the cure of any parish, provided you can, as a clergyman, better serve God and His Church in your present or some other station.' "[8] The impression one receives from reading his *Journal* and *Letters* of this period is that Wesley was not anxious to leave the comfortable nest at Oxford where the life he thought it best to lead was easy of achievement. In a letter to his father on December 10, 1734, he showed he was not ready to leave Oxford.[9]

It was in the period 1735-1739 that Wesley, with his brother and others went as missionaries to Georgia to convert the heathen Indian. In Wesley's letters to Dr. Burton in the same volume of *Letters* just quoted, he shows his chief motive in going to America was to save his own soul. He felt the need to be converted himself before he could preach true salvation. This is not the whole answer, by any means. Certainly he had a desire to put his ideas into practice, and the chance to return to what he felt would be primitive church conditions would have appealed to him.

Wesley was strongly influenced during these early days by George Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple,* where the priest stands in place of God and represents him. The priest

> *fills up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, for his Body's sake, which is the church,* wherein is contained the complete definition of a Minister. . . . a Priest may do that which Christ did, and by his authority, and as his Viceregent . . . (and) a Priest is to do that which Christ did, and after his manner, both for Doctrine and Life.[10]

In accordance with Wesley's above mentioned high-church views, while in Georgia he refused Holy Communion to "all those who had not received baptism at the hands of an episcopally ordained clergyman and only such were to receive Christian burial.[11] This presupposes not only a high view of the sacraments but of apostolic succession as well. And, while Wesley's views on the absolute necessity of episcopal succession appeared to change in time (as will be seen later), he was firmly against not only lay-baptism, but more especially lay-administration of the Eucharist, right up to his death. Why? Perhaps Wesley saw that if lay preachers were to observe all the functions of ordained clergy, without ordination, then there could be no let to the aberrant forms which might spring up and to the out-of-the-

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[8]A. B. Lawson, *John Wesley and the Christian Ministry.* London: SPCK, 1963, p. 11.

[9]John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (John Telford ed.), Vol. I. London: Epworth Press, 1931, pp. 166-178. Hereafter designated as *Letters.*

[10]George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert in Prose and Verse.* London: Wm. Pickering, 1846, pp. 145-46.

[11]Lawson, *op.cit.,* p. 13.

way practices which might begin. Perhaps, too, we will find a better answer at the end of our search.

We can see in Wesley's relationship to the Moravians an instance of his high-church views, as well as an indication, at least, of an ambiguous attitude toward aspects he could not pigeonhole. He seems of two minds toward the Moravians during his stay in Georgia. On the one hand he greatly admired and envied their courage and assurance of faith, but on the other hand he was uneasy about their credentials. Though still holding to the validity and *necessity* of apostolic succession, Wesley does not suggest that the ordination of Bishop Anton Seifart by the Moravians was invalid.[12] The interest and respect Wesley showed toward them on board ship on the way to America is common knowledge, and his close association with them in the colony at Georgia occasioned many discussions between them on doctrine—most especially concerning "the validity of the consecrations of their bishops and baptism.[13]

Even though the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325, recognized lay baptism as valid, Wesley felt at this time that "the sacrament of baptism had to rank on an equality with that of the Lord's Supper, insomuch that it was only valid when administered by an ordained minister."[14] And valid ordination came only through true apostolic succession, which the Church of England claimed to have. In July of 1737 a man named Bolzius, known to be of pious and exemplary character, was refused communion by Wesley because of invalid baptism.[15] Bolzius, it must be amitted, was a Salzburgher and not specifically a Moravain, [16] but the assumption on the part of the Moravians that Christ has done all and so good works, such as communion, etc. were not necessary, caused Wesley to cast a suspicious eye on their theological doctrines. "He expressed anxiety when he heard that they regarded baptism by Lutheran ministers not episcopally ordained as fully valid.[17]

At this juncture it is necessary to mention what E. Herbert Nygren calls the "sacerdotal concept of the priesthood in the Church of Eng-

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[12]*Ibid.*, p. 12.

[13]Green, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

[14]Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

[15]In his *Journal* for September 29, 1749 he speaks concerning a letter from John Martin Bolzius: "What a truly Christian piety and simplicity breathe in these lines! And yet this very man, when I was at Savannah, did I refuse to admit to the Lord's Table, because he was not baptized; that is, not baptized by a Minister who had been episcopally ordained." John Wesley, *Works,* Vol. II. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., from 1872 edit., p. 160. Hereafter designated as *Works.*

[16]The Salzburghers' views, says Green, were not entirely in agreement with those of the Brethren. Green, *op.cit.*, p. 44.

[17]*Ibid.*, p. 43. See also John Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies.* 2nd ed. London: Epworth Press, 1934, p. 325; William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley.* New York: Abingdon Press, 1946, pp. 146-47; Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley," *A Library of Christian Thought.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 353-376; John Whitehead, M.D., *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley M.A.* Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Co., n.d., p. 363.

land."[18] This concept is based on the assumption that the Holy Ghost is transmitted in the laying on of hands, thus enabling the minister to exercise his office. The Roman Catholic Church held this view, making of orders a sacrament, and the Anglican Church followed suit. But Wesley stressed the power, through conversion, of God active and working in a man which enables him to not only preach the Gospel, but to live it.[19] Nygren says that

> Very likely the belief that the Holy Ghost was received at ordination often led to a minister's neglect of his own personal religious life, for, according to this concept, if the Spirit of God works through this instrument set aside by the rites of the Church, what need was there for a man to be concerned with his relation to God? . . . The priestly acts are valid, irrespective of the character of the man who performs them, stated the twenty-sixth Article of Religion.[20]

There is ample evidence of the unrest in the mind and soul of John Wesley both before and after Aldersgate. His acquaintance with the Moravians had deeply impressed him, even though as has been stated, he eventually broke with them.[21] It is not over-reaching to make a point to say that Wesley seems early to have been uncomfortable with the slighting of good works, both by the Moravians and by his own Church of England. In Wesley's *Letters* and *Journal* one reads of his lack of "joy." Constantly after the Aldersgate experience he says he has peace but no love or joy in Christ and the Holy Ghost. This was around the first part of December, 1738. And, all during the period from Wesley's ordination to his leadership in the Holy Club he had been giving much thought to his spiritual condition. Green testifies to this, as well as to the increasingly monotonous invariability of Wesley's life from 1729-1735, yet has to admit that the "almost prophetic sense of vocation" made this man Wesley an exceptional person in his society.[22]

Nygren makes much of the Aldersgate experience and the assurance of conversion it gave Wesley, having been instrumental in changing the direction of his thinking about the ministry. It is an interesting point and certainly deserves looking at.

> Previously he had been concerned about spiritual fitness *after* receiving holy orders. Now he believed that a man must have some sort of personal religious experience and be converted in order to become a worthy minister of the church . . . Wesley was in accord with Luther's teaching that "The unction by a pope or a bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration, clothes differing from that of laymen—all these may make a hypocrite or an annointed puppet, but never a

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[18]Nygren, *op.cit.*, p. 266.

[19]William R. Cannon, "The Holy Spirit in Vatican II and in the Writings of Wesley," *Religion in Life*, Vol. XXXVII, Autumn 1968, #3, pp. 440-53.

[20]Nygren, *op.cit.*, pp. 266-67.

[21]In a letter to Charles Wesley of April 21, 1741 (quoted in Whitehead, p. 363) he says " 'As yet I dare in no wise join the Moravians: . . . And lastly, because they make inward religion swallow up outward in general. For these reasons chiefly I will rather, God being my helper, stand quite alone than join with them.' "

[22]Green, *op.cit*, pp. 24-25.

> Christian or a spiritual man . . . for, if we had not a higher consecration in us than pope or bishop can give, no priest could ever be made by the consecration of pope or bishop." . . . Heretofore he (Wesley) had considered it (the ministry) to be primarily a priestly function; now he began to emphasize the prophetic aspect . . . Wesley now believed that the call of God was of more importance than standing in the succession of the priesthood.[23]

This supposed change of emphasis in Wesley will be discussed again in relationship to the call of a man to the ministry, and to Wesley's ordinations.

Lay Preachers and Lay Preaching

Given a man with high church views of the sacraments, and of apostolic succession, what would cause him to take to the open and preach in a manner not of an Anglican priest, but of a man converted, trying to speak to the conditions of other men and to convert them? And what would cause such a man to begin to gather about him other men to similarly preach? Alfred Plummer characterizes the period from 1710 to 1760 as a "period of clerical unpopularity". He says, "There was in the nation, as a reaction from Roman pretensions, rather a strong feeling against sacerdotalism; so that the exclusive right of the clergy to administer the sacraments did not of itself produce a feeling of respect."[24] Green does not feel that things were all that bad. "Although the eighteenth-century Church was not as neglectful nor as lethargic as its detractors have made out, its particular virtues were not popular. It had not adapted its pulpit or its services to the needs of the masses."[25] Any generalization about a period of history is apt to be only generally true, and here we are dealing with one very specific man.

John Wesley's main argument for employing unordained men was simply necessity. He began by being shocked at the lay-preaching of Thomas Maxfield,[26] and wound up preaching in open fields and beginning finally a succession of ministers outside the Established Church for work in another country.

> If we compare the Wesley of the Holy Club and the Wesley of Georgia with the Wesley of 1739 we are almost startled at the contrast. The punctilious "High Churchman" can scarcely be recognized . . . John Wesley's conversion changed his view of the neglected doctrines of the Church and modified his ecclesiastical position. It did more. It made him an evangelist filled with an insatiable desire to save the souls of men.[27]

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[23]Nygren, *op.cit.*, pp. 268, 269. Quoting from Luther, "Address to the Nobility," *Three Treatises*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947, p. 164.

[24]Alfred Plummer, *The Church of England in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Methuen and Co., 1910, pp. 84-85.

[25]Green, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

[26]W. H. Fitchett, *Wesley and His Century*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1927, pp. 201-2; John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies*, 3rd ed. London: Epworth Press, 1952, p. 25.

[27]Simon, *op.cit.*, pp. 333-34, note 17.

If one looks even hurriedly at Wesley's *Journal* and his *Letters,* t becomes evident that Wesley soon after returning from Georgia howed that he believed the main consideration was the preaching of he Gospel to the salvation of men's souls,[28] and the almost complete ack of interest on the part of the clergy of that day in that very hing was enough necessity for John Wesley to preach to those willing o listen, and to accept lay "Helpers" with no thought he was separating from the Established Church.[29] The state of the clergy of the lay caused Wesley to face the question of the efficacy of the ministry of such men. He seems to have always held that the godliness of the ninister does not affect the efficacy of the sacraments.[30] However, here did seem to be later wavering with regard to the exact sacramental nature of baptism. In his *Letters,* Vol. III, page 36, he denies hat baptism is necessary to salvation. William R. Cannon suggests hat "the import of Wesley's own Aldersgate experience and the conversions wrought in so many baptized people whose lives did not conform to the standards of the Christian life led him to disassociate the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration from the act of baptism tself.[31]

While Wesley seems to agree with the Twenty-Eighth Article that 'the unworthiness of the minister does not hinder the validity of the acraments,"[32] the fact remains that Wesley took great care to see hat his "Helpers" were as godly a group of men as possible. In his ermon *On Attending the Church Service* he deals with the question of whether God blesses the ministry of unholy men. "If God never did bless it, we ought to separate from the Church; at least where we have reason to believe that the Minister is an unholy man."[33] He uses Judas as an example to prove God sends whom he will send, holy or not. Of those who would separate from ungodly ministers and go off omewhere, he said that salt "heaped in a corner" loses its savor. However, he wrote to a friend in 1788:

> Those ministers (so-called) who neither live nor preach the gospel I dare not say are sent of God. Where one of these is settled, many of the Methodists dare not attend his ministry; so, if there be no other church in that neighborhood, they go to church no more. This is the case in a few places already, and it will be the case in more; and no one can justly blame me for this, neither is it contrary to any of my professions.[34]

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[28]"Mr. Wesley was so fully convinced of the great design of a preached gospel, hat if sinners were truly converted to God, and a decent order preserved in hearing he word, he thought it a matter of less consequence, whether the instrument of he good done, was a layman or regularly ordained . . . And thus he was induced to nake use of the labors of laymen, on a more extensive scale than had hitherto been llowed." Whitehead, *op.cit.*, p. 371.

[29]Simon, *op.cit.*, pp. 331-33, note 17.

[30]John P. Parris, *John Wesley's Doctrine of the Sacraments.* London: Epworth Press, 1963, p. 69.

[31]Cannon, *op.cit.*, p. 448, note 21.

[32]*Letters,* Vol. VI, p. 327.

[33]*Works,* Vol. VII, p. 175.

[34]*Letters,* Vol. VIII, p. 92.

This is not a case of inconsistency in Wesley's thought, but rather of necessity forcing the later Wesley to re-think a former stand, and reevaluate the appropriate response. But he spoke for himself, in 1755, regarding ministers of the Church of England who "themselves disclaim that inward call to the ministry which is at least as necessary as the outward . . . I cannot answer these arguments to my own satisfaction. So that my conclusion (which I cannot yet give up), that it is lawful to continue in the Church, stands, I know not how, almost without any premises that are able to bear its weight."[35]

On April 1, 1739 Wesley first preached in the open to the colliers at Kingswood at the invitation of George Whitefield, who was returning to America.[36] A Bishop Butler, in August of 1739 claimed that Wesley was "exercising an irregular ministry ('you are not commissioned to preach in this diocese') . . . " Wesley courteously answered that his fellowship at Oxford gave him "an indeterminate commission to preach the Word of God in any part of the Church of England."[37] And, in a letter to his brother Charles of June 23, 1739 Wesley said, "If any man (bishop or other) ordain that I shall not do what God commands me to do, to submit to that ordinance would be to obey man rather than God."[38] Very early then, two notes are sounded which recur in Wesley's letters and other writings—the degrees of importance he was to give different sources of authority, i.e., man or God, etc., and his reference to a direct call from God, which is, of course, basis for the first.

Lay administration of the sacraments, a man's call and separation from the Church are woven so closley together in preparation for a consideration of Wesley's actual ordinations, that they must be looked at together before going on to the final section of this study.

When Wesley and his fellow preachers were not allowed the use of Anglican pulpits, they took to the fields to preach, more and more, and began meeting in homes for mutual help and encouragement. But the Conventicle Act of the seventeenth century had made it illegal to worship in private homes. Since Wesley did not consider himself a Dissenter, nor what he was doing as separation in any way from the Established Church, the Toleration Act of 1689 was not really much help either. By it

> congregations declaring themselves to be "Protestant Dissenters" might insure their meeting-houses against trespass and destruction, and dissenting ministers, on taking the oaths of allegiance, might obtain a license to preach and might protect their persons from arrest by the constable or from the violence of the mob.[39]

This situation, of licensing his preachers, is well covered in many

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[35]*Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 145.

[36]John S. Simon, *The Revival of Religion in England in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Eaton and Mains, n.d., pp. 212-14.

[37]Green, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

[38]*Letters,* Vol. I, pp. 322-23.

[39]Thompson, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

books,[40] and there is not room to delineate it here. What needs to be said here is that Wesley saw the need for a preaching and a pastoral care which was not in sufficient evidence in the Church of his day. But were the lay preachers to have administered the sacraments without ordination, Wesley would have been open to charges of schism. Bishop Stillingfleet in his *Irenicum* says, "The controversies then which tend to break the peace of a religious society, are either matter of different practice, or matter of different opinion. The former, if it comes from no just and necessary cause, and ends in a total separation from that society the person guilty of it was joined with, is justly called *schism;* . . . "[41] The sacraments were available, but preaching of salvation and the care of souls were not, so in allowing lay preachers Wesley was not, according to Stillingfleet, involved in schism. In his sermon on *The Ministerial Office,* preached in 1789, Wesley spoke of his first "Helpers"—"We received them wholly and solely to preach, not to administer sacraments."[42]

Wesley, in his use of lay preachers, may have been emphasizing more and more the prophetic aspect of the ministry as against the priestly,[43] but, even given this as so, he still "held to the belief that only duly ordained men should administer the sacraments."[44] Wesley's preachers were never commissioned by him to perform what he would have considered to be the priestly function of administering the sacraments. In the Church of England there was a dichotomy between preaching and administering the sacraments. There is a separate "ordination" for deacons to read and preach the Gospel, and one for the Priesthood, which usually follows a year later.[45] So it is only natural that Wesley held this same dichotomy. Unfortunately, as will be seen, this dichotomy set up with the dichotomy between divine and human "call" tempts one to associate administering with the human call and preaching with the divine. And Wesley always held the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in high esteem. He would not have meant to say that a human "call" or the laying on of hands was all that was necessary to administering the sacraments. It is well, however, to ask the question whether Wesley, when he left behind his insistence on apostolic succession, wasn't leaving behind also the sacerdotal aspect of the ministry. To most, his requiring ordination for administration would argue against that assumption. Yet it is clear he valued the divine "call" over the "human," and the divine call was necessary to be a "Gospel minister".[46] Wesley says,

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40Cf. Plummer, Simon, and Thompson.

41Edward Stillingfleet, *Irenicum; A Weapon Salve for the Church's Wounds,* 1st American ed. Philadelphia: M. Sorin, 1842, p. 135.

42*Works,* Vol. VII, p. 277.

43Nygren, *op.cit,* p. 271.

44*Ibid.,* pp. 272-73.

45*Book of Common Prayer.* New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1945, pp. 530-48.

46Cf. "Thoughts Concerning Gospel Ministers." *Works,* Vol. X, p. 456, also "An Address to the Clergy," *Works,* Vol. X, p. 481.

> . . .there ought, if possible, to be both an outward and inward call to this work; yet, if one of the two be supposed wanting, I had rather want the outward than the inward call . . . I acknowledge I had rather have the divine without the human rather than the human without the divine call.[47]

Perhaps Wesley feared the people were no longer "affected by the rites" in the Church of England, due to the poor state of the clergy. If they could be brought back to a living faith, then the sacraments could again have their pre-eminent place in the Christian life, and be meaningful as a "means of grace". Regarding this, Nygren says,

> This sacerdotal order was the original instrument in which Hebrew religious life was centered. During the period of the judges, however, the priestly order fell into a state of disrepute, and the people were no longer affected by 'the rites which the priests performed. Under these circumstances a new order arose, the prophetic order . . . [Wesley now believed that the call of God was of more importance than standing in the succession of the priesthood.][48]

We have said that administration of the sacraments was for Wesley a special priestly function. In the Anglican Church preaching seems to have been given a slightly more inferior position, if the sequence of ordination for the two functions is any witness. The emphasis in the Roman Church was definitely on the sacerdotal rather than the prophetic function, and perhaps this is why the Church of England followed this line to an extent.

In 1746 Wesley wrote in answer to a question about "preaching up and down"—"I think God hath called me to this work 'by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery,' "[49] but in 1747, "I know God hath required this at my hands. To me, His blessing my work is an abundant proof; . . . my motive to preaching . . . the spring of this is a deep conviction that it is the will of God . . . "[50]

The dichotomy apparent between the Word and the Sacraments was, in part, why Wesley connected lay administration with separation from the Church. In answer to a letter from Joseph Benson regarding lay-baptism, Wesley wrote in 1783, "Dear Joseph,—I do not, and never did, consent that any of our preachers should baptize as long as we profess ourselves to be members of the Church of England."[51] At the Conference at Leeds in 1755,

> The principal subjects discussed concerned the administration of the sacraments by the lay preachers, and the formal separation of the Societies from the Established Church. The two subjects were so closely related that it was inevitable that

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[47]*Letters,* Vol. III, p. 195. This letter, in September of 1756, was in answer to Samuel Walker, Vicar of Truro, a man much respected by Wesley. Walker had dismissed the possibility that lay preachers might be called of God to preach and laid great stress on the laws and constitution of the Church of England, finding in them her true essence.

[48]Nygren, *op.cit.,* p. 269.

[49]*Letters,* Vol. II, p. 235.

[50]*Ibid.,* p. 97.

[51]*Ibid.,* Vol. VII, p. 179.

they should be considered at the same time, and the Conference discussed them for nearly three days.[52]

The decision was made not to separate, and therefore lay administration could not continue. "The necessity of ordination for the administration of the sacraments was always a fixed principle with Wesley . . . To Wesley preaching and administering the sacraments were two totally different acts, which could be, but were not necessarily, linked together."[53]

Ordinations for America

The controversy over administration of the sacraments continued, growing ever more problemmatical. It was not helped by the American Revolutionary War, as a result of which many, if not most of the Anglican priests in America returned to England, and the American Methodists were, to use Wesley's phrase, as "sheep without shepherds."

There is evidence that Wesley thought about the problem, in relation to presbyterial ordination, long before 1784. In 1755 he had written to Samuel Walker, ". . . is it lawful for presbyters circumstanced as we are to appoint other ministers?" He answered his own question later that year in a letter to Thomas Adam. "It is not clear to us that presbyters so circumstanced as we are may *appoint* or *ordain* others, but it is that we may *direct* as well as *suffer* them to do what we conceive they are *moved to by the Holy Ghost.* It is true that in *ordinary* cases both an *inward* and an *outward* call are requisite. But we apprehend there is something far from ordinary in the present case."[54] By this Wesley probably was referring to the fact that he "understood his own mission primarily as that of a minister extraordinary, called forth by God to help remedy the insufficiencies of the ordinary ministry of the established church."[55] Nygren says that Wesley saw himself as a "missionary episkopos," a presbyter uniquely required to exercise his inherent right to ordain.[56]

Most authorities cite January 20, 1746 as the date of Wesley's reading Lord Peter King's *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity, and Worship of the Primitive Church*—Wesley in his *Journal* for that day says this. Whatever might have been the exact date, the pivotal point in this study is reached after 1745, when Wesley no longer emphasized the necessity of apostolic succession for valid sacraments, and the historic episcopate as the only true line of ministry. In the Church of England the right administration of the

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[52]John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism.* London: Epworth Press, 1955, p. 291. See also *Letters,* Vol. III, p. 129.

[53]Lawson, *op.cit.,* p. 83. For letters on this problem, see *Letters,* Vol. III, pp. 186-87; Vol. IV, pp. 119n, 235; Vol. VII, p. 203.

[54]*Letters,* Vol. III, pp. 146, 150.

[55]Outler, *op.cit.,* p. 306, note 17.

[56]Nygren, *op.cit.,* p. 273.

sacraments rested on valid succession,[57] and up to 1745 at least Wesley "still held to the Anglican principle of a threefold ministry and the necessity of episcopal ordination for valid sacraments, the true episcopacy involving a succession from the Apostles through the Roman bishops."[58] Simon says that Wesley read Lord King in 1746 but "he was not prepared to accept Lord King's assertion until he had given is full consideration."[59] After ten years he gave his conclusion in a letter to the Rev. James Clarke, July 3, 1756. He still believed that episcopal succession was scripturally and apostolically agreeable, but not prescribed in Scripture. He gives credit at this time also to Bishop Stillingfleet. And, "When facing the possibility of a visit to America in 1772, he was prepared to act according to his convictions."[60] Whether this means that Wesley was prepared to ordain is not clear in Simon.

It is clear that King convinced Wesley that presbyter and bishop were of one order, but different in degree. Wesley became convinced, then, that he *could* ordain, given unusual circumstances. In 1780 he told his brother Charles, "I verily believe I have as good a right to ordain as to administer the Lord's supper. But I see abundance of reasons why I should not use that right, unless I was turned out of the Church."[61] Gerald Moede gives added support. "Not only Stillingfleet, but even Archbishop Usher had justified presbyterial ordination: 'I have ever declared my opinion to be that bishop and presbyter differ only in degree, and not in order; and, consequently, that in places where bishops cannot be had, the ordination by presbyters standeth valid . . . "[62] Stillingfleet felt that this power to ordain, while it must be admitted is "radically and intrinsically" in every presbyter, must be restrained to certain persons, to avoid schisms in the church. So bishops, not out of any *divine right,* "but only upon their convenience of such an order for the peace and unity of the church of God,"[63] are employed. Stillingfleet also maintains that if only three bishops are present at the ordination of a bishop (as the Nicene Council prescribed) then there should also be the consent of the majority of the rest. For a full analysis, in line with the views of

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[57]T. J. Bailey, *A Defence of Holy Orders in the Church of England.* London: James Parker and Co., 1871, p. 1.

[58]Lawson, *op.cit.,* p. 45. December 30, 1745 Wesley wrote to his brother-in-law, Westley Hall, what Lawson, p. 80, calls his, "last statement in defence of uninterrupted Apostolic succession." He seems to feel that "to Wesley, the conception of Apostolic Succession seems to have meant a limitation of 'free grace' To restrict the work of the Holy Spirit by mechanical means did not appeal to him: 'None but God can give man authority to preach his word.' " (p. 82)

[59]John S. Simon, *John Wesley, the Master Builder.* London: Epworth Press, 1927, p. 303.

[60]*Ibid.*

[61]*Letters,* Vol. VII, p. 21.

[62]Gerald F. Moede, *The Office of Bishop in Methodism.* Zurich, Switzerland: Publishing House of The Methodist Church, 1964, p. 39.

[63]Stillingfleet, *op.cit.,* pp. 301, 302.

Lawson, of the impact on Wesley of King and Stillingfleet respectively, the reader is referred to Lawson's book, *John Wesley and the Christian Ministry,* pp. 47-56 and 59-69.

Leaving behind the necessity of a ministry descended from the apostle Peter was the first step toward ordination of Methodist ministers. Some may claim that Wesley's allowing lay preachers was the first step, but if the Anglican Church had incorporated Wesley's movement into itself, as the Roman Church did its various orders of monks, and as Wesley had been in hopes she would, then there would have been no difficulty. The fact is she didn't, and we must now look at the events leading up to the ordinations of 1784, and then it may be possible to draw some conclusions from our study.

One reason Wesley did not allow his lay preachers to administer the sacraments has already been mentioned. He saw such a step as separation from the Church. And the fact that they never did separate during his lifetime he called their particular glorying. "Now, as long as the Methodists keep to this plan, they cannot separate from the Church. And this is our peculiar glory."[64] Wesley's followers were constantly urged to attend their parish churches for the sacraments. Several problems arose which made this impossible, however. Even though Wesley still held that the godliness of the minister did not affect the efficacy of the sacrament, many Methodists were staying away from the communion of ungodly men. And the Methodist people could not understand why they could not receive the sacrament from the hands of the same men from whom they received the Word of life.

That there was lay administration of the sacraments before Wesley took the step in ordaining for America cannot be denied. In 1754 Charles Wesley wrote in his *Journal* regarding those who had done so, saying, "We have in effect ordained already . . . He [John Wesley] urged me to sign the preachers' certificates; was inclined to lay on hands; and to let the preachers administer."[65] Just how correct this observation is cannot be ascertained. And in a letter to John from Charles Wesley, dated by Thomas Jackson in March 1760, "Even Mr. Crisp says he would give the sacrament if you bade him . . . Upon the whole, I am fully persuaded, almost all our preachers are corrupted already. More and more will give the sacrament, and set up for themselves, even before we die; and all, except the few that get orders, will turn Dissenters before or after our death."[66] It was Simon's theory that Charles at this time wanted to have the lay preachers ordained and provided with livings in the Church of England.

John Wesley was sufficiently concerned about the numbers being denied the sacraments, for one reason or another, that he decided to

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64 *Works*, Vol. VII, pp. 278, 428.
65 Quoted in Simon, *The Advance of Methodism, op.cit.,* note 54, p. 292.
66 Simon, *The Master Builder, op.cit.,* p. 73.

change what up to then he had been inflexibly against. He decided to hold services during the hour of regular Church Service. He said in his *Journal* of October 7, 1770, "My brother and I complied with the desire of many of our friends, and agreed to administer the Lord's Supper every other Sunday at Bristol. We judged it best to have the entire service, and so begin at nine o'clock."[67] The day was fast approaching when the decision would have to be made as to whether it was even possible, must less plausible to stay in the Church of England.

The American Revolution provided John Wesley with the perfect situation, as far as circumstances went, for both doing something and yet not doing anything. I hope to explain that statement in my conclusion. For now, a look is required at that situation in America which brought about Wesley's ordinations.

As a result of the war with England, most of the Church of England priests had had to return to their native land. This left only those few priests who were loyal to the Methodist cause, and even many of them, Rankin and Shadford included, returned. The actual events which led up to the ordinations are chronicled in many histories of American Methodism, and a brief summary here will suffice.

When the preachers in America began to beg Wesley to send over more men who could minister to them, and especially administer the sacraments, Wesley tried to appeal to Bishop Lowth, then bishop of London, to ordain some men for America. However, no bishop of the Church of England was going to ordain anyone to be a Methodist minister, especially if they planned to go to the rebellious colonies. "When Wesley desired ordination, it was, in most cases, to enable them to administer the sacraments to the societies they visited and remain Methodist preachers. It was natural that any bishop would think twice about conferring ordination for this purpose."[68]

In 1771 Francis Asbury and Richard Wright had been sent by Wesley to America. In 1772 Asbury received a letter from Wesley making him Assistant in America.[69] At the Quarterly meeting that year the question was raised if the people would be content without sacraments. Robert Strawbridge was in favor of having them, even without ordination, but Asbury would not agree to it.[70] The first Conference in America was called by Rankin and two of the rules agreed to by the preachers were:

> Rule 1. Every preacher who acts in connection with Mr. Wesley and the brethren who labor in America, is strictly to avoid administering the ordinances of

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67*Ibid.*, pp. 280-81.

68Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

69Lee, *op.cit.*, p. 40, "Francis Asbury says in his *Journal* on October 10, 1772: 'I received a letter from Mr. Wesley, in which he required a strict attention to discipline; *and appointed me to act as Assistant.*' The letter is not known." Cf. *Letters,* Vol. V, p. 341.

70*Ibid.*, p. 41.

> baptism and the Lord's Supper. Rule 2. All the people among whom we labor are to be earnestly exhorted to attend the Church and to receive the ordinances there.[71]

As the Revolutionary War was drawing to a close the preachers in America, especially the southern ones, were feeling in a measure independent of Wesley's direct rule. Lee, who was writing as a contemporary of Wesley, says,

> Many of our travelling preachers in *Virginia* and *North Carolina,* seeing and feeling the want of the instituted means of grace among our societies . . . concluded, that if God had called them to preach, he had called them also to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.[72]

Asbury, fearing this, called a Conference in 1779 to Judge White's home, which was then his place of retirement. Moede says that Asbury invited only those in agreement with him on the matter at hand, and that the following questions were central:

> Quest. 12. Ought not brother Asbury to act as General Assistant in America? Ans: He ought; 1st, on account of his age; 2nd, because originally appointed by Mr. Wesley; 3rd, being joined with Messrs. Rankin and Shadford, by express order from Mr. Wesley. Quest. 13. How far shall his power extend? Ans: On hearing every preacher for and against what is in debate, the right of determination shall rest with him, according to the Minutes.[73]

The southern preachers, feeling Asbury had gone behind their backs, held their own conference at Brokenback Church, Fluvana, in May of 1779. They proceeded to appoint some of the older preachers to ordain ministers for them. "The committee thus chosen, first ordained themselves, and then proceeded to ordain and set apart other preachers for the same purpose."[74] So the situation had become serious indeed, when lay preachers, albeit in America and feeling separated from the direct rule of John Wesley, would take it in their own hands to ordain for the purpose of administration of the sacraments. Let us look at two citations of this incident.

> Claiming that "the Episcopal Establishment is now dissolved, and therefore in almost all our circuits the members are without the ordinances," they appointed a presbytery of three preachers to ordain themselves and the others in order that they might duly administer the sacraments.[75]

> The eighteen preachers present chose and empowered a committee of four to supervise them. Three of the same men were appointed to be "the presbytery". Philip Gatch, Reuben Ellis, and James Foster. They were authorized "to admin-

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[71]Moede, *op.cit.,* p. 29. Lee also mentions this, pp. 46-47.
[72]Lee, *op.cit.,* p. 69.
[73]Moede, *op.cit.,* p. 32.
[74]Lawson, *op.cit.,* p. 20; Lee, *op.cit.,* p. 69.
[75]Frank Baker, "Wesley's Early Preachers in America," *The Duke Divinity School Review,* Vol. 34, No. 3, Autumn 1969. Durham: The Divinity School of Duke University, p. 160.

ister the ordinances themselves; and to authorize any other preacher or preachers, approved by them, by the laying on of hands."[76]

However, Asbury visited them the following year and persuaded them that, for the sake of peace, they should agree to drop the ordinance until Mr. Wesley should be consulted.[77] Even so, it is not until April 17, 1784 that we have a letter from Thomas Coke, suggesting that Wesley had been in touch with him about the American situation. Lawson quotes Etheridge, in his *Life of Thomas Coke,* to the effect that Wesley suggested ordination by the imposition of his hands but Coke would not agree to this. "Coke then began a study of the biblical and patristic evidence for presbyteral ordination" and, in essence, he came to the same conclusions Wesley had.[78] Coke then suggested in a letter of August 9, 1784 that Wesley go ahead and ordain him, and ordain Whatcoat and Vasey presbyters, offering to bring James Creighton, another minister of the Church of England of Methodist persuasion, in order to have three presbyters for the ordination of Whatcoat and Vasey.[79] Whatever the exact details of the situation, Wesley finally had acted. But was this his first "ordination" as a presbyter? We have seen that Charles Wesley wrote that as far as he was concerned they had ordained already, with the instances of lay administration. Then, there was the curious case of Bishop Erasmus. Simon says that John had Erasmus ordain John Jones sometime before 1784. When Charles Wesley heard of it he was upset and would not allow him (Jones) to assist him in administering the sacraments. Then, "Unknown to Wesley a few of his lay preachers persuaded the Greek bishop to ordain them. When Wesley heard of these ordinations he was indignant, and threatened to sever those who had been ordained from association with himself.[80] The question must be asked, why did Wesley do this, if he did, and why, when others sought only what he had sought himself, did he become so "indignant"?

However, whatever the exact details of the situation, according to most Wesleyan histories, Wesley finally did in 1784 act. But Baker is of the opinion that Methodist ministers had already been ordained, in 1779, and calls Coke and Asbury their "two belated successors."[81]

Conclusion

John Wesley "was accused of 'assuming the Apostolate of England' " but he denied the charge. "I no otherwise assume the Apostolate of England . . . ," he wrote from Dublin on March 22, 1748,

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[76]Norman W. Spellman, "The Early Native Methodist Preachers," *The Duke Divinity School Review, ibid.*, p. 174.

[77]Lee, *op.cit.*, p. 73; Lawson, *op.cit.*, 133.

[78]Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 139.

[79]*Ibid.*

[80]Simon, *The Advance of Methodism, op.cit.*, p. 130.

[81]Baker, *op.cit.*, p. 161.

'than I assume the Apostolate of all Europe . . . ."[82] This argument, is Green points out, is tautologous. Wesley had a rather distinctive 'iew of the apostolate, that is, after he moved beyond a necessity of 'alid succession from St. Peter. Within the range of authority of the Church of England, Wesley felt he could not assume episcopal functions. But he clearly felt that once outside of that range of authority, necessity dictated his actions. In February of 1772 Wesley had written o Walter Sellon, "You do not understand your information right. Observe, 'I am going to America to turn bishop.' You are to understand it *in sensu composito* (in the sense agreed). I am not to be a bishop till I am in America. While I am in Europe, therefore, you have nothing to fear."[83] This would indicate he considered his authority to ordain, whether for America or for Scotland, to be ocalized to those areas. For evidence that Wesley felt that England was a different case entirely from America and Scotland, the reader s referred to his *Letters,* Vol. VII, pp. 262, 321, 333. However, we know that Wesley *did* ordain for England before his death. Was this a case of, as the Church of England *Interim Statement,* p. 13, suggests, "The ordinations for England, at the end of Wesley's life, sprang from his preoccupation with the future of Methodism after his death"? Whether this was the explanation or not, it is clear that Wesley had been faced for some time with the decision to separate in word, when he had already separated in fact. As far as this author can tell, he only succeeded in putting off the decision until his death. Certainly he never *wanted* to separate—no one can deny that. But by ordaining for America, he must have known, as Charles Wesley seems to have, that he was in essence separating from the Established Church of England. And his ordinations for England clinched the matter.

A problem must be considered now which goes deeper than whether Wesley separated or not. Were Wesley's ordinations valid? And how does one go about determining validity? The cases both King and Stillingfleet were concerned primarily with were those where other bishops were available. But the Methodists had no bishops. The laying on of hands must come from the Anglican Church if it was to come from a prior source, that is, a human one. Wesley appealed to King and Stillingfleet for authority for what was done for America. However, why then did he not move according to the pattern outlined in both King and Stillingfleet? This author, as a result of reading both, received the distinct impression that a majority consent was necessary. This Wesley did not have. Nor does it seem he sought it. If, as Lawson claims, Wesley meant only to "delegate to Coke his own personal authority in America, for he could not be there himself," then he must have known this did not require the laying on of hands of a "presbytery". And, Coke being a Church of

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[82]Green, *op.cit.* p. 91.
[83]*Letters,* Vol. V, p. 303.

England man as much as Wesley himself, surely Wesley knew he was making it possible for Coke to assume espiscopal powers, since this was their experience of the way things were done. In essence, Wesley was substituting Wesleyan succession for Apostolic succession. Just how important his link with the Church of England was in all this cannot be assessed here.

Whitehead makes some salient points, whether we agree with them all or not, in his life of Wesley.

> 1. Mr. Wesley in ordaining or consecrating Dr. Coke a Bishop, acted in direct contradiction to the principle on which he attempts to defend his practice of ordaining at all. 2. As Mr. Wesley was never elected or chosen by any church to be a bishop, nor ever consecrated to the office, either by bishops or prebyters, he had not the shadow of right to exercise Episcopal authority in ordaining others, according to the rules of any church, ancient or modern. 3. Had he possessed the proper right to ordain either as a bishop or presbyter . . . yet his ordinations being done in secret, were rendered thereby invalid and of no effect, according to the established order of the primitive church, and of all Protestant churches. 4. The consequence from the whole is, that the persons whom Mr. Wesley ordained, have no more right to exercise the ministerial functions than he had before he laid hands upon them.[84]

Wesley's best argument would seem to be the appeal to the commission and approval of God, via the fruits of their labor. This would be in keeping with his emphasis on the divine call, whether the human call was present or not. A person's true call is the call from God to do His work amongst one's fellow-men. And this call is still the necessary one in the United Methodist Church. The act of ordination, the laying on of hands of the presbyters, is human authorization, authorization by men set apart to superintend the work of the ministers, of the call which only God can give. Wesley said this when he answered a friend in 1761 as to the charge that the Methodists refused all right of the Bishops to control them, and "say that, rather than be so controlled, they would renounce all communion with this Church . . . Episcopal authority cannot reverse what is fixed by Divine authority."[85] The fact that he could not allow this same argument—"by their fruits . . ." when it came from the lay preachers who felt it all right to administer without ordination,[86] does not necessarily mean that he felt himself the only proper judge of such matters, but, to give Wesley the benefit of the doubt, an indication of his concern for ongoing order rather than chaos.

So, from the standpoint of an historical action, Wesley's ordinations may be seen as invalid, since they did not correspond to the model to which he appealed as authority for his action. But when considered in the light of the total picture, they can be seen as the only possible response, the necessary one, and, under such circumstances, valid.

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[84]Whitehead, *op.cit.*, pp. 532-33.
[85]*Works*, Vol. XIII, pp. 235-36.
[86]Spellman, *op.cit.*, p. 168.